Introduction

The View from Ireland

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The theme chosen for this special issue of the journal *V(eliko) T(arnovo) U(niversity) Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, "Ireland Across Cultures," may initially appear extravagant when one considers that Ireland is a small island, separated from the European mainland by a larger island which comprises England, Scotland, and Wales. Yet, writing in 2008, Helen Ó Murchú observed that

> there is hardly a place on earth, from the continent of India to the small island of Montserrat …; from China and Japan to North and South America; from Australia and New Zealand to Africa, that does not have some past or present memory relating to Ireland: military, political, educational, economic. DNA research shows that, in the distant past the Irish were among the first settlers of Iceland around the year 800.Whether they were sailors, wives of Viking invaders of Ireland, or slaves is not known. The monks of Ireland spread their civilizing influence across Europe for centuries as centres such as Bobbio and St Gaul attest. In later times, the Irish Colleges were established. Some of the history of Ireland – religious, literary, military – is found among other places, in Salamanca, Valladolid, Paris, or Louvain (Leuven).[1]

And the writer has not even included the mass emigration to the New World that took place in the nineteenth century and subsequently. Perhaps, not too extravagant, after all!

Migration has been part of Irish life since the peregrinations of the Christian missionaries began in the sixth century to the present day and the literature of the country has reflected this. Inward migration has also played a significant part in Irish history and culture, the Irish – like the Bulgarians – having been subject to foreign conquests and occupations over the centuries, in the Irish case, by the Vikings, the Normans, and the English. But, unlike Bulgarian, the Irish language did not ultimately survive the foreign conquests as the dominant language of the country. Having successfully assimilated parts of the language and culture of the Vikings and the Normans and, initially, the English, the native Irish were dispossessed, as their land was confiscated, in the seventeenth century and the shift in political power which occurred following the Cromwellian Campaign ensured that English became the language of public life and administration. Thereafter, the decline of the Irish language, which had already begun, gained pace, reaching a climax in the aftermath of the Great Famine of the 1840s when death and emigration reduced the population of the country from some eight million persons to six and a half million, a disproportionate number of whom were from the regions where the Irish language was spoken.

Nevertheless, Irish, a Celtic language, is still spoken today, albeit by a minority of the population of the country. It is an official language of the state and of the European Union and there is a vibrant contemporary Irish language culture which includes literature and film. However, the distinction between the two terms for "Irish" is not always apparent to those who are not familiar with that language: *Éireannach* (Irish) is a geographical term whereas *Gaeilge* (Irish) is a linguistic term. "Irish literature," therefore, can refer to literature in English or in Irish. And, in the case of the former, "Anglo-Irish" would tend more towards the geographical side of the distinction and "Hiberno-English," towards the linguistic. Nevertheless, the terms tend to be interchangeable. For example, there are two books by distinguished scholars: *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English* (1st edition, 1998),

[1] Helen Ó Murchú, *More Facts about Irish* (Coiste na hEirann den Bhuiro, 2008), p.11.

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compiled by Terence Patrick Dolan, and *A Dictionary of Anglo-Irish: Words and Phrases from Gaelic in the English of Ireland* (1st edition, 1996), compiled by Diarmaid Ó Muirithe. The former claims that his book "is aimed at …supplying information for scholars of Anglo-Irish literature who may find difficulty with words that are either not mentioned at all in other dictionaries of English or are not given their specific Hiberno-English context." The latter, having warned us that "the term 'Anglo-Irish' does not please everybody," then tells us that:

> This compilation of Irish words and phrases is not being presented solely for its linguistic interest, but as an indication of the extent to which the Gaelic lexis has continued to enrich daily speech in rural Ireland, thus continuing to fulfil a social function. There are, between the covers of this book, thousands of Irish words that were collected during my lifetime in places where Irish had long since died. I can personally vouch for the fact that some of the people from whom words were collected thought they were standard English and had no idea that they were in fact Irish.

This rather basic explanation may clarify, to some extent, what these sometimes confusing terms mean in the interview and articles that follow. Many writers whose primary work is in the Irish language write also in English, reflecting the bilingual environment to which they belong. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Alan Titley are two such examples. In her interview with Professor Ludmilla Kostova, Ní Dhuibhne elaborates on some of the complex issues mentioned above and provides a fascinating insight into her own linguistic background and the genesis of her literary work (part of which is based on her experiences in Bulgaria). Titley, like Ní Dhuibhne, has written novels, short stories, and plays and, as Professor of Irish, he has also published a large corpus of academic work, in both languages. It is the academic rather than the creative writer who addresses us here, and he offers further elucidation on the status of literature in the Irish language in a predominantly English-speaking environment. He describes the government scheme which encouraged translation from foreign languages, particularly languages other than English. This scheme had the benefit of challenging the translation skills of native writers, but also, of enabling them to engage with literary forms and techniques from outside of their own tradition, which had not evolved apace with European, or Russian, or American literature during the centuries prior to the Irish Language Revival. The creative benefits that ensued were minimal, however, and while translation of literary works into Irish continues, the target readership continues to be an elite minority in a predominantly English language environment.

The idea of bypassing English in favour of other languages in the matter of literary translation also applies to Hugo Hamilton's situation in *The Speckled People*, the subject of Helen Penet's article. Hamilton's biographical novel deals with the fanatical aspect of the Irish Language Revival, epitomized in the Irish expression "*is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste*" ("broken Irish is better than clever English"). The title of the novel derives from the Irish adjective "*breac*," defined as "speckled, spotted"; "*galar breac*," "measles"; "bó *bhreac*," "a speckled cow"; cuilt *bhreac*', 'a patchwork quilt'. More significantly, the term "*Breac-Ghaeltacht*" refers to a mixed Irish-English speaking district, "*Gaeltacht*" being the officially designated region in which Irish is the first language. A rather negative description of "*Breac-Ghaeltacht*" would be a region in which Irish and English struggle for dominance, neither side emerging victorious. Hamilton's "speckled people" exist in a space, or on a metaphorical wall, between a fanatical Irish-speaking father and a German-speaking mother where the English language is forbidden though it is the everyday language of the rest of the population.

The question of cultural identity in Roddy Doyle's novel, *Oh Play That Thing*, is the subject of Genoveffa Giambona's article but, in this case, that identity is teased out within an English-speaking world, that of the United States of America. Language is not a major issue here, although at one point, the character uses an Irish version of his name, Henry Smart (Henry "Glick" – from the adjective "*glic*," meaning "smart"). In this complex picaresque work, past and present merge and, ultimately, Henry's identity is defined less by what he is than by what (or who) he is not – not Black, not English, and, if American, not Irish.

Katarzyna Gmerek's historical article on the role of two Irishmen in the Polish Uprising of 1863 is meticulously researched, using both Irish and Polish archives and contemporary newspaper sources. In documenting the interest of the Young Irelander, William Smith O'Brien, and the Tory M.P., John Pope-Hennessy, in the Polish cause – two individuals not usually associated with each other and, as the writer states, a pair who never met personally as far as is known – Gmerek argues convincingly for the existence of a hitherto unacknowledged Irish connection with nineteenth century European affairs. The countries linked with Ireland (and Britain – which then included Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom) in this case, include Russia, Prussia, and Austria which, at the time, jointly ruled the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania. Truly, a case of "Ireland across cultures."

Desmond O'Grady, who died in 2014, was one of the most international and erudite of contemporary Irish poets. In an incisive and sensitive analysis of three of his poems – each, as the author says, a dialogue between the Irish poet and his Russian counterparts, Brodsky, Voznesensky, and Akhmatova, Alla Kononova makes a highly original contribution to our understanding of O'Grady's work. It is noteworthy that, in previous comments on the translation policy pursued by the Irish State in the early years of Independence, the engagement of Irish writers with literature in other languages was considered to be valuable. O'Grady, an expert linguist and a highly accomplished literary translator, echoes this opinion saying that translation "is an excellent way to learn the craft of writing verse and to learn about oneself as a poet." According to Kononova, this quotation illustrates O'Grady's understanding of translation as "a dialogical act, as an act of reaching out to other languages and other cultures and connecting with them."

In conceiving the idea of a special Irish issue of *UVT Review*, on the theme of "Ireland Across Cultures," Professor Ludmilla Kostova might not have imagined the rich intercultural response that would result. Alla Kononova speaks of "the interrelation between Irish and Russian literatures in the twentieth and twenty-first century, which had a major impact on many Irish authors and played an unprecedentedly crucial role for many contemporary Irish poets." This role is not just confined to the poets, however, as Alan Titley points out in his article. He refers, in particular, to the translations from Russian by Liam Ó Rinn and Maighréad Ní Mhaicín but also, to the work of the novelist and short-story writer – probably the greatest Irish writer of the last century, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, who "drew sustenance and confidence from the Russian greats." Nor, indeed, is the interrelation confined to Russia and Ireland, as the following articles demonstrate. One example of *interrelation* is the case of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, who has learned Bulgarian and who has had a collection of her short stories translated and published in Bulgarian. (Her work has also been translated into German, Italian, Czech, and Japanese.)

Professor Kostova is to be congratulated on her achievement in bringing together the contributors to this journal and on her continuing work in encouraging Irish-Bulgarian academic relations.

The View from Bulgaria

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Over the last fifteen years or so, interest in Irish history, literature, politics, culture, and language has been growing among academics throughout Europe and the rest of the world. This interest may be linked to many factors, ranging from long-term intellectual engagements with issues of identity, nationhood, diaspora, and postcoloniality, which have long enjoyed academic favour and will continue to do so for reasons that transcend the narrow space of academia, to concerns with language survival, language choice,

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diglossia, and interlingual contact. The interest in things Irish outside Ireland and the countries connected with it through diasporic ties, such as the United States and Australia, is likely to result in positive developments within Irish Studies as a transdisciplinary area of research and teaching. Comparativist and transcultural research has been gaining ground in it and the importance of this tendency has been stressed by eminent Irish scholars in the field. Thus, Luke Gibbons declared back in 2006: "Cross-cultural and comparativist perspectives are vital to bring Irish studies out of centuries-old stereotypes of the insular Celts" (quoted in Kurdi 12). While similar views inform most of the chapters of the recently published *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, Michael Cronin goes further than most in advocating the adoption of "a *diffusive* perspective [italic in the original] on Irish culture" (33). Such a perspective focuses on "the Irish presence in the non-Anglophone world" and includes both "the work of non-Anglophone scholars writing on Irish culture and the impact of Irish culture on the non-Anglophone world" (33). One could quibble about Cronin's choice of words in the first part of his definition: at present most scholars writing on Irish culture are likely to be Anglophone although English may not be their first language. Leaving that aside, he is right in principle in stressing the potentially important role of scholars from non-Anglophone countries in providing novel perspectives on Irish Studies (33). This special issue of *VTU Review* is a modest attempt to contribute to the field through texts by scholars for some of whom English is an acquired language rather than a "native" (or "mother") tongue.

One of the sections of Cronin's chapter in the Handbook is called "The European Eye" and is concerned with perceptions of Ireland and the Irish in continental Europe (34–36). He quite correctly remarks that "*[p]art of the context of how we think about Ireland must be how Ireland appears in different contexts* [my emphasis]" (34). Cronin goes on to discuss a publication entitled *Ireland in the European Eye*, which was commissioned by the Royal Irish Committee on Language, Literature, Culture, and Communication and came out in 2019. The book examines Ireland from "the standpoint of different European countries and languages" (Cronin 34) and aims at enhancing awareness among the Irish of the ways in which their culture is perceived elsewhere. *Ireland in the European Eye* contains much that is valuable and is likely to impact on the perceptions of continental Europeans no less than on those of Irish readers.

The book is organized in four parts, with several chapters being included in each of them. Part 2 is split into two subsections; 2 a is concerned with representations of Ireland and Irish literature in different European national contexts, whereas 2 b deals with literary representations in comparative perspectives. Except for Poland, most of the countries discussed in 2 a and 2 b are situated in western Europe. Such a choice is in many ways justified. Over the centuries, Ireland's contacts have for the most part been with countries such as France, Italy, Spain, or Austria. As for Poland, as Katarzyna Gmerek has ably demonstrated in her contribution to this issue, Polish-Irish relations have also had a long history, and at present Poles constitute one of the largest migrant groups in Ireland (see Cronin 51).

Nevertheless, I found the absence of Bulgaria disappointing partly because there are quite a number of Bulgarians living in Ireland today as well as some Irish people who have acquired property and have resettled to Bulgaria but also because there have been significant Bulgarian-Irish encounters in earlier times. In what follows I am going to dwell on one such encounter which occurred in the late nineteenth century and involved an eminent Bulgarian writer and an anonymous Irish woman.

Of Ivan Vazov and His Irish Landlady in St. Petersburg and the Emotional Affinities of Small Nations

In his 1891 travelogue "*Izvan Balgariya*" (Out of Bulgaria), the Bulgarian writer Ivan Vazov (1850 – 1921) represents a visit to Russia. Considerable space is devoted to his stay in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg. Vazov, whose Russophilia was an important facet of his political-cultural makeup at the time of the visit, nevertheless represents Russia's modern history as a cautionary tale that Bulgarians should learn not to repeat. Thus, he strongly disapproves of Russia's "morbid ambition" in striving to become part of "western civilization" which has impelled it to perform "kangaroo-like jumps" (209).[2] One of those, according to Vazov, has resulted in the "excessive emancipation" of educated women in

[2] All translations from Bulgarian into English are mine.

the Russian capital; they appear to surpass even their western "sisters" in "free thought and romantic spirit" (209).

However, the conservative gaze of the Bulgarian traveller does not picture the most westernized of Russian cities in entirely negative terms. Significantly, his representation of the cosmopolitan atmosphere of St. Petersburg transcends the simplistic dichotomy of "East versus West." In the Russian capital, Vazov claims, Bulgarian intellectuals, who had few opportunities to travel to "important European cities," could experience the advantages (and disadvantages) of life in a metropolis (255). While alienation was decidedly a disadvantage, the status of the city as a "contact zone" (Carr 70 – 87) in which representatives of different national and ethnic groups came together and established various forms of political and cultural contact must have been an indisputable advantage. For instance, Vazov speaks of attending Georg Brandes's lectures on the state of literary criticism in the nineteenth century (212), which the Danish scholar delivered in French.

The city's cosmopolitanism is further illustrated by the composition of the lodging house in which Vazov rented a room:

> The six people, who dwell therein, represent six different European nations. The elderly landlady is Irish, my next-door neighbour Mr Cox is a purebred Englishman, the next lodger is a young governess, who boasts a Russian surname but is in fact French, the fourth lodger, that is, yours truly, is Bulgarian, the housemaid is Russian, and the porter is a Pole. (256)

Vazov further adds that this "cosmopolitan house" was somewhat like "the tower of Babel" insofar as each of the inhabitants spoke his or her own tongue best and that caused misunderstandings – especially between him and his Irish landlady. Because of his "southern" appearance, she at first assumed that he was Georgian and tended to be cold and even rude when she spoke to him. Her attitude changed, however, when she realized that he was Bulgarian. With the help of the housemaid as an interpreter, the landlady questioned him about "the sanguinary events in Rustschuk," most probably, the execution of Russophile officers in the 1880s, and exclaimed, in a mixture of Russian, French, and German, "*bedno Pauvre Bulgarien*" (257). Apparently, to her, as to Vazov himself, the execution of Bulgarians by other Bulgarians was fratricide.

Vazov never mentions the name of his Irish landlady but dwells on her political likes and dislikes at some length:

> As an Irish patriot she hated all the English (except for Gladstone and Mr Cox), and, by the same token, loved Russia, as the enemy of England. Her love of Russia naturally led her to sympathize with the Bulgarians. Those feelings were also shared by Agrafevna, the housemaid. From this day, a triple alliance was concluded between Ireland, Russia, and Bulgaria against perfidious England. … The ardent Parnellite had not yet had an opportunity to draw France, that is, the governess, into the alliance and thus strengthen it further. (257)

Mr Cox, on the other hand, never suspected anything and visited Vazov on a regular basis but those visits mostly degenerated into yawning competitions because of the language barrier.

The cultural encounter Vazov describes conforms, almost completely, to the pattern of ethical relativism that is, as a rule, celebrated by theorists of intercultural relations today. In the Bulgarian writer's text, national, linguistic, and political differences are relativized through the medium of humour and the outcome is an atmosphere of comparative openness to, and acceptance of, others. The only exception would seem to be Georgians against whom the landlady was prejudiced.

Leaving that regrettable exclusion aside, Vazov's representation of his contact with his Irish landlady may be approached in terms of what Murray Pittock has called "fratriotism" (238). He defines fratriotism as "sympathetic engagement [on the part of a representative of an oppressed nation] with oppressed nationalities elsewhere" (238). Pittock also uses the term to refer to the reservations of oppressed nations in the nineteenth century "concerning the nature and development of empire[s]" (238).

He is aware of the sexist slant of the term and admits that there have been numerous “sisterly” examples of “sympathetic engagement” (238). Given the nature of Vazov’s example, *sororo-fratriotism* may be a more appropriate term.

Fratriotism is a tricky term insofar as it may foster the simplistic assumption that solidarity with oppressed others is “natural” to those who have themselves experienced some form of oppression. Pittock quotes Terry Eagleton, according to whom, “a society which has suffered colonization… has only to consult its own ‘local’ experience to feel solidarity” (238). This may result in the idealization of oppressed groups. While the limitations of such a perspective are obvious, there are a number of examples of sympathetic engagements with oppressed and/or struggling groups in both Irish and Bulgarian history that need to be addressed and analysed. Vazov’s encounter with his Irish landlady is only one of those. To the two countries’ experience of oppression, we should also add the obvious fact of their *smallness* in terms of size and population. Identification understood as “the presence of [the] self in the other” (Pittock 243) appears to be among the distinctive features of Vazov’s relationship with his landlady.

Another significant element is their attitude towards empires. While both Vazov and his Irish “sister” resent the British Empire, they do not explicitly associate Russia with colonial oppression. Vazov was indignant at Great Britain’s support of the tottering Ottoman Empire and had earlier expressed his indignation in denunciatory poems directed against the Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and John Blunt, the British Consul in the Thracian city of Edirne, classical Adrianople, around 1876 - 1877. [3] The landlady had presumably experienced British political oppression in a direct form since she had chosen to emigrate to Russia. Significantly, neither of them resorts to simple Anglophobia. Both admire the liberal leader Gladstone: Vazov, presumably, on account of his anti-Ottoman stance and sympathy for the Bulgarians in the aftermath of the suppression of the April Rising of 1876, and the landlady, on account of his advocacy of home rule for Ireland. The fact that the landlady supports Gladstonian home rule rather than full independence suggests that she is not a radical nationalist. Neither of the two “conspirators” is inclined to blame Mr Cox, whom they know personally, for the ills caused by British imperialism.

As was already remarked, Russia is not portrayed as an oppressive imperial power in the episode under consideration. Moreover, it is admitted into the alliance of the two small nations against “perfidious England.” However, Russia is not represented in this alliance by a mighty general or a learned Slavophile (it should be noted in passing that Vazov speaks of his rather irritating encounters with Slavophiles elsewhere in the travelogue) but by the housemaid: a servant who could hardly be perceived as an agent of empire. The same goes for the plan of the “conspirators” to strengthen the alliance further by drawing in the French governess with the Russian surname.

Interestingly, the mutual sympathy that Vazov speaks about in his travelogue did find expression in Irish and Bulgarian support for a nation that both sides perceived as being involved in an anti-imperialist struggle. Later in the century the Boers would be actively supported by both the Irish and the Bulgarians. Pittock speaks of a committee that was formed in 1898 for the purpose of organizing an Irish brigade to fight on the side of the Boers (252). A group of Bulgarian intellectuals demonstrated their support for the Boer side during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902) by signing an open letter to the President of the Transvaal Republic. The letter was published in one of the 1900 issues of the journal *Misal* (Thought). The signatories stressed the importance of mutual sympathy and support between smaller nations as a way of opposing the power and arrogance of empires. Needless to say, the champions of the Boer cause in Bulgaria and perhaps even in Ireland were not aware of how the Boers treated Africans. That alone shows that fratriotism could be paired with moral blindness. In addition, its nineteenth-century version was inspired by a cult of the nation which might be found objectionable nowadays in view of nationalist excesses throughout the twentieth century. Present-day reservations notwithstanding, we should value fratriotism for the spirit of generosity to little-known others which was an essential part of it. For let us face it: Vazov and his Irish landlady knew little about their respective nations: for the landlady, the Bulgarians were above all a *suffering* nation (“*bedno Pauvre Bulgarien*”) whereas for Vazov, the Irish were primarily enemies of the detested British Empire.

[3] See Vazov, “Dizraeli” (62) and “Blant” (63).

In closing, I can only express the hope that more nuanced accounts of Bulgarian-Irish encounters might be produced in the future either by talented Bulgarian migrants in Ireland or equally talented Irish expats in Bulgaria.

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