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INTERVIEW

Nothing is Important because it Happened to You **An Interview with Philip O Ceallaigh**

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Winner of the 2006 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, short-story writer Philip O Ceallaigh has been living in Romania since the beginning of the 2000s. After having travelled extensively through and worked in a number of countries (among which Egypt, Georgia, Kosovo, Russia, Spain, the U.S.A.), he decided to pursue a career as a writer. Nominated for the Glen Dimplex New Writers' Award, his debut volume, *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse* (2006) was followed by a second collection, *The Pleasant Light of Day* (2009), shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. His first novel, *Și te trezești râzând* ['And you wake up laughing'], was published in Romanian by the Polirom Publishing House in 2012. A special guest at Timișoara's first International Literary Festival, he talked about his work, ideas, methods, projects in a generous interview.

Cristina Chevereșan: Dear Philip, if you were to introduce yourself, as a writer, to somebody who has never read anything by you, what would you want him/ her to know?

Philip O Ceallaigh: I'm primarily a short story writer. It's the form I am comfortable in, I've always been attracted to, and somehow cannot get out of. I'm always looking for brevity and clarity, the kind of beauty you get with a short story: it's nearly like a little object, something that can be seen from all sides at once, not a labyrinth that you get lost in. It is consistent with how I see the world and life: not as something that I understand or can portray comprehensively. I am not looking to give a general statement or describe society. I am trying to hold on from moment to moment and construct a little bit of meaning. That is something I've always felt very strongly about: writing should be simple, not based upon abstractions.

C.C.: Did you ever think that you would be able to make a living out of writing?

P.O.C.: I thought it might be something that would happen when I had hair growing out of my ears. It happened a little sooner. I still don't make a secure enough living from it for my head to get swollen. I am aware that most people don't read or care about what I write. It's a very equivocal sort of success. Critical success has been very good; sales of books are not. That reminds one of one's place as a writer and of the place of writing these days, as opposed to the visual media, for example.

C.C.: Why Romania? What made you settle here?

P.O.C.: I think it was mostly an accident. I'd been moving around and when I decided to stop, that was where I was. I was wasting a lot of energy living the kind of life I had been living, moving from place to place and city to city, every six months or year. In order to write, I felt the need to settle, so I did. By the time I'd reached my thirties, the only stability in my life was the fact that I wrote. I realized I had to make a commitment to that; I'd be always frustrated unless I tried to take it as far as I could.

C.C.: Your short stories are placed in different locations around the world. Does place, space in general, influence your writing?

P.O.C.: I can't really know; I haven't had another kind of life. When you're in a new place, your eyes are wide open in a way they are not when you're stable. There's an element of

sleepiness that creeps into settled life. My first book was much more Romania-centered; people always wondered why I wanted to come here and write about their country. Well, I didn't. I didn't even write about Romania or Bucharest. I just wrote about my immediate personal surroundings, in particular the neighborhood where I lived for several years. It's a very personal, selective vision, and more. When writing about something, you are projecting your own preoccupations on what you see. Any city that you write about is going to be an imaginary space. Somebody else writing about the same place is not going to write about it in the same way. A person living in Bucharest ten or fifteen years ago will recognize a lot of the things that I mention, but they will do so at my suggestion. Behind that is really me using the city, the space, to talk about things which interest me.

C.C.: Which are the things that interest you most at this point?

P.O.C.: Firstly, simply how we manage to construct sense of life, even in situations which are discouraging or chaotic. Romania in the Nineties and the early part of this century has been, for most of the population, an experience of humiliation, discouragement, disorientation. My experience of living in an apartment block on the edge of Bucharest, surrounded by pensioners who have worked all their life and have nothing, a purely utilitarian and physically ugly environment, a country that seemed to be going nowhere: all these combined to create a tremendous sense of frustration. At the same time, I had my own personal problems, which might have correlated with what was around me. So readings of the stories in the first book might differ completely: a Romanian might see it as a very vivid kind of journalism, whereas someone in Ireland, who knows nothing about the situation, will read it as a story. In either case, you have to read it as a human being. I wouldn't be satisfied unless people who didn't know the immediate environment were able to read it as a story. A story must function as a story: as long as you are a human being, there are certain common characteristics.

C.C.: Is building a good story what you are most interested in, or is it character, atmosphere, setting?

P.O.C.: It's everything. No two stories are the same. I always feel I have to start at the beginning with a story. You never know quite what it is about. It is through the act of doing that these things are resolved. You can't start off with a formula. It doesn't work that way.

C.C.: How much of these stories could be characterized as autobiographical?

P.O.C.: There is a lot of autobiography. At the same time, it's not important whether something happened to me or not; it is my ability to make a story of it that is important to the person who reads. This is the easiest thing to forget for a young and inexperienced writer: you think that if something happens that affects you, that is enough. That it is a story. It's not. Nothing is important because it happened to you.

C.C.: Do you have favorite writers?

P.O.C.: I do, but not the same from year to year. I've been through Hemingway, Bukowski, Hamsun and Celine. I like visceral, hard writers, many writing from the perspective of the simple individual in some kind of a struggle with the society. I like such writers and stylists but, probably because I was influenced by them, I am now interested in authors like Bellow or Grossman, interested in giving a bigger view, a more considerate intellectual answer to life and history.

C.C.: Most of your protagonists seem to be loners drifting in a chaotic world.

P.O.C.: I may have been satisfied with that up to this point, but you can't keep doing the same thing, both in your relationship with the reader and in your own life. There has to be some kind of evolution. When I finished the last book of short stories, I actually tried to stop writing. I saw it as something negative, a type of compulsive behaviour, a reaction to my own unhappiness, a coping strategy. I decided to make life hard for myself and throw out all of my old ideas. It has been hard; I have to start again, differently. I have no idea how long it will take or if I will be able to do that.

C.C.: Do you have a particular reader in mind when you write?

P.O.C.: No. I see myself becoming the reader as I write. You have a very personal relationship with what you are writing. It comes from a very hot emotional place, from personal experiences and feelings. As you continue to work, it cools down a little, it starts to assume a shape irrespective of your original intentions, and you start to see it more critically. As time goes by, you see it nearly as something somebody else created. Your own experience becomes, in some respect, an external object.

C.C.: Does speaking several languages influence your writing?

P.O.C.: To the extent that I am conscious of the idea as something separate from the effect of language. I don't feel like getting off on language as a musical instrument that creates effects. I am conscious of what translators would do. I am looking for a certain amount of clarity, of simplicity when I am working. With language, you are not playing games. You really are saying something in the simplest way that you possibly can.

C.C.: Is there a language other than English that you feel at home in?

P.O.C.: No. For me, Romanian is a language of speech, not a language for writing or even reading in. I don't know why. I can read happily in Spanish, for example. I've never managed to achieve that comfort in Romanian.

C.C.: The city that you depict in various pieces is associated with aggression, even cacophony. There is a chaotic mixture of sounds, movements. You were telling me that your first book was written as a sort of a defense against whatever was surrounding you. Was it the city or was there more to it?

P.O.C.: Understanding is never comprehensive. It's always provisional. Most of the things that are pressing against us are distractions. Most objects are junk, most of the things that happen to us have no intrinsic meaning. Life in this century has no centre, the things that gave meaning to people previously are gone. There are no common points of reference, nothing to give life unity, wholeness, a sense of agreement. We get more and more caught up in technology, effects and noise that have no content. It's as if we were being constantly bombarded, but nothing is constructed. We're just swimming through the fragments. Out of this comes most of the discomfort, the anxiety that people feel. Everywhere people are trying to find sense in the way that used to be given by religion, by a certain symbolic unity that life used to have. I don't believe it still does. The sense of responsibility for the individual to do this is much greater now, but we are not succeeding. A variety of us are managing, but each in his or her chaotic individual way. There's not even a common readership, as there used to be. It is in the city that you see this in its most dramatic form. As a writer, it's easiest for me to represent this perception of chaos and the individual constantly under assault. Maybe that is why a place like Bucharest invites me to write about it. It's not actually that I am interested specifically in Bucharest or Cairo, like in the second book.

C.C.: Do you have favorite contemporary writers?

P.O.C.: Not necessarily. What I am talking about is common to all historical societies undergoing change. In Dostoyevsky there's the same reaction to chaos, characters who don't believe anything anymore. They are in rebellion against society because it's wrong and they must construct something completely new out of it. What Dostoyevsky is saying in *Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* is that nobody actually has the wisdom to do this on their own. You are not bigger than all the history that came before you. You can present a certain reaction to it, but you cannot overcome it.

C.C.: Are you also tempted by non-fiction?

P.O.C.: My next book will probably be non-fiction. I am writing about the Holocaust as seen by Jewish writers from Eastern Europe.

C.C.: Which writers do you have in mind?

P.O.C.: Mihail Sebastian, Vasily Grossman, Isaac Babel. Saul Bellow is very much an Eastern European writer who just happened to be born in Montreal. He grew up speaking Yiddish as his first language, his father was Russian. As a young adult, becoming conscious of what had happened in Europe shaped his fiction and gave it broadness.

C.C.: You have already won your share of awards. Are they important to you?

P.O.C.: I haven't won any for a long time. I love awards, birthday parties, people laughing around me, rather than being alone and miserable. So yes, give me an award! It's good to have a medium. It's hard to write when no one is reading you or you are not getting any kind of reaction. It's stimulating to feel people responding to something you write. At the same time, it's wonderful to be able to be indifferent to that. At a certain point, when I was starting out, I managed to write exactly what I wanted just by knowing that I was not going anywhere, I was completely ignored. Once you start having a little bit of success, you open yourself up to all kinds of unhappiness. It's never enough, there will always be people who are more successful than you, you never feel appreciated enough. Then you win the Nobel Prize, people are jealous and say that you didn't really deserve it, and you worry that you aren't as good as you used to be. You can make your life hell by worrying about your relationship to the world!

C.C.: Most of your reviewers focused on the story which parodies Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist*. Why do you think that is?

P.O.C.: Probably because he's so well known himself. His *Alchemist* is a popular culture reference, a spectacular piece of bad writing and silliness that manages to sell in absolutely every culture. Everywhere you go in the world - India, Iran, Russia -, people read Paulo Coelho. He manages to hit all the lazy spiritual buttons. I wrote the parody as I read the book, surprised at what nonsense it was. I'd read twenty-thirty pages, then I'd sit down, laugh and type something out. It was probably one of the easiest things I have ever written: it's probably not revised at all. I never thought I'd publish it in a book, I was just having fun. Some critic even wondered how I could include something as frivolous in such a good book, but a lot of people could get a laugh out of it.

C.C.: One of the stories I was interested in was *Walking Away*. Was there a particular life-situation behind it?

P.O.C.: That's a very peculiar story from a number of points of view. It took me years to write, even though I think it is the shortest in the book; there's no apparent complexity. It's the story of a man who goes to meet a woman one night. They have sex; the next day, he walks off. We learn along the way that they had met at a funeral. Originally, when I planned the story, I was describing a man who hears about the suicide of his friend and goes to the family house where he has hung himself. Later on, he goes to the funeral, meets a woman and imagines that he is going to hook up with her. I even had the last sentence. "He imagined he was in with a chance". For some reason, I could never write this story properly. There was always something wrong and I couldn't figure out what it was. I left it aside for several years, until I just sat down one morning and I realized that the way to do it was not to mention anything about the funeral or the suicide. Just talk about meeting this woman.

This was counter-intuitive to my idea of writing, i.e. you don't try to be mysterious and leave things out. You don't play games. I wasn't trying to play a game. It was simply that mentioning suicide in the course of the story was like throwing a grenade. It was too traumatic, it would've sent the story to bits. The way I resolved this, to my great dissatisfaction at the time, was "a simple solution to a complex problem". Ernest Hemingway defined suicide as "a simple solution to a complex problem", the problem, of course, being everything that we consider life. After a plane crash in Africa, everyone thought he was dead and *The New York Times* printed his obituary. There is a famous picture of him, with his big beard, holding his obituary and smiling. Writing about it, he came up with this definition of suicide. His father had killed himself; Hemingway eventually shot himself too. I managed to somehow incorporate that into the last sentence. Some people are going to imagine different things when they read this story.

C.C.: What about *Do You Believe in God?* Were you mainly thinking of commercialism and consumerism?

P.O.C.: I was thinking of a very particular character, a tourist in Cairo who wants to do good and gets ripped off. He wants to help out orphans, but an unscrupulous local manages to relieve him of his money and shortcuts his epiphany. I was quite interested in the character and the kind of vulnerability you can have being a foreigner in a place you don't understand, where you might look for a certain kind of experience that you've desired for a long time, perhaps project this too enthusiastically and let yourself be taken advantage of.

C.C.: There are multiple references to religion. Was it a preoccupation at the particular time you were writing the stories or is it in general?

P.O.C.: It was particularly at that moment. It still is, but when I started writing that book I was living in Egypt. All through that period I was constantly reading *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. Everything in existential literature - that people like Houellebecq go on about these days - has been written so much better and more succinctly before. What is the point of life when you know it's all going to end? What's the point of constantly repeating things which have happened before and are going to happen again? What's the point of getting carried away in passions that ultimately result in nothing? It's the most beautiful piece of poetry! You come to the realization that language is a kind of alchemy that gives you the possibility to perhaps not confront things which are unacceptable in experience, but at least get a little closer to them.

It is the same instinct that makes people put things in songs. Even if they are sad, there's beauty in the song. That's our experience of life: we constantly have to convert it, express it through some vehicle. It never sits there raw and undigested. You can't live like that; you must create something. I was reading *The Book of Ecclesiastes* as I was writing, with a kind of

fundamental humility, knowing that it had been written before, it would be written again and I was just knocking out a few notes as best I could. No reader or critic has ever noticed that and there is no reason why they should, but I come back to *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. There are quite a few quotes in both my books. For example, towards the end of the story with the monastery in Egypt, the protagonist is reading the Bible in the dark. The title of the book, *The Pleasant Light of Day*, is from *The Ecclesiastes*. Light appears in different stories, like the one you have mentioned, *Do You Believe in God?*, or in the last couple of pages from the very last story, *Time for Everything*. In the Second World War, a woman finds out she's pregnant. The latter part of that passage is a rewriting of a very beautiful part from *The Ecclesiastes*.

C.C.: Thank you so much for this interview!

POETRY

Ruth Fainlight



Ruth Fainlight was born in New York City, but has lived in England since the age of fifteen. She has published thirteen collections of poems in England and the USA, as well as two volumes of short stories, and translations from several languages, including the first book to appear in English by the eminent Portuguese poet, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. Her translation of Sophocles' *Theban Plays*, in collaboration with Robert Littman, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2009. Books of R.F.'s poetry have been published in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian translation. She received the Hawthornden and Cholmondeley Awards in 1994, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her collection *Sugar-Paper Blue* was short-listed for the 1998 Whitbread Award. R.F. has also written libretti for the Royal Opera House and Channel 4 TV. Her *New & Collected Poems* was published in the UK by Bloodaxe Books in 2010.

from: NEW & COLLECTED POEMS

by Ruth Fainlight

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Midland Contemporary

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If you stand on the path leading out of the village,
with your back to the airport buildings, the pylons
hidden, the bright motorway signs too far
on the left to enter your field of vision
and the last row of houses too far to the right,

the vista towards that distant line of hills
sloping gently down to the muddy stream
in the shallow valley that lies before you, gives
little evidence of the present moment – seems
a perfect nineteenth century English landscape.

But the moment you shift your head from that one angle