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Irvine Welsh in Sibiu

Sibiu is fast becoming a literary centre to reckon with in Romania. To say that it is becoming one is not to say that its interest in literature is a new thing. On the contrary, over the centuries Sibiu's vibrant literary tradition has produced book clubs and literary schools, in addition to physical books and periodicals, libraries and book shops.¹ The city has never been short of poets, and thanks to poet and literature professor Radu Vancu, it now has a vital young poetry club, Zona Nouă, which publishes its own magazine. Sibiu's university and many of its high schools have fostered a culture of creative writing and reading. In Sibiu, literature is cool. And since no poetry-lovers community can exist in a vacuum, the most impressive project taken on by this new generation of poets has been a series of international poetry festivals and author events.² Their latest guest is the Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh.

Welsh's is not the first recognisable international name to ring in Sibiu. Through collaborations with the British Council, the Romanian Writers' Association and the US Embassy, the English Department at Lucian Blaga University has invited, over the years, writers such as Niall Griffiths, Bernard MacLaverty, Willy Vlautin, Tiffany Murray, Robert Carver, among many others. Although award-winning and well known in certain circles, these are niche writers, with very distinctive voices, whose works are still to be translated into Romanian. German- and French-language writers have also been known to visit our city, read from their work, give interviews and workshops. And thanks to the Zona Nouă festival, poetry in just about every European language has rung in Sibiu's libraries, theatres and clubs. Additionally, literary scholars have come from prestigious universities to give lectures and seminars or participate in international conferences. Scholarly journals and literary magazines are published in Romanian, English, French, German, and occasionally even Hebrew, bringing together an ever-growing, ever-evolving world of creative ideas. Sibiu revels in its multilingual, multicultural, cosmopolitan

literary tradition and encourages underground and youth forms of expression.

This is the town to which Irvine Welsh was lately invited as the guest of honour in a literary festival, on a tour that also included Bucharest. It is hard to tell what he makes of Sibiu, but he notices that it is more middle-class, more like a college town than Bucharest. He enjoyed the energy of Bucharest; the audience there was more demanding, more up close and personal. Yet he tells his audience that as time passes he finds that his tastes run closer to those of the middle class – or, indeed, he quips in an interview, the leisurely upper class –, that he now prefers, for instance to have dinner in a nice restaurant, in mixed company, rather than get drunk with his mates in a pub. He has also been known to confess to having been inspired by authors such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Sir Walter Scott and Victor Hugo.

Himself a native of a city with a long and distinguished cultural tradition, which, towards the end of the twentieth century, also acquired the doubtful distinction of having the highest HIV-related mortality rate in Europe, Welsh made his name by writing about the chemical generation, particularly the scagboys, of that period. His 1993 *Trainspotting* (turned into a cult film in 1996) portrays a segment of Edinburgh's youth who are suburban, undereducated, unemployed, disenfranchised and disaffected. The protagonists, Renton, Spud, Sick Boy and Begbie, take turns describing the chase for the next dose, the gratification of scoring, the dehumanising indifference to dignity, physical integrity and affective relationships of the high, and the dejection, self-loathing and physical pain of withdrawal. Although an eminently urban – and, more specifically, suburban – kind of fiction, all we see of Edinburgh in Welsh's novel are the buses and taxis that take his protagonists to their next fix in pubs and dilapidated tenements. However, this network of vehicles and liminal spaces that point to the various marginalities – social, economic, cultural – inhabited by the protagonists ultimately fails to connect. The title of the novel is ironic, as trains no longer stop at Leith Central Station, suggesting the isolation and forsakenness of the suburb of Leith at the end of the Thatcher era. Cut off from mainstream culture, Welsh's protagonists belong to the subculture of punk and raves, whose rhythms, noise,

irreverence and profanity, along with the Edinburgh dialect, supply the recognisable grit of his style.

Welsh is not directly concerned with the political background or the economic causes that have brought his protagonists to find relief in this kind of self-destructive behaviour. *Scagboys*, his 2012 prequel to *Trainspotting*, in which he shows how the protagonists descended into heroin addiction, seems almost like the afterthought of a more mature man who finds his priorities shifting and feels the need to contextualise and mitigate; whether he manages to redeem or justify remains a moot point. Neither does one get the impression of great psychological depths in his characters: they are not permanently damaged by some identifiable psychological trauma, and in fact they seldom have complex personal histories. Rather, they respond to various sources of social and cultural angst by experimenting with drugs until they reach various personal rock bottoms. Some re-emerge and are able to reinvent themselves, others do not. They are picked up again at different stages of life in various other books, notably in *Porno*, Welsh's 2002 sequel to *Trainspotting*, now also a successful motion picture (2017).

What interests Welsh in portraying Leith's disaffected youth is the current transition from capitalism to what he calls conceptualism, from industrial production to virtual production. Not only do jobs become increasingly scarce – blue-collar jobs through outsourcing in the 1970s and 1980s, white-collar positions being replaced by A.I. more recently – but there is a general sense of the human being becoming redundant or inadequate. At such transitional times, Welsh explains in interviews and Q&A sessions, there is always an epidemic, and the current one is the endemic use of drugs that in the interim has been all but normalised. Welsh prefers not to use the term addiction in connection with this now almost casual use of recreational drugs, as addiction, too, has become endemic and naturalised: we've become 'addicted' to so many things, from alcohol to social media. He does not think of the drug habit as particularly destructive, although his novels dramatize the way in which it erodes relationships. It is not the inner landscape of the person taking drugs that concerns Welsh, but the social aspects of living on the fringes of society, the way the lives of others go on, the conflict with every form

of authority. Like the sense of redundancy in the wake of the ‘end of work,’ this rebelliousness without a cause reveals the drug user’s reliance on certain entrenched hierarchies – from patriarchal bias against women and gays, to relations of production or Scottish nationalism – for his own sense of self. Society’s criminalisation of drugs, Renton argues in *Trainspotting* and is echoed by Welsh in interviews, is largely a way of admitting its failure to preserve viable social structures:

Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae’s behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose that ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah’m gaunnae huv a short life, am ay sound mind etcetera, etcetera, but still want tae use smack? They won’t let ye dae it. They won’t let ye dae it, because it’s seen as a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. (*Trainspotting* 187)

A best-selling author with a huge following among young and also, by now, middle-aged, readers, Welsh has often been regarded by literary critics as a writer who peaked at debut. However, he is also a necessary writer, and his *Trainspotting* is a significant achievement in a number of ways, as Peter Childs explains in *The Literary Encyclopedia*:

Trainspotting . . . created a new international literary bestseller that was distinctly Scottish; it had as great if not greater success in its adaptations as film and play; it was read in clubs and appealed to the chemical generation; it encouraged music shops to sell fiction; it reaffirmed the potential of literature to provoke moral outrage; and it dealt with a subject and with an underclass that both society and fiction had largely chosen to ignore – in a dialect and a demotic language it had also largely chosen to ignore.

The novel’s potential to provoke moral outrage remains, along with its style, its most salient feature. Welsh is particularly attuned to the ways in which the current consumerism both holds forth the promise of availability and foregrounds the price. The proliferation of screens and media make us experience the world differently from how we used to: while they make vicarious or virtual experience more available, they also enhance desire for unmediated experience. Welsh describes his fiction as hyperrealistic rather than experimental, although he acknowledges that

there is a hefty dose of experiment that goes into the early stages of writing. This is probably what makes *Trainspotting* and a few others of Welsh's novels eminently adaptable to the stage and screen. His gift for fast cutting, soundtracks, and voices has also enabled him to take up a career in film making.

At writer events and in interviews, Welsh is charismatic, well informed and astute. In person, Welsh is taciturn and elusive. He has clearly constructed a public persona for himself, which he doles out with great equanimity. He wants us to believe that he has lived the dissolute life he describes in his novels, yet does not even try the famous Romanian *țuică* (plum brandy). When he has had enough of conversation he pulls out his mobile phone and reads social media newsfeeds and goes upstairs to his hotel room as soon as he has finished eating his supper. It is hard to tell if he finds the company tedious or has simply had enough of human interaction, having just entertained a theatreful of readers. He is hard to read, so one reverts to the books and interviews and hopes he did not have an entirely miserable time of his visit to Romania.

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Notes:

¹ Sibiu is the seat of some of the oldest libraries in the country, founded respectively by German (Franciscan monks, 1300) and Romanian (ASTRA, 1861) institutions. Additionally, the city boasts the first documented school (1380), printing press (1525), paper mill (1534) and bookshop (1557) in the Kingdom of Hungary, to which Transylvania was annexed for much of its medieval history. Grammars, textbooks, science books and newspapers published here in both Romanian and German contributed to a strong sense of local identity throughout Sibiu's convoluted history.

² The *New Zone in Culture (Zona Nouă a Culturii)* is a project organized by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania, and funded jointly with a division of the Romanian Ministry of Culture. Taking place between 18 September and 12 November 2017, it involved inviting a number of Romanian and international writers and their translators to speak about their work in schools and public venues in eight cities. This is only the most recent of a series of such projects developed by Vlad Pojoga and Ștefan Baghiu, currently doctoral students at

LBUS and prime movers of the Zona Nouă book club. For details, videos and interviews, look up Z9Hub on Facebook.

Works Cited

- Childs, Peter. "Irvine Welsh." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 1 Nov. 2004. Web. 26 Oct. 2017.
- Welsh, Irvine. *Trainspotting*. London: Vintage, 1995.