



By Way of Old Petersburg: Desmond O’Grady and Russian Poetry

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The article takes on a direction which has great potential for further studies of contemporary Irish poetry: studying the work of Irish poets through their relation to Russian literature. It focuses on the reception and reimagining of Russian poetry in the work of Desmond O’Grady, one of the leading figures in Irish poetry, who started writing in the mid-1950s. The article studies three poems by O’Grady which are addressed to his Russian counterparts: “Missing Andrei Voznesensky,” “Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale,” and “My City,” a translation from Anna Akhmatova’s “Poem without a Hero.” None of these poems has yet been subject of thorough critical analysis. Each of the poems has become a signpost on O’Grady’s poetic map and an important element of his own “private mythology.” When analysed in the wider context of Irish poetry, they help form a clearer picture of the influence Russian literature has had on contemporary Irish poets.

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Desmond O’Grady (1935–2014) is one of the most remarkable figures in Irish poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is sometimes described as a phenomenon “unusual among Irish poets of his generation for both his interest in modernist experimentation and his immersion in the poetry of other cultures” (Mills). In his writings O’Grady defined himself as “a wandering Celt” and “an Irish European”, saying that all he wished to do was “bring my Ireland into the greater Europe and bring that greater Europe into Ireland” (*Trawling Tradition* xi-xii). In our view, this statement could be a summary of the whole creative philosophy the poet lived by.

Born in Limerick in 1935, O’Grady left Ireland in the 1950s and moved to Paris, where he worked in the Shakespeare and Company bookshop and later started teaching. In his own words, O’Grady studied, taught, and wrote in Europe, America, Egypt, and Iran (*Trawling Tradition* xi). He was a teaching fellow at Harvard University, where he studied Old Welsh and Old Arabic for his doctorate in Celtic and comparative literatures. While living in Rome (from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s), O’Grady was a founding member of the European Community of Writers. He also worked as European Editor of the *Transatlantic Review* and organized the Spoleto International Poetry Festival. During his time in Italy, he met Federico Fellini and featured in his film *La Dolce Vita*, playing the role of an Irish poet. In the early 1980s O’Grady returned to Ireland and settled in the small town of Kinsale. However, every year he travelled back to Rome – the city that became his “home from home about forty years now, despite some cities in between” (*The Road Taken* 250). Thus, he never lost the imminent touch with his European roots and those of greater Europe, whose boundaries spread from Old Petersburg to Old Alexandria (*Trawling Tradition* xi).

In this article we will dwell on the Petersburgian edge of O’Grady’s mind’s map and focus on three poems “Missing Andrei Voznesensky,” “Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale,” and “My City,” a translation from Anna Akhmatova’s “Poem without a Hero.” Each of these poems is a dialogue between

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O'Grady and his Russian counterparts, and each poem is also a reflection of O'Grady's poetic principles and preoccupations. Thus, the analysis of these poems, on the one hand, helps us fill another gap in a vast area of research: the interrelation between Irish and Russian literatures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which had a major impact on many Irish authors and played an unprecedentedly crucial role for many contemporary Irish poets, including O'Grady. Furthermore, through these poems we can get a better insight into O'Grady's poetic system, his creative challenges, and concerns. The comparative approach allows us to study O'Grady's rich heritage not only within the Irish canon, but also within the wider scope of the European tradition.

One of the essential points that should be stressed here is the very nature of O'Grady's dialogue with his Russian counterparts (Brodsky, Voznesensky, Akhmatova). This dialogue unfolds not only on the intertextual level, through direct quotations or allusions, but has deep personal undertones, as is shown, for example, in the poem "Missing Andrei Voznesensky," written in Rome in 1979:

We met in Italy's Firenze, in that grand
Camera del Cinquecento, Pallazzo della Signoria,
at another festival, 1962. (*The Road Taken* 276)

From the very first stanza O'Grady writes with the precision of a chronicler. In the first three lines he gives us the exact time and place of his first meeting with Andrei Voznesensky – Florence, 1962. O'Grady relishes the Italian place names – Firenze, Camera del Cinquecento, Pallazzo della Signoria – and thus lets himself, his distant interlocutor Voznesensky, and his readers become fully immersed in the atmosphere of his beloved Italy. In the second sentence of the first stanza O'Grady, however, returns from the grandeur of the past to the present moment, and the tone of the poem becomes more conversational, the syntactical constructions – elliptical:

Tonight I miss you, not here
with our mutual friend Yevtushenko, looks plumper. (*The Road Taken* 276)

But this detour into the present is brief, and after this remark, made en passant, O'Grady transposes the poem fully into the decorations of that memorable evening in Florence:

We, the youngest then in Firenze – among those grey-
haired old dogs of the battle from East and West... (*The Road Taken* 277)

The city of Florence becomes simultaneously a historical fact and a poetic symbol, rich in cultural and literary allusions. The homeplace of the great Dante Alighieri, Florence is one of the major reference points for the whole of European culture, and thus serves as a perfect setting for the gathering of poets from all around the world. Apart from Voznesensky and himself, O'Grady mentions the Brazilian poet Murilo Mendes, the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet, whom he describes as "an Asian Celt," and the antagonist of the poem, "State Censor" Alexey Surkov, who recited "his stale Stalinist verses."

The abundance of first names and surnames is one of the distinctive features of O'Grady's verse. As Carla de Petris notes in her article "Desmond O'Grady: 'the Wandering Celt'... in Search of Europe," most of O'Grady's poems are "in the form of a conversation, a dialogue with some silent interlocutor. Repetition, re-wording of the same idea, is part of every human exchange of thoughts and feelings, and reference to mutual friends is part of a shared human landscape" (124). The poem "Missing Andrei Voznesensky" is no exception: in the first stanza O'Grady invokes the names of Isaak Babel, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Pasternak as if paying homage to the literary tradition Voznesensky's poetry springs from. In the second stanza he pays tribute to his own tradition by introducing the solitary figure of Patrick Kavanagh into the text.

The second stanza opens with a very Joycean idea of the location of Ireland and Russia as peripheral to the centre of European culture. This idea helps strengthen the bond between the Irish poet and his

Russian counterpart for it shows that, although coming from two different poles of Europe, they share similar experience and possess similar knowledge:

Cosmopolitan provincials both, from far flung places,
in Florence's Renaissance centre among our peers
and elders... (*The Road Taken* 277)

With great reverence O'Grady recalls that moment when Voznesensky and himself, two young poets, stood among their fellow poets, among their elders:

... I stood minded of the day, as important
to me, I met my first poet: Patrick Kavanagh playing
rings and darts in his Dublin pub among honest friends. (*The Road Taken* 277)

However, the elevated tone of these lines is once again counterbalanced, as we have seen in the first stanza, by a passing conversational reference to a comic episode that happened at the Russian Embassy in Rome:

(Later I helped him out a door Tvardovski tried to get
in through.) (*The Road Taken* 277)

The full account of this episode involving Kavanagh, O'Grady and, by pure accident, Tvardovsky is given in O'Grady's memoir "Patrick Kavanagh in Rome, 1965: A Personal Memoir. Part II." During a reception at the Russian Embassy Kavanagh managed to lock himself in a men's bathroom, and O'Grady, feeling that while Kavanagh stayed in Italy his well-being and safety were his responsibility, tried to let him out:

Out we walked, like sheepish schoolboys caught smoking against the rules, to face the manservant with a hammer and chisel in his hands encircled by a curious group of embassy staff and the huge frame of Tvardovski, the poet and editor of *Novy Mir*, who was dying to piss but suddenly smiled broadly when he saw it was Kavanagh who had been locked in. ("Patrick Kavanagh in Rome" 121)

When viewed within the context of the poem this account not only has historical value but acquires a wider metaphorical meaning. It shows the continuity of cultural dialogue between Ireland and Russia, the spontaneous and often unpredictable nature of the literary and personal contacts between Irish and Russian poets.

In the third stanza O'Grady builds his conversation with Voznesensky upon direct quotations from Voznesensky's poems which the Russian poet apparently recited during the festival in Florence:

'*Ya Goya*' 'I am Goya / of the bare field /
gouged by the enemy's beak.' No merchant
of protest jargon you, but of human rights,
love, death, the trespass of the State, blind
authority, unsung despair: 'banging your body /
like a tolling bell / against the toll of insults. /
It hurts but it resounds.' (*The Road Taken* 277)

The first quotation in the stanza was taken from Voznesensky's poem "Goya," while the second ("banging your body / like a tolling bell") – was from his "Lines to Robert Lowell." O'Grady keeps true to the original and tries to recreate Voznesensky's Russian voice by using transliteration ('*Ya Goya*')

and pointing out the original line breaks (“I am Goya / of the bare field / gouged by the enemy’s beak”). In doing so, he seems to turn what could sound like a one-way rhetorical utterance into full-bodied discourse, in which his addressee takes an active part and can be clearly heard.

According to O’Grady’s further account, these poems immediately fuelled Surkov’s indignation:

Immediately Surkov jumps up
reciting his stale Stalinist verses, his two-faced grin
not moving the blank faces of his European and Party peers. (*The Road Taken* 277)

Here the principal argument of the poem is made explicit: the freedom of unbiased and genuine poetry against tyranny, censorship, and political propaganda. But as the argument is about to explode into “East-West war,” “the Asian Celt,” Nâzım Hikmet, brings everyone back to their senses, by “singing his ironies in that Turkish nobody understood but rose to in response”:

He brought
us all back to our common reality: makers of poetry,
not imposers of political propaganda. (*The Road Taken* 277)

Thus, O’Grady touches upon the aspect painfully relevant both for Irish and Russian poets of the twentieth century: the relation between poetry and politics. The poem shows how subtle the boundary between the two opposites sometimes is and how easy it is to fall into a heated political argument. But the final stanza affirms the power of the poetic word that is articulated and heard. The sound of the Turkish poet’s voice resonates with the quote from Voznesensky given in the third stanza – “it hurts but it resounds.”

The idea of common roots, the sense of kinship and connection is explored by O’Grady in another poem addressed to a Russian fellow poet – “Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale.” It must be mentioned that much about O’Grady’s relation to Brodsky we learn from the Irish poet himself. In his poem “Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996),” which was written after Brodsky’s death, he generously provides us with background information which sheds light on the poem we are about to analyse.

In “Joseph Brodsky” O’Grady structures his memories in the form of elegiac couplets:

Akhmatova named you to me, nineteen sixty
four, on her joyful visit to Sicily. (*The Wandering Celt* 128)

We come to know that it was Anna Akhmatova who first told O’Grady about Brodsky during her visit to Italy in 1964, which will be discussed in detail later. She named Brodsky as the Russian poet of O’Grady’s generation whom she admired most, and they raised a toast to him. When Brodsky arrived in the States, O’Grady paid him a visit at his apartment at Morton Street in Greenwich Village:

... You said Akhmatova had told
you of me too. We each struck our like’s chord

then walked the Village, talked the world, drank at the White Horse
and raised a *yeh I da* to Dylan Thomas. (*The Wandering Celt* 129)

After that O’Grady and Brodsky, two exile spirits, kept in touch as “poets and pals,” meeting every now and again in Ireland or in Italy, their encounters sometimes happening by pure accident. O’Grady knew perfectly well of Brodsky’s plans and worries, of his heart problems, and his long-lasting romance with the city of Venice. The year Brodsky died O’Grady was hoping to see him in Venice, but that meeting was never to take place:

This fall, in Rome, I called. You hadn't shown. Christmas,
I thought you would for sure. We'd meet in Venice.

My phone rang. You're dead. New York. Your heart.
A toast to your worth. *Spaseboch* I impart.

Meer Prakhu Ayvo: Peace to his ashes. (130)

One of the meetings between O'Grady and Brodsky occurred in Kinsale, a small, picturesque town in County Cork where O'Grady settled after he returned to Ireland in the 1980s. It is this meeting that creates a biographical context for the poem "Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale." Unlike "Missing Andrei Voznesensky," this poem to Brodsky is located not in the heart of European culture and civilization, but in O'Grady's homeland. However, despite different settings, the poems share similar techniques. The first technique that immediately attracts our attention is the same historiographic approach that O'Grady used in his poem to Voznesensky and in the poem in memory of Brodsky. From the very first line he is determined to record the time and place of the event that is central to the poem:

In the early summer of eighty-eight
You came in on the New York morning flight
And sauntered nonchalantly through our town,
Our life – like a sailor coming home... (*The Wide World* 148)

So we learn that Joseph Brodsky, one of the most famous wandering poets and exiles of the twentieth century, arrived in Kinsale in the summer of 1988, and was welcomed like a long-awaited prodigal, like a sailor who had finally come home from sea:

In ritual
The whole town came to see and hear you, even
Though most didn't know yet you were Russian

Jewish by way of old St. Petersburg
But now live in Greenwich Village, New York.
They asked me what to say to such an exile
In our small, historic harbour of Kinsale. (*The Wide World* 148)

As we can see, the poem is written in quatrains with a rhyming scheme *aabb*, and thus in the third stanza O'Grady rhymes two place names – Saint-Petersburg and New York, and by doing so puts emphasis on the distance Brodsky had to overcome. In the juxtaposing of these two faraway cities, old and new, Petersburg and New York, the poem reflects the whole dramatic scale of Brodsky's journey, his transition to a completely different historical and cultural landscape. The magnitude of this journey is set in opposition to the quiet life of Kinsale, "our small, historic harbour." Even to Irish people, well acquainted with the idea of exile, Brodsky becomes a phenomenon, a Russian Jew assimilating in a new American context ("what to say to such an exile").

The fourth stanza employs another technique, similar to that used in the Voznesensky poem: O'Grady directly addresses his interlocutor, emphasizing their common ground and shared experience:

That's what you and I share between us:
The secret sores of prodigal perseverance,
Our exiled souls' new scars. The more fortunate,
I've reclaimed my homeland. You're still expatriate. (*The Wide World* 148)

While the uniting theme for O'Grady and Voznesensky was their "cosmopolitan provincialism" and their longing to be connected to the heart of European literary tradition, for O'Grady and Brodsky it

is the theme of exile. The tone of the poem is very personal, almost intimate, for it addresses the poet's kindred spirit, another "exiled soul," who had his own share of "secret sores and scars." The crucial difference is the nature of the exile: O'Grady's exile was voluntary, a sort of spiritual and cultural pilgrimage, while Brodsky's emigration was prompted, or "strongly advised," by the Soviet authorities. The result is that after a certain time O'Grady was able to return to his homeland, while Brodsky, according to the Irish poet, remained expatriate.

It is important to point out that Brodsky was never keen on exploiting the victim-of-the-regime status and therefore he tried to fully embrace his new opportunities, new culture, and new language. As Seamus Heaney, a great friend of Brodsky, recalls:

He had such valour and style and lived at such a deliberate distance from self-pity and personal complaint, you were inclined to forget that he was as mortal as the next one ... instead of embracing victim status and swimming with the currents of radical chic, Brodsky got down to business right away as a teacher at the University of Michigan. ("The Singer of Tales")

This might be a perfect example of the attitude that O'Grady defined as "prodigal perseverance," which was also a characteristic of the Irish poet himself.

However, O'Grady is an exile who "reclaimed his homeland." This brings up the question: what does it mean for O'Grady to reclaim his homeland? This question becomes especially intriguing if we consider the fact that he was originally from Limerick, but in this poem his idea of home is manifested in the image of Kinsale. To solve this puzzle, we must go back to O'Grady's concept of "the wandering Celt" who chooses exile as a vital step in order to trace his roots. According to O'Grady's beliefs, anyone who wants to learn more about themselves and the history of their people has to "begin from the beginning." That is why he started his journey back to his native land from Northern Iran, the territory that belonged to ancient Celtic tribes, and from there he found his way to Kinsale – the harbour into which the Celts eventually sailed ("Desmond O'Grady: The Dark Edge of Europe" 23:50-24:30). Therefore, O'Grady's return to Ireland and his settling in Kinsale become symbolic for they represent the reclamation of the poet's homeland in its full-scale historic sense.

The poem has seven stanzas in total and can be thematically divided into three parts. The first three stanzas resemble a chronicle and are related to the biographical context. They narrate the story of Brodsky's arrival in Kinsale and gradually introduce the theme of exile that will become the driving force of the entire poem. The fourth stanza can be described as a watershed between the story and the reflection on it, between the personal and the universal. It is also the climax of intimacy when the idea of connectedness and some shared knowledge is made most prominent.

Starting from the fifth stanza the poem rises above the level of personal experience and moves into the realm of philosophical meditation and universality:

Each form of exile grants favour and disfavour:
It gives detachment from all that's familiar,
Perspective on old icons of childhood and growth,
A keener view of what plays false, what truth. (*The Wide World* 148)

To understand this change of tone better, it is essential to remember that the poem was first published in the *Southword Literary Journal* in 2000. After that it was presented in the volume *The Wide World: a Desmond O'Grady Casebook, and New Poems* (2003) and later appeared in his poetry collection *On My Way* (2006). In his review of *On My Way* Kevin Kiely defined O'Grady's poetry in the collection as "doggedly unassuming" and "self-effacing," with the Eliotic feel for exploration and a "Sailing to Byzantium" tone (95). The conclusion Kiely comes to is that the poet "is gathering himself up into the artifice of eternity with quiet soul singing" (96).

Indeed, *On My Way* turned out to be O'Grady's final collection of poetry, which makes its calm and reminiscing tone sound even more haunting and profound. With the simplicity and strictness of its

quatrains, with its steady pacing, “Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale” conveys the same slightly nostalgic, slightly elegiac aura of the collection. Therefore, unlike the much earlier poem to Andrei Voznesensky, the Brodsky poem does not let itself be absorbed in excitement and heated arguments, for example, on poetry and politics. On the contrary, it takes on a more detached and balanced view of a wise poet who, in his late age, can cast a thoughtful look back on his own life and the life (and death) of his fellow-poet and friend. O’Grady meditates upon the very phenomenon of exile and its impact on a poet’s life. In the final stanza that presents a summary of their lives O’Grady gives almost a formula that reflects the stages of exile:

Our prodigality serves up its worthwhile
Riches, it sensibly banks the beneficial
Wealth of experience: depart, confront, return
Equipped to bear the weight of our human burden. (*The Wide World* 149)

If we look back at his *oeuvre*, we can find this formula of exile (“depart – confront – return”) already present in his early poetry. For instance, the poet sees the necessity of leaving behind the life he was used to and embracing the unknown in the poem “Purpose” from his 1977 collection *Sing Me Creation*:

I looked at my days and saw that,
with the first affirmation of summer,
I must leave all I knew: the house,
the familiarity of family,
companions and memories of childhood.

This is the prospect of departure from the ordinary and habitual introduced in the first stanza. The second stanza explores the next step – the idea of confronting the unknown:

I looked face to face at my future:
I saw voyages to distant places,
saw the daily scuffle for survival
in foreign towns with foreign tongues...
And finally, the poem hints at the last element of the formula – the return home:
I looked at the faces about me
and saw my days’ end as a returned ship,
its witness singing in the rigging.

Curiously, the poem not only reflects, but also predicts O’Grady’s life, his endless wanderings and acquaintances with different places and, what is even more important, different languages and different literary traditions. The idea of self-exile becomes his poetic credo that defines his way of life and feeds his creative energy. Even in this early poem he feels that exile is essential and inevitable, and it is often the only way for a poet to fulfil his ambition and find his voice.

Many years later in the poem “Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale” O’Grady sums up his experience by introducing his friend and another great wanderer Brodsky into the conversation and weighing his own struggles in exile against Brodsky’s. So if we go back to the final stanza of this poem, we can see that its crucial point is that exile strengthens the poet’s resilience, makes him better equipped for his “human burden,” and opens up new perspectives and raises self-awareness. Some of these ideas were already expressed in the 1977 poem “Purpose.” But now the formula of exile (“depart – confront – return”) appears to be relevant not only to Brodsky and O’Grady – it extends the borders and becomes almost universal. This transition to the impersonal can be traced even in O’Grady’s use of the pronoun “our” – while in the fourth stanza it referred strictly to the two poets, in the final stanza it seems to embrace the

whole community of poets. Thus, the poem can be interpreted both as a reflection on his own life by the poet and as a piece of advice to future poets and exiles.

From the two poems that we have analysed so far we can observe that conversation with his contemporaries and his predecessors is an indispensable part of O'Grady's poetic approach. Quite often he uses explicit dialogue, directly addressing his interlocutor (as we have seen in his poems to Andrei Voznesensky and Joseph Brodsky). But O'Grady uses another, more subtle and intricate, form of poetic discourse which is translation.

During his long writing career O'Grady remained a prolific translator. He began by translating some poems from Irish, including the poem "Mise Raftery," which he sent to Ezra Pound. He translated the medieval Welsh epic poem *Y Gododdin* and started translating from Old Arabic. The list of authors and languages he worked with is indeed impressive: he did translations from, among other languages, Italian, German, French, Armenian, Greek, Romanian, and Russian. Some of these translations were published in his book *Trawling Tradition: Translations, 1954–1994* (1994). As he writes in the preface, translation "is an excellent way to learn the craft of writing verse and to learn about oneself as a poet ... it is a personal record of the company I have kept for forty years" (xii).

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. Translation is often the creative act that helps the poet driven into exile to stay connected and not succumb to the danger of falling into complete isolation. As Thomas McCarthy observed in his article on O'Grady and his art of translation:

The martyrdom of exile is mutated, metamorphosed, into the grand hotel of translation. In the clanging foyer of language all who are exiled (meaning all who are poets) are translated in homage and welcome ... Translation is a return to common origins ... Translation is that effort to cling to life while engaged in a permanent voyage of estrangement. (71–72)

Another essential point that O'Grady makes in the preface is that translation is a way to learn more about "oneself as a poet." This idea is crucial for understanding his approach to his translations and for choosing our strategy to analyse those translations. It is also important to remember that O'Grady was a friend and a secretary to Ezra Pound, and in many ways Pound's disciple, when it came to the art of translation. As he writes in his essay "Ezra Pound and Creative Translation":

Pound invented a new art we call "Creative Translation." Now the poet may, because of Pound's creative daring, introduce echoing or reflecting fragments of poems, or indeed entire poems, from various times and traditions into his own original compositions. With this liberating innovation Pound created a new dimension in poetic composition that would echo, reflect, and continue the history of the poetic imagination and enlarge the poetic body of our multi-lingual poetic tradition. (204)

This Poundian approach is fully employed in O'Grady's translation from Anna Akhmatova's "Poem without a Hero," which appeared, along with several other translations from Akhmatova, in *Trawling Tradition*. He translated an excerpt from the third chapter of the "Poem" (the first thirty-four lines of the chapter, from "Были святки кострами согреты" to "Приближался не календарный – Настоящий Двадцатый Век"). The translation was published under the title "My City."

Curiously, upon its publication O'Grady's book was criticized by some scholars for its many liberties and inaccuracies:

The Irish poet Desmond O'Grady (1994), who claims to be in the Poundian tradition, recently published a very large volume of translations from many languages. And in this one book, cheek by jowl, we find some beautiful, accurate translations and some that take liberties which, to my mind, are totally unacceptable. (Osers 59)

One of those “unacceptable liberties” appears to be the whole text of “My City”:

Christmas blazed a bundle of bonfires.
Carousers jumped off bridges for bets
and the City of the Broken Treaty
drifted towards an unknown distinction
up and down the River Shannon. (*Trawling Tradition* 568)

As we can see from the very first lines of the translation, O’Grady took the greatest possible liberty – he transformed Akhmatova’s Saint Petersburg into his own native “City of the Broken Treaty,” Limerick. In his foreword to the Akhmatova translations he confesses that his versions are very free and, in the case of “My City,” “very personalized by making her St. Petersburg my own home city” (567). That is why we believe that the word-for-word comparison of the translation to its original in this case would be barely acceptable and would limit the possibilities of both texts. It is important to follow the path O’Grady highlights for his readers in the preface to the book, where he explains his strategy as a translator: “Because these translations, versions, renderings, what you will, are in my own likeness they are related to my own poems... I am recognisable in and responsible for them all” (*Trawling Tradition* xii). In other words, O’Grady insists on reading these translations (versions or renderings – he deliberately does not stick to a specific term) as an inseparable dimension to his own poetic system, as texts stemming from and enriching his own poetry. It is also important to analyse “My City,” on the one hand, as part of O’Grady’s personal dialogue with Russian poets and, on the other hand, as part of the wider context of Irish-Russian literary relations.

As is the case with Voznesensky and Brodsky, O’Grady’s dialogue with Akhmatova goes far beyond the page. As we have mentioned earlier, he came to know Akhmatova during his time in Italy. Once, while changing a bulb in his Roman apartment he confessed to his friend, the poet Peter Donnelly, that he “fell in love with a woman named Akhmatova” (Slade). In 1964 O’Grady was one of those who helped get Akhmatova out of the Soviet Union and bring her to Italy to accept the Etna-Taormina Poetry Prize: “I organized a poetry reading where I got the poets in the audience to stand up one at a time. I made the announcements. After the prize had been presented, each one stood up and recited a poem of their own in her honour” (*The Wide World* 44).

Thus, O’Grady had almost first-hand knowledge of that “extraordinarily courageous, if tragic, literary life involving the long misery of the great Russian artists and writers up to Joseph Brodsky today” (*Trawling Tradition* 566). As an Irish European and “a committed modernist” he perfectly understood the longing of Russian poets, such as Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Brodsky, to be part of “greater Europe” and feel the connection to the common European tradition. It is a longing that he himself shared and tried to fulfil. With great sympathy he writes of Akhmatova: “From there [Sicily] she travelled to Paris, London and Oxford where she was honoured with a Doctorate of Letters. She died the following year on 5 March feeling she had fulfilled her dreams and destiny as a citizen of Greater Europe as a whole” (*Trawling Tradition* 567).

Having made her personal acquaintance O’Grady continues his conversation with Akhmatova through his translations and makes them as personalized as possible. We thus become witnesses to a very curious metamorphosis as he changes Akhmatova’s Petersburg into his home city of Limerick: the “funereal city” of Petersburg is transformed into “the City of the Broken Treaty”; the Neva is replaced by the River Shannon; instead of Galernaya Street and Summer Garden we find ourselves on the Flag of All Nations Street. Like Akhmatova, O’Grady keeps the city as the main character of the poem. He visualizes the map of Limerick and enhances his poem with details that give it a strong local touch:

Drawn blinds. No heat from
gaping fireplaces. Flowers
withered in their vases... (*Trawling Tradition* 568)

Although familiar, these images create a disturbing feeling that the city is drained of its life, that everything is neglected and almost abandoned. Even the weather is changed in order to strengthen this aura of stagnation and emptiness: the dark frosty nights and snowdrifts, the silver moon above the silver age are replaced by the bleak colours of rain:

Occasionally,
in the isolated suffocation
of those blank days,
an incomprehensible vision dawned.

.....
Buttoned up,
it brooded about in the rain
pelting on the river. (*Trawling Tradition* 568)

In this chapter of the “Poem” Akhmatova recollects her memories of Petersburg in 1913, on the brink of the “real twentieth century” – the First World War, followed by the Revolution, Civil War, and the onset of the Soviet regime. O’Grady, in his turn, writes about his own time and the Ireland of the twentieth century that he lived in. Although he keeps the suspense and anticipation of something unknown ahead, the imagery of Dostoevskian delirium, future execution, and terror-filled nights is replaced by images that are more routine-like and static: everything is blank, withered or buttoned up, the city is stuck in isolated suffocation. The slight change of tone occurs with the introduction of the speaker’s “I”:

I believed we were possessed,
unwilling to recognize ourselves
in the dirty mirror
of our own black night – (*Trawling Tradition* 568)

The affirmative phrase “I believed” seems to be the only mark of a living human in this ghostly somnambulist city. In the last line of this quote (“of our own black night”) the focus of our attention is drawn to the pronoun “our” and the adjective “own,” because they reveal that finally O’Grady openly addresses Akhmatova’s text and juxtaposes the two realities – Petersburg and Limerick. This line functions as a direct reply to Akhmatova, it breaches the temporal and spatial distance between two poets and creates the stunning effect of immediate dialogue. But full understanding of the direction the poem is taking dawns on the reader with the lines that follow:

while all the time,
down on the forbidden docks,
my twentieth century – the real
not our politico-clerical century –
rode at anchor, prepared to sail. (*Trawling Tradition* 568)

Finally, we come to realize what the phrase “our own black night” means, and the dramatic difference between Akhmatova’s Petersburg and O’Grady’s Limerick becomes apparent. Akhmatova’s Petersburg is full of uneasy anticipation of some great threat ahead, it is delirious and disturbed by ominous premonitions, while “the real twentieth century” is approaching. The Limerick of O’Grady’s poem already exists in the twentieth century, and what is more, it is stuck in its own version of that century and its daily routine governed by religion and politics (“our politico-clerical century”). In the last few lines of the poem there is an opposition between the possessive pronoun “my” which means “real” and the pronoun “our” which stands for nothing but illusion. Therefore, it is the city that is stuck in the past, while its life and colours are draining away, and only the poet understands that an epoch is over, and the twentieth century is prepared to sail away.

If analysed in the wider context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish poetry, this poem fits perfectly into the already well-formed tradition of reimagining and remapping the Russian literary and geographical landscape by Irish poets. As Ronald Schuchard writes in his Introduction to Seamus Heaney's *The Place of Writing*:

The aura of place imposes itself on one poet's imagination; another poet imposes his singular vision on a plural place; places become havens or heavens; they drive the poet into spiritual or physical exile; they provide poetry with its nourishment and its distraction; they liberate imagination and darken consciousness. (4)

Due to the extraordinary interest in Russia and Russian literature among Irish poets and writers, Russia has long become a place of spiritual and real pilgrimage, and a place of voluntary exile; it has become a source of poetic nourishment and a haven providing necessary distraction and detachment from the real place a poet lives in. Many poets including J.C. Mangan, W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Paul Durcan, Paula Meehan, and Mary O'Malley, have embarked on this journey to the unknown, exploring in their mind's eye places like Moscow or Saint Petersburg, or even travelling further – to Siberia and the island of Sakhalin. By invoking place names and aspects of Russian life, these poets defamiliarize their own poetic landscape and subject matter, while trying to solve some of their own most significant questions.

However, in more rare cases, we can see this process reversed in the opposite direction, when Irish poets merge the Russian landscape with the contours of their native one. O'Grady's poem ("translation" or "version") can be considered among the most illustrative examples of this phenomenon. For him, Akhmatova's Petersburg becomes fundamental for the translation of his own home city into poetry. He fits Akhmatova's Petersburgian myth into his own poetic system, reinterpreting and expanding it and finally making it part of his own private mythology. O'Grady chooses the form of translation, and it allows him to give voice to his interlocutor, Anna Akhmatova, and to make the ghostly presence of her Petersburg most visible. As a result, the poet looks at his familiar reality from his own perspective and, at the same time, through the lenses of the other.

John Liddy once described O'Grady as "your European poet, a poet's poet. You can learn so much from his unswerving dedication to the pursuit of truth in the word." This "pursuit of truth" can be said to lie in the permafrost of each of the poems we have studied in this article, be it O'Grady's search for his own origins or his journey to the heart of the European literary tradition, his exploration of the nature of poetry and its existence in a highly politicized context, or his study of his own land, his own city, his own age. Like many Irish poets of his generation, he tries to solve these questions by addressing his Russian fellow poets: Voznesensky, Brodsky, and Akhmatova. Their shared artistic philosophy and principles, their peripheral location vis-à-vis the "centre" of European culture and the strong feeling of "nostalgia for world culture" (as Osip Mandelstam defined it) – all these aspects make these Russian poets ideal interlocutors for O'Grady. They become his poetic others, and by maintaining the dialogue with his others O'Grady performs the necessary ritual of defamiliarization or estrangement – "the detachment from all that's familiar" (*The Wide World* 148).

These three poems were written in different periods of O'Grady's life, and can also be perceived as signposts on the map of his creative journey. Each poem has its own distinct location that has played a crucial role in O'Grady's poetic system and personal mythology. The first poem, "Missing Andrei Voznesensky," is set in Florence – the city that encodes the entire cultural heritage of Europe. In "My City," the poet revisits his home city of Limerick and witnesses it drifting towards some "unknown distinction," moving closer and closer to the brink of a new era. In the poem "Joseph Brodsky Visits Kinsale," O'Grady settles in the historic harbour of Kinsale – the final destination of the wandering Celt, whose search for his origins was fulfilled and who, through his quest for geographical and poetic estrangement, acquired "a keener view of what plays false, what truth" (*The Wide World* 148).

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