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'Broken North'

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SLIDE1

SLIDE2

This paper touches on ideas of wilderness in the North and in particular visiting artists and writers. There's a connection with my earlier article on Scottish landscape *Contemporary Scottish Art and the Landscape of Abandonment* for Visual Culture in Britain. That article discussed how a north directed journey towards an empty landscape is a common theme in contemporary visual art, not just in Scottish art, and one imbued with an intangible sense of an *abandoned* landscape. What I didn't say then was while there is always the opportunity of a *further* North. For the Northern visitor *the ideal* is that the North offers up a place of *personal* arrival which has no 'beyond', ie a place one need not go beyond, and that seemingly what needs to be left behind can be left behind.

So a northern pilgrimage, if you like, is a transit from one edge to another edge, [SLIDE3] or centrifugally¹ from Centre to Edge, but in a frame of personal reference the hope is usually that by going North to explore and create one will go just beyond that personal frame, or 'beyond an edge'. i.e. what is to be abandoned is the prior self, free from distraction or diversion, and closer towards an idea of authentic existence. If this is sounding very much like I'm describing the shore to shore qualities of island experience then that's correct.

So in this context what do I mean by Broken North? Among other things I'm intrigued by Heather Clark's article 'Leaving Barra, Leaving Inishmore' for *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 2009, here she describes how Louis MacNeice, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon were drawn to Gaelic-speaking islands, and that these writers sought an 'imaginative withdrawal from territory . . . [seeking] a basic human community which might transcend and replace tribalism and triumphalism.' However as she goes on to argue withdrawal to a northern pastoral island is a type of disengagement which is prone to failure, and these writers as having arrived at an apolitical pastoral. They are in effect suspended between the points of arrival and departure. She describes how

Embedded, then, in these poets' seemingly apolitical pastorals is a subtext of engagement versus disengagement, home versus exile. For to live on an island is to disengage oneself from turbulent political, economic and cultural realities; islands beckon as places where one might, as Mahon writes in 'Rathlin' be 'through with history.' Yet these writers realise, by the end of their island sojourns, that such a hope is a fantasy.

So where withdrawal and disengagement is the intention of a Northern pilgrimage this is what I mean by Broken North, and if meant in an existential way, conversely its opposite pole is true North. There is the inescapability of self and memory. And then that the Northern terrain is difficult, and then there is that interesting problem that people actually live there. MacNeice's self-castigation of his own attempt at Northern island engagement is rewarding, he described his book 1938 *I Crossed the Minch* as 'of an outsider who has treated frivolously what he could not assess on its merits'.

[SLIDE4] So the key here is slow and long-term engagement with the North, and pilgrimage rather than visit, and what that means in the context of creative arts. There are numerous productive literary encounters with the Gaelic islands, one which is

interesting me greatly is how George Orwell devised a pastoral existence following the end of the Second World War and the advent of the Cold War, in a large farmhouse – Barnhill - in the remote northern tip of the island of Jura, while writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Something changes in Orwell during this period, it's hugely under-researched. In Orwell's letter to Henry Miller in 1936 he deduced 'I have a sort of belly-to-earth attitude and always feel uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green and stones are hard etc.'ⁱⁱⁱ A little more than ten years later his *Diaries* recorded his life on the island as the beginning of an extraordinary world that his early death prevented from its fuller development in his fiction 'Last night saw the northern lights for the first time. Long streaks of white stuff, like cloud, forming an arc in the sky, & every now & then an extraordinary flickering passing over them, as though a searchlight were playing upon them.'ⁱⁱⁱ The writing since published from his time on Jura is futuristic, or concerned with autobiographical memory, diaristic, and systematic - measuring the patterns of the seasons and so on.

I made a visit to the remote farmhouse Barnhill on Jura to recreate the walk that Orwell biographers tend to describe as physically arduous and which Orwell frequently undertook in all weathers, [SLIDE5] and today Barnhill is an increasingly visited site of, I suppose, cultural pilgrimage. So what Orwell did there, and why he went there, and how it relates to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and other events that happened to him there at this time, is the under-researched aspect. I think Orwell's desire for authenticity was enmeshed with a need for a simple existence, that is implied in Barnhill's remoteness. And into this is an interleaving of personal memory, tragedy (including the successive losses of close family members), severe illness and then the backward-looking retrospection in Orwell's outlook at this time. But above all Jura's remoteness enabled him to confront other anxieties that his prior travels in post-war Europe raised towards the end of his shortened life. However what the biographers tend to forget to say, if they had visited the house one can easily see how Barnhill offered a new version of pastoral in Orwell's life, a genuine 'Golden Country' resembling those he had and achieved in earlier phases of his life and which are envisioned within in the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. (The bottom right photograph is a typically austere image associated with Barnhill, whereas the main image is a typical spring day on what is a beautiful place). So rather narrate this last period in Orwell's life as a return to significant discomfort – and to overcome self-imposed obstacles, I think it is a coda of contentment. He was engaging with and improving the chastening land, digging away at the rocky ground to grow food, and as his relocation to Jura was to be permanent, perhaps not coincidentally accompanied by a reconsideration of the case for Scottish nationalism. In his posthumously published '*Such, Such Were the Joys*' (1939-48) describes the 'curious cult of Scotland' he encountered during his public schooling, founded he wrote upon 'a cover for the bad conscience of the occupying English, who had pushed the Highland peasantry off their farms to make way for deer forests, and then compensated them by turning them into servants.'^{iv}

Jura itself does not feature in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is the gloom of wartime London suffuses the most oppressive environmental descriptions, yet incidents there described in his Orwell's *Diaries* do seem to have made their presence felt in the novel; his sister keeping at bay the foraging rats, there is the inexplicably romantic encounter Orwell has with a skull [Small image] in Glengarisdale bay may have had him thinking of the disappearance of persons from history. Other autobiographical

details appear throughout the novel. His hospitalization in Hairmyres Hospital outside Glasgow from TB and experimentation with streptomycin mirrors *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston Smith's loss of autonomy. But again he holds all these autobiographic connections at bay. For the speculation is that Orwell went North and was fashioning a life for his young family in self-sufficient preparation for an European post-nuclear existence, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* writes out those fears and realisations from a rural island retreat. There is slow engagement with the North, but within a pause and reflection on the coming nuclear age – a post-war nihilistic vision which the bombed out Orwell made from his distant position of Northern sanctuary.

[**SLIDE6**] I hesitate to use the word sanctuary or a phrase like 'breathing space'. The southern representation of the North and the ignoral of its resident northern rural communities is often problematic, nevertheless the continued attraction of an empty landscape prolongs the ideal of a breathing space but the emerging reality tends to corrupt this fantasy or falsity. A bleak passage from Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* illustrates its author's confrontation with Broken North. And so I'll explore this a little further. Macfarlane's 'intention is to make a single winter journey along the uppermost edge of Scotland' to 'be closer to the Arctic Circle than to the south coast of England.'^v Macfarlane resists moving forward to the Orcadian Straits and decides to ascend Ben Hope, [**SLIDE7**] the most northern munro. Unexpectedly He encounters nature's indifference to him on the plateau of its south-western tip – 'a blazing perception of the world's disinterest', [**SLIDE8**]

There was nothing, save the walls of rocks I had made and the summit cairn, to suggest history. Nothing human. I turned east and south, straining to see if there was any flicker of light in the hundreds of miles of darkness around me. Even a glimpse of something lit, however distant and unreachable, would have been reassurance of a sort. Nothing. No glimmer. [...] The comfortless snow-shires, the frozen rocks: this place was not hostile to my presence, far from it. Just entirely, gradelessly indifferent. [...] Here there was no question of relation. This place refused any imputation of meaning.^{vi}

But as *The Wild Places* progresses Macfarlane feels that his pursuit of an empty wilderness have been misguided, even nonsensical. An idea of an inherited and protective landscape emerges, 'tutelary harshness' as he writes of the Burren in Western Ireland, [**SLIDE9**] and writes

I had expected to find evidence of contemporary damage, contemporary menace, but I had not thought to encounter these older darkneses. I had passed through lands that were saturated with invisible people, with lives lived and lost, deaths happy and unhappy, and the spectral business of these wild places had become less ignorable. My idea of wildness as something inhuman, outside history, had come to seem nonsensical, even irresponsible.^{vii}

Recognising these nagging presences and older darkneses is a precondition of working with Northernness in a fructifying and meaningful manner. Joseph Beuys is a great exponent of this. **SLIDE10** This is a image from Beuys's first visit to Scotland in May 10970, the image is redolent of other 'ruckenfigur' works in German art, in advance of the pivotal exhibition *Strategy: Get Arts* in Edinburgh later that year. This was a north-westerly journey, organised by Richard Demarco, up the west coast

through to Glen Coe. There are several photographs of Beuys in Argyll, looking west (this one for example, with Castle Stalker) and visits by Beuys to Scotland's wildernesses, including Rannoch Moor. As well as a series of Scottish derived sculptures with landscape themes it's the presence of older darknesses and a reordering of autobiographical elements that are the catalyst for Beuys Scottish works, landscape is memory, both personal and historical.

[**SLIDE11**] An excellent example of this working method - but not from a Scottish context - is concurrent with the first Scottish visit. Beuys' *Voglio vedere le mie montagne* (*I want to see my mountains*) 1950–71 is almost an illustration of the ability that Beuys had to transform objects and forms into moods and anxieties, akin to trans-substantiation in religious ritual (unlike Dumchamp). For Beuys the readymade enables the artist to merge their personal world with this newer convention of art, and so the past with the present, including nagging presence of the dead. Hence the manner in which his vitrines resemble an anthropological collection displayed in a Museum. [*I want to see my Mountains* derived its title from the death-bed words of the nineteenth-century Italian painter Giovanni Segantini who died unexpectedly on the Schafberg, while working on his Alpine Triptych, *Life – Nature – Death.*)^{viii}] This installation is more domestic than many other of Beuys' cryptic masterpieces and more autobiographically traceable. His own furniture is arranged as a re-inscribed topography; chalked wording, 'Walun' (valley) on the bed, 'Cime' (peaks) on the back of a mirror. While it is concerned with, in his words, 'the mountains of the self' it is a claustrophobic work, with the air of an abandoned sanatorium, and its domesticity differs from the museum-like quality in other installations, as if visiting the house of a recently dead relative. (The furniture was from the family home in Kleve inherited from his then deceased father, or borrowed from his soon to be deceased mother Johanna Beuys (1889 – 1974)).

Joseph Beuys would utilise his sense of landscape, of loss and unknowability in a number of works made in Scotland through the 1970 and early 1980s. (Beuys would return to Scotland seven times, more than to any other country.) The idea of the work is as a repository of conventionally inaccessible memories is there in *Poorhouse Doors* (1981) *Celtic Kinloch Rannoch* (1970), *Three Pots action* (1974) and drawing *Runrig* (1962-72). [**SLIDE12**] In *Runrig* (The term refers to a type of arable land maintenance, most common in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, characterised by its ridge-and-furrow appearance) the Braunkreuz colour could also be meant to evoke the peat earth of northern Europe, given the title's allusion to farming and land management. On the reverse of the collage, the upper and middle parts are signed and dated 1972 by the artist, while the bottom part is signed and dated 1962 - a ten-year gap between various sections of the work. The curator Ann Temkin has observed that 'Beuys's integration of past and present, of drawing and multiple' [...] is towards 'reclaiming several early drawings to initiate larger series' (Temkin and Rose 1993, p.64.) and so the Scottish derived artworks often involved bridging past and present and the incorporation of Scottish found materials. The first of these is the little-known *Loch Awe Piece* that later became *Loch Awe vitrine* (1963-70). This I think is the most mysterious of his Scottish works. An intuition of an intangible heritage of a place. The curator Sean Rainbird has charted Beuys's relationship with the Celtic world, and wrote of Beuys's first visit to the Scotland in May 1970 that: 'Loch Awe provided Beuys with found materials for *Loch Awe Piece* 1970, the first sculpture he made using Scottish materials. It consists of a lump of peat, a small piece

of bog pine, into which the artist cut a notch, and a length of copper tubing that Beuys bent into a “Z” shape.’ (Rainbird 2005, p.44.) The *Loch Awe Piece* is completed when finally situated alongside a closed off box from an earlier period of his life. Using all the tropes of minimalism still it better resembles some kind of rural tool-box. Initially it seems unknowable, and its contents are like finds from an archaeological dig. And unknowable as the landscape in which he found it might be, and for all of nature’s indifference, - Loch Awe Piece is as lead-cold as a winter loch - it is as if he is saying it is we who bring meaning to it. [SLIDE14]

ⁱ I’m interested in an ineluctable sense of how the Northern landscapes hold the same compelling emptiness for pilgrims as that of the Desert. Robert Macfarlane touches on this relationship in his *The Wild Places* while discussing how the North-West coasts of Ireland and Britain were settled between 500 – 1000AD, during which ‘monks, solitaries and other devout itinerants’ sailed out into a wild remoteness, travellers known as ‘peregrini’ derived from peregrinus which carries the idea of wandering over a distance, and giving us the word pilgrim ‘*This Celtic Christian culture of retreat originated in the Ireland of the fifth and sixth centuries. Begun by St Patrick in the 430s, and inspired by the desert saints of the preceding centuries, the practice of retreat spread to what is now western Scotland and coastal Wales: a centrifugal motion, carrying men to the brinks of Europe and beyond.*’ (p.24-5)

He continues ‘*It is clear that these edgelands reciprocated the serenity and the asceticism of the peregrini. Their travels to these wild places reflected their longing to achieve correspondence between belief and place, between inner and outer landscapes. We can surmise that the monks moved outwards because they wished to leave behind inhabited land: land in which every feature was named. Almost all Celtic place-names are commemorative: the bardic schools, as late as the seventeenth century, taught the history of places through their names, so that the landscape became a theatre of memory, continually reminding its inhabitants of attachment and belonging. They migrate away from the named places (territories whose topography was continuous with memory and community) to the coasts (the unmapped islands, the anonymous forests) was to reach land that did not bear the marks of occupation. It was to act out a movement from history to eternity.*’ (Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places*, 2007, London: Granta, p. 24-5).

ⁱⁱ *George Orwell: A Life in Letters*, ed. Peter Davison, 2011, p.65.

ⁱⁱⁱ Orwell, G., *Diaries*, 2009, p. 461.

^{iv} Reprinted in *George Orwell – It Is What I Think (1947-1948)*, ed. Peter Davison and assisted by Ian Angus and Sheila Davison, Secker and Warburg: London, 2002, p.377.

^v Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places*, 2007, London: Granta, p.115.

^{vi} Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places*, 2007, London: Granta, p.157.

^{vii} Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places*, 2007, London: Granta, p.176.

^{viii} There is a link to be made here, with another anecdote retold by Macfarlane (p.77-8)
In 1977, a nineteen-year-old Glaswegian named Robert Brown was arrested for a murder that he did not commit, and over the course of the following days had a confession beaten out of him by a police officer subsequently indicted for corruption. Brown served twenty-five years, and saw two appeals fail, before his conviction was finally overturned in 2002. When he was released, one of the first

things he did was to go to the shore of Loch Lomond and sit on a boulder on the loch's southern shore in sunlight, to feel, as he put it, 'the wind of my face, and to see the waves and the mountains'. Brown had been out on the loch shore the day before he was arrested. The recollection of the space, that place, which he had not seen for a quarter of a century, had nourished him during his imprisonment. He had kept a memory of it, he recalled afterwards, 'in a secret compartment' in his head.'