



TÍR NA NÓG – THE LAND OF ETERNAL YOUTH

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I arrived in Grunewald with a mission. A clear mission. And I worked on it with an intensity that was unrelenting, throughout my year at the Wiko, every day of the week without fail. I applied myself to it immediately after breakfast and often worked on it late in the evening. I read a great deal about it, I sought advice from Fellows and partners, and sometimes solace when I hit an obstacle. Notwithstanding the setbacks, I remained committed and confident until the end. And then, in the last week of my Wiko Fellowship, it came undone. Groaning in pain, I lay on the ground outside the Villa Jaffé, nursing a

pulled muscle and confronting the unambiguous failure of all of my efforts. The cocker spaniel I had been chasing around the garden sat ten meters away, tongue lolling, ready to go again. After all the effort, the days and weeks and months of puppy training, the dreaded *Hundeschule auf Deutsch* every Sunday morning, the blasted little creature refused to toe the line. There was no denying it any more: the one project I had worked on more assiduously than any other at the Wiko was a definitive failure.

Now a reasonable person might well ask why a reasonable Fellow thought it reasonable to bring an entirely unreasonable puppy to the Wiko in September 2016. That such a question could even be asked – and, indeed, was asked by more than one of my Wiko friends – only shows that reason is a poor substitute for sense. Reasonable or not, the puppy made sense, at least in the whole scheme of things. And that is precisely how I came to the Wiko: in the whole scheme of things. The puppy made sense for the 9-year-old who was willing to come to Berlin, but only if she did not have to leave Geneva ... unless, she hinted, she could fulfil her lifelong dream of having a pony. I countered with a goldfish, we negotiated our way through a menagerie, then compromised on a puppy. Except that my partner, despite being the 9-year-old's father, did not agree ... at least until I committed to his one condition: that Her Fellowship or Her Fellow-ness (designation varying depending on the argument) take sole and exclusive responsibility for the training of the puppy. *Q.E.D.*

Her Fellow-ness delivered on her part of the bargain, albeit to ignominious effect, and the rest of the plan fared just as badly. Far from being lonely and sad in the opening weeks of school in Berlin, the 9-year-old demanded an entirely different kind of attention. Returning home from school, at an hour that seemed unsettlingly close to the time she had left, she bubbled over with talk of new friends and barrel-eyed fish and “mathletics”. Then, just as we became dimly aware that Anna S. and Anna T. might be different people, she fell out of love with both of them, lost confidence in her scientific and mathematical abilities, and sank into a funk. Enter the puppy, one might think, but no! By then the puppy was so familiar that the young lady wanted him out of her space ... and, therefore, in my space since the partner was in a funk too. Enough details for fear they might be used against me in a court of law. Suffice it to say that the puppy can be understood as a metaphor for the whole hectic mess of a domestic life I had uprooted and moved to Berlin.

Somewhere in that mess, the missives from the Wiko arrived, “inviting” me to attend the Tuesday colloquium, every single Tuesday that meant, and without fail. Oh, and by the way, they continued, there was an *Abendkolloquium* every few Wednesdays or so. Not

to speak of lunch every single day except Thursday. And Thursday, well there was an obligatory apéro and dinner, undoubtedly for fear that the Fellows might not know what to do with themselves. I had a pretty clear idea of what I was supposed to be doing in my early months in Berlin, with my sights firmly set on finishing a paper by reading some correspondence between central bankers during the 1930s. In the mornings, I looked at their letters and tried to make sense of what they said, but then I had to go to lunch, where I talked about the ancient world and art history and populism. Fellow Fellows asked me hard questions, big questions, about the economics of trade and the meaning of money, and my head began to feel like it would explode. I went back to my desk and couldn't remember what I had thought about that morning, or even what I had read, and I began to despair about ever getting anything done in my gilded cage in Grunewald.

Several times during those early months, I thought about running away from the Wiko, fantasised about it, even planned how I would make the break. And then life changed, slowly at first, but steadily, then definitively. Chats with Sa'diyya and Maria helped me laugh off some of the domestic chaos, and seeing Ashraf and Ismael in the early mornings and Chiara in the afternoons made life seem more manageable. Andrea, Vera and Vera, Funda and Nina helped enormously in coming to grips with life in Berlin, and classes with Eva turned my reluctant interest in the German language into outright enthusiasm and generated much more fun with my "classmates" than the Konjunktiv II would seem to allow. I developed a peculiar passion for German operettas and learned entire phrases, such as "Du bist die Welt für mich" and "Grüß mir die süßen, die reizenden Frauen im schönen Wien", that were of no apparent use on the M19. Whatever the BVG drivers might think of you, the M19 helped in its own right, given where it might take you. And, notwithstanding my newfound interest in German, eating in French proved to be a particular pleasure with Lena and Giacomo and Frédéric and Ibrahim. The puppy helped too, encouraging me to take lovely walks around the lakes and forest of Grunewald and offering an easy introduction to many of the biologists: Tamás early in the morning, Steve on his way to work, Peter a little later on Koenigsallee, Michael J. and his chewed trouser leg at dinner, and Jen and Jon any time of the day! Tine proved that social scientists could be just as passionate about animals as biologists, although Michael L. kept his distance until the bitter end, and Emily certainly wished that she had!

I started to enjoy the Tuesday colloquia and to relish the debates that ensued, not just as we fought our own disciplinary ground, but especially as the complexity of ancient history and law and biology became visible in discussions among their specialists. Conversations

seemed to know no limit, ranging from the division of labour in the animal kingdom to navigation in the ancient world and financialisation and the history of cities and mystics and Austerlitz and so much more besides. And that was just the Fellows! I came to love Thursday evenings for the partners it lured to the table, its more relaxed ambience, and the wonderful conversations we had over dinner.

My curiosity began to reawaken, and I started to learn in a way I hadn't learned for a long time, the way you learn only when you don't really know where you're going. Fine and good, one might say, but what about the intellectual objectives I had for my year at the Wiko? How about the project I was planning to work on, not to mention that paper I was supposed to finish? Well, after a certain point, I began to think that maybe I needed to stop fobbing off questions about money and trade and start thinking a bit more deeply about them so I could offer something other than pat answers. And, since my project for Wiko was on the role of capital in capitalism, that helped me go back to basics to think about capital and profit and interest. The virtue of my project was that its scope was so immodest that nobody really expected me to finish it, but I did manage to make more progress on it than I had ever thought possible.

Working on my project led me to spend a great deal of time reading and thinking about a concept that preoccupies many economists, the concept of productivity. If an economist is asked to explain what productivity means (say, for example, at a Wiko lunch!), she will tell you that it is the relationship between the inputs used in a production process and the outputs it generates. If pressed, she will follow up with a simple example, a particular favourite being a tale about men digging holes with spades. In truth, the physical productivity that such illustrations evoke is not exactly what productivity means in economics, so they are usually qualified by saying that the value of output matters as well as its quantity.

Straightforward enough on the face of it, perhaps, but I spent a great deal of time delving into the problems concealed behind the apparent simplicity of economic notions of productivity. Most of these problems offer few analogies of broader interest, but one of them strikes me as potentially appropriate in this context. From an economist's perspective, you can be productive by producing more output or better output for every hour you spend working. In academia, where there is a veritable obsession with productivity, we are familiar with these possibilities too, and, certainly, being productive at the Wiko can be understood in these terms. What economic notions of productivity do not allow for, however, is the possibility of being productive without generating any output at all. What

the Wiko made possible for me was one of the most creative years of my intellectual life precisely because it released me from the pressure, much of it self-inflicted, of producing.

I think that is what Rogers meant during the introductory meeting of the Fellows when he encouraged us to use our year at the Wiko to break out of our “productivist” routines. He was teased mercilessly thereafter, as we took stock of his own prodigious output, but for me he hit the nail right on the head. The possibilities of Wiko took time for me to realize, of course, and I remained firmly in my rut for the initial months. I was used to three hours here, and two hours there, snatched between meetings and classes to work on my research. Little wonder then if I used that time to produce text and tables and graphs for articles and chapters that made me feel effective and buffered my frustration at the noisiness of academic life. Still, I envied my graduate students, as they messed around reading anything and everything, without any idea of where they might be going. I castigated them when they complained about their confusion, telling them these might be the best years of their academic lives, no doubt because I felt mine were behind me. I comforted myself with the notion that I was better at research than I had been before, that I knew how to identify a question and answer it in shorter order than graduate students could. There was truth in that, of course, but there was no denying that I was on a kind of intellectual treadmill.

After a few months at the Wiko, I stepped off it, tentatively at first, then with more confidence. I stopped reading with my usual focus and purpose and allowed myself to get distracted. Various people at the Wiko encouraged my distraction, the Rector in the first instance, Daniel and Thorsten too, as well as Katharina, Sophia, Kathrin, Uta, and Francisco. I followed up on hunches I’d had for years and didn’t worry too much when some of them turned out to be far-fetched. I plunged into new literatures, in one case spending weeks reading for a project I was sure I’d undertake, only to drop it because it was so phenomenally boring. And, shock and horror, I sometimes stopped writing and reading altogether, allowing myself time to think! Of course, when you’re as obsessive as I am, the wheels keep turning anyway, but now they turned in new directions. I continue to be animated by the project I took to the Wiko, but I could never have imagined that it would take the shape it has now.

I left the Wiko intellectually refreshed and renewed, ready for the treadmill once again, albeit a different one now. I pulled out the paper that I had not managed to finish in Grunewald and I completed it in a week, working steadily on it for three hours every afternoon. When I looked down at the finished version, with its impeccable footnotes, I

felt a sense of accomplishment. Yet, somehow, I could not resist another feeling, one that made my heart sink a little, with a sense of paradise lost.

Well, in truth, the metaphor of paradise seems a bit overwrought now that I am back in the real world with two feet very much on the ground. Even the dog has settled down, impressing Geneva's dog owners with his ostensibly Germanic discipline, but they do have serious trouble with his name. The pronunciation of Oisín was a challenge at the Wiko too. At least that was true for almost everyone except Claire, since she grew up, as I did, with the legend of Oisín and Tír na nÓg.

Oisín was a great warrior and poet who fell in love with Niamh of the Golden Hair. She brought him on a magical horse to her home in Tír na nÓg – the Land of Eternal Youth – and there they lived happily together. However, after a few years, Oisín became homesick for Ireland and wanted to visit his people there. Niamh agreed to let him go on her magical horse but she warned him that if he ever touched the soil of Ireland, he would never be able to return to Tír na nÓg. When Oisín arrived in Ireland he found that hundreds of years had passed and his clan had long gone. The Irish people had become weak and poor and, filled with compassion, Oisín tried to help some of them move a stone. As he bent to lift it, he fell from his horse, and instantly became an extremely old man. As Niamh had forewarned, he never returned to Tír na nÓg. The legend can be used as a metaphor in many different ways – men have tended to see it as a warning against the lures of beautiful women, women invoke it as a warning against men who do not listen to their good advice – but in choosing Tír na nÓg as the title of my entry, I had a different metaphor in mind.