

Introduction

I

Arados

Most of the poems in this book were written in Poznań, Poland in 2009. Others – *R.S. CV, Pont-ar-Daf, Enlli* – were written in Wales between in 2005–2007. *Turf Smoke* was written in Ireland, in 1997. Several of the poems in the book were first published, in 2009, in the Romanian cultural review ‘Discobolul’. *The Birth of Trystan* is published here for the first time, as are, for example, *Begegnungen, Omul-Flaut* and *Zamor*.

The idea of the book arose during and as part of the founding of *Arados*, a society, based in Poznań, for the appreciation of poetry principally in the Slavic, Celtic and Romance languages. *Arados* found common ground in the work of Lucian Blaga (Romania) and R.S. Thomas (Wales) for example, and began to meet to discuss the work of these and other poets, including Seán Ó Ríordáin (Ireland), Wallace Stevens (America), Paul Celan (Romania/France), and Cyprian Kamil Norwid (Poland).

The book represents a dialogue between two cultures geographically distant from one another within Europe. One, represented by the Irish and Welsh languages, lies west of the European continent, while the other, Romanian, borders the Black Sea in the east. Between the two territories lies the old Europe of the Vienna–Prague–Berlin triangle, and a newer Europe, whose axes have, at different times, passed through Paris, London, and more recently Brussels.

Though separated from one another by these two sub-continental divisions, the peripheral west and east, ‘Celtic’ and Romanian, have preserved in their literatures and cultures echoes of things diminished elsewhere during recent centuries of industrial development, scientific progress, rationalism and utilitarianism.

These echoes may be represented by a phrase from Blaga’s poem *Lumina* (Light): ‘că ultimul strop din lumina creată în ziua dintîi’ (‘the final drop of the light created on the first day’) (*Poemele Luminii*, 1919). To this we add: ‘in cities that have outgrown their promise people are becoming pilgrims again’ (The Moon in Lley, R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems* 1993, p. 282). In section II of this book, *Island*, the poems *Enlli, Walking to the Island*, and *Orchids on a Rock* evoke and acknowledge pilgrimage traditions of the past, and their resonance in our lives today.

This book includes original work in English, but also in Irish (*An tÉan, Móin*) and Welsh (*Enlli, Pont-ar-Daf*). When translating the Irish and Welsh texts into Romanian, the authors made use of the English language as a bridge. This method involved creating an extensive gloss of the original, from which a Romanian text-translation was then derived.

II

Trystan

In 1865, Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* was staged in Munich. Since that time, the name Trystan has been a familiar one in cultural circles in Europe and beyond. Wagner's opera was derived from the courtly romance *Tristan* written about 1200 by Gottfried von Strassburg. This text is one of several written in the 12th and 13th centuries. Others exist in Norse, English, and French.

In the 20th century, Trystan, and Isolda, became the subject of much academic research and debate. Literary historians from both sides of the English channel contributed to discussion on issues of origin. In these discussions, there is tension between interpretations of the continental and insular elements in the tale. On the one hand, the extant texts belong to medieval literary genres that enjoyed much popularity on the continent. On the other hand, there are references in these texts to places and persons from the insular world. On the one hand, only one short passage of the Trystan story has survived in the Welsh language until modern times. This fragment, written in Middle Welsh, takes the form of a dozen or so stanzas. On the other hand, the 12th and 13th century continental texts, though the narrative they contain often seems incomplete, are copious text that run to thousands of lines.

A compelling aspect of the Tristan corpus is this fragmentary nature of the texts we have inherited, whether insular or continental. And, consequently, the elusive nature of their characters is itself compelling. Of the hero, at any time, little can be known. He remains an outlaw. A shadow. An echo.

Other aspects of the tale invite brief comment. The Tristan corpus does not belong to the body of heroic literature written down in western Europe in the late first and early second millennium. Unlike Beowulf, Cú Chulainn, Siegfried or Roland, Tristan, the outlaw, is tribeless and protector of none. The tragedy of his fate stems in large part from this solitude.

Furthermore, the consuming love of Tristan and Isolda for one another seems atypical of the Celtic tradition on the whole. The early Celtic tradition – in Welsh and Irish – tends to reflect rigid systems – social and cosmic, for example. Drama arises when these systems are tested or threatened. In the first millennium AD, the individual, individual human experience, and treatment of individual human experience, are as a rule, unelaborated in literature in the Celtic languages. While brutal in places, Tristan and Isolda is modern, or perhaps perennial, in sentiment, and the appeal of the tragedy it relates might be described as classical rather than pathetic.

Returning briefly to questions of origin, one is led to consider the question of mediterranean influence on the culture(s) of Britain during Roman times. Latin heavily influenced the Brythonic language, and it is unlikely that no osmosis occurred between the two cultures from the 1st until the 4th century AD. Perhaps, within Roman society in Britain, tales from Greek or Latin were married with indigenous legends of a banished hunter. These tales, hypothetical products of cross-cultural romano-brythonic fertilisation, would then have gained currency amongst the people, and entered into a post-Roman oral and literary tradition. This process, of course, is akin to things that happened on Romanian soil, when Latin and Slavic combined to form a distinct culture.

The text published in this book, *The Birth of Trystan*, might be described as a contribution to this non-existent mother tradition of the continental medieval cycle. We enter an unmapped place and time, an elemental world shared by man with star, bird and fox. The language of *The Birth of Trystan* is English, but through it the notion of a meta-language resonates. This meta-language is Welsh. The text might therefore be regarded as the translation of an undocumented original.

III

Curtea de Argeş

Through translating poems from Irish, English and Welsh into a single language, Romanian, a new monolingual corpus has been created. The Romanian language has the capacity to house this corpus. It is an old, earthy language, with a proud literary heritage. Like Irish and Welsh, its heyday may now be over. But like Irish and Welsh, it has maintained a sense of continuity with the medieval past.

No text better illustrates this than the poem *Pont-ar-Daf* (Bridge over the Taf). This poem postulates a foundation legend for Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. Together with *The Birth of Trystan* therefore, the text is a contribution to reflexion on the emergence of Wales in times on the cusp of history.

The idea is drawn from a Balkan custom of sacrifice as a part of the bridge-building tradition. Human sacrifice in such cases was not unknown. In his novel, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, Ismael Kadare of Albania tells such a story. *Pont-ar-Daf* is derived from Kadare's book.

In Romania, a variant of the tale exists. Here however, the sacrifice is carried out during the building not of a bridge, but of a monastery. The monastery is called Curtea de Argeş, located near Bucharest in southern Romania. A ballad relating the sacrifice survived in the oral tradition in Romania until the 20th century. The ballad is named after the monastery.

The idiom of this ballad, and of other ballads of the same ilk from the Romanian tradition, offers the translators of *Pont-ar-Daf*, *Enlli*, *An tÉan* and *The Birth of Trystan* their idiom, their resonance, and their fertile soil. We hope that by reading the work, you will share with us a unique journey through language, space and time.