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"Migration in Joseph Beuys' Work: James Joyce's Nomadic Language"

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Migration in Joseph Beuys' Work and James Joyce's Nomadic Language

Joseph Beuys, 1921-1986, () organised a migration workshop as one of his *Free International University's* activities during documenta 6, Kassel 1977. (FIU docu) Naturally, he invited Irish people. Despite the artist's great international presence and his war-time ramblings, he himself never moved any further away from his native Cleves than an hour's drive. He grew up in a Catholic and formerly Celtic area in the Lower Rhine region near the German/Dutch border, and he spent his adult life in Düsseldorf on the same river Rhine.

This very stationary *curriculum vitae* did not prevent him from applying almost every conceivable metaphor of the nomad to himself. He included in his work the fast-moving hare as an image for himself, and the notion of a line spanning the Eurasian continent called *new cross* or *Eurasian staff* (**Eurasian staff**). He pointed out the distribution of the oak on this continent, and was generally very interested in the nomadic origin of Indo-European civilisation.

The artist as a nomad, especially a shepherd, is deeply rooted in our idea of an artist from the times of Giotto, as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz have found out.¹² Beuys was looking to conform to it, if not in moving around himself, he did this in his work. This childhood photograph (**Beuys child**) has become programmatic. In it, Beuys' insignia, the hat and the walking stick are already apparent.

James Joyce (CGW), on the other hand, created a very stationary oeuvre: He wrote about nothing but Dublin. But he was the nomad, the 'hare', bearing the wanderer's or pilgrim's hat and staff. He called his one and only play *Exiles*, meaning himself, and he incorporated the Indo-European civilisation, at least linguistically, exemplified in his 'pre-Babylonian' *opus magnum*, *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce spent most of his life outside Ireland, but far from making him 'un-Irish', this seems to make him even more typically Celtic.

Migration is a link between the two artists' lives and works. Both, Beuys and Joyce, incidentally, claimed to have run away with a circus when they were young.¹³ There are many more such 'coincidences' in their biographically charged 'works in progress'.

Joseph Beuys did not only read Joyce's difficult works. He admired the Irish writer, who came to exemplify important aspects of mutual interest, like Celtic wan-

derings. Let me refer to one of Beuys' major installations called *Das Kapital Raum* (Capital Room) 1970-1977 in Schaffhausen, Switzerland. **(Kapital)** The blackboards in it originated in discussions at the above-mentioned migration workshop at documenta 6. Other parts of the installation evolved out of several of the artist's works, mainly performances (or as he called them, 'actions') entitled *Celtic* (**Celtic**). From the lower Rhine region, a formerly *Celtic* enclave, Beuys borrowed material for the installation by way of *Celtic*-Scottish Edinburgh, where he performed *Celtic*. Then he transferred it to the Alpine source of the Rhine river, to Basel and finally to Schaffhausen: back to the *Celtic* roots of the La Tène and Hallstatt cultures. **(Kapital)**. Beuys himself noted: "Getting the idea of the place clearly into the picture has always been recommended by Ignatius of Loyola. In Edinburgh [I thus acted on the basis of the] still existing mythology of the Celts."¹⁴ Later in Basel, i.e., within the sphere of the Scottish and Irish monks on the continent, Beuys added new elements to the action *Celtic*, namely the washing of feet and a kind of baptism, performed with the objects on view (**Kapital tub**). Not far from here, places of insular religious mission are located. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Beuys installed *Das Kapital* at Schaffhausen within the geographical triangle of Neuchâtel or La Tène, Hallstatt and St. Gallen, where the monks had returned to the roots of their own culture, enriched by Christianity. Beuys followed their lead. Beuys thus clearly worked on the topic of Celtic migration. This for him could be traced back as far as to the Indo-Europeans in the region of the Russian steppes, whose important traits were preserved by the tribes which later called themselves the Celts.

Beuys' and Joyce's Eurasian diagonals find echoes in the line across the continent drawn by Celtic wanderings. But these lines are not parallel. Joyce stressed coincidences between the Irish and the Ancient Greeks of the *Odyssey*, while extensively using Indo-European, i.e. Eurasian, roots of words and any language imaginable for his word-plays in *Finnegans Wake*.¹⁵ Beuys, on the other hand, took his own war-time experiences on the Crimean peninsula, as well as theories about the origin of Indo-European man in that area, as a starting point for his *new cross* or Eurasian staff (**new cross**), connecting east and west.

As something incorporating such opposites, Beuys artist was fascinated by Celtic Christianity, the convergence of Christian and pagan elements, priest and Druid. He declared:

The basic form [...] Christianity in its highest spiritual form [...] was only taken up by the Celts and the Germanic tribes. Whereas what passed by way of Rome was very quickly formalised and became the so-called church.¹⁶

Joyce, too, was very interested in the Christianity of Ireland. He tried to liberate himself from its overwhelming influence and, as he seems to have not been successful in this, to "secularise" it in his works. Joyce found religious and liturgical patterns and myths in contemporary everyday life. In his fictional average man, Leopold Bloom, he saw Odysseus and Stephen Dedalus, an alter ego of the writer, turned labyrinth builder and Jesus Christ. HCE, alias Tim Finnegan, the protagonist of Joyce's last work, *Finnegans Wake*, has traits of Celtic mythological figures; Finn is, after all, one part of his name. But Joyce, strange to say, was not a "celtophile" as much as Beuys was. Beuys knew about Joyce's predilections and reservations since he not only had read his works but also Richard Ellmann's comprehensive Joyce biography.¹⁷

James Joyce appears, not unlike the monks, to be a European exile, a quasi-nomadic "hare" (to use a Beuys image). Joyce followed the same diagonal across Europe: not only in the history of his own migrations but linguistically, by returning to the sources of Indo-European languages, taking along with him everything he found on his way. Like Beuys, he also called himself a hare - i.e. he almost did in *Finnegans Wake*: „the scut in a bad fit of pyjamas fled like a leveret for his bare lives“¹⁸.

Not only did Joyce live in times when exile was the order of the day for so many artists, he multiplied this notion. When living in Zurich, he went to the main station at the same time every evening to wave good-bye to the Orient Express, as if his dearest friends were parting. Did Beuys also subscribe to a nostalgia of railway stations¹⁹? I think he did. He might have thought of this train - or trains in general - spanning the Eurasian continent, when he declared that mysteries take place in the main station. (**Myst. Main stat**) This is what a postcard-multiple issued by Beuys in 1979 says.

Movement is central. The status of Ireland in this respect is one Beuys and Joyce did not at all times agree upon: Joyce saw the Ireland of his day as a country in stagnation, a country of paralysis - but later on in exile he conceded the Irish were the

most intelligent and gentle race. Beuys ascribed to Ireland the status of the "Brain of Europe" (**Brain of Europe**). The line "Brain of Europe" heads a list of the abbreviated names of Irish political parties etc. in *Das Kapital*. The artist often wrote these words above the contours of the island (**Fireplace brain of E**). They not only designate the early medieval situation but also the intellectual "capital" embodied in the young, qualified emigrants from Ireland who invigorated the continent, as well as America and Australia. Here too, Joyce can be seen as an ambassador and typical representative of his homeland and his love- hate relationship toward it.

In the Seventies Beuys lectured and exhibited on the island (both North and South). The *Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland* should be mentioned here, one of Beuys' most important series or 'blocks' of drawings, possibly dedicated to Joyce as the secret person in Ireland. We cannot know, but we can speculate that the artist might have meant Joyce as well as himself, and - for good measure - anyone who saw the exhibition in 1974 in Ireland.

How much Beuys was touched by the political situation in those years can be grasped when one realises that using the material he provides in *Das Kapital*, (**Kapital IRL**) a lecture could be organised on the political landscape in Northern Ireland. Six of the 33 blackboards on the walls deal with the political parties, terrorist organisations and cultural institutions in Ireland. On the other hand, Beuys' analysis of the "Troublespots in Europe" (**Kapital Trouble**) has not been confirmed. Like most of us, he could not predict German reunification nor the war in former Yugoslavia. Here he provided an assessment of sources for potential and actual emigration within Europe.

Beuys might have had Irish emigrants in mind when he issued a multiple with the title *Belfast 1975 (Belfast mult.)*, and wrote on it "Beuys lands at Carrickfergus after his historic crossing of Belfast Lough". Following a folk song, the impossibility of landing at Carrickfergus has become a symbol of so many Irish emigrants' unanswered wish to return to their home-country. Beuys acted as their boatman instead, while not crossing oceans as in the song but a far shorter distance: Belfast Lough. He did not like to travel too far.

It would be an over-simplification to speak about migration in Joyce's and Beuys' works and only mention the movement of peoples, prehistoric, historic and modern, not taking into account their languages and dialects by which migration can be measured. Even more generally, a language of flow, to use a term Joyce coined in *Ulysses*, and

flux, as in the contemporary art movement Fluxus which Beuys had an input in, are important categories here. It should be mentioned that prominent Fluxus-artists like John Cage were very much interested in Joyce.

Beuys allegedly organised a reading of *Finnegans Wake* in 1950. Even if this was not a public reading as the German expression suggests, this entry in Beuys' CV from 1964 tells us that he was aware of the fact that one should read Joyce's work aloud so as to grasp the rush and flow and the musical aspect of the multi-lingual text. The blackboards in the installation *Das Kapital*, as all of Beuys' boards, testify to speech. They all, as well as the grand piano (**Kapital piano**) and tape recorders in the installation, stand for something that is heard, at least potentially.

Sound waves, be it in speech or music need something to divide them and thereby create the sound. Tongue and teeth do this while I am speaking, and in a grand piano there are felt-covered hammers that make the strings vibrate. The axe, too, is just such a tool for division, according to Beuys. Many viewers have criticised the fact that the axe, an instrument of destruction, should be made so harmless. Indeed, it sounds intimidating to hear Beuys say that he in fact did not use the axe during his action in Edinburgh, but it was important to him that it was there. Why?

When I propose an interpretation Max Reithmann²⁰ has already hinted at, I do not mean to detract from the threatening aspect of the axe, but hope to explain why it really was important for Beuys that it become part of the action and subsequently of the installation: "Celt" in English means of course a member of the *Celtic* tribes, but it can also refer to an axe-shaped prehistoric tool, mostly made of stone. Therefore, dividing up sound waves or speech for a sculpture probably was something „celt-ic" for Beuys - and something that Joyce represents perfectly. Beuys presumably knew that the Celts are said to have retained traits of Indo-European civilisation for a particularly long time. Archaeological remains are not sufficient to retrace features of this civilisation today. One has to proceed like Joyce, and following his lead Beuys: You use language to draw conclusions about life. Therefore, if the term for a basic tool like an axe (celt) is the same as the name of a tribe, the Celts must have been very unadulterated.

For Beuys it surely was no coincidence that Joyce was born in Ireland. With *Finnegans Wake* he had created the literary work that treats language in a sculptural way, as Beuys understood it, by following its roots and thereby going back before the Babylonian confusion of languages. Therefore it is understandable how Beuys could

write that he himself wanted to "do" Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* "again", in the sense of a "New Book of Celts"²¹ (**Book of Celts quote**). Beuys wrote "C e l t s" here and not "K e l l s". This was, I believe, no spelling mistake, as is usually assumed. It was Beuys' method, exactly the one Joyce had developed in *Finnegans Wake*: it is a *portmanteau*-expression. I.e. Two or more meanings incorporated into one word or expression by changing the spelling to arrive at a meaningful blend. "Book of Celts" as an axe-book would, of course, still mean "Book of Kells" (**Book of Kells**).

Joyce certainly referred to this high point of his home country's culture from ca. 800 AD. It is even known which commented edition of reproduced pages he owned. The structure of *Finnegans Wake* and already the Dublin labyrinth of *Ulysses* with its protagonist Dedalus, named after the labyrinth-builder, have often been seen in this connection. I have already mentioned the liquid language of flow, as well as the link to the Hiberno-Scottish monks who penned manuscripts near Schaffhausen, where *Das Kapital* is installed.

For Beuys, Joyce represented the ideal „Western Man“, to whom he dedicated a large number of drawings; ideal, because he also encompassed Eastern thinking, and therefore again spanned the Eurasian continent diagonally. To give adequate expression to this idea, Beuys combined Joyce's initials (two 'J's) to form a yin and yang-signature to conclude his statement on how, in his own words, "there is a parallel and [... I] did relate to Joyce" (**multiple JJ**) (multiple *James Joyce*, 1984).

The main difference to be detected in Beuys' and Joyce's treatment of migration and the nomadic, is that the writer created in Leopold Bloom the wandering Jew, whose roaming has often been seen in relation to Joyce's own Diaspora.²² In this respect, once more, Beuys stayed at home.

- ¹ Gespräch mit Klaus Reichert ...
- ² Kramer 37: [S]elbstverständlich ganz bewußt und auch provozierend derselbe Titel, der auf dem dicken Buch steht: 'Das Kapital'. In der festen Überzeugung, daß da ein dickes Buch ist, das zwar eine geniale Kritik am Kapitalismus darstellt, dennoch über die Stellung des Kapitals keine Aussage macht.
- ³ Kramer 39: [Der Künstler fährt fort:] diese Sache provoziert Fragen [...] Und sie erfordert vom Zuschauer die Ergänzung nach irgendwohin, nach rückwärts.
- ⁴ Kramer 214
- ⁵ Kramer 10: Satie [hatte] innerhalb des Tonlichen eine ähnliche Bedeutung wie Joyce mit seinen [...] literarischen Ergebnissen. Beide versuchen ja einen Mythos aufzubauen, der sich bezieht auf den einfachen Mann [...] auf der Straße, ja sagen wir, das Proletariat von Dublin, was seine ganze Literatur ausmacht.
- ⁶ "The instantaneous deaths of many powerful enemies, graziers, members of parliament, members of standing committees, are reported. Bloom's bodyguard distribute Maundy money, commemoration medals, loaves and fishes, temperance badges, expensive Henry Clay cigars, free cowbones for soup, rubber preservatives, in sealed envelopes tied with gold thread, butter scotch, pineapple rock,* billets doux "in the form of cocked hats, readymade suits, porringers of toad in the hole, bottles of Jeyes' Fluid, purchase stamps, 40 days' indulgences, spurious coins, dairy-fed pork sausages, theatre passes, season tickets available for all tram lines, coupons of the royal and privileged Hungarian lottery, penny dinner counters, cheap reprints of the World's Twelve Worst Books:" *Ulysses*, 458.f.
- ⁷ s. Joseph Beuys: *James Joyce*, Multiple 1984. „Ja, es gibt eine Parallelität, und ich habe mich auf Joyce bezogen, weil ich meinte, daß diese Dinge, die das Weltall verändern, in unser Bewußtsein gehören [...] Beuys schließt dann:] Ich will damit sagen, daß dieses selbstverändernde Prinzip als Ingredienz, als Stoff, man kann auch sagen als dynamische Medizin, für mich entscheidend gewesen ist.“
- ⁸ S. Foto von d'Offay
- ⁹ S. Horst Bredekamp. In: InterAct, Duisburg 1997
- ¹⁰ Kramer 15.f.
- ¹¹ FW,
- ¹² p. 31
- ¹³ Eilmann 181, Schreiber 125, similia 233, Tisdall Coyote 14
- ¹⁴ Kramer 13: Ignatius von Loyola [hat] immer empfohlen [...], die Idee des Ortes mit klar in das Bild zu bekommen... In Edinburgh [...] agierte er dementsprechend] aus der dort [...] wie er sagte] immer noch existierenden Mythologie des Keltentums heraus“
- ¹⁵ John Bishop. Night book
- ¹⁶ Kramer 14: [D]ie eigentliche Urform [...] Das Christentum in seiner allerhöchsten spirituellen Form [...] ist] nur aufgenommen worden von den Kelten und den Germanen. Was über Rom gelaufen ist, ist ja sehr schnell formalisiert und zur sogenannten Kirche geworden
- ¹⁷ Kort, Klüser
- ¹⁸ (176.26, 27).
- ¹⁹ Kronegger 180
- ²⁰ Reithmann
- ²¹ Lieberknecht Interview
- ²² S. mein Beitrag zu Locom...