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# From Dostoevsky to Yeltsin: Failed Translations and Russian Literary Landings in the Irish Language

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## De Dostoiévski a Ieltsin: traduções malsucedidas e aterrissagens literárias russas na língua irlandesa

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# From Dostoevsky to Yeltsin: Failed Translations and Russian Literary Landings in the Irish Language<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article proposes the metaphor of *prizemlenie* (landing) as a new investigative approach to Translation Studies. *Prizemlenie* refers to literary texts which ‘land’ in the target language’s literary field without acquiring wide readership or becoming integrated in the target culture. Focussing on literary translation from Russian to Irish, I survey the record of An Gúm, the Irish Free State’s official publishing organization, with regard to literary translation; undertake a close reading and case study of the first Irish-language translation of Dostoevsky in 1938; and examine the *habitus* of three of the most significant Russian-to-Irish literary translators. In conclusion, I argue that even the minimal cultural interaction sustained by *prizemlenie* plays an important role in preserving the target language.

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe a metáfora da *prizemliénie* (aterrissagem) como uma nova abordagem investigativa para os Estudos de Tradução. A *prizemliénie* se refere a textos literários que “aterrissam” no campo literário da língua de chegada sem que adquiram um público-leitor amplo ou que se integrem à cultura de chegada. Tendo o foco na tradução literária do russo ao irlandês, acompanho o registro de atividades do An Gúm, a organização oficial para publicações do Estado Livre Irlandês, com atenção para o que diz respeito à tradução literária; realizo um *close reading* e um estudo do caso da primeira tradução de Dostoiévski em língua irlandesa, feita em 1938; e examino o *habitus* de três dos tradutores literários mais significativos do russo para o irlandês. Na conclusão, argumento que até mesmo a interação cultural mínima mantida pela *prizemliénie* desempenha um papel importante na preservação da língua de chegada.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura russa; Tradução; *Prizemliénie*; Dostoiévski; An Gúm  
**Keywords:** Russian literature; Translation; *Prizemlenie*; Dostoevsky; An Gúm

**Cé thuigean Rúisis chun saobhar Tholstoi a thionntó?  
(Who knows Russian well enough to translate Tolstoy?)**

**Liam Ó Rinn, 'Cumann na Scribhneoiri: Tuille Tuairimi',  
Misneach, March 25th, 1922**

## **Introduction: landing in Shannon**

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There are many contentious metaphors for translation, and post-colonial translation is a particularly rich field for idioms of disruption and violence. In the twentieth century, cannibalism has gained traction as a metaphor for the aggressive cultural recycling typical of post-colonial nations – including Brazil and Ireland – which gained, or consolidated, their political and cultural autonomy during this period. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi began their influential 1999 volume on post-colonial translation by revisiting the case of the Catholic bishop devoured by cannibals in Brazil in 1556.<sup>2</sup> This unfortunate prelate's demise informed Bassnett and Trivedi's now well-known argument that '[o]nly by devouring Europe could the colonized break away from what was imposed upon them. And at the same time, the devouring could be perceived

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1 I would like to thank the staff at the National Library of Ireland and the National Archives of Ireland for their affability and invaluable assistance with locating rarely consulted documents. I would also like to thank Mark Ó Fionnáin and Risteárd Mac Anraoi for generously answering my questions about their translation practice and sharing their published work with me. I thank Mairead Breslin Kelly, daughter of Maighrhead Nic Mhaicín, for granting me access to her mother's archive; sharing many memories with me; and for translating key documents. Without the help of Siobhán McNamara, many Irish passages cited in this article would have remained Greek to me. I also thank the European Research Council for funding this research as part of the Horizon 2020 RusTrans project (grant agreement no. 802437). Finally, I thank the editor of this special issue, Professor Bruno Gomide, for inviting me to contribute.

2 This was *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, one of several books co-edited by Bassnett around 2000 to explore the cultural turn in Translation Studies. See Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), p. 1.

as both a violation of European codes and an act of homage'.<sup>3</sup> This was not, however, the first time the bishop himself was recycled for cultural critique. He made his debut in the 1928 'Manifesto Antropófago' of Brazilian avant-gardist Oswald de Andrade: this unusual text calls for the selective consumption, digestion, and reconstitution of vital elements of European culture in order to nourish Brazilian creativity. Andrade called Europeans 'fugitives from a civilization we are eating, because we are strong and vindictive'.<sup>4</sup> Haroldo De Campos' theoretical essays on cultural translation extrapolate from Andrade's manifesto, applying metaphors of violence, cannibalism and patricide to the literary field. These brutal concepts aptly express the fraught cultural relationship between formerly colonized states, seeking an independent, holistic identity, and the unavoidable textual presence of their former colonizers.<sup>5</sup> De Campos explains Andrade's figurative anthropophagy as a 'critical devouring of universal heritage', a form of

'transculturation [...] capable of appropriation and of expropriation, of dehierarchization, of deconstruction. Any past which is an "other" for us deserves to be negated. We could even say, it deserves to be eaten, devoured, with the following clarifying proviso: The cannibal [...] devoured only the enemies he considered courageous, taking their marrow and protein to fortify and renew his own natural energies'.<sup>6</sup>

Ireland, a formerly colonized state, has done its share of '[a]bsorption of the sacred enemy', to characterize the relationship of Irish writers to British texts in Andrade's cannibalistic terms.<sup>7</sup> Ireland emerged painfully as an independent nation

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3 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

4 Oswald de Andrade, 'Cannibalist Manifesto', p. 41.

5 For discussion of de Campos' writings, see Rainer Guldin, 'Devouring the Other: Cannibalism, Translation and the Construction of Cultural Identity', pp. 109-22, in Paschalis, Nikolaou and Maria-Venetia Kyritsi, eds. *Translating Selves: Experience and Identity between Languages and Literatures*. London, Continuum, pp. 109-122; and Vieira, Else Ribeiro Pires. 'Liberating Calibans: readings of Antropofagia and Haroldo de Campos' poetics of transcreation" in S. Bassnett and H. Trivedi (eds.), *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London and NY: Routledge, 1999, pp. 95-113.

6 Haroldo de Campos (2007), pp. 159-60.

7 De Andrade, p. 43.

in the 1920s, in the wake of the 1919-21 War of Independence (from the British Empire) and a short and bitter civil war (1922-3). At this time, Ireland faced the dual challenge of asserting itself culturally on the world stage while restoring its native Celtic language, suppressed under British rule. Both tasks commenced in the late 1880s with the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century, in which scholars and writers such as Douglas Hyde and W.B. Yeats (and many lesser-known figures), and organizations such as the Gaelic league, worked towards the restoration of the Irish language, the recognition of Irish literature (in either Irish or English) abroad, and the creation of a Celtic cultural sphere based on both modern experience and traditional myths.<sup>8</sup> Pascale Casanova concisely traces the conflicts that developed in this 'Irish paradigm' during the twentieth century, between writers active in the Irish and English languages, between rural mythographers and social realists, and between those writers who aligned their work with the hegemonic tradition of British literature (including George Bernard Shaw and, arguably, Yeats), and those who sought cultural autonomy by aligning themselves with the 'Greenwich meridian' of Paris (such as Joyce and Beckett).<sup>9</sup> One might add a third category: authors who wrote in the Irish language for Irish readers, thus dooming themselves to an audience so small that one of the twentieth century's most significant modernist novels (Máirtín Ó Cadhain's 1949 *Cré na Cille*) remained unknown in English until 2015.<sup>10</sup>

All of the above categories of writer practised different forms of cultural cannibalism, some more overtly than others: *Finnegans Wake's* cross-linguistic borrowings amount to 'an autonomous literary language',<sup>11</sup> while *Cré na Cille* re-uses motifs and techniques from Gorky and Dostoevsky, to mention

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<sup>8</sup> For a critical overview of these developments, see O'Leary (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Casanova, esp. Chapter 10, "The Irish Paradigm", pp. 303-23.

<sup>10</sup> *Cré na Cille* was translated as *The Dirty Dust* by Alan Titley (2015) and as *Graveyard Clay* (2016) by Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (both published by Yale University Press). The latter translation is usually considered the more literal of the two. See Ní Fhrighil, 216-18.

<sup>11</sup> Casanova, p. 332.

only the Russian influences on this novel.<sup>12</sup> The topic of this essay, however, is not the intellectual cannibalization of Russian literature by Irish authors. There exists a fourth category which was active in Ireland's cultural revitalization during the first half of the twentieth century and, sporadically, ever since: translators of foreign literature into the Irish language. By translating texts by authors from Thucydides to Twain, they enrich the target language semantically and lexically, enable monolingual Irish speakers to assimilate global literature, and (theoretically, at least) make their native tongue equivalent in status to other major global languages. It is these translators, and specifically those who translated Russian literary texts into Irish, with whom my essay is concerned. Yet the metaphor of cannibalism fails this category of cultural translation, because of one crucial impediment: cannibalism implies digestion, the reception of translated texts by a native readership and their subsequent dislocation and insertion into new literary patterns. Because the readership for Irish-language literature was small, and because the ideal reader for these translations (a literate, Irish-language monoglot) was already a more or less imaginary being, very few of these texts were ever read. They were certainly not critically assessed, taught, or emulated. They accumulated symbolic capital for the Irish language and nation by the fact of their existence, and the (minimal) fees paid to the translators, who were often writers or poets, helped indirectly to sustain Ireland's cultural production during decades of economic crisis and depression. But they were poorly distributed; barely sold; and therefore not *digested*, which means we require a new metaphor to capture the closed system of Russian-to-Irish literary translation.

No Irish cannibals have ever eaten a Russian cleric; but there was one iconic moment in recent Russian-Irish relations which may yield the required metaphor. In 1994, the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, returning from a UN summit, made a

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12 For an overview of Russian influences on Máirtín Ó Cadhain's fiction, see Louis De Paor, 'Introduction: Introducing Máirtín Ó Cadhain', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, v. 34, n. 1, 2008, pp. 10-17; for an exploration of its Bakhtinian resonances, see also Radvan Markus, 'The Carnavalesque against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*', *Litteraria Pragensia*, v. 28, n. 55, 2018, pp. 56-69.

last-minute decision to conduct a diplomatic visit to the Republic of Ireland. In a hastily scheduled series of arrangements, the President was meant to land at Shannon Airport, historically a major hub for Russian aircraft, meet with the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Albert Reynolds, and visit a nearby castle for a formal dinner. When the Russian plane arrived in Irish airspace, the Taoiseach and other diplomatic personnel were waiting on the tarmac with a military band. The plane continued to circle overhead. When it eventually landed, Yeltsin did not emerge; nor was Reynolds allowed aboard to greet him. Instead, Yeltsin's deputy reported that the President was indisposed and, after a courtesy handshake with the Taoiseach, the entire Russian delegation departed for Moscow. This non-visit offended the Taoiseach and the entire nation of Ireland. It indirectly humiliated Yeltsin, widely assumed to have been drunk (conflicting reports suggest he may have been unwell or merely asleep).<sup>13</sup> It does, however, fit within an extant, if obscure, tradition of textual Russian visitors who enter the Irish language but never meet their target readers. I would like to suggest the Russian word *prizemlenie* ('landing') as an apt metaphor for this kind of translation: a visit without contact or cultural integration. As I will show, original translations of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Pushkin, Aleksandr Ostrovsky, Konstantin Simonov and even Viktor Pelevin have *landed* in the Irish language since the early twentieth century, most intensively in the period between 1926 and 1950. But, as I shall show, none of these texts were widely read; some were never even published; others were published but not distributed. In terms of our metaphor, they did not get off the plane; they certainly missed the ceremonial dinner. The only difference is the direction of the snub. Yeltsin's behaviour insulted the Irish government, whereas in the world of literary diplomacy, Irish-language readers turned up their noses at Russian fiction.

Hence *prizemlenie* becomes a playful metaphor for failed intercultural transmission, which I will examine here in the

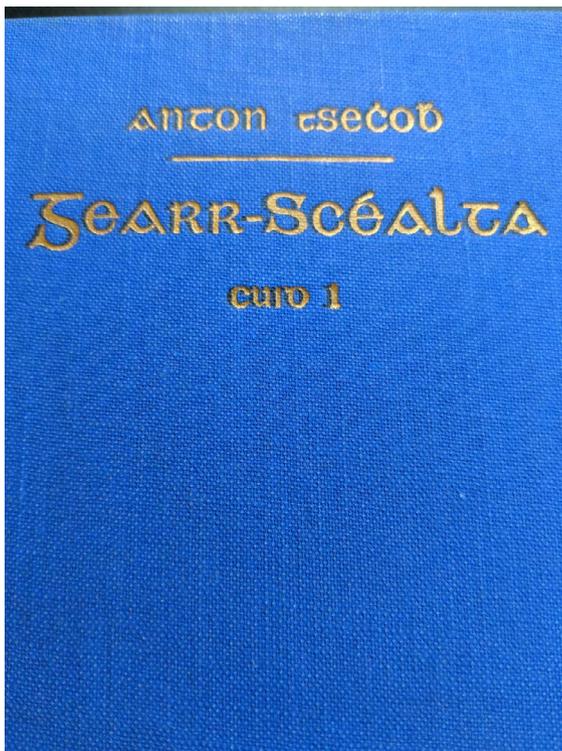
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<sup>13</sup> See Kozyrev (2008).

context of Russian-to-Irish literary translation, although it might be applied in other contexts of unsuccessful exchange. Drawing on interviews, contemporary reportage and archival sources, I take a diachronic approach to the question of why the Irish state and individual Irish translators funded or pursued translations from Russian to Irish during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – despite knowing that *prizemlenie* was the almost inevitable outcome. I focus in the central section of this article on the original working model of An Gúm (meaning, in the Connaught dialect of Irish, ‘The Project’ or ‘The Scheme’), a state-funded committee founded in 1927 to encourage translation into Irish while stimulating the production of new, Irish-language prose fiction. It also published textbooks, nonfiction, and sheet music for Irish songs. An Gúm was responsible for the majority of translations from Russian into Irish, but its inefficiency – what a former Finance Minister memorably called ‘the jam in the Gúm’ – left translators frustrated, unpublished, and unpaid.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, An Gúm failed as a mediator of foreign literature because it

was unable to establish a significant market share for translations into Irish. In the following sections, I will discuss why the Irish Government decided to support the translation of foreign literature; examine the publication and editorial mechanisms of An Gúm, with emphasis on Russian texts; and, by analysing in detail the text and (non-) publication history of one proposed translation, I will conduct a case study of *prizemlenie*. In the final section of my essay, I look briefly at the habitus and motivations of three Russian-to-Irish translators: Maighréad Nic Mhaicín, Mark Ó Fionnáin, and Risteárd Mac Annraoi. Collectively, their experience shows the importance of long-term advocacy by individual translators in resisting, if never quite overcoming, *prizemlenie*.

Fig. 1. Maighréad Nic Mhaicín's 1939 translation of Chekhov's short stories for An Gúm.



<sup>14</sup> Ernest Blythe, ‘Famine in Irish Books’ (1936).

## The earliest Russian-to-Irish translations and the foundation of An Gúm

Individual translators, rather than a state-funded collective, were responsible for the first translations of Russian literature into Irish. Most of these were re-translations via English or French bridging texts; they drew upon a shared pool of short fictions by Tolstoy, Gorky and Chekhov. They appeared in Irish-language, politically nationalist journals and newspapers such as *Misneach* (Courage), *Fáinne an Lae* (The Break of Day) and *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light) between 1909 and the mid-1920s.<sup>15</sup> They represented attempts to restore cultural capital to the Irish language (and to the newly founded journals that published these fictions) by demonstrating that European thoughts and trends could be expressed more than adequately ‘as Gaeilge’ (‘in Irish’).<sup>16</sup> P.H. Pearse, a poet, educator and messianic nationalist (executed by the British Government for treason in the aftermath of the failed 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin), issued in 1906 an important call for Irish writers to become familiar with, and to adopt, the trends and forms of European literature, specifically, social realism:

We must get into touch also with our contemporaries – in France, in Russia, in Norway, in Finland, in Bohemia, in Hungary, wherever, in short, vital literature is being produced on the face of the globe. [...] Irish literature, if it is to live and grow, must get into contact on the one hand with its own past and on the other with the mind of contemporary Europe.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For a near-comprehensive list of these translations, see Ó Fionnáin (2015), pp. 268-70. The earliest such text to be translated was probably Tolstoy’s 1886 tale of a peasant corrupted by a devil, *The Imp and the Crust* (*Kak chertenok kraiusku vykupa*) as ‘An Maistín agus an Geampa aráin’ in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, July 31<sup>st</sup> 1909. *Misneach*, and later also *Fáinne an Lae*, ran a regular ‘Aistriúchán’ (‘Translation’) column featuring an original short story or poem from English or another European language, accompanied by its Irish translation, presented to readers as an opportunity to study Irish syntax and grammar from a comparative perspective.

<sup>16</sup> All translations from Russian or Irish are my own, unless otherwise credited. I thank Siobhán McNamara for her correction of my translations from Irish. Any remaining inaccuracies are my fault.

<sup>17</sup> P.H. Pearse (1906).

Even more specifically, in 1916 the Irish author Daniel Corkery wrote a brief article identifying Russian literature as a 'storehouse of models' for Irish writers. He drew several situational and thematic parallels between Russian and Irish literature: both were recently 'invented' by their own practitioners; both countries had a large and often fanatically religious peasant majority overseen by a small but 'smug' bureaucracy.<sup>18</sup> The advocacy of Pearse, Corkery and others did draw many Irish prose writers to Russian literature, especially to Tolstoy and Gorky, but most read (and subsequently cannibalized) English translations.

Only a handful of Irish translators knew Russian well enough to translate directly from the original. This group includes Liam Ó Rinn (1886-1943), a civil servant who held the post of Chief Translator for the Dáil (the Irish Parliament) for twenty years. Ó Rinn taught himself Polish and Russian; while he is chiefly remembered for his work with Polish literature, particularly Adam Mickiewicz's poetry, he also published *Dánta Próis* (1933), a volume of prose poems by Turgenev.<sup>19</sup> Gearóid Ó Nualláin (1874-1942) was a Catholic priest, classical scholar and (from 1909) Professor of Irish at Maynooth College. He published several well-regarded Irish grammars and, in 1922, an anthology of his own short fiction called *Dia, diabhal agus daoine* (*God, Devil and People*) which included very free translations of Tolstoy's 'What Men Live By' ('Chem liudi zhivy', 1885) and Pushkin's 'The Blizzard' ('Metel', 1831).<sup>20</sup> Most other translations dating from this period are of a single story (usually by Tolstoy), or play (usually by Chekhov). It is rarely indicated whether the Irish translator worked from the original Russian or from an English bridging text. Almost certainly, the majority of translations were from English versions; for example, in 1933 the playwright Máiréad Ní Ghráda (1906-1971) produced yet another variation of 'What Men Live By', re-titled *Mícheál* (Michael) by Ní Ghráda. Unusually for the time,

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<sup>18</sup> Corkery (1916).

<sup>19</sup> For more on Ó Rinn's life and translation philosophy, see Ó Fionnáin (2014).

<sup>20</sup> For detailed analysis of Ó Nualláin's work, see Mark Ó Fionnáin (2015), pp. 270-3.

she specified the English translator of the bridging text, Miles Malleson. The text of *Mícheál* was printed by the Publications Office in 1933, and the play itself first performed at Dublin's Gate Theatre in April of that year.<sup>21</sup> Ní Ghráda became only the second Irishwoman to adapt a Russian play for publication (after Nic Mhaicín, whose version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyyi sad*, 1903) was already in preparation).

Most of the later translations in this group were published (and funded) by Coiste na Leabhar ('the Committee of Books'), located within the Department of Education; and better known as the above-mentioned An Gúm. From its inception in 1927, this body oversaw the commissioning, editing and printing of most Irish-language literature. By the 1930s, its monopoly over this branch of literary production, despite its minimal staff (consisting of two editors, one proof-reader, one 'writing-assistant' and the formidable Publications Officer, Sean Mac Lellan, who dealt with the majority of correspondence) was near-total.<sup>22</sup> How did An Gúm become so powerful? As Ó Conchubair argues, the government had two initial, urgent motivating factors for establishing and subsidizing an organization which would promote and manage the translation of foreign literature into Irish. The first factor was the lack of translations from any language at all into Irish; the second was the scarcity of native prose literature in the Irish language. A third reason was the fact that translation work, although poorly paid, provided sustenance for Irish writers who lacked a fixed income.<sup>23</sup> There is an analogy with Gorky and Anatolii Lunacharskii's project 'Vsemirnaia literatura', founded in 1918 in Soviet Russia, which played a similar role in employing translators to consolidate Russian cultural capital and edify the public by intensively translating foreign literature.

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<sup>21</sup> See Ní Bhrádaigh (1996), for more on Ní Ghráda's *Mícheál*.

<sup>22</sup> In a letter of February 17, 1930, one of the editors, Domhnall MacGrianna, described the current staffing situation as 'totally inadequate to cope with the arrears and keep abreast of incoming work'. Dublin, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), File 99/52/4630.

<sup>23</sup> See Ó Conchubair, pp. 93-97; and O'Leary (1994), esp. Chapter 6, 'Unwise and Unlovable: The Question of Translation' (pp. 355-399). O'Leary alleges that writers were paid a pound per thousand words at the time (p. 355), or the equivalent of US\$88 today.

Their translation collective aimed boldly to professionalize its own practice, while feeding starving writers and producing thousands of new translations of Western classics every year. It 'employed vast numbers of men and women from among the *déclassé* old intelligentsia. The unlucky ones were paid in worthless paper money; the more fortunate, in grain and salted fish'.<sup>24</sup> But despite its short-term success, the Russian organisation disintegrated rapidly, crippled by the emigration of both rank-and-file translators and high-profile organizers like Gorky himself (who, disgusted with Lenin's summary justice, had left for Sorrento in 1921). An Gúm, however, endures in a modified capacity to the present day. After ceasing to publish translated European classics in the early 1960s, it now concentrates on grammars and children's literature in Irish.

In 1971, Máirtín Ó Cadhain acerbically summarized An Gúm's activities:

When *An Gúm*, a government organization for promoting Irish, was established in 1927, Irish writers began to be paid commercially for the first time. Immediately whole lots of novels began to get written by the most unexpected people, and quantity surveyors noticed that these had become twice and three times the size of previous novels. They need not detain us. They are as harmless as cement or tractor novels. Under this soviet [sic] organization of literature two censorships operated, the ordinary state censorship and a special *Gúm* censorship which presumed that everything that was to be written in Irish was for children or nuns.<sup>25</sup> [italics in original]

Was this verdict unfair? Certainly, to some extent. An Gúm was inefficient, constrained by its tiny staff, bureaucratic redundancies and the censorship prevalent in a rigidly Catholic state at the time. It also faced unique challenges. An Gúm was not only tasked with supplying its audience; it had to *create* an audience of eager Irish readers, in a country with a population of fewer than three million, of whom only 20%

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<sup>24</sup> Friedberg (1997), p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1971), p. 147. Ó Cadhain's familiarity with Russian and Soviet literature, dating from his discovery of Gorky's work during the 1930s, can be felt in the familiar reference to 'cement and tractor novels'.

considered themselves competent in Irish. Compulsory Irish classes in schools failed to counteract declining numbers of native speakers.<sup>26</sup> Both responsibilities were daunting. In order to sustain a supply of new titles, *An Gúm*'s editors had to purchase, read, and assess hundreds of source texts annually. Because not all their translators were native speakers of Irish, the editors had the additional problem of checking their translations not just for accuracy, but for correctness and consistency in use of the target language (avoiding, for example, excessive use of anglicisms, non-standard grammar, or dialectal expressions). Meanwhile, they were contending with the unassailable fact that the majority of the reading public were much likelier to buy foreign literature in English translation than in Irish, given the choice.<sup>27</sup> Once again, Ó Cadhain offers a pithy summary of *An Gúm*'s failings as a translation enterprise:

Most of the work done by *An Gúm* [...] was translation, preponderantly from English. Many have commented on the futility of it. Most of the translations were of third, or fourth rate books, or of mere trashy books. A book, translation or otherwise, given to this department need not appear in the lifetime of the translator. [italics in original].<sup>28</sup>

While broadly true, my scrutiny of *An Gúm*'s records shows that Ó Cadhain's verdict does not do justice to the range of translations which it commissioned. This was impressive: translations (often of more than one work from each author, by different translators) of Molière, Plutarch's *Lives*, Cicero, Thomas Mann, Ibsen, Alphonse Daudet, and a host of English authors from George Eliot to Jerome K. Jerome. Short stories were clearly preferred; adventure literature (R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*) was published alongside more serious material (Henry Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*). Seán Ó Cuirrín's 1933 translation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was actually 'a bestseller and an instant success' (that is, it sold more than 700 copies

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<sup>26</sup> Carnie (1996), p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> See Ó Conchubair, p. 97.

<sup>28</sup> Ó Cadhain, p. 150.

out of a total print run of 1,000).<sup>29</sup> But publication delays worsened over time; one irate textbook author wrote to the Taoiseach's office to request 'aid in extracting from the Gum mortuary for Irish manuscripts, two of mine which were accepted for publication years ago – one of them in 1941!'.<sup>30</sup>

Five years was, in fact, a minimal delay; twenty years was not unheard-of. Maighréad Nic Mhaicín's translation of Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (*Zapiski okhotnika*, 1852) was accepted for publication in 1933, the same year as her first volume of *Gearr-scéalta Anton Tsecobh* (*Short Stories of Anton Chekhov*). However, the Chekhov volume was published after only six years' delay, in 1939 (the vaguely planned second volume never took shape); whereas the Turgenev stories eventually appeared in 1954. Less well-known, but more insidious, was the internal committees' prevarication over whether to commission translations of certain foreign classics. A list of 'optioned' titles was updated several times of year, with rejected volumes eventually auctioned off to second-hand booksellers. Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (*Revizor*, 1842) first appeared on one such list in February 1931; after rolling over for eighteen months, it vanished without ever being commissioned.<sup>31</sup> Records from the end of that decade show that stories by Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, in addition to a play by Ostrovsky, were sold off as surplus to a bookshop in this way.<sup>32</sup> Although no Ostrovsky play was ever commissioned by An Gúm, an Irish version of *The Storm* (*Groza*, 1859) was performed for one night only by Dublin's Abbey Theatre in November 1942. *An Stuirm* was translated by Aodh Mac Dubháin (a history teacher and keen dramatist) and produced by Frank Dermody. The National Library of Ireland preserves a single,

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29 De Brún, p. 71. Sales statistics are cited from An Gúm's records in the National Archives of Ireland.

30 Joe O'Connor, letter to the Taoiseach's Private Secretary, December 1946. Dublin, NAI, 97/9/369.

31 An Gúm Memorandum: 'Lists of books for translation (1931/2)'. Dublin, NAI. File 99/52/4885.

32 An Gúm Memorandum: 'Books proposed for translation and found to be unsuitable'. Dublin, NAI. File 99/52/4882.

apparently fire-damaged copy of Mac Dubháin's manuscript. Whether or not the play's performance and An Gúm's rejection are connected, there is no record.

In 1936, the controversial former Irish government minister Ernest Blythe published an incisive article which both condemned and explained An Gúm's inefficiency. Blythe, as Minister for Finance, had originally funded An Gúm despite the Irish government's shaky financial condition in the late 1920s. Referring to a review dating from the end of his term in office, Blythe describes a deeply inefficient and redundant system:

The author dealt with the Publication Section of the Department of Education, which dealt with the Stationery Office, a sub-department of the Ministry of Finance, which dealt with the printers. The author laid the blame for the delays on the Gúm, the Stationery Office, or the printer, but naturally held himself faultless. The Education Office blamed the writers, or some of them, whose erratic spelling and careless work, including, in the case of certain translators, a tendency to skip difficult passages, caused the task of editorial revision to be unduly prolonged and laborious; it also blamed the Stationery Office for delaying copy and proofs on their way to and from the printer, and for failing to adopt any firm attitude towards printers, no matter how dilatory they were. The Stationery office blamed the Department of Education for delay in returning corrected proofs and for making on proofs alterations which should have been made in the manuscript before it went to the printer at all. Printers complained that they did not get corrected proofs back in time, and were faced with extensive author's collections, even when books were in paged proof [...].<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, under these conditions Blythe's stated ambition to support an edifying and entertaining stream of Irish-language literature for Irish readers, front-loaded with translations until native fictions of sufficient quality emerged, could never be realized. Blythe's relatively radical recommendations included liberating An Gúm from its partnership with the Stationery Office, which would always prioritize 'the sturdy blue-book and the stately abstract of statistics' over imaginative literature; ensuring the time lag between acceptance of a manu-

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33 Blythe (1936).

script, and publication, never exceeded six months; raising the number of Irish-language titles published annually from forty to as many as four hundred; subsidizing up to two-thirds of the production costs of independent publishers; publishing an entertaining periodical review of Irish literature to whet the public's appetite for reading in that language; sending young writers abroad to function as 'literary attachés', observing trends in European literature; and, interestingly, hiring a staff of full-time, permanent translators to work at An Gúm. His views on translation remain apposite (and sadly, often unenforced) today:

Good translation should also be paid for at a higher rate, while inferior work should simply be rejected instead of being laboriously doctored in the Gúm office, as heretofore. [...] It is obvious that for a long time we [would-be Irish-language readers] must depend on translation for the majority of our books. [...] At the moment, however, translators generally speaking are dealing only with the easiest type of material; and with a few notable exceptions all are translating from English. [...] Convenience should dictate that such a group [of translators] should translate mainly from English; and there are reasons why copious translation from English should be carried on. Nevertheless, in order to prevent interest in Irish books being stifled by a general feeling that they include practically nothing which is not to be had in English, it is essential that a much larger proportion than heretofore should consist of translation from Continental languages. Indeed things should be so arranged that a translation of every outstanding new book published – French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish or Polish – would appear in Irish at least as soon as in English.

Sadly, the changes that Blythe suggested were not made, and the 'jam in the Gúm' continued to worsen, with delays of up to six years between acceptance and publication not uncommon. In 1944, the *Irish Independent* reported that An Gúm had published 850 Irish-language books (or an average of 57 per annum, far short of Blythe's ideal) since its foundation, of which 350 were translations from other languages; 200 were original plays; and 'up to 70 [were] original novels in Irish'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 'Work of An Gúm: 850 Irish Books in 15 Years', *Irish Independent*, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

An internal Department of Education memorandum from 1947 raised this total to 924 items printed since 1927, including 388 translations and 86 original novels or fiction anthologies in Irish; the remainder included textbooks, plays, sheet music, reference books, and other non-fiction resources.<sup>35</sup> In total, 650,000 copies of publications issued by An Gúm had been sold since its foundation. The memorandum acknowledged difficulties with the printers (including missing metal for typesetting, and dwindling staff); a decline in submissions from authors; and a persistent manuscript backlog (including 182 which had been accepted but not sent on for printing, and 106 lost somewhere in the printing and distribution pipeline). In short, a quarter again as many publications as An Gúm had actually issued in its lifetime were stuck in the production chain. An even more damning internal report from 1951 revealed that 219 manuscripts were still in limbo between acceptance by the editors and dispatch to the printers (with 26 more held up at the printers’); of these, seventy had been accepted by An Gúm during the 1930s (two had been accepted in 1931).<sup>36</sup>

Several of these severely delayed manuscripts belonged to Maighr ad N c Mhaic n, as we have seen. Besides the titles mentioned above, an anthology of Russian short stories (three translated by N c Mhaic n and two reprinted from   Nuall in’s earlier collection) was delayed from 1946 to 1955. More damaging to An G m, and perhaps to the translators’ self-esteem, was the commercial failure of their work.   Rinn’s collection of Turgenev’s prose poems, *D nta Prois*, issued in November 1933 in a run of 500 copies, had sold just over half by the time of the 1957 audit. N c Mhaic n’s *An Sil n-Ghort*, published two years later, sold 220 copies. Her volume of Chekhov short stories, published in an ambitious run of 1000 copies, sold 400 over seventeen years.<sup>37</sup> In 1958, the results of the audit were re-

35 The translations break down as follows: ‘133 are novels, 104 are volumes of plays, 83 are children’s books, 25 are text-books for secondary schools. The remainder cover [a] wide variety of subjects’. Mac Lellan (1947).

36 An G m, Internal Memorandum, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1951.

37 ‘Document showing sales to 31 March, 1957 of translations and Original Works of Gene-

leased publicly, leading to a minor scandal: the press revealed that An Gúm was operating at a huge financial loss, fewer than half of all copies of its publications had actually sold, and – worst of all – 97,000 copies of taxpayer-funded books had been sent to be pulped. There were calls for the committee’s closure. In an article called ‘Waste Paper’, the *Irish Times* acknowledged the difficulty of the task An Gúm had always faced. Instead of blaming the organization’s shortcomings, the writer blamed audiences, especially the new generation for whom these translations had been intended: ‘teen-agers did not reveal the hoped-for enthusiasm for Irish: most of them loathed it, and displayed no interest in books in Irish, good, bad, or indifferent’.<sup>38</sup>

If An Gúm’s project to translate world literature failed within twenty years of its foundation, what can we learn from those translations that An Gúm rejected? In the next section, I argue that even failed, never-published translations like these have much to teach about how the Irish language adapts Russian literature, and how An Gúm’s bureaucratic regimen sometimes impeded good translations from finding readers.

## **A Christmas Tree Without A Wedding: Dostoevsky’s First Irish Translator**

In 1938, Micheál Ó Flannagáin completed ‘An Crann Nodlaig’ (‘The Christmas Tree’), his translation of Dostoevsky’s 1848 short story ‘A Christmas Tree and A Wedding’ (‘Elka i svad’ba: iz zapisok neizvestnogo’). ‘An Crann Nodlaig’ exists only as a handwritten manuscript preserved among An Gúm’s records in the Irish National Archives.<sup>39</sup> It was never published, as An Gúm rejected it the same year. Both Ó Flannagáin’s text and the decision-making process deserve scrutiny, and not only because this was the first and only Dostoevsky story translat-

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ral Literature in Irish.’ Dublin, NAI.

38 ‘Waste Paper’, *Irish Times*, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1958.

39 ‘The Christmas Tree: M.S. Ó Flannagáin’. Dublin, NAI, File 99/52/4215.

ed into Irish until Risteárd Mac Annraoi published his selections from two of Dostoevsky's novels in 2016.<sup>40</sup> As in most of the early Tolstoy and Chekhov translations, the author used an English bridging text: not, remarkably, either of the widely distributed translations made by the British translator Constance Garnett (1918) or the New York-based émigré Thomas Seltzer (1917). Ó Flannagáin selected a version by the now-forgotten translator Reginald Merton, whose many translations from Russian, French, Spanish and Italian appeared in a London magazine which specialized in publishing and re-printing short, literary fiction, *The Argosy*, between 1928 and 1935. This text, 'A Christmas Tree and a Wedding', appeared in the magazine's January 1935 issue, alongside short fiction by Alphonse Daudet, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, and Dorothy Parker, among others. It was subtitled, 'A children's party provided the prologue to a little drama of life in pre-war Russia'.

A still later translator of the same tale, David Magarshack (1950), has called it 'perhaps the most artistically perfect short story Dostoevsky wrote during his first period as a fiction writer. [...] It is one of Dostoevsky's most savage judgements on "success" under the acquisitive system of society'.<sup>41</sup> 'A Christmas Tree and a Wedding' is narrated from the perspective of a social outsider, a cynical young man who accepts an invitation from a wealthy acquaintance to a children's Christmas party. The gathering is really an opportunity for adults to network while the children play. Iulian Mastakovich, the most highly-placed and influential guest, discovers during the evening that one eleven-year-old girl has a dowry of three hundred thousand roubles. After calculating aloud (believing himself unobserved) that the dowry, if well-invested, is likely to increase to five hundred thousand rubles after five years, he decides to ingratiate himself with the child and her family.

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40 Feodar Dostaidheivscí, extract from *Na Deirtháireacha Caramasov*, in Risteárd Mac Annraoi, ed. *Scéalta ón Rúis: Aistriúcháin agus aistí ar mhórscribhneoirí na Rúise* (Dublin: Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 2016), pp. 21-26; and, in the same volume, an extract from *An Choir agus an Cúiteamh (Crime and Punishment)*, pp. 27-44.

41 Magarshack, viii-ix.

In so doing, he makes the girl cry and cruelly intimidates her friend, a humble boy with no inheritance at all. The narrator picks up his story five years later after accidentally looking in at a society wedding and recognizing the bride and groom as the girl and Iulian Mastakovich. He overhears that the girl's dowry is thought to be at least five hundred thousand roubles. In the final line, the narrator comments, half-admiringly, that Iulian Mastakovich had calculated accurately.

All four English translators mentioned here vary their use of definite and indefinite articles in their translations of the story's title; only Magarshack preserves the original subtitle, 'From the Memoirs of an Unknown' ('Iz zapisok neizvestnogo'). The Irish translator is also the only one to shorten the title: Ó Flannagáin's version is called simply: 'An Crann Nodlaig' ('The Christmas Tree').<sup>42</sup> I refer to the bridging text from which Ó Flannagáin actually worked in order to identify omissions or inaccuracies in his text (of which there are several, including the elision of several lines about Iulian Mastakovich's initial reaction to the little girl's friend). But in my brief analysis below, I will emphasize what Ó Flannagáin's Irish *contributes* to the affect of Dostoevsky's story. I contrast the lexical structure and implied meanings of the Irish version with the accessible English versions of 'A Christmas Tree and A Wedding'. The language of the story is rich in emotional nuance and irony; typically for Dostoevsky's early fiction, this tale is often noticeably Gogolian in its portraits of ludicrous individuals or pompous behaviour. One of the most overtly Gogol-esque passages here is a portrait of an unimportant official, invited to the party and ignored by everyone present. To save face, the man is forced to spend the whole evening serenely stroking his prominent (and luxurious) side-whiskers. Dostoevsky's narrator comments jocosely:

Бакенбарды были действительно весьма хороши. Но он гладил их до того усердно, что, глядя на него, решительно можно было подумать, что сперва произведены на свет одни бакенбарды, а потом уж приставлен к ним господин, чтобы их гладить<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> National Archives File 99/52/4215: "The Christmas Tree: M.S. Ó Flannagáin."

The following English translations are variously successful at catching the arch humour of the original:

Certainly they were extremely fine whiskers, but he stroked them with such persistence that, as I stood looking at him, it was by no means difficult to imagine that the whiskers were created first and that the man was added later for the purpose of stroking them. (Merton, p. 81)

His whiskers were really fine, but he stroked them so assiduously that one got the feeling that the whiskers had come into the world first and afterwards the man in order to stroke them. (Seltzer, p. 72)

His whiskers were certainly very fine. But he stroked them so zealously that, looking at him, one might have supposed that the whiskers were created first and the gentleman only attached to them in order to stroke them. (Garnett, p. 226)

His whiskers were indeed extremely handsome. But he stroked them with such enthusiasm that one could not help feeling that his whiskers were brought into the world first, and the gentleman himself was only afterwards attached to them in order to stroke them (Magarshack, p. 90)

Agus a leabhar-sa, b'in í an fhéasóg a raibh an téagar inti! Ach leis an slíocadha bhí aige uirthi, séard a thiocfadh i do cheann dá mbéitheas ag féachaint air, gur bé'n chaoi a raibh an fhéasóg i dtosach ann agus nár cuireadh ar an saoghal é féin ach in aon turas le haghaidh a bheith da slíocadh!<sup>44</sup>

Notable features of the Irish version include the use of the second person singular possessive pronoun ('séard a thiocfadh i do cheann' (what would come into your head)), which increases the immediacy of the text by apostrophizing the reader. None of the English translators have used this direct approach, preferring to translate the subject of the Russian neuter conditional ('можно было подумать') with the English indeterminate pronoun 'one'. There is a minor loss

43 Dostoevskii, 'Elka i svad'ba', p. 145. My literal back translation, for comparison: 'The whiskers really were quite handsome. But he stroked them so zealously that, looking at him, it was definitely possible to assume, that the whiskers had been brought into the world first, and then the man introduced to them later, in order to stroke them'.

44'And [I declare] by the book, it was a substantial beard! But with the way he had of stroking it, what would come into your head if you were looking at him was that the beard was there first and that he himself was only put in the world for the purpose of stroking it!' Ó Flannagáin, p. 2.

of accuracy in the use of the word 'féasóg' ('beard') to translate 'бакенбарды', which literally means 'side-whiskers' (side-whiskers, in Irish, require the genitive singular noun 'leicinn' ('of the side') to follow 'féasóg'). An idiomatic phrase not found in the original has been introduced: 'Agus a leabhar-sa', meaning literally 'And by the book' and figuratively, 'And I declare by the Good Book (Bible)', thus further emphasizing the glory of the gentleman's side-whiskers. The frequent use of gerunds and participles in Irish syntax (here, 'an slíocadha' ('the stroking'); 'ag féachaint' ('looking')) emphasizes the continuity of the actions described. This is suitable since Dostoevsky wishes to stress, for maximum comic effect, the be-whiskered man's extended isolation at the party and his exaggerated nonchalance. The exclamation marks introduced into the punctuation is an addition to the original which, with the idiomatic and conversational syntax and intonation of the passage, intensifies a *skaz*-like effect implicit in Dostoevsky's Russian, nascent in Ó Flannagáin's Irish and barely perceptible in the four English versions.

Similarly, when Iulian Mastakovich makes his first, suitably obsequious approach to the eleven-year-old heiress, the lexical diversity of Irish actually adds a nuance not present in the Russian or English versions.

А что вы тут делаете, милое дитя? – спросил он шепотом, оглядываясь и трепля девочку по щеке.<sup>45</sup>

"What are you doing there, my dear?" he asked, looking round and stroking her cheek. (Merton, p. 83).

"What are you doing here, dear child?" he whispered, looking around and pinching her cheek. (Seltzer, p. 74).

"What are you doing here, sweet child?" he asked in a whisper, looking round and patting the girl's cheek. (Garnett, p. 229).

"And what are you doing here, my sweet child?" he asked in a whisper, throwing another furtive look round him and

<sup>45</sup> Dostoevskii, 'Elka i svad'ba', p. 147. 'And what are you doing here, sweet child?' he asked in a whisper, looking around and patting the little girl on the cheek.

patting the little girl's cheek. (Magarshack, p. 92)

"Céard tá dá déanamh anseo agat, a stór?" ar seisean léithe;  
súil timcheall i gcomhnaí aige is é go slíocadh ar an bpluic.<sup>46</sup>

In this line, at the cost of one inaccuracy ('шепотом' ('whispering') is omitted by Merton and thus by Ó Flannagáin also), an extra sense of menace is conveyed by the implicit sexuality of the Irish lexis. In place of Dostoevsky's 'милое дитя' ('sweet child'), Ó Flannagáin uses 'a stór', sometimes anglicized as *ashtor*. It means, literally 'my treasure'; and figuratively, 'sweetheart'. While it is a perfectly appropriate endearment to address to a child, it is also, significantly, used between lovers. In the original, Iulian Mastakovich is 'patting' ('трепля') the little girl's cheek, an avuncular gesture awkwardly sexualized by the context. Of the four English translators, two enhance their translation to convey the implicit tension: Seltzer's Iulian 'pinches' the girl's cheek, while Magarshack's throws a 'furtive' look. Ó Flannagáin modifies Iulian Mastakovich's gesture, making him 'stroke' the child's 'plump cheek'. Following Merton literally here, he changes 'pat' to 'stroke', by re-using the verb 'go slíocadh' ('stroking') which appeared earlier in the passage about the neglected guest 'stroking' his side-whiskers (where it translated the Russian 'гладить'). Repeating the same verb in this way, although a divergence from the original, creates a link between the two scenes that emphasizes the emotional significance of gestures and movements in the story. Finally, Ó Flannagáin's ultimate sensory coup is impossible in English, which (like Russian) has only one word for 'cheek'. Irish, however, in addition to the neutral term 'leiceann', contains the alternative 'pluc', meaning a cheek that is plump and rounded. This very specific word simultaneously conjures childish plumpness and nubile flesh with a suggestive quality that even Dostoevsky's original cannot match.

There are numerous other examples of amplification and exaggeration of idiomatic speech in the Irish text. For instance, when in the original Iulian Mastakovich is described

<sup>46</sup> "What are you doing here, my love?" he said to her; his eyes continued looking around as he was stroking her plump cheek. Ó Flannagáin, p. 7.

in passing as ‘красен как рак’ (‘red as a crab’)<sup>47</sup>, Ó Flannagáin transforms this brief phrase into a colourful apostrophe to the reader: ‘Ní fhaca tú aon ghliomach Muire ariamh ba deirge ná é’ (‘you’ve never seen a crawfish that was as red as him’).<sup>48</sup> The transformation of the original crab (‘рак’) into a crawfish (‘ghliomach Muire’, literally, lobster of [the Virgin] Mary) appears to result from sheer exuberance on the translator’s part. All four English translators, by contrast, abandoned strict literality for the corresponding English idiom, ‘red as a lobster’. The phrase ‘an fear mór’ (‘the big man’) is sometimes used where Dostoevsky has Iulian Mastakovich’s name and patronymic, often when the latter is viewed from the children’s perspective: this strategy, whether intentional or not, intensifies the sheer size and threat posed by an adult who comes out of this story, on the whole, looking rather small. Another inaccuracy that intensifies affect (here, Iulian Mastakovich’s contempt for the miserable child) occurs in a passage where the would-be suitor orders the boy ‘пошел к своим сверстникам!’ (‘go away to your peers’).<sup>49</sup> Magarshack and Garnett both offer ‘playmates’ to capture the sense of ‘children of the same age’; Merton has ‘friends’; Seltzer, ineptly, has ‘go to your likes’ (p. 76). Ó Flannagáin’s version is ‘Imthigh leat ‘s fáigh amach do leitheidí féin eile’ (‘Away with you and find people of your own kind’).<sup>50</sup> The boy’s unfitness for the company of Iulian Mastakovich and his intended is emphasized by the formulation ‘your own kind’; although inaccurate, it underlines his inability to treat the hapless boy with either empathy or justice.

In the final line of the story, Dostoevsky’s narrator concludes:

«Однако расчет был хорош!» – подумал я,  
протеснившись на улицу.<sup>51</sup>

47 Dostoevskii, ‘Elka i svad’ba’, p. 148.

48 Ó Flannagáin, p. 9.

49 Dostoevskii, ‘Elka i svad’ba’, pp. 148-9.

50 Ó Flannagáin, p. 14.

51 Dostoevskii, ‘Elka i svad’ba’, p. 151. “‘However the reckoning was good!’ I thought, after squeezing myself through onto the street’.

"Well," I thought, when I had made my way out into the street, "his calculation was quite correct." (Merton, p. 84).

"Then his calculations were correct," I thought, as I pressed out into the street. (Seltzer, p. 78).

"It was a good stroke of business, though!" I thought, as I made my way into the street. (Garnett, p. 233).

"He got his sum right, by Jove," I thought, as I elbowed my way into the street (Magarshack, p. 96).

"Bhoil," arsa mise nuair a fuair mé féin ar an t-sráid ar ais, "dheamhan seachmhall ar bith a bhí ar mo dhiúlach an oidhche fad ó shoin a raibh sé ag cunntas ar a chuid méar."<sup>52</sup>

Irony is present in all six versions; Iulian Mastakovich's shameless cupidity has paid off richly with his marriage, contracted precisely on schedule. However, while the four English translations attempt to mirror the concision of the original (with minor additions for emphasis, such as Magarshack's very dated and class-specific 'By Jove!'), the Irish translator has gone off on an idiomatic tangent. Unlike Seltzer and Magarshack, who are careful to evoke the spatial constriction suffered by the narrator (too literally for fluency, in the former's version), Ó Flannagáin ignores the Russian 'протеснившись' ('after squeezing myself through') for a neutral formulation modelled on Merton ('when I found myself again in the street'). But he augments the narrator's final comment beyond all recognition, substituting the rhetorical device of meiosis ('he certainly made no mistake in his calculations') for Dostoevsky's verbal irony ('his calculations were correct'). Beginning with the onomatopoeic exclamation "'Bhoil'" (a variant of the phatic English 'Well!'), Ó Flannagáin introduces the Irish idiom 'devil a bit of a mistake' ('dheamhan seachmhall ar bith'; literally, 'no mistake at all'). Considering the significance of textual mentions of the Devil in Gogol and Dostoevsky, this phrase seems like a happy accident.

Ó Flannagáin's narrator refers to Iulian Mastakovich as 'mo dhiúlach' (literally, 'my fellow', or 'my boyo', as in 'my friend so-

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52 ' "Whell [sic]," I said to myself when I found myself again in the street, "devil a bit of a mistake my boyo made that night long ago when he was counting on his five fingers".' Ó Flannagáin, p. 14.

and-so’); this familiar reference to a near-stranger is another typically Irish rhetorical device. Finally, the very literal reference to Iulian Mastakovich’s self-addressed calculations – ‘a raibh sé ag cunntas ar a chuid méar’ (‘he was counting on his five fingers’) – recalls the repulsive physicality of this character much more expressively than the original’s ‘расчет’ (‘reckoning’). Clearly, despite his occasional errors, Ó Flannagáin’s diverse vocabulary and energetic grasp of Irish idiom lent him a marked aptitude for capturing the *skaz*-like qualities of Dostoevsky’s writing; and he was well suited as a translator for this early and quite Gogolian short story. One is irresistibly reminded of Nabokov’s quip that ‘none but an Irishman should ever try tackling Gogol’; perhaps only a Mayo man like Ó Flannagáin should tackle early Dostoevsky.<sup>53</sup>

As we know, however, Ó Flannagáin’s Dostoevsky was never published, and for the most prosaic of reasons: copyright difficulties. Ó Flannagáin evidently lacked publishing experience; when he sent An Gúm the manuscript of ‘An Crann Nodlaig’ in April 1938, it was clearly an unsolicited approach. His cover letter, which opens ‘Seo sgéal le údar mor Ruiseach’ (‘Here is a story by a great Russian author’), never identifies either the story or its author. This is left for the cover page of the handwritten manuscript. He explains that he translated the story from an English version published in *The Argosy* three years previously; and that he has previously translated from French. Seán Mac Lellan responded four days later to request (quite reasonably) a copy of the English version used for Ó Flannagáin’s translation. Unfortunately, Ó Flannagáin had lost this; he asked hopefully whether his translation could be credited to the Russian original, if one could be found in Dublin. Mac Lellan then informed him that the story could not be published without permission from the copyright holder of the English version.<sup>54</sup> In July 1938, Ó Flannagáin visited An

53 Nabokov, p. 38. This prediction was borne out by Roddy Doyle’s adaptation of Gogol’s *Revizor* (1836) as *The Government Inspector*, using Hiberno-English vernacular, for Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in 2011.

54 Correspondence between Micheál Ó Flannagáin and Sean Mac Lellan between April 4<sup>th</sup> 1938 and July 12<sup>th</sup> 1938. Dublin, NAI, File 99/52/4215.

Gúm's offices in central Dublin in person; he missed Mac Lellan, but left a note and a letter received from the editor of *The Argosy*, Clarence Winchester. Winchester wrote:

I personally have no objection to your publishing your translation of "The Christmas Tree" by Theodor Dostoevsky. As you are doubtless aware, the version I used was by Reginald Morton, but as far as I know I have no judicial rights over any other translation that may be made.<sup>55</sup>

No further correspondence was preserved, but An Gúm's file on 'An Crann Nodlaig' indicates that the story was rejected the same year. It is possible that another factor in its rejection was one of the aspects that makes translations culturally useful. Venuti calls this phenomenon "mirroring", or self-recognition: the foreign text becomes intelligible when the reader recognizes himself or herself in the translation by identifying the domestic values that motivated the selection of that particular foreign text'.<sup>56</sup> As often with social satire, however, the values recognized by the reader are negative ones; and An Gúm would have seen no advantage in selecting a story that showed up the mercenary elements consecrated in contemporary Catholic marriages.

The rejection of this unique translation is an example of the failure of An Gúm or, in Tymoczko's more generally applicable terms, an example of how 'a radical aspect of the language movement [...] became tamed and co-opted by the conservative power structures of the Irish state'.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, the under-staffed team at An Gúm, with their growing backlog of manuscripts and their stable of frustrated regular translators, had no motivation to pursue this unsolicited 'rogue' translation. 'A Christmas Tree and A Wedding' attacked hypocrisy, corruption and cruelty with a zest echoed in contemporary Irish fiction by James Joyce and Frank O'Connor; but resemblances to such controversial authors would hardly have endeared the tale to An Gúm's conservative editors. Nor would the translation's

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<sup>55</sup> Clarence Winchester, letter to Michael O'Flannagan, 22 June 1938. Dublin, NAI, File 99/52/4215.

<sup>56</sup> Venuti, p. 77.

<sup>57</sup> Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland, p. 11.

robust exposure of Dostoevsky's narrative obsessions – from pederastic lust to demons – appeal to readers unfamiliar with this particular 'great Russian writer'. Dostoevsky's fiction made a safe landing on the receptive soil of the Irish language; but, like the majority of the Russian texts mentioned in this article, it stayed on the plane as far as Irish-language readers were concerned.

## Later Russian-to-Irish translators

The anthologies of Russian short fiction translated by Maighréad Nic Mhaicín (1899-1983) mark the zenith of Russian-to-Irish translation. Not only was Nic Mhaicín a prolific and skilled literary translator from several languages, she lectured in Russian at Trinity College Dublin (holding that institution's first Russian teaching post) from 1942 to 1969. Her apartment at No. 59 Grafton Street in the centre of Dublin city became a meeting place for admirers of Russian culture and literature until her death. The details of Nic Mhaicín's increasingly hostile relations with An Gúm can be found elsewhere; I will comment briefly here on how this difficult environment influenced and may have restrained her habitus as a translator.<sup>58</sup> A scholarship girl from the remote north-western county of Donegal who studied at Queen's University Belfast and later at the Sorbonne, Nic Mhaicín never conceded to the parochiality of Irish society. She discovered the Russian language by befriending a Russian émigré, known as Mrs Prescott, whom she met in Dublin.<sup>59</sup> Her love of Russian literature and culture eventually brought her to Moscow, where she found work as a translator for several years in the 1930s and even met her husband, the poet Padraic Breslin (who was, ironically, also from Donegal). From Moscow, Nic Mhaicín corresponded with An Gúm, attempting to discover whether and when they might accept *An Silín-Ghort* (her version of *The Cherry Orchard* and

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58 See Coilféir (2016).

59 Interview with Mairead Breslin Kelly, April 2019.



Fig. 2. Máirtín Ó Cadhain (far left) and Maighr ad Nic Mhaic in on an official Irish cultural delegation to Russia and Kirghizia in 1960.

her first literary translation from Russian). As Nic Mhaic in's prospects for suitable work in Dublin were limited, her decision whether to stay in Moscow or return home hinged on An G m's response. Sean Mac Lellan suggested that he might be able to give her an answer when she next returned to Dublin. She wrote to a friend, 'Could you beat that? – as if they couldn't say yes or no.'<sup>60</sup> This hesitation was, unfortunately, the hallmark of An G m's relationship with Nic Mhaic in, as with many of their translators. An G m did accept her proposal for *An Sil n-Ghort* in 1932, but their lack of a substantial offer of future work caused Nic Mhaic in to return to Russia in 1936. After finally settling in Dublin in 1937, she concentrated her expertise on private tuition and university teaching rather than translation.

Although Nic Mhaic in was by far the most experienced and professionally trained translator from Russian whom An G m had ever employed, their relationship was rocky: Nic Mhaic in objected to publication delays, low pay, and even the attempted censorship of one of her translations, Leskov's *The Toup e Artist* (*Tupeinnyi khudozhnik*, 1833).<sup>61</sup> As with the cupidity of Iulian Mastakovich in 'A Christmas Tree and a Wedding', the lubricious behaviour of a priest in Leskov's story perhaps reflected Irish reality a little too closely. In a 1949 note to the editorial board declining Nic Mhaic in's Leskov, Sean Mac Lellan commented, 'B'fhearde don Roinn gan ch uis ghear in a thabairt do dhaoine mille nach' ('It would be better for the Department not to give cause for complaint to fault-finding people').<sup>62</sup> Although the nine books

<sup>60</sup> Maighr ad Nic Mhaic in, letter to Kathleen Twomey, July 8 1932. Private collection of Mairead Breslin Kelly.

<sup>61</sup> Coilf ir (2016).

<sup>62</sup> Coilf ir, p. 19. I thank Mairead Breslin Kelly for providing this translation.

that Nic Mhaicín produced for An Gúm (she also translated from French and English) are all of the highest quality, she continued to translate other texts from Russian without any clear intention of publication. At some point in the 1960s, Nic Mhaicín completed 'Na Rúisigh', a handwritten translation of Konstantin Simonov's three-act play *The Russian People* (*Russkie liudi*, 1942).<sup>63</sup> The National Library of Ireland's metadata suggests that the play was intended for performance at the Abbey Theatre (like Ostrovsky's *The Storm* twenty years before), but I have found no record of any correspondence between Nic Mhaicín and the Abbey.

In the years since An Gúm haggled with Nic Mhaicín over commissions, the translation landscape in Ireland has shifted again; the early commitment to 'broaden[ing] the linguistic range of the Irish language as well as its intellectual, aesthetic, and literary repertoire' has intensified, assisted (since the mid-1980s) by the emergence of several small, privately owned Irish-language publishers.<sup>64</sup> Ní Fhrighil singles out Coiscéim, founded in 2000, as one of the most prolific small presses: it has already published more than '100 works of translation into Irish from over twenty different languages'.<sup>65</sup> Viktor Pelevin is a possibly unwitting benefactor of Coiscéim's receptivity to translation proposals and its resourcefulness in obtaining funding. Mark Ó Fionnáin, who currently lectures in Celtic Studies at the Catholic University in Lublin, Poland, is the first translator of book-length fiction from Russian to Irish. Having begun with short stories by Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvden-skii and Iuri Mamleev, Ó Fionnáin began translating Viktor Pelevin's debut novel *Omon Ra* (1992) for his Translation Studies MA thesis (his first degree, from Trinity College Dublin, was in Russian and Irish). Coiscéim published Ó Fionnáin's *Amón-Rá* in 2012 (for comparison, Andrew Bromfield's English trans-

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63 Simonov's play was quite well known outside Russia; an adaptation by the playwright Clifford Odets was performed in New York the same year it premiered in Moscow.

64 Ní Fhrighil, p. 318.

65 Ní Fhrighil, pp. 318-19.

lation appeared in 1994).<sup>66</sup> The book was funded by Foras na Gaeilge (an organization which promotes the Irish language, supported by the governments of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) and the Arts Council of Ireland. As Ó Fionnáin commented, ‘there’s no money made from publishing in Irish’.<sup>67</sup>

He summarizes his reasons for translating from Russian thus:

I just saw my translations from Russian as an attempt to bring writers I like to a (very very small) audience. If even one Irish-language reader read Kharmis or Pelevin because of me, I’m happy, as I’ll have introduced a text I like to someone else. The chances of this happening in Irish are probably slightly bigger mathematically than in English, as there is only 50 or so [...] books of all types published in Irish each year, so the chances someone saw my Pelevin when it came out is probably bigger than someone seeing him amongst the millions of books published in English each year.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike Nic Mhaicín and O’Fionnain, the third of the three translators discussed here does not translate directly from Russian. Risteárd Mac Annraoi (born in 1944) is a Cork-based author who has rendered Zamiatin’s *My* (*We*, 1921) in Irish under the title *Sinne* (a grammatical form of ‘we’). He has also translated extracts from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat’ia Karamazovy*, 1880), in addition to several short stories by Tolstoy. Some of these translations are self-published,<sup>69</sup> others were supported by the independent Irish-language publishers such as Coiscéim. His major anthology, *Scéalta ón Rúis* (*Stories from Russia*, 2016), was funded by a religious organization which promotes Irish-language cultural pro-

66 Ó Fionnáin’s translations of Kharmis and Vvedenskii were published by Coiscéim in 2004 as *Folcadán Airciméidéis* (*Archimedes’ Bath*).

67 Ó Fionnáin, email interview with author (2020).

68 Ibid. Proportionally, Ó Fionnáin’s assumption is almost certainly true: since 2000, according to data obtained from Nielsen Book UK, the single most popular Pelevin novel was *Babylon* (*Generation “IT”*, 1999; translated 2001), which sold a total of 1,305 copies in 2001.

69 See, for example, Leiv Tolstaí, *Ina Phríosúnach ar Shliabh Chaucais agus scéalta eile* [*The Prisoner of the Caucasus and Other Stories*], ed. Risteárd Mac Annraoi (Cork: 2017).

jects. *Scéalta ón Rúis* re-published three stories translated by Maighréad Nic Mhaicín and one by Liam Ó Rinn, as well as Mac Annraoi's versions of stories by Zamiatin, Boris Pil'niak, Isaak Babel and others. Mac Annraoi, by his own admission, does not understand Russian; he translates Russian stories by comparing several different English versions until he feels 'able to reach back to the common underlying stratum to develop an Irish-language text'.<sup>70</sup> While he rejects 'ideological or didactic' justifications for translation, he is clearly invested in the notion of making the Irish language a repository for global literature:

It is difficult to get books published in Irish and frequently the very limited access to grants involves paperwork and bureaucratic supervision that kills any good scheme – or in some cases gets hijacked by self-congratulatory closed cliques. On that basis I have subsidised my own productions which I see as a revolutionary act simply because they are not based on any profit motive and involve minute editions. The hope is that in some subtle way they will open up the streams of intelligence and co-operation that are embodied in the Irish language and are the key to community renewal. [...] I did have some hope that my efforts might stimulate others to similar work and believe that in some sort of way I have tapped into a very real stream or, even modestly, contributed to an increasing sense of the need for more translation work. Such a need is vital in lesser-used languages viz Basque and Welsh.<sup>71</sup>

His translations from Russian – via bridging texts – are part of a broader mission to translate international literature into Irish and bring it to the wider public – by donation, if necessary. In March 2018, for example, as part of the Irish-language festival *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, he donated thirty new translations to Cork City Library, with other copies available from a local bookshop for purchase.<sup>72</sup>

There have been other minor and ephemeral Russian-to-Irish translations. The 1980s saw a collaboration between Raduga

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<sup>70</sup> Risteárd Mac Annraoi, personal email to author, February 5<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Mahoney (2018).



Fig. 3. The 1984 edition of Tolstoy's *Stories for Children* jointly published in Irish by Raduga and An Clódhanna Teoranta.

Publishers (the modern descendant of the well-known Soviet imprint Progress, which translated Soviet literature into English for publication abroad) and the Irish-language publisher An Clódhanna Teoranta (an organization which, founded in 1908 under the auspices of the Irish-language advocacy organization Conradh na Gaeilge, considerably pre-dates An Gúm but operated on a much smaller scale than the latter for most of the twentieth century). This unusual co-operation led to the publication of two attractive illustrated books for children: *Scéalta do Leanaí* (*Stories for Children*, 1984) by Lev Tolstói, from an unknown translator, and *Cé acu is láidre?* (1988), a translation by Rachel Ní Riada of the Russian screenwriter Valerii Suslov's short tale *Kto silnee?* (*Who Is Stronger?*). These books were not targeted specifically at Irish audiences; Raduga's predecessor imprint Progress had published an English translation of Suslov's tale in 1974,

and the front matter of the Tolstoy volume states: 'An chuid is fearr de scéalta Tolstói - a thaitníonn le páistí ar fuaid an domhain - agus iad ar fáil as gaeilge anois' ('The best of Tolstoy's stories, which children all over the world enjoy, are now available in Irish'). No sales or circulation figures were made available for either volume. In 1970 the Irish-language cultural review *Comhar* published a translation of Chekhov's 'The Student' ('Student', 1894) as 'An Mac léinn' by the civil servant Art Ó Beoláin, who taught himself Russian from sheer love for the language.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See 'Strong commitment to the Irish language' (2003).

## Conclusion

I have presented this essay as a study in failure; namely, the failure of intercultural transmission when a translated text does not find readers in the target language. Even An Gúm's 'bestsellers', as records show, sold fewer than a thousand copies in two decades; and the eager native-speaker audience that An Gúm aimed to create has never existed on a commercially meaningful scale. Many opportunities to publish good translations, such as Ó Flannagáin's Dostoevsky or Nic Mhaicín's Leskov, were lost through small-minded managerial procedures. It is very unlikely that Nic Mhaicín's unpublished Simonov play will ever be staged, or that Ostrovsky's *An Stuirim* will have a second night's performance. Yet these failed landings attest to the guiding principle of translators: hope. They survive as proof that even in the dark economic times of the early twentieth century, when Ireland was dominated by back-room, nationalist politics and the moral hegemony of the Catholic Church, thousands of individuals were still actively reading global literature and attempting to share it in their native tongue. Translation is not solely a matter of communication: it is also a statement of hope, or faith, in the possibility of mutual understanding and in the communicative abilities of the target language. When, like Irish, that language is a minority tongue, translation becomes an act of faith in its survival. As Liam Ó Rinn wrote in 1922,

[...W]e should attempt to translate important books [...]. Even if no-one would read them we would have them as a source of hope, and as proof that our language, which has not been used for three hundred years, is not just a "patois".<sup>74</sup>

Therefore this essay can ultimately be read as a success story: a tale about the resilience of the Irish language, of translators, and of stories themselves.

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<sup>74</sup> Cited and translated by Mark Ó Fionnáin (2014), p. 66.

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