

Contemporary Scottish Short Fiction: “Caledonian Polysyzygy” at Work

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The title of this thematic issue of the Journal was inspired by the seminar of the same name conducted at the 14th ESSE Conference at Masaryk University in Brno in 2018. The initial aim of the seminar’s organizers, Milena Kaličanin (from the University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Serbia) and Soňa Šnircová (from Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice, Slovakia) was to gather and share valuable insights of the European colleagues particularly interested in the scientific field of Scottish Literary and Cultural Studies. Since a great number of academics expressed a genuine interest in this seminar, both the morning and afternoon sessions were arranged for the presenters and eager audience. The full articles of several intriguing presenters and audience members that analytically explored the concept of “Caledonian Polysyzygy” and applied it in their reading of contemporary Scottish short fiction are included in this issue of SKASE.

It was in 1919 that G. Gregory Smith coined the term “Caledonian Antisyzygy” in order to depict the lack of organic unity in Scottish literature in particular, as well as Scottish propensity to embrace dueling polarities within one entity in general. As the concept of “syzygy” denotes an alignment of planets, Smith’s phrase could literally be translated as a misaligned, scattered arrangement. Although the notion of the unexpected merging of opposing or paradoxical cultural viewpoints, or as Martin (2009: 84) put it “the idea of dueling polarities within one entity”, is not solely unique to the Scots, it is “among the Scots that this contradiction becomes apotheosized” (Finlayson 1988: 22). In recent times, numerous arguments have been made against the prevalent practice of reducing Scottish polyphonic tradition to a mere set of binary oppositions. For instance, as a reaction to Smith’s rather unwieldy phrase, Kelly (2009: 12) suggests a new critical term describing contemporary Scottish literature – “polysyzygy”, which refers to a diverse set of “multiple alignments, plural connections, a web of interlinked ideas and words” (Kelly 2009: 12).

This thematic issue of the Journal offers a multitude of analytical interpretations of “Caledonian polysyzygy” by demonstrating a vibrant thematic and theoretical diversity in the domain of contemporary Scottish short fiction. The first two articles, by **Rachael Sumner** and **Ema Jelínková** are focused on Scottish women writing that has lately witnessed a continuing proliferation. The articles by **Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen** and **Milena Kaličanin** explore the identity issues from the perspective of the most influential male artistic voices in Scotland at present. In the similar vein, the articles by **Eva Pataki** and **Vesna Lopičić** deal with the immigrant and diasporic Scottish identity issues, respectively. **Jean Berton** offers an interesting text-context approach in his article in order to discuss Scotland’s relations with the rest of the UK, Europe and America. Finally, a genuine voice of the Scottish short fiction writer **Tom Hubbard** is presented in his creative essay about “The Kilt” from his book *Slavonic Dances* (2017).

Sumner in *The Joy of Subversion - Myth and Narrative Economies in Ali Smith’s Novella Girl meets boy* (2007) validly claims that this novella represents a reminder of the ‘Caledonian polysyzygy’ tendency to embrace pluralities and contradictions whereby it transcends the binaries of past and present, male and female, local and global, inviting the reader

to step into the liminal territory beyond. The author purposefully draws on theories of myth to explore the way it feeds into narrative economies - the exchange of those stories which shape the patterns of cultural identity.

The objective of Jelínková's paper **The Concept of "Caledonian Polysyzygy" in Kate Atkinson's Short Story Collection *Not the End of the World*** is to harmonize the influences of competing national as well as cosmopolitan literary traditions as they coexist in a state of polyphony in the short story collection *Not the End of the World* (2002) by the Anglo-Scottish writer Kate Atkinson. Jelinkova insightfully states that modern Scottish writing continues to be haunted by the heritage of "Caledonian Antisyzygy", as well as the historical sense of being an oppressed nation deprived of sovereignty and, by extension, voice, through becoming part of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, within an already marginalised stateless nation, the author shrewdly points to the fact that there is a doubly marginalised group of Scottish women writers, whose voices only started to be heard as late as in the 1980s. In Jelinkova's opinion, far from simply substituting the authority of one dominant discourse for another, Atkinson allows for a multitude of voices to inform her work, thus invalidating the conventional antisyzygy in favour of what might more properly be called "Caledonian Polysyzygy".

In **Scottish Polysyzygiacal Identity and Brian McCabe's Short Fiction, Aliaga-Lavrijsen** rightly asserts that at the present time, the concept of identity postulated is no longer essentialist and monologic, like the one associated to the two halves of the traditional "Caledonian antisyzygy", but positional and relational, "polysyzygiacal", to use Stuart Kelly's term (2009: 12). As this article shows, McCabe's short fiction explores Scottish identitarian issues from a renewed multifaceted and dialogic perspective, fostering an ongoing debate about what it means to be Scottish nowadays, and contributing to the diversification and pluralisation of literary representations of identity.

Kaličanin explores one of literary representations of Scottish identity in **Disillusionment and Hope in James Kelman's "talking about my wife"**. By focusing on Fromm's perception of modern individual as a mere cog that fits into the grand economic machinery, the author portrays a husband/wife relationship that serves as a potent criticism of contemporary disillusionment with politics and harsh realities of economic stagnation in Scotland (and the world at large). The author notices that the only way to restore personal dignity in Kelman's writing is to be found in the domestic sphere relying on a meaningful human interaction, long forgotten in the unjust system operating on the free market economy rules. Apart from Fromm's views, the article also relies on the theoretical insights of Bond, Rich, Marcuse and Freud.

Pataki's article, **"Nae blond wigs in Glasgae": Urban Imaginaries and Affective Relationships in Suhayl Saadi's Short Fiction**, maps the atmospheric qualities and urban imaginaries of contemporary Glasgow as portrayed in Scottish Pakistani author Saadi's fiction. Through a close reading of "The Queens of Govan" (2001c), "Bandanna" (2001a), "The Naked Heart" (2001b) from the collection *The Burning Mirror* and excerpts from *Psychoraag* (2004), the author explores the characters' social practices, memories, visions and hallucinations, as well as their bodily experiences and mental perceptions of and affective relationships with the city. Pataki potently argues that there exists a deeply phenomenological and mutually constructive

relationship between the body and the city, through which Saadi's characters are both affected by and affecting the emotional qualities and urban imaginaries of Glasgow.

In **The Cultural Web of Paterson's "Scotch Settlement"**, Lopičić writes about Neil Paterson's best short story "Scotch Settlement" from the collection *The China Run: A Book of Short Stories* (1951) in the context of some traditional elements of Scottish culture preserved and persevering in settler Canada at the turn of the 19th century. The author explores a few facets of this interesting story in which two little boys steal a baby, in order to show how Paterson deals with the issues of religious devotion, family values, personal pride, orphaned childhood, kindness and love. The concepts related to Johnson and Scholes' (2008) Cultural Web model is adapted to examine the cultural environment of a Scottish family and community in Canada.

Berton in **Reconfiguring the body of Scotland** views Issue 35 of *New Writing Scotland* (2017) titled *SHE SAID: HE SAID: I SAID* as a literary correspondence of T. Devine's "Being Scottish" (2002), which enables him to apply a text-context approach in the given article. The aforementioned collection of pieces of short fiction introduces single individuals, couples and parents and children, more loosely connected characters through love and friendship, and characters belonging to folklore and legends — all being connected with Scotland. The author states that these tales lead us to open the whole collection of short fiction to interpretation: the family, or body, of Scotland, the broad community of the UK, and the broader society of men of Britain, Europe and America.

Finally, in **Absurdities and Epiphanies: "The Kilt" from my Slavonic Dances**, **Hubbard** sets his work in the context of other Scottish writers who have responded to the Prague Spring and the invasion, notably a poet of an earlier generation and longer historical reach, Sorley MacLean (1911-96). His article begins with a striking reminiscence of 1968 by the Edinburgh-born journalist Neal Ascherson, who witnessed and reported on many of the key events in late twentieth-century east-central Europe. Hubbard compares the ways in which the "little" story and the "little" poem attempt to deal with the "great" issues in life by referring to the story "The Kilt" from his book *Slavonic Dances* (2017).

In conclusion, the articles in this thematic issue of SKASE primarily represent an attempt "to portray and illustrate the burning cultural issues of modern Scotland and, hopefully, uncover the myriad of Caledonian peculiarities" (Kaličanin 2018: 1) from the perspective of Kelly's concept of "Caledonian Polysyzygy" as applied to contemporary Scottish short fiction. The mere fact that the aforementioned scholars chose a diverse range of Scottish writers and themes to write about testifies to the utmost topicality of this subject. The given articles are adequately placed into broader historical, philosophical, political and cultural contexts which is definitely beneficial to the complex task of exploration the multi-layered issue of Scottishness.

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In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2019, vol. 1, no. 1 [cit. 2019-06-24]. Available on web page http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS01/pdf_doc/01.pdf. ISSN 2644-5506.