

Titelthema: Entfaltung wagen

Fortsetzung zu S. 25

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The capitol of Scotland – a hauntingly beautiful place situated between the Forth of the Firth (an estuary of the North Sea) and the hillside of the Pentlands – is home to the half a million people from all over the world that give Edinburgh its cosmopolitan feel. Anyone who has ever had the misfortune of mistaking a Scot for an Englishman will know that Scotland is its own political and cultural entity. Decades of devolutionary policies that led to the establishment of Scotland's own parliament in 1999 are represented today by a parliamentary building designed by Catalan architect Enric Miralles, located at the foot of Edinburgh's extinct volcano Arthur's Seat and next to the King's Scottish Residence Holyrood Palace. Since the year of its opening (2004) – when it was voted one of the ugliest buildings in Britain – this Brobdingnagian concrete forest has been the object of the kind of brutal Scottish banter that distinguishes the Scots from their English neighbours. Comments like 'If democracy had a migraine, this is what it would look like!' or 'I went in looking for democracy and came out looking for the exit!' are exemplary of the dry, sharp and completely unfiltered Scottish humour that is necessary to survive in a country that only has two seasons: June and winter.

In spite of the continual lack of sunlight and howling North Sea winds I immediately felt at home in Edinburgh the way I never had before anywhere else. Scotland, it seemed to me, was the cultural middle ground between Germany and England. The Scots' combination of directness and politeness for example made me feel like both parts of my heritage could be held together in agreement rather than tension; they could coexist. I was no longer half British (half English) and half German, but fully both! My English friends regarded me as completely British; my Scottish friends thought me a typical

'Shandy-drinker' (Scottish slang for English), my international friends (Americans, French, Iranians, Chinese, Japanese) treated me like one of them, a German visiting the UK. Being treated as fully one or the other by each of my friends exacerbated that radical sense of belonging to both Germany and the UK which Scotland had granted me.

I experienced this epiphany not only in my social life with friends but in my academic life too. For the first time I was studying the English language and Anglophone literature alongside other native speakers. I began to realise that maybe my initial decision to study English literature had partly been motivated by a desire to feel connected to that part of my heritage. So, as my sense of belonging grew stronger, I became free to pursue my studies not as a means of solidifying my cultural identity but in a way that let my transnational identity inform and guide my academic interests. As I took classes in other disciplines such as politics, I came to the realisation that my discipline pondered similar questions but that literature (and the arts in general) had the ability to give voice to people's complex political and cultural realities – whether citizens of one, several or no countries – in a way that politics alone could not.

Thus, after a year of epiphanies, friend-making, involvement with various university societies and, of course, intellectual growth I returned to Heidelberg feeling that I was not yet finished with Edinburgh. I spent the preceding year completing my bachelor's thesis, applying to Edinburgh's coveted master's programme as well as various scholarships that would help me finance this lofty undertaking. With the generous help of the "Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes" I found myself back in classes in Edinburgh commencing my masters in American Literature only a little over a year after I had left Scotland. As UK master's degrees tend

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to compress the content of a two-year long German master's programme into 12 months, the workload was immense. Between reading and annotating about two to three novels (plus secondary material) a week, writing regular essays all of which counted towards my overall degree classification, and simultaneously working on my master's dissertation there was little time left for leisure. Nevertheless, playing with the Edinburgh University Symphony Orchestra was one of the activities that helped me preserve the last vestiges of a work-life balance.

Over the course of this academically challenging and yet rewarding year my personal investment in the politics of transnationalism and my love of nineteenth-century literature found their academic home in the field of Victorian transatlanticism; particularly the study of how the Anglo-American relationship had been represented by and had itself informed American and British prose writings of the nineteenth century. While the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdown in March 2020 could not lessen my enthusiasm for research it brought with it certain unexpected logistical challenges to my post-graduation plans. Having been encouraged by my thesis supervisor to develop my master's dissertation into a potential PhD project, I had been planning to take a year off to work in a bookshop as I applied to various doctoral programmes. But those bookshops were now closed. Everybody and everything was quite literally in lockdown. What to do?!

After finding out that my scholarship would fund another master's degree if I could prove its relevance to my chosen career path, I decided to spend my lockdown and my 'break' pursuing a second master's degree; this time in 'International Relations'. Surprised that I had been accepted onto this competitive programme I was excited to refine my doctoral ambi-

tions by delving deeper into the political philosophy and theory of transnationalism. Little did I know that I would not be spending one but the next two years studying the subject. As another lockdown reared its ugly head, the course was taught remotely. Many therefore decided to intermit their studies until they could be guaranteed more in-person teaching. Realising that I was in desperate need of a real break and that doing a second masters was in fact not a restful use of my time, I too decided to take some time off over the summer months of 2021. While I was able to spend time with my family and friends in Germany, I also witnessed Edinburgh awaking from its pandemic-induced slumber. The otherwise bustling main street of the capitol, the Royal Mile, had been completely deserted the months of total lockdown and was now slowly coming back to life. When I got back to 'hitting the books' to complete the International Relations degree in September 2021 it was also time to start applying to doctoral programmes. After a frank conversation with a mentor who had encouraged me to pursue doctoral studies and at the same time warned me about the dismal job prospects in higher education, I made the ludicrous decision to only apply to Oxford and Cambridge. Go big or go home, I thought! If I was going to embark upon an extremely difficult and competitive career path, I might as well try to set myself up for success right from the start. A few excruciatingly busy months of PhD proposals and interviews, writing doctoral scholarship applications, and completing my International Relations degree followed. By April 2022, I found myself in the completely unexpected situation of having to choose between Oxford and Cambridge, having received offers from both.

While it certainly was a nice position to be in, the conundrum of having to decide where I'd spend the next three to four years of my life brought me face to face with the harsh reality

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that I would be leaving my beloved Scotland; the place that had opened my eyes to the joys of having two homes. I feared that permanently returning to either of my two homes (Germany or England) would once again trigger that sense of not quite belonging, that my growing into the fullness of both cultural identities was inextricably linked to a particular location. Now that I've spent the last two years outside of Scotland, I know that this was not the case. I carry its lessons with me. I carried them with me, when I moved back in with my parents for the six months between graduating with my International Relations degree in October 2022 and starting my PhD at the University of Cambridge in April 2023. And I cherish them today, as the second year of my doctoral studies ends and the third year looms menacingly.

My choice of Cambridge over Oxford was informed by what my chosen college had to offer as well as the prospect of working with a particular doctoral supervisor. Even though their rivalry dates to 1209 – when scholars seeking refuge from hostile townsmen in Oxford founded the University of Cambridge – the two universities differ very little. What is distinctive about these institutions is that they both operate via a collegiate system much like the Hogwarts houses of the Harry Potter books. If you are picturing ivy-covered ancient buildings with hallowed halls and pristine English lawns, you'd be right. Almost each of the 31 colleges at Cambridge can boast of their very own chapel and mostly ancient dining halls hung with portraits of previous masters and fellows.

I am at Selwyn, a late Victorian college built in 1882 and named after the first Anglican missionary to New Zealand, George Augustus Selwyn. While the choice of your college does not affect who you are taught or supervised by, it determines every other aspect of your Cambridge life: from where you sleep, how well you eat,

your social life, as well as the pastoral support that is available to you. And as odd as they may seem at first, you do get used to your college's peculiar traditions – such as wearing your graduate gown to 'formal hall' and chapel, reciting prayers in Latin before dinner or referring to the Porter's Lodge as the 'Plodge' – surprisingly quickly.

My doctoral supervisor is affiliated with Trinity Hall, Cambridge's fifth-oldest college founded in 1350. Having regular meetings by the fireplace in her traditional college office which overlooks a beautiful courtyard is an added bonus to the world-class guidance I receive at the hands of my supervisor's expertise in the fields of literature and law. Prof. Dr. Jan-Melissa Schramm – who in spite of her wonderfully German name hails from the land down under (Australia) – works on the cultural relations between law and the humanities. Having worked as a lawyer before completing her PhD in English literature, my supervisor's interdisciplinary insights have been a great asset to my doctoral project which seeks to amalgamate the study of international cultural relations with that of literature.

In addition to finding many wonderful new friends, one of the biggest joys of this Cambridge journey thus far has been the ever-increasing understanding that my past struggles with cultural identity have brought me to this very point. I can see now that my experiences of 'Heimatsurlaub' have not only made me who I am today but allow me to write more authoritatively about the experiences of cultural and national identity formation depicted in the very writings my doctoral thesis explores. I know now that 'Heimatsurlaub' captures that 'self' and 'other' or 'home' and 'abroad' are inextricably linked and that – to quote another great American author James Baldwin – 'home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition'.

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