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Eastward Ho! Aspects of Eastern European Writing Translated into Irish

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The article focuses on translations into Irish of literary texts by writers from several central and eastern European countries. The author adopts a historical approach by first drawing attention to the Irish language as a means of literary expression and a vehicle for the translation of classical texts in the Middle Ages. Irish came under sustained attack because of English rule from the seventeenth century onwards and was only spoken by the poor and the marginalized in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century the language experienced a revival. The latter process was intensified following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. In 1926, a project for literacy and provision of reading material in the Irish language was implemented, and a government publishing company known as *An Gúm* started producing books for the new Irish-reading public. Since the start of the project, the general tendency has been for books by western European writers to be translated into Irish. However, a significant number of texts by eastern and central European authors, ranging from classics by Tolstoy and Chekhov to novels and short stories by contemporary Russian and Slovenian authors, have also been published over the years.
Keywords: Irish language, translation, state language policy, *An Gúm*, eastern European literature, central European literature.

When the Irish state got its independence from the United Kingdom in 1922 on the back of a war of liberation, it was recognized that much of the spirit of that struggle derived from a cultural and literary revival. The big beasts of that revival will be well-known to anybody interested in Irish literature, Yeats and Synge and Joyce and Wilde and O'Casey and more. What will not be as well-known is the equal and in a sense more revolutionary resuscitation of writing in the Irish language.

Irish – often incorrectly termed "Gaelic" – was the main, and mostly the only language of the Irish nation for the greatest part of its history. It came under sustained attack as a result of the English conquest since the seventeenth century and was largely spoken only by the poor and marginalized in the middle of the nineteenth century. The great famine of the 1840s destroyed this linguistic community by starvation and by emigration resulting in a much reduced native-speaking population when the cultural revival commenced at the end of the nineteenth century.

A goodly part of this cultural renaissance involved a renewed interest in the Irish language by people whose fathers and mothers, or grandmothers and grandfathers (meaning this in its precise literal sense) had left it behind. Given that literature was then, although less so now, the most prominent signifier of a cultured and enlightened people, it was of vital importance that a new and modern literature in the Irish language be brought into being.

There is some small irony in this, given that the Irish language contains the longest unbroken vernacular literary tradition in Europe apart from Greek. Yes, we are aware of Latin, but this dissolved into its various Romance or rarely more romantic parts as soon as the Roman Empire lost out to the "barbarian hordes" but, in due course, taught them manners. Greek and Roman classics were translated in Irish before most of the rest of Europe could read, and while this is true, I cannot pretend but that only a tiny minority could read them in Irish, too, as literacy was the privilege of an elite.

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This privilege of literacy did not stretch to the Irish-speaking population when literacy became common. In Ireland, literacy in English was driven by the British colonial government which excluded the Irish language from the curriculum. As an example of this, in County Donegal, which had more than 70,000 speakers of Irish according to the census of 1871, only 1000 could read the language.

Part of the programme of the new Irish government was to reverse the trend of this cultural exclusion. As a result, Irish was taught with vigour in all schools and a project for literacy and provision of reading material in the language was founded in 1926. This was a government publishing company known as *An Gúm*, which simply means "the scheme," or in more modern jargon, "the project." Again, in more modern jargon, their "mission statement" was to publish books which the new Irish-reading public would be able to read. It was unlikely that more commercially minded publishers would fulfil this role as their main concern was with lovely lucre, and so state intervention was important.

It was said that *An Gúm* churned out the books with gusto. Gusto may be applicable, but churning is less accurate. Every book was scrutinized by several readers and some of the best and foremost scholars in the language were part of their editorial teams. Most of the new books were to be translations from foreign languages. This was not surprising, as you cannot order writers to come up with original works of genius on demand. Thus, a scheme was devised whereby the great, the ordinary, and the common books of contemporary and of classical literature would be translated into Irish for the expectant new and pristine reading public.

At one level, this project was a tremendous success. Novels and stories and plays and poetry by the good and the not so good were published in quick succession. Some would say "churned out" as above, but this would be unfair to the meticulous care which the editors took, and to the large number of rejections which was the most common result for most aspirant authors. It would also be unfair to the fine list of classic novels, stories and plays which were published in translation, along with more ephemeral pot boilers. Apart from providing reading material there was also the intention to make a great deal of modern European literature in translation available for its own sake and to provide models and examples which would be inspirational for new writers.

Unfortunately, the spread of linguistic diversity among the pool of translators was thin, and thus, despite much encouragement, the vast majority of translations were from English. It was argued cogently, and with some justification, that it was unlikely that somebody would read the Irish translation of, for example, Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, or Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* when they were readily in the shops in English anyway. As most Irish-speakers were bilingual, and certainly all of the literate Irish-speaking public read both languages, the point made is quite obvious. On the other hand, there were, and are always, some readers who would prefer a good Irish version of a dull book by Thackeray or a boring one by Kickham to the original. It is significant that of the hundreds of books in the English canon that were offered to *An Gúm* not one suggested some fancy chick lit by Jane Austen. There is no doubt that her prim and prissy petulant prose would have been impossible to render into Irish without the ghosts of Irish writers past rising up from their unquiet graves to haunt the failed translators in their impossible task.

The result was that out of these hundreds of new books only a handful came from European authors. French was the most popular of those and so we have works of Daudet, Bazin, Verne, Merimée, and others, including *Iascaire Inse Tuile* by Pierre Loti (*Pecheur d'Islande* in the original) which is said to have encouraged Tomás Ó Criomhthain to write his own famous autobiography *An tOileánach*. There was some German, Thomas Mann, Hans Dominik, Gustav Freytag, and Italian, the most sparkling being a wonderful idiomatic rendering of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. There was some classical Greek but no translations of modern texts. Translations of *Iphigenia* and other Greek plays were published, as well as *Plutarch's Lives* by Monsignor Pádraig de Brún, an uncle of the renowned Irish poet, Máire Mhac an tSaoi.

Taken altogether this was a huge literary shift, providing more literature in translation for Irish speakers in a few years than all other translations put together for over a thousand years previously when Irish scholars began adapting the classics in their own language from the eighth century.

The huge gap which gapes, however, is the dearth of translations from what we generally style "eastern Europe." We could clutch at straws and attempt to include Seán Ó Cuirrín's translation of *Dracula*, if only for its setting, and for the benefit of Romanian tourism. In fact, this translation is one of the finest pieces of writing in modern Irish far surpassing the plodding Victorian prose of Bram Stoker. But *Dracula* is not, of course, an eastern European novel and does not pretend to be. We could even sneak in Joseph Conrad if we really wanted to play sleight of hand. This great Polish author went to sea in a boat and wrote copiously and cogently about the exploiters and the exploitees in what we fancifully call the Far East, as well as in Africa with his scary take on colonialism in *Heart of Darkness*. While this has not been translated, several other texts by Conrad were privileged to have been Irished by Seosamh Mac Grianna. Mac Grianna was interesting as a writer in his own right who came from a very traditional family of story tellers and singers who turned modernist in his prose, twisting the gnarled and intricate language of his own place into a vehicle for a more modern and fancy sensibility. He translated four novels of Conrad, including *Typhoon* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. They were the subject of a monograph by Seán Mac Corraidh who demonstrates his inventiveness when confronted by words that he did not have in his native vocabulary. But we cannot really include Conrad in a discussion of Irish connections with eastern Europe.

There are others, but they were not rendered from the original languages. There is a wonderful translation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* by the scholar priest Aindrias Ó Céileachair who had already edited texts from old Irish. His translation is remarkable for its judicious use of archaisms to give the sense of ancient Rome, but they do not in any way interfere with our pleasure of the text. It is also remarkable in the manner of how he went about his translation. He would read out his text to one of the great traditional story tellers of Ireland from his own area, Amhlaoibh Ó Loingsigh, before submitting anything to a final version. In this sense, the book follows a strange and fascinating path: a novel by a great Polish writer about ancient Rome where all the characters spoke Latin filtered into modern Irish by a scholar of the historical language with the suggestions and recommendations of a great local sage. What is missing from this account is that it was done from an English translation and not from Polish.

An equally round-about translation is Liam Ó Rinn's version of Adam Mickievicz's *Le livre de la nation polonaise et des pélerins polonais*. The title is in French because it was translated from that language. Ó Rinn initially saw some excerpts that were Englished by the journalist Aodh de Blácam which sparked his interest. He acquired the French version, probably the only one easily available, and commenced with some passages which were published in a literary journal. When this became known he was contacted by a Fr Clement from a monastery in Loughrea who told Ó Rinn he had translated it all. We know nothing more about this man or his translation except that he sent it to Ó Rinn in the hope it would be of some help. This information comes from his preface to the Irish translation which first appeared in 1920, and in which he also informs us that he sought the assistance of An tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (Fr Peter O'Leary), then seen as the most important writer and stylist in the Irish language, having been the author of the first real novel and a determined defender of normal idiomatic Irish, especially his own. He had some problems with Ó Rinn's version as there were words in it, he claimed, that a native speaker of the language would not be familiar with. We must presume that he meant an illiterate speaker of the language as there is nothing in Mickiewicz's prose beyond the competence of anybody who had ever read a book, or even a newspaper.

Liam Ó Rinn was himself a multi-talented person. While born in Dublin he commenced learning Irish as part of the general enthusiasm of the cultural revival which is usually dated to c.1880. He took part in the 1916 rebellion against British rule and was imprisoned for a while due to his military activities. He was employed in the new government's translation staff shortly after independence and was involved in the Irish versions of both the 1922 and 1937 constitutions. These are not actually translations as both the Irish and the English were drawn up at the same time, with both sets of drafters working together. While he was not a creative writer himself in the sense of someone who writes poetry, novels, and plays, he was certainly creative in forging new words and terminology for a language which had been harassed out of urban discourse and banished from normal development and challenge for hundreds of years. In fact, more people have sung the words of his song than any other Irish song, it can safely be

said, ever. This is because he translated the national anthem into Irish, and this version has superseded the original English one whose words were written by Peadar Kearney, a distant relation of Brendan Behan. Ó Rinn's national anthem is the one sung by the crowd before international football games, and before all major hurling and Gaelic football championship games. Few people who sing those words before we get beaten, or in soccer, crawl to a scoreless draw, realize that the man who wrote the words also translated Adam Mickiewicz's great paean to Poland and the Polish people. Perhaps it was not too surprising that he would see the spirit of the Polish nation as being a possible inspiration for the Irish.

There is a rather crude debate in Irish literary circles which divides people into "nativists" and "modernizers." The nativists would be seen to look to the past, to folklore, to rural life, and the earlier Irish literature as being bedrocks of a modern literature; while the modernizers are depicted as seeking their seedbed in contemporary literature from abroad, or wherever. Ó Rinn would be firmly in the modern camp. While he did not understand Polish, he was a remarkable linguist, reading or speaking French, German, Welsh, Spanish, and Russian. His Russian he put to good use translating the prose poems of Ivan Turgenev as *Dánta Próis.* It is a beautiful book, but far too short. Apart from being beautifully romantic with haunting nature pen pictures and reflections thereon, it is the first important book to be translated from a Slavic language into Irish.

There were not too many others during these early years of the new Irish state. One important exception is the translation of Anton Chekhov's stories by Máighréad Nic Mhaicín, or Daisy McMackin, as she was colloquially known. They appeared as *Gearrscéalta Tchekov Cuid a hAon* in 1939 and were volume one of a planned two volume project which never saw completion. Her story is as fascinating as Ó Rinn's but much more tragic, or at least with an unfulfilled edge. She grew up in Donegal on the perimeter of a very strong Irish-speaking area, but we must presume that the language was all around her from her early youth and childhood where she certainly did something good. Her family were steeped in the Irish revolution but were inclined to the more left-wing side of the movement than the bourgeois one. Unusually for a woman when women were scarce in the higher reaches of academic achievement, she gained an MA in Celtic languages in Belfast, but had already begun to learn Russian in Paris some years before with the encouragement of the socialist writer Peadar O'Donnell. Apart from her general left-wing inclinations and the hope of a regeneration of common humanity under communism, which was a common desire of anti-royalists and anti-hereditary privileged of the time, there is no doubt that it was driven by her deep passion for Russian literature, which she had originally imbibed through English.

Other Irish writers had been similarly inspired, particularly Pádraic Ó Conaire who drew much of his inspiration from the deep passion of Dostoevsky rather than from the domesticated safe musings of Turgenev. There was a communion of souls between Ó Conaire, a contemporary of Nic Mhaicín, and the more extreme and passionate Russian writers. A later generation, especially Máirtín Ó Cadhain, drew sustenance and confidence from the Russian greats as distinct from the wan and watery stuff which came from the Britain of the nineteenth century. This may have been simply a personal communion of kindred spirits, or something to do with two great literary countries on the farther ends of the same continent striving for a meeting of souls. Ní Mhaicín spent three distinct periods in Russia in the 1930s. The first was in 1932, ironically travelling on a British passport, as part of the delegation of Irish Revolutionary Groups invited to the First of May celebrations in Moscow. She got work as a translator, and during this time she met Pat Breslin whom she later married. She returned to Russia in 1936 having already signed contracts with *An Gúm* to translate Russian literature into Irish. She worked in the Co-operative Publishing Society in Moscow rendering works by Lenin, Marx, and Stalin into English, but was most interested in classical Russian literature, particularly Pushkin's dramas at this time. She married Breslin but was not permitted to leave the country because of her Irish citizenship unlike him who had already been married and had two Russian children of his own. She had been involved in translating the *Communist Manifesto* into Irish as well as having signed a contract with *An Gúm* to complete a book on the Young Ireland movement of the nineteenth century. This allowed her to return to Ireland. She returned to Moscow for the third time in 1937, not a very auspicious period in those years of terror but managed to return home again as she was pregnant with her daughter and the Soviet authorities allowed that because of her small frame she would be better off having her baby in Ireland.

It is because of this brave woman that we have the best of Chekhov's stories in Irish. They were published as already stated in 1939, and while publicized as volume one, with the obvious intention that there would be a volume two, this never appeared. The writer Séamus Ó Grianna, who wrote under the pen name of "Máire," used to claim that nobody who was not a native speaker of Irish could write or translate in the language. While this did not prevent himself from writing in English, he was not someone for whom irony was a commanding presence. He did, however, make an exception of Máighréad Nic Mhaicín and Seán Mac Maoláin from the Glens of Antrim, both of whom were installed in his Valhalla of Irish writers who knew the language just as well as himself. Ní Mhaicín seems to have led a quiet life in Ireland after her return from Moscow but had the distinction of taking up the first lectureship in Russian in Trinity College Dublin, a position she retained throughout her life. She continued to translate for *An Gúm* including Chekhov's drama *The Cherry Orchard/ An Silín-Ghort* where nothing still happens even in Irish, Turgenev's *A Sportman's Sketches/ Scéalta Sealgaire*, and a collection of stories from Russian, *Scéalta ón Rúisis,* including stories by Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Pushkin. It seems that the great mad genius of Dostoevsky passed everybody by, although he would have been eminently suitable for an Irish translation, especially by somebody who could imbibe his wild passion.

The mad rush or great project of translating the world's literature into Irish by the state publisher began to lose its mojo at the end of the 1930s, although it dribbled on for twenty more years. This was partly because it had run out of steam and new original writing was now being produced. It was also because other publishing houses had been founded and with some state funding became a rival to the established house which went on to concentrate on children's literature and on textbooks for the most part. This turn did not prevent the translation of foreign language works into Irish. While yet again the Francophile brigade dominated because of its fashionistic appeal, it is noteworthy that literature from a wider range than its western European crow's nest of privilege began to peep out.

Part of this re-emerging was a hand stretch to the east. Knowledge of eastern European literature in its original garb was still scant and thin and anorexic. Yet it emerged: for one example, Mark Ó Fionnáin has translated a novel by Viktor Pelevin entitled *Amón-Rá* which is as exotic as it is entertaining. And more: Áine Ní Chonghaile translated Milan Kundera's extended essay *Croí na hEorpa (The Heart of Europe*) for the Irish reading public in 1990.

Thus, it is no surprise that literature from eastern Europe is beginning to appear in Irish. The heart of Europe brings us to a more sticky debate. It is not a concept that is common currency in Ireland. Yet two recent books involving Slovenia raise this issue. The first is *DVA: díolaim de nua-litríocht na Slóivéine*, a collection of essays, stories, and poems of modern Slovenian literature. To use the cliché just once and begging forgiveness, it does what it says on the cover. About half of the book is prose and the other dedicated to poetry. It has the advantage of being as comprehensive as any anthology of close on 400 pages can be, and the disadvantage is that this is never enough. An opening sally by Andrej Inkret as well as the introduction by the editor Eoghan Mac Aogáin re-introduce us to the idea of middle-Europe, a concept not much understood in the farther west. It is a rich collection, best read just as great stories and poems, and best forgotten that they belong to east or west or even to this muddled middle. Many pieces are selections from novels which may on the one hand inspire us to seek out the full thing in translation or on the other hand to find them teasingly unattractive. It is a compendium of more than 65 authors who we must presume are as representative of Slovenian literature as any 65 others. As a result, no Irish reader can presume to be ignorant of the best of what is being written in Slovenia today. It must be said that while most have been filtered through English some have been translated from the original Slovenian, as many are not available in other languages. This is certainly true of those by one of the editors, Eoghan Mac Aogáin, a polymath and polyglot whose mind stretches far and wide.

A more singular collection giving us one voice is a translation of Drago Jancar's short stories including the titled tale "Dalta an tSeoigh" or "Joyce's Pupil." They have been translated by Breandán Ó Doibhlin, former professor of French in Maynooth University. He is a noted scholar and translator who set up a new school of criticism for Irish literature half a century ago and followed his own example with novels, plays, and copious translations. As it happens this book is translated from the French, although I am aware that an English translation is available.

Short stories often pass you by. You read them, shrug your shoulders, admire the epiphany, maybe chuckle, note the glimpse, and then walk on. They rarely whang you in the gut. On reading Jancar I often felt that dig in the solar plexus. This is because he deals with big issues, or those big issues are there somewhere in the background. In other words, his stories are not about some little hurt or imagined slight or a piece of hair out of place or a handkerchief on the lawn or a boyfriend/girlfriend who said the wrong thing or a misunderstood look or any of the panoply of tricks and sleights of hand that the short story indulges in as part of its quest for subtlety. For example, "Eachtra ar an bhFaiche" ("An Adventure in the Park") relates the tale of Mihail Sevcenko, a Slovenian professor in America, who suffers from an appalling toothache. He is more than reluctant to go to the dentist and is willing to put up with the suffering as long as he can. On his way across one of the public parks he is met by a bunch of students who push left-wing Communist pamphlets into his hand. Although he resists for a while, he eventually cracks, seemingly as a result of his pain and hits one of the students. Or so it seems. But as the story and the events unfold, we learn of the torture he suffered at home inflicted by a particularly sadistic dentist of the regime and the vision of blood from his mouth being reflected in the red of the students' pamphlets and posters.

"Scéal fá shúile" ("A story about Eyes") is even more graphic and direct, contrasting as it does a fascist Croatian leader, Ante Pavelić , who during the war collected the eyes of executed prisoners and kept them in a basket, and a scientist who was so fascinated with Einstein's eyes that he wanted to keep them after the great man's death. It is a story that ripples with horror and with wonder. There are very few of these tales that do not have a serious back story haunting them. There is the story of the Russian doctor who escaped the slaughter of the First World War to live in a Slovenian village and serve the people humbly, only to be later confronted with the Second World War coming from across the river. And the title-story of a student to whom Joyce taught English and he later becomes a writer and translator but is accused of being a spy simply because he has excellent English and for which he suffers. And yes, he can be tender and mysterious as well and spring a surprise when needs by. But he has that rare gift of bringing us inside a person's head and making us appear that we know them for years. It is a book which I am grateful for being put into my hand and told to read it. I am the richer for it.

The eastern European presence in Irish translation has not been substantial, but what has been done over a hundred years is of a very high standard. While the *Societas Celto-Slavica*, which was founded in Moscow in 2004 and is comprised of scholars of Celtic languages and cultures from Celtic-speaking and Slavic countries, has done good work on linguistics, folklore, and aspects of cultural history, it has not been as active as it should be with regard to modern literature. It is to be hoped that this will improve in the near future as readers of Irish would benefit from the writings and experiences east of the usual suspects whom we know, sometimes only too well.