Interview

"BEING INSIDE A SMITHY OF CREATIVITY" AN INTERVIEW WITH REGI CLAIRE

For a comprehensive reader, contemporary Scottish fiction displays an affluence of styles, an unprecedented diversity of forms, foregrounding a distinctive literary force and maturity, asserting Scotland's newly regained political and artistic status.

At a closer examination, one might perceive four dimensions when dealing with Scottish fiction in the latest decades, which reveals so much creative energy and a thorough rejuvenation of both authors' and readers' interest for this literary category. First of all, one can notice the tendency to reconcile and juxtapose, adapt and challenge conventional views with new visions, asserting the heteroglossic feature of tradition seen as a combination meant to render the national imagination, that is "the space in which a dialogue is in process between the various pressures and inheritances that constitute, by the nature of the issues which they foreground, and by the reiteration of elements of the past, a dialogue which is unique to the particular place" (Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel. Narrative and National Imagination,* Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p.31). It has been accurately demonstrated by the novels of George Mackay Brown or Emma Tennant in which legends and myths are reassessed now out of a shared awareness of the Scottish basic tradition of storytelling, of a deep concern for this archaic heritage and a special delight in using Scottish material in a Scottish setting in order to display an imaginary, still recognisable, world.

There is also an obvious tendency to incorporate the wave of experiment and innovation in a coherent framework, exploring the spread issues and getting to a real contest of the imaginative challenges with traditional narratives, as in the novels of Alasdair Gray or Janice Galloway whose texts become "an inner dialogue of competing voices and languages, a heteroglossic space in which the self is defined not by its unity but by its multiplicity" (Cairns Craig, *op.cit.*,p.103).

Asserting Scottishness remains one of the dominant criteria in sharply defining a cultural self-expression emerged from a long history of despair of being deprived of the national identity preserved by traditions, settings, and a variety of discourses which constitute "the space that is the imagining of Scotland and Scotland's imagination" (Cairns Craig, *op.cit.*,p.33). The challenge of Scottishness pervades most of the contemporary novels serving the cultural and political dilemmas of the country; authentic subjects for many Scottish writers are to emerge from "deracination and spiritual homelessness, as well as from the opinions and perspectives of a minority within a broadly-defined society" (Douglas Dunn, *Divergent Scottishness : William Boyd, Allan Massie, Ronald Frame, in The Scottish Novels since the Seventies,* edited by Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson, Edinburgh University Press, 1993,p.156), thus validating the Scottish experience. The writings of Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, bear the vernacular energies provided by exposing problems of social class, political belief, national issues, as well as much freedom of imagination encouraged by the contemporary experiments, namely the postmodern attempt "to negotiate the space between centres and margins in ways that acknowledge difference and its challenge to any supposedly monolithic culture" (Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction,* London, Routledge, 1988, p. 198).

A crucial characteristic of the Scottish novel today is the question of the narrative voice and "how far this can faithfully reflect the realities of several forms of non-English Scottish speech and syntax without unduly limiting the writer's potential audience" (Gavin Wallace, *Voices in Empty Houses: The Novel of Damaged Identity, in The Scottish Novel since the Seventies,* p.221), the attempt to mediate the relation between the system of a unitary language and the individual speaking in this language, in Bakhtin's view. James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, William McIlvanney, Elspeth Barker, Irvine Welsh see language as the basis of the narrator's search to define a different subjectivity and to thematize this difference as an ex-centricity provided by "contextualization or positioning in relation to plural others" (Linda Hutcheon, *op.cit.,* p.67). The narrative voice should find a way of fusion between the use of a dialect that can become an effective mode of narration itself and the challenge to standard English uniformity, a reconciliation between two sets of values "forced into an equivalence in which they articulate for each other" (Gavin Wallace, *op.cit.*, p.221).

This huge historical and linguistic heritage is constantly reworked and re-evaluated by a category of writers, such as Shena Mackay, William Boyd, Muriel Spark, or Allan Massie, whose fiction might not be "about" Scotland but reflects its departure from a Scottish vernacular impulse, insisting on "the imagination's freedom from the nationality whose constraints might even have encouraged the necessity of making the choice" (Douglas Dunn, *op.cit.* p.169); it displays the elusive syndrome of Scottishness simultaneously transcending the boundaries and narrowings of the traditionally Caledonian issues, reshaping and re-coding the haunts of the past into new histories.

Mapping the dominant features of the contemporary narrative discourse, one might nevertheless notice a relatively new tendency meant to foreground the multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality that make up the concept of difference, namely the presence of several newcomers on the Scottish literary stage, a silent group, emerged from the global migration and ethnic intermingling that we all witness nowadays. In our opinion, **Regi Claire** is one of those writers who contribute to the hybridization of contemporary Scottish prose by trans-planting personal Swiss experiences on Caledonian territories. She was born and brought up in Munchwilen, Thurgau, attended grammar school in Frauenfeld, Thurgau, studied English and German at Zurich University, had various

jobs (secretary, translator, teacher) and completed her Ph.D. research in the English Department of Zurich University. Her Swiss experience got challenged during her exchange scholarship at the University of Aberdeen (1983-1984) after having won a semester prize for a paper on Charles Dickens, and mostly since summer 1993 when she became resident in Edinburgh and married the Scottish poet and author, Ron Butlin. She is a member of Scottish PEN and a client of the London-based literary agent Shirley Stewart. In 1995 she won the 10th Anniversary Short Story competition for previously unpublished authors, organized by *Edinburgh Review*; the success was followed by her stories being published in Scottish and English literary magazines, some of them translated into Hungarian and Romanian (in the literary magazine *Unu* in Oradea). In 1997 she gets the Scottish Arts Council Writer's Bursary; in 1998 she has her first collection of stories, *Inside-Outside* published and it is shortlisted for the 1999 Saltire First Book Award. Her first novel, *The Beauty Room* is published by Polygon in Edinburgh, in May 2002, after sections of the book had been published as work-in-progress in *Neonlit:* TIME OUT *Book of New Writing* (Vol.2). As an author, between 1999 and 2000, she featured in a series on contemporary writers on Scottish television, she read in Switzerland, Scotland (at the Scottish Book Town Festival in 2001 and at the Edinburgh International Book festival in 2002), in Hungary (a conference organized by the British Council). In 2002, she got the Writer's Bursary from the Department of education and Culture of Thurgau Canton in her homeland and this year, she got a Writer's Bursary for her second novel, *Women Without Men* from Pro Helvetia (Swiss Arts Council). She shared Ron Butlin's Creative Writing workshops in Bahrain in 2002, organized by the British Council.

Our electronic interview is meant to introduce Regi to potential Romanian readers.

M.D.: *Readers are always enticed to find out details about artists' lives in order to discover the "real" person behind the pages of a work, to get familiar with names and places and things that make up an author's milieu.*

REGI CLAIRE : My real name is Regula Butlin-Staub. I was born and bred in Switzerland, and my mother tongue is Swiss German Ever since I was a little girl reading Red-Indian action adventures with a love interest, I had dreamt of becoming a writer, yet never dared. Instead, I followed the academic route and started, rather half-heartedly, on a Ph.D. about Graham Swift. But then came my marriage to the Scottish poet and author Ron Butlin in 1993. It happened like a bolt out of the blue and changed everything. I moved to Scotland and, thanks to Ron's encouragement, decided to abandon my Ph.D. and give fiction writing (in English) a try. I chose a nom de plume so no one would know who I was. This nom de plume is not totally fictitious, though. Originally I called myself Yvonne D. Claire (Yvonne is one of my first names, D. stands for Dora, my mother, and Claire for both my grandmothers, who were called Klara/Clara). A few years later I settled on Regi Claire (Regi – pronounced like 'Reggae' – is the short form of Regula and my name here in Scotland .

M.D.: *Ron Butlin is a complex author, a poet, a "master of prose" and a playwright. He visited Romania as a participant in the British-Romanian Writers' Conference several years ago and Romanian readers had the opportunity of reading his poems and short stories as they had been translated and published in literary magazines, or, the lucky ones could even meet him. What is it like to be a family of writers?*

R.C.: It's rather intriguing, a bit like being inside a smithy of creativity. You are the first reader of your spouse's work – work that's still glowing with the heat of the imagination that fashioned it. Malleable work whose rough edges need smoothing or whose smoothness needs roughening up. Work full of possibilities, angles to be explored. People often ask whether we're in competition. We're not. On the contrary, we try to encourage each other and promote each other's work whenever we can. Of course, it can happen that we both submit to a magazine or anthology and only one of us gets an acceptance. But that's life. One of the first things I have had to learn as a writer is to cope with rejection.

Living and writing as a couple can be a little difficult at times. I am an owl and Ron is definitely a lark. I love working at night with the moon and the stars looking in through the skylight above my desk. There's absolutely no distraction. And the mellowness of mind that comes with physical tiredness is very conducive to my writing. In case you're wondering: yes, we do meet – for dinner. Ron usually reads to me (we must have shared at least fifty books in this way during the ten years of our marriage!) while I do the cooking, which makes chopping onions a lot more exciting!

M.D.: *Most writers acknowledge a literary and artistic initiation as a fundamental issue in their endeavour. Do you feel you are indebted to someone? Who do you owe much to as a writer ?*

R.C.: In terms of encouragement, feedback and criticism, first and foremost to my husband. With regard to literary influences, I can only guess. To be honest, I consider myself very much a self-made writer. I have never attended any workshops or courses in creative writing and have never felt the urge to study other authors in order to imitate them. Authors I remember admiring during my formative years at grammar

school include Heinrich Boll, Heinrich von Kleist, Henrik Ibsen, Bert Brecht. Alfred Andersch, Max Frisch and Jeremias Gotthelf. During my time at Zurich University in the eighties, several professors (Prof. Dr. Peter von Matt and Prof. Dr. Rolf Tarot from the German Department, and Prof. Dr. Max Nanny from the English Department) made me appreciate the interrelation between form and meaning, the subtleties of the narrative technique and style. Nowadays, unimpeded by academia's demands on me, my favourite reading ranges widely, and wildly, from Dickens, Graham Greene, Rosamund Lehmann, Brigid Brophy, Jean Rhys, Carson McCullers, Toni Morrison and others to thriller and detective writers such as Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine, Tami Hoag, Margaret Millar, Ross Macdonald, Martin Cruz Smith etc. (I am afraid that for the last decade at least, I haven't read any books in German...)

M.D.: *Any reader could be curious to find out why you have decided to write in English, and not in your mother tongue. Was it a linguistic challenge somehow?*

R.C.: I suppose part of the reason why I chose to write in English was exactly that : the linguistic challenge of doing as well as any native and not being branded an 'impostor'. I love leafing through English dictionaries and *Roget's Thesaurus*, and if I was sent to a desert island, I would definitely pack the big *Collins English Dictionary* as it also contains etymological references and a wealth of historical and cultural information.

M.D.: *As a reader, I perceive your books as belonging to a person who is different, who shares a status of the "other", so well described by Tzvetan Todorov and other "migrant" writers, by your settling in Scotland, against a rather traditional background. How would you describe this life experience?*

R.C.: Settling here, I never thought Switzerland and Scotland would be so different. It was only once I started **living** here that I realised how little I actually knew about Britain. I didn't have the general and specific knowledge of someone who had grown up here. Often, for example, the names of public figures, past and present, would crop up in conversation and I had no (or only a vague) idea of who they were, which made me feel an outsider. At first, this bothered me. By now, though, when I go back to Switzerland, I am aware that I'm no longer quite **au fait** there either. I have come to accept my 'in-between-ness' as a positive force field that can be explored, and exploited, creatively. Not surprisingly, therefore, the stories in my collection, *Inside-Outside*, give voice to people who don't quite belong. They're about cruelty and suffering, about being misunderstood and manipulated. And always about the search for acceptance and compassion if not love. These themes have been further developed in my first novel, *The Beauty Room,* which is set in Switzerland and deals with a woman's bid for freedom after the death of her beautician mother, with whom she didn't get on at all. It is an inner and outer journey towards some kind of truce with the living, and the dead.

M.D.: *Is there anything peculiar about being a writer in Scotland?*

R.C.: Scotland is a small country and its population is only about five million. This means most writers know (or know of) each other and there is usually a sense of goodwill among them. It also means that if you've got a feud going, everybody will be aware of it...

M.D.: *What would you have liked to do if it hadn't been for writing?*

R.C.: Possibly acting. I vividly remember how much I enjoyed a short spell of this in primary school. Maybe if I hadn't fallen ill the night before our performance of 'The Wolf and the Seven Goats' (by the Grimm Brothers), in which I played the main character, Mother Goat, things might have turned out differently... As it was, my mother consoled me with a big bottle of Coca Cola, which in those days was a special treat!

M.D.: *Is there anything special about female writing?*

R.C.: Special maybe in the sense of different from what their male counterparts write about, such as feminist, or post-feminist, issues. Also, I find that, in general, women writers portray female characters more convincingly, though not necessarily more sensitively. On a linguistic level, women's work is often richer in sensual perceptions. But I suspect this has more to do with upbringing than gender-specific predisposition.

M.D.: *What are you working on, Regi?*

R.C.: I am three quarters through a new book of short stories (*Invisible Partners and Other Stories* [working title]) and have also embarked on a new novel (*Women Without Men* [working title]). The latter is set in Scotland and narrated by an old lady in her eighties, who unexpectedly finds herself forced to deal with certain events in her past. (I was delighted to hear, a few days ago, that I've been awarded a bursary for this novel from Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council). Let's hope my agent in London will manage to place them with a good publisher when the time comes! (Sadly, my experience with Scottish publishers has been terrible and I would not wish to repeat it...)

M.D.: *What do you know about Romania? How do you feel about Romania?*

R.C.: I have never been to Romania myself, but both Ron and my father have. Most recently, Ron took part in the Oradea 2000 conference, and he was highly impressed by the deep interest of Romanian writers and academics in serious literature. Over here in Britain it often seems that quality hardly matters any more, only money and quantity (i.e. sales figures), which is terribly dispiriting.

My father travelled to Bistrița seven years ago, with an aid agency from the village of Eschlikon in Switzerland, near where I grew up. He and others accompanied a lorry load of German books for a new library, shoes and clothing , mattresses, tools, school materials, children's toys and bicycles, medicine for the hospital etc. My father found the Romanian people very open and warm-hearted – and he is still in touch with one of the committee members of the "fundația culturală Bistrița. Also, the Protestant church of Eschlikon donated its organ to the Hungarian – Protestant church in St. Gheorghe, where it was skillfully reassembled by a Romanian organ builder.

M.D.: *Thank you for the interview.*

Magda Danciu
University of Oradea