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## Changing Times: a Post-Indyref view from Italy

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**CHANGING TIMES:  
A POST-INDYREF VIEW FROM ITALY**

*Carla Sassi*

The opening ceremony of the 2014 European Society for the Study of English conference, held in Košice, Slovakia (29th August–2nd September) featured a poetry reading and a talk by Scottish writer James Robertson, focusing on Scotland’s cultural specificity and quest for political independence.<sup>1</sup> This was the first time that an ESSE conference was officially opened by a Scottish-themed event (with the possible exception of the 1995 Glasgow edition), and certainly the first time that an ESSE event explicitly celebrating Scotland’s culture and aspirations to statehood attracted such a wide non-specialist audience and received such a straightforwardly positive response. Much of this was of course owed to Robertson’s brilliant and captivating performance, but arguably also to a growing interest in and awareness of Scottish literature/culture among European academics, as well as to the curiosity stirred by the forthcoming referendum. For many Europeans, the gradual discovery of Scotland as a distinct cultural entity has indeed gone hand in hand, in the past fifteen years or so, with an acquaintance with Scotland’s growing demand for devolved powers/political independence. If the restoration of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 contributed to a wider awareness of the ‘Scottish question, the unprecedented media coverage earned by Scotland’s threat to the status quo of one of the world’s leading powers in 2014 no doubt further boosted it. Never before had European media discussed at such length Scotland’s political and economic position, let alone its history, society and cultural expressions.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of and comment on Robertson’s talk, see John Corbett, “An Interview with James Robertson,” *European English Messenger*, 23:2 (Winter 2014): 67–73.

While the response of the Košice academic audience was undoubtedly only partly informed by recent media representations of Scottish politics and cultural identity, the impact of such representations, multiplied by digital technologies and social networks, can hardly be overestimated. There is in fact a level at which academic and popular perspectives are increasingly intersecting and even interacting – that of “topicality.” In a European context, the referendum has represented not only and simply a specific event in a specific country, but a meaningful expression of a wider process, deeply resonating with Europe’s current concerns over shifting political landscapes – an event that both triggered change and emblematically represented it. Scotland, arguably for the first time in modern history, has been seen not as a remote, eccentric “region,” but as a political epicentre – a centrally crucial expression of that same heterogeneous wave of change that has recently brought centre-stage the unsettling perspectives of small, “marginal” or stateless nations such as Catalonia, Ukraine or Greece. The prospect of a “yes” victory was seen by many, either with hope or with concern, as the possible beginning of a chain reaction, igniting the not-so-sleeping regionalist or nationalist aspirations that “threaten” the unity of Europe’s historical nation-states, and ultimately deeply question Europe’s status quo.

Scotland’s newly-discovered political topicality, its partaking in a new European discourse of independence and self-governance for minority nations and regions has arguably represented, since the official launch of the referendum campaign in November 2013, a privileged threshold into the world of Scottish studies. One would be tempted to observe that this is a little like dancing with the devil. On the one side it has made Scotland’s national specificities more visible across the world, on the other it has arguably tied Scottish cultural expressions to a specific political project and historically determined moment. On the one side we might expect that, by attracting unexpected visitors to a comparatively little frequented field of studies, new, exciting cross-cultural vistas will be ultimately opened, on the other, such newly gained attention might turn out to be a *feu de paille*, and interest in Scottish studies might indeed subside once the political project and historical moment have lost sense of novelty.

It is certainly too early for a proper assessment of the post-referendum impact on our discipline – but there is no doubt that 2014 has brought a fresh breeze of stimuli and a positive sense of “connectedness” into it, as well as (further) exposed some of its clichés and underlying assumptions. In this context, Italy’s response to the Indyref campaign can provide an

interesting ‘case study’.

It may be worthwhile to point out here that while a number of Italian individual scholars have engaged with Scottish studies, at least since the 1950s,<sup>2</sup> no Italian university has so far introduced a chair of Scottish literature (and neither has any “continental” university), and in the light of the growing cuts of funds and downsizing of the humanities in this part of the world one can imagine that it is unlikely that there will be one in the near future. Scottish literature is thus an academic field of specialisation (by now fully accepted by the academic establishment) within the wider field of “English studies.” As far as teaching goes, a tessera in the shifting and kaleidoscopic world of “English Literature,” that in the Italian compartmentalisation of academic disciplines includes, among others, the “new literatures in English” (with the exclusion of US literature, a separate disciplinary field) as well as Irish literature (characterised here, as elsewhere, by a longer academic history as an academic discipline). Those of us who specialise in Scottish literature teach then Scottish authors and texts as part of “English literature” classes, and according to an approach that is most of the times comparative – chronological, thematic or theoretical – and hardly ever purely “national,” as the present system does not easily accommodate it. At a bachelor level we address an audience of non-native speakers whose knowledge of the history, culture and literature of the British/Irish archipelago is inevitably lacking, or, in some cases, even non-existent (a *cahiers de doléance* shared these days by many European colleagues). Furthermore the generalist framework of Italian university education does not leave much room for highly specialist approaches even at the master level (*laurea magistrale*, a two-year degree course that focuses on a select number of subjects) – width of knowledge is traditionally favoured over monothematic depth, as the ideal of the Renaissance polymath, somewhat anachronistically, still lingers in this part of the world, with both positive and negative implications. Teaching Scottish literature in this context may be seen as quite an acrobatic feat – and yet, it can yield some interesting fruits, as an Italian (or indeed any continental European) class will have fewer pre-conceptions than a British one in relation to this

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<sup>2</sup> The first Italian scholarly text to engage with a Scottish writer – acknowledging his Scottishness – was to my knowledge Sergio Rossi’s *Robert Henryson* (Milano: C. Marzorati, 1955). The same author also published an anthology of translated texts entitled *I Chauceriani scozzesi* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1964).

subject, and will hold a different set of expectations, based on familiarity with a different set of social/cultural norms and practices.

As far as the 2014 Autumn term is concerned, my personal experience is possibly indicative of a wider trend. I taught a class I had taught before – on the British historical novel – and one of the three set books was Walter Scott’s *Waverley*. Scott is a difficult writer to teach – the novel’s lengthy and detailed descriptions and complex syntax (not to mention the passages in Scots) are difficult to come to terms with for a class of EFL learners and, more generally, for a generation of readers who are more at home with the clipped and simplified language of Twitter, Facebook or text messages. As all teachers must, I desperately look for popular “clues” that can make my subject approachable and captivating. As far as ScotLit is concerned, before stepping into a new class, I know in advance that most of my students will have heard of Macpherson/Ossian (actually they are likely to know a little more of Macpherson/Ossian than their British counterparts), Walter Scott (if they have read anything by him, it will, predictably, be *Ivanhoe*), R.L. Stevenson (i.e. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), Conan Doyle (i.e. “Sherlock Holmes”), and Irvine Welsh (i.e. *Trainspotting*). With a bit of luck they will have heard of Robert Burns. There are of course students who have a wider awareness of Scottish literature, some of them may indeed have spent some time in a Scottish university as ERASMUS students, but they represent a tiny minority. And while, as non-native speakers, they will not show excessive enthusiasm at Scott’s use of Scots, they will nonetheless regard the choice to inscribe a “non-standard” language/dialect in a literary text as a perfectly acceptable one. The diversity of regional cultures and dialects has always been a matter of celebration in Italy – a restlessly multivocal country. In Verona (by way of example) the two most visible literary monuments celebrate respectively Dante (perched up in pensive and austere attitude on a pedestal in Piazza dei Signori) and, at short distance, Berto Barbarani (1872–1945), a poet in the Veronese dialect, famous, in this part of the world, for his loving evocation of daily life and views of his native city. His monument, a recent addition (2004), stands in Piazza Erbe, the ancient market square, and depicts the poet dreamily admiring the view of the square, his walking stick resting behind his back. The fact that a small and quite inexpressive bust of the single author who made Verona worldwide famous – Shakespeare – is relegated to a corner of Piazza Bra (I doubt that many tourists notice it, or if they do, that they are impressed by it) tells a lot about Italy’s “provincialismo,” but also about its praise-worthy local-centric structure and resistance against

globalisation. To be fair, Dante is celebrated here mainly because he spent several years in Verona, where he wrote part of the *Divina Commedia*, and mentioned the city in his work – in a certain sense, he was a Veronese poet *before* being a national bard. Not all of my students (who are not all from Verona) will have heard of Barbarani, but they will be aware of the fact that quite a few Italian canonical writers wrote in local dialects – Carlo Goldoni (in Venetian), Carlo Porta (in *milanese*) and Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (in *romanesco*) among others.

What I noticed in last term's class was a wider awareness of Scotland's history and cultural distinctiveness, that is, beside the familiarity with tourist icons (e.g. kilts, whisky or the Loch Ness monster) or recent popular representations (e.g. Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*) that I have previously relied on, if only in challenging my students to look beyond them. Tangible evidence of this recent new awareness was offered in a programme by the students' radio of the University of Verona, broadcast in October 2014 and featuring a number of short interviews with randomly stopped students.<sup>3</sup> These showed on the whole a good knowledge of and lively interest in the Indyref campaign debate and of its implications – unsurprisingly so, as younger generations in Italy are (understandably) disillusioned with Italian “partitocracy” and harbour a strong desire for change, which they express in local rather than national initiatives and/or by looking beyond national borders for alternative socio-political models.<sup>4</sup>

This awareness of Scotland's history and cultural distinctiveness, and a certain degree of curiosity to find out more about it, made my job a little easier. I could count on a basic narrative framework (Scotland's history of resistance to the centre) which somehow related to Scott's *Waverley* and made it “topical”: Scott's romantic rebels handily resonated with many media narratives and visual images (which of course, in their turn, were often unwittingly shaped by the romantic imagination of Scotland). The *Internazionale* issue of 5-11 September 2014, for example, had

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<sup>3</sup> Radio FuoriAulaNetwork (Università di Verona), “Movimenti indipendentisti: Inghilterra-Scozia 1-0” <http://www.fuoriaulanetwork.net/podcast/movimenti-indipendentisti-inghilterra-scozia-1-0/> [podcast].

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., “Giovani e politica, una generazione altrove,” *Repubblica*, 17 April 2013: [http://www.repubblica.it/rubriche/bussola/2013/04/17/news/giovani\\_e\\_politica\\_u\\_na\\_generazione\\_altrove-56874518/](http://www.repubblica.it/rubriche/bussola/2013/04/17/news/giovani_e_politica_u_na_generazione_altrove-56874518/)

featured a cover page bearing the head title “Se la Scozia si ribella” and depicting a “wild” young Scotsman, flaunting his long, “unruly” red hair.<sup>5</sup> Such visual conflation of 19th–20th/21st century myths and clichés (from sentimental Jacobitism to Disney’s *Brave*)<sup>6</sup> has been often used by journalists to attract viewers into reading otherwise well-informed and critical articles (as is the case with the *Internazionale* issue in object). While this can indeed be a source of despair for the specialist, eager to move on to more up-to-date investigative paths, arguably, for the time being, it also provides a strategic advantage. Making Scott’s *Waverley* more interesting to a class of young EFL learners, is one possible outcome. And a quite remarkable one.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://static.internazionale.it/assets/img/covers/thumbnail/1067-tn.jpg>.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally the title was translated as *Ribelle* in the Italian version.