



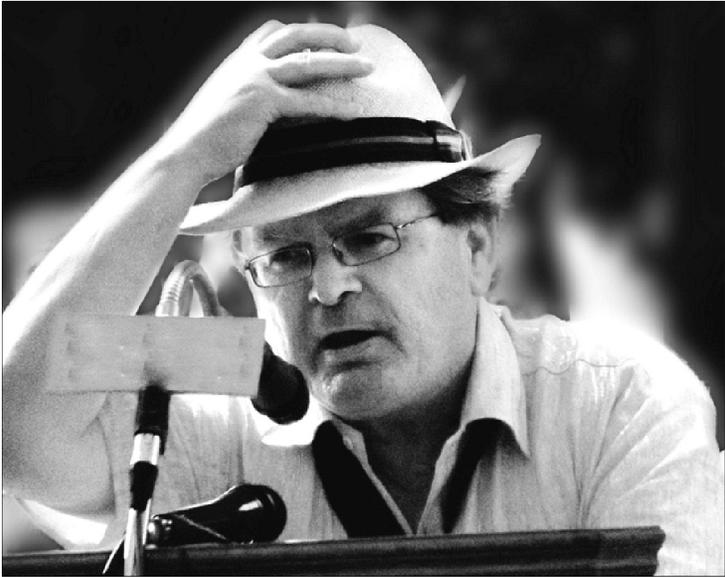
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Title	Gabriel Rosenstock (*1949): "The Rejection of the Early Morning Dew"
Author(s)	Ní Mhunghaile, Lesa
Publication Date	2014
Publication Information	Ní Mhunghaile, Lesa. (2014). Gabriel Rosenstock (*1949): "The Rejection of the Early Morning Dew" In Sabine Egger (Ed.), Cultural/Literary Translators. Selected Irish-German Biographies II. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag.
Publisher	Wissenschaftlicher Verlag
Link to publisher's version	<a href="http://www.wvttrier.de/top/beschreibungen/ID1445.html">http://www.wvttrier.de/top/beschreibungen/ID1445.html</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6696">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6696</a>

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Gabriel Rosenstock. Courtesy of Gabriel Rosenstock

## Gabriel Rosenstock (\*1949): “The Rejection of the Early Morning Dew”<sup>1</sup>

Lesa Ní Mhunchaile

Gabriel Rosenstock is regarded as one of Ireland’s foremost Irish-language poets but he has not always received critical attention.<sup>2</sup> This is due in part, possibly, to his sometimes controversial nature and also, as a fellow poet has remarked: “His prodigious if not bewildering output can at times mask his achievements”.<sup>3</sup> Rosenstock is a prolific writer and has written or translated more than 170 books, including thirteen collections of poetry of his own composition. He was born in Kilfinane in Co. Limerick in 1949. His father, Georg Rosenstock, a doctor from Schleswig-Holstein, was a medical student in the Wehrmacht. He had literary leanings and published the novella *Paradies der Armen* (1964) and a collection of poetry, *Irische Gezeiten* (1978). Gabriel’s mother, Mauyen Keane, was a nurse from Greethill, Co. Galway, who met her future husband in Jersey during its occupation.<sup>4</sup> She published her memoirs under the title *Hello, is it all over?* (1984). Gabriel was the third of six children and the first born in Ireland. Although his German-Irish heritage is an intrinsic part of who he is, he also identifies closely with the culture of the Orient:

Is there a myth about the German work ethic? Do Germans actually work harder or more efficiently than others? I don’t know. But even if myths have no basis in reality, that doesn’t mean they don’t affect us. My wife notices that even though I don’t wear a watch, I’m punctual, which may be a German trait. And sometimes I work myself to death!

Does globalisation mean we are all becoming a little like each other? Does that even make any sense? I suppose I’ve never given this question much thought. I’m more

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- 1 <http://roghaghgabriel.blogspot.ie/2013/07/the-rejection-of-early-morning-dew.html> (accessed 11 December 2013).
  - 2 Relative to other contemporary Irish-language poets, few critical studies of Rosenstock’s poetry have been undertaken. These include Pádraig de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2005; Muireann Ní Dhomhnaill, ‘Gabriel Rosenstock: Iniúchadh ar a Shaothar Fhilíochta’, unpublished MA thesis, NUI, Galway, 1996; Ailbhe Ní Ghearrbhuigh, Gabriel Rosenstock. In: Ríona Ní Fhrighil (ed.), *Filíocht Chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge*. Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life Teoranta, 2010, pp. 94-120.
  - 3 Liam Ó Muirthile, Poetry in Irish Now. In: Caoilfhionn Nic Phóidín and Seán Ó Cearnaigh (eds.), *A New View of the Irish Language*. Dublin: Cois Life, 2008, p. 145.
  - 4 Gabriel Rosenstock, How I Discovered Irish or How Irish Discovered me. In: Ciarán Mac Murchaidh (ed.), *‘Who needs Irish?’ Reflections on the importance of the Irish language today*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2004, p. 84.

appreciative of an Irish sense of humour, for instance, than I am of a German sense of humour. (What is a German sense of humour? What is German cuisine?) I watched an interview with the Irish traditional musician Tony MacMahon in which he said he feels more Asian than European [...] That's two of us!<sup>5</sup>

Growing up in a literary environment where the family home was full of books, including German-language books and journals, and where German writers such as Heinrich Böll and Rudolf Hagelstange visited, Rosenstock's interest in and awareness of German literature stems from an early age: "I even remember, though my German wouldn't have been good enough at the time, seeing journals coming to the house that were edited by people that I would later translate myself. People like the (former) East German poet Peter Huchel".<sup>6</sup> Although he had access to the books in his father's library, the young Rosenstock also began to assemble a library of his own, some of which he brought with him to Rockwell College boarding school in Co. Tipperary. His experiences there helped lay the foundation for his future literary career:

My father had a fine library, in German and in English [...] Some of his books were in the old Gothic script. I was building up my own library, much of it in the 'cló Gaealach' or Irish script.<sup>7</sup> One of the books I took with me from home to boarding school was George Moore's *Heloise and Abelard* (I had been expelled from Gormanston for anarcho-literary activity and finished up in Rockwell). I was enthralled by Moore at the time. Sad that he is no longer widely read. The book was confiscated by the Dean of Studies. He never gave it back. I was devastated. I had intended to savour every word, every sentence of the historical novel. Thinking back on the event, I still feel the pain, the insult.

Now there was nothing to read but the rubbish in that so-called library of theirs, all 'safe' writers, approved by the Catholic Church. No, damn it, says I, one can only take so much of Belloc and Chesterton; if they won't allow me to read real literature I'll have to write it myself.<sup>8</sup>

As an undergraduate in University College Cork, Rosenstock was a member of a group of poets that included Michael Davitt, Liam Ó Muirthile and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who were prominent in the establishment of the Irish-language literary journal *Innti*. As an undergraduate he read widely and was immersed in the writings of William Blake, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Freud, Nietzsche,

5 Personal communications between Rosenstock and the author, 10/12 May 2014. Hereafter referred to as 'Personal communications from Rosenstock'.

6 Interview with Gabriel Rosenstock, conducted by Lesa Ní Mhunghaile. Glenageary, Co. Dublin, 2 July 2013. Hereafter referred to as 'Interview with the author'. For a full transcript of this interview, see <http://roghagh Gabriel.blogspot.ie/2013/07/the-rejection-of-early-morning-dew.html> (accessed 11 December 2013)

7 This was the type used in publishing Irish-language material until the 1960s. The fonts were modelled on uncial handwriting.

8 Personal communications from Rosenstock.

Kant, Arthur Waley's translations from Chinese, Ezra Pound and the Irish-language poets Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, Aogán Ó Rathaille and Seathrún Céitinn. He was also interested in Buddhism, the Surrealists and Dadaists. He studied magic and read the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*.<sup>9</sup> In addition, he was greatly influenced by some of the minor English classics that had been published in Irish translation by the state publishing company An Gúm, works such as *Viocáire Wakefield* (*The Vicar of Wakefield*) and *Dracula*.<sup>10</sup> He believes that in their original English those works do not have a high literary merit but that the translations are of value not only for the style of Irish and turn of phrase they employ but also for the Gaelic ethos they contain. He argues that such works provide the best reading material for the 'would be' Irish-language author.<sup>11</sup>

On graduating from college with a degree in Irish, English and German, Rosenstock spent most of his working life as a translator and Assistant Editor with An Gúm. The company had been founded in 1925 tasked with publishing literature in the Irish language but it also had a strong tradition of translation that included the translation of works by Thomas Mann and Erich Kästner. It was there that Rosenstock honed both his translation and editorial skills. Over the years, he has published Irish-language versions and translations of, among others, Francisco X. Alarcón, Seamus Heaney, Rabindranath Tagore, Günter Grass, W. M. Roggeman, Said, Zhang Ye, Michele Ranchetti, Michael Augustin, Peter Huchel, Georg Trakl, Georg Heym, Hansjörg Schertenleib, Hilde Domin, Johann P. Tammen, Munir Niazi, Ko Un, Günter Kunert, Iqbal, Michael Krüger, Kristiina Ehin, Nikola Madzirov, Agnar Artúvertin, Walter Helmut Fritz, K. Satchidanandan, Elke Schmitter, Hemant Divate, Dileep Jhaveri, Matthias Politycki and Martin Walser as well as Irish-language versions of classical haiku and modern haiku by amongst others John W. Sexton (Ireland), J. W. Hackett (USA), Andres Ehin (Estonia), Petar Tchouhov (Bulgaria) and Janak Sapkota (Nepal).<sup>12</sup> During those years the practice of translating has changed the manner in which he views the world around him:

Translation, if you allow it, can take over. In other words, instead of being a task to be done at some allotted time, translation becomes the constant prism in which one views the universe, in which one de-anglicises it, for instance. In other words, one is

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9 Robert Welch, *The Bengal Tiger*. In: Gabriel Rosenstock, *Rogha Dánta / Selected Poems*. Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2005, p. v.

10 Many of the early publications of *An Gúm* were translations of English classics or European authors.

11 Liam Ó Murthaile, *Agallamh le Gabriel Rosenstock*. In: *Comhar* (Iúil 1989), p. 5.

12 <http://roghahgabriel.blogspot.ie/p/about-gabriel-rosenstock.html> (accessed 11 December 2013). Rosenstock holds an honorary life membership of the Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association.

translating all the time, consciously and unconsciously. So, obviously, some changes must have happened in the brain, I imagine, to accommodate this. For one thing, it means one is never bored.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter will outline Gabriel Rosenstock's thoughts on the nature of literary translation and why he translates. In doing so, it will assess his contribution as a cultural mediator between world literature, including German literature, and literature through the medium of the Irish language. Both his creative work as an Irish-language poet and his work as a translator are inextricably linked and it is important, therefore, to first examine his role as a poet and his thoughts on the creative process.

### Rosenstock as an Irish-language poet

It is noteworthy that like other members of the *Innti* group of poets, Gabriel Rosenstock writes primarily in Irish although not a native speaker of the language. He addresses a vast array of universal themes in his poetry, which has received the following praise from the major Indian poet Koyamparambath Satchidanandan:

Gabriel Rosenstock's poetry is unique in the aesthetic resolution it achieves between the political and the metaphysical, the regional and the universal, the identification with the victims of injustice, neglect and exploitation and the celebration of nature's endless mystery: there are very few poets writing today who can equal him in his range of concerns, themes and forms as well as the simplicity that he achieves in the poetic expression of his integrated vision that is a mark of a rare meditative maturity.<sup>14</sup>

His first collection of Irish-language poetry entitled *Susanne sa Seomra Folctha* (Susanne in the Bathroom) was published in 1973. An experimental collection, it continued the "assault on convention" that had begun two years previously in Mícheál Ó hUanacháin's *Go dTaga Léas* (1971).<sup>15</sup> In a review of the work, the poet Seán Ó Ríordáin remarked on "boladh na túise" (the scent of incense) that he sensed in the collection and drew attention to its international features.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the decades since the publication of his first collection, Rosenstock has continued his "experiment with eastern and other influences",

13 Personal communications from Rosenstock.

14 K. Satchidanandan's blurb on the cover of Rosenstock's most recent collection *Margadh na Míol in Valparaíso / The Flea Market in Valparaíso* (Indreabhán, 2014).

15 Louis de Paor, Contemporary Poetry in Irish 1940-2000. In: Margaret Kelleher and Phillip O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Vol. II 1890-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 337.

16 Seán Ó Ríordáin, 'File Nua', review of *Susanne sa Seomra Folctha*. *The Irish Times*, 2 February 1974.

as is particularly evident in his adaptation of the haiku.<sup>17</sup> Another aspect of Rosenstock's poetry that critics have drawn attention to is his strong sense of humour, encompassing black humour, mockery and self-deprecation, which is considered one of his main strengths as a poet.<sup>18</sup> A further important element is his celebration of human relationships, love and sexuality.<sup>19</sup> His other poetry collections include *Tuirlingt* (1978), *Méaram!* (1981), *Nihil Obstat* (1984), *Migmars* (1985), *Rún na gCaisleán* (1986), *Portrait of the Artist as an Abominable Snowman* (1989), *Oráistí* (1991), *Ní mian léi an fhilíocht níos mó* (1993), *Rogha Rosenstock* (1994), *Syójó* (2001), *Eachtraí Krishnamurphy* (2003), *Krishnamurphy Ambaist* (2004), *Géaga trí Thine. Rogha Haiku* (2005), *Tuairiscíonn Krishnamurphy ó Bhagdad* (2006) and *Guthanna Beannaithe an Domhain* (2008).

He has been termed “the great innovator of his generation” by his fellow poet Liam Ó Muirthile, who believes that Rosenstock's “greatest gift to the Irish-language poem is his stance as outsider”.<sup>20</sup> He is passionate about the language and is committed to its survival and its cause appeals to the ‘non-conformist’ in him:

I like being different. It is not so much a question of liking being different, I feel different [...] Had we an Ireland today that was 90 per cent Irish-speaking, I would probably join the other 10 per cent – whatever that might be, Anglo-Irish, Hiberno-French [...] anything you wish to imagine. I like minorities. The world needs them more and more as we jostle towards consensus, towards homogeneousness.<sup>21</sup>

Belonging to this minority has its downsides, however, and Rosenstock's fears about the state of the Irish language and the state of Irish culture in general manifest themselves as a type of *Kulturangst* in his poetry. In the poem ‘Portrait den Ealaíontóir mar Yeti’ (Portrait of the artist as a Yeti) contained in the collection *Portrait of the Artist as an Abominable Snowman* (1989), he likened the modern day Irish-language writer to a Yeti on the edge of society. This sense of alienation is prevalent in a number of his collections. While sharing a common purpose with his fellow Irish-language poets, he is unafraid of speaking out, of being controversial when necessary, particularly when commenting on contemporary Irish-language poetry, some of which he feels has lost its way:

17 De Paor, *Contemporary Poetry in Irish 1940-2000*, p. 338.

18 Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, *Review of Rogha Dánta / Selected Poems, Lá*. <http://www.cic.ie/review.asp?idreview=7> (accessed 11 December 2013).

19 Colm Breathnach, Réamhrá. In: Gabriel Rosenstock, *Oráistí*. Indeabhnán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1991, p. 19.

20 Ó Muirthile, *Poetry in Irish Now*, p. 145.

21 Interview with the author.

[...] Irish-language poetry today is showing signs of damage, the type of damage done to Tara, the rape of the temenos.<sup>22</sup> Some of our Irish-language poetry is now showing signs of etiolation, infected by the artificiality of modern life which we have allowed to dominate our lives. Depersonalisation is becoming a problem in Irish society, is it not?<sup>23</sup>

His efforts to spark a debate on the issue did not have the desired effect, however. This he feels was due to the unwillingness of critics to be too critical as the Irish-language literary circle in Ireland is so small:

I wrote a controversial essay in which I said poetry in Irish is going astray. A lot of what I said was a bit over the top, phrased to create a bit of controversy, a debate, a discussion about where poetry in Irish was at the moment. The anticipated debate didn't happen. Did people shy away from it? Was there a lazy consensus about contemporary Irish-language poetry which universities, in particular, did not want to examine very closely? I got a lot of interesting e-mails and private correspondence in reply to that controversial essay which convinced me that there is a debate that's worth opening up. Who will kick the can down the road again, a little more vigorously this time? It probably won't happen. One advantage that Germany has over us is demographic. A critic in München can say what he feels about some poet or novelist in Berlin or Frankfurt, knowing that he's not going to bump into said scribe on his way to the theatre. Not so here. A critic can't open his mouth because his wife is related, by marriage, to the scribe's godfather or some such inhibiting factor.<sup>24</sup>

Ó Muirthile believes that Rosenstock has pushed out the boundaries with his Irish-language poetry and “brought it into domains it has never known”.<sup>25</sup> As a result, he regards Rosenstock's achievements as having “exposed the threadbare texture of the range of writing in the Irish language”.<sup>26</sup> Despite the innovative quality of his poems it has not encouraged other Irish-language poets to follow suit, however, and it may be inferred from Ó Muirthile's assessment of the impact of Rosenstock's poems that this has been a missed opportunity. He remarks ultimately that “it is more likely that, in some future domain, his work will be seen as how poems in Irish might have been”.<sup>27</sup>

Although Rosenstock is committed to the preservation of the Irish language, he does not allow himself to become restricted to dealing with themes

22 Rosenstock is referring here to the controversial construction of the M3 motorway, which opened in 2010. The motorway was contested because the route passes near the ancient archaeological site of the Hill of Tara in Co. Meath and through the archaeologically rich Tara-Skryne valley.

23 Interview with the author.

24 Ibid. This article was published in the now defunct Irish-language newspaper *Foinse*.

25 Ó Muirthile, *Poetry in Irish Now*, p. 145.

26 Ibid., p. 146.

27 Ibid.

relating to Gaelic culture alone in his poetry. Instead, he views himself as a writer who happens to write in Irish:<sup>28</sup>

[...] I am much more at home in Isaac Bashevis Singer's descriptions of Jewish Poland than I am in Ó Cadhain's Conamara. I'm not sure if I could ever live in the Gaeltacht, for instance, or be fully integrated in any Western society. I am nowhere happier, indeed, than in Kerala, India.<sup>29</sup>

As an artist, Rosenstock considers it his first duty to find out what we are as human beings and whether literature and the arts can enlighten us on this question. He claims to find "more solace, more insight and more wisdom in the cultures of the east" than he finds in the cultures of the west but acknowledges that he must engage with the Anglosphere: "The Anglosphere bores me. But, one must engage with it and with the West because one is living here and, like it or not, I'm a Western!"<sup>30</sup> He is an advocate of the benefits that can be attained by seeking inspiration from the literature of other cultures, particularly the cultures of the East. He notes that the same creative impulse that inspired Goethe also inspires him:

Goethe was probably one of the first people in Europe to talk about Weltliteratur, or world literature, and to create an east-west cross-pollination in his West-östlicher Divan. The same impulse is in a lot of my own work. Three volumes of *Guthanna Beannaithe an Domhain*, in which shamans, sages and saints rub shoulders, including Hafez, beloved of Goethe, are of a higher spiritual, cultural, poetic and aesthetic order than quite a lot of the contemporary German-language poets that I have translated, with fellow mariner on these rough seas, Hans-Christian Oeser. I'm more of a Gaelic voice for those traditions – tweeting a daily haiku in translation, for instance – than a champion of modern German literature.<sup>31</sup>

The process of creating "world literature" allows Rosenstock to unify the various sides of his personality and to reach a better understanding of himself: "[...] ag iarraidh teacht ar aontacht na n-ilphearsantachtaí. Tríd an gcuimilt so le litríocht Ghiúdaise, na hEorpa agus na hIndia tagaim ar chodann éigin díom féin" ([...] trying to reach a unity of multipersonalities. Through this contact with Jewish, European and Indian literature I reach other parts of myself).<sup>32</sup>

### Rosenstock as translator and cultural mediator

Gabriel Rosenstock's work as a poet and as a translator is interlinked. He believes that there is "no real substantial difference between personal creative work

28 Ní Ghearrbhuigh, Gabriel Rosenstock, p. 95.

29 Rosenstock, *How I Discovered Irish or How Irish Discovered Me*, p. 89.

30 Interview with the author.

31 Ibid.

32 Liam Ó Muirthile, *Agallamh le Gabriel Rosenstock*, p. 10.

and literary translation” as “it springs from the same creative source”. For him it is not a mechanical process but instead “it’s an essential part of my creative, intellectual and spiritual life and suits my chameleon nature and my Whitmanesque understanding of the human being as ‘containing multitudes’”.<sup>33</sup> He draws on the material he translates as a source of inspiration. This does not necessarily mean that he ‘likes’ all of the material he translates. Why then does he translate?

One might want to explore something that is completely outside of one’s own realm, one’s own experience, and try to get under the skin of that other creative life. Every poem you translate has certain qualities, ‘nutrients’ that are going to enrich your own poetic imagination, your use of language, your ear, so that some day in the future a phrase will occur, a pause, a word, a theme or colouring will occur, something you might not have possessed without having translated this body of work. Trakl or Huchel or whoever, it is the whole life of a man or woman in many respects, condensed into these thoughtful words or passionate words, the joys, the sufferings, the experiences, the disappointments, the boredom, the ecstasy. Everything that that person has seen and heard and felt goes into a well-formed, well-made poem and when you translate it, what happens? You take all that experience or at least you absorb the substance of it and it’s something alive and spiritual and even physical. It is sound. It is vibrational. There’s something mysteriously alive in a real poem and you take that life and it’s a responsibility, a sacred responsibility, to handle that life, and to give it as it were another life on the page, in another language. Translator as midwife. By so doing, you are also enriching your own imaginative and spiritual life in immeasurable ways. So that’s why it is worth doing.<sup>34</sup>

Rosenstock relishes his role as a cultural intermediary and has chosen Irish as the most appropriate target language for his translations:

It’s interesting to be an intermediary between cultures through the medium of Irish because English is not really a vital tool in Ireland, or even much in merry England, in terms of translating other cultures. I would say there is more being done in Ireland through the medium of Irish, in terms of literary translation – much much more – than what’s being done through the medium of English. That may be just due to a few individuals like myself or it may be because there is more of a translation tradition in the Irish language.<sup>35</sup>

He also reaches out to readers around the world through the medium of the internet. Like any writer, he does not wish to write in either a cultural or linguistic vacuum:

I am tweeting a haiku a day and blogging poems that I like, making almost instantaneous translations from sites such as ‘Poetry Chaikhana: Sacred Poetry from Around the World’, usually using English as a bridge language, sometimes looking at originals, when I can find them, such as the medieval German of Mechthild von Magdeburg. There’s a transcendent joy in instantaneous translation, as in instantaneous com-

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33 Interview with the author.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

position of haiku: it happens so fast that it doesn't pass through the interpretative faculties, as Barnhill puts it. Where these little dandelion seeds will land, who knows, but in this digital age they could land anywhere and that's interesting in the sense that one feels that one is no longer writing in complete isolation, even in a minority language with very few readers, very very few readers. But in a digital age you don't know where these little dandelion seeds are going to travel on cosmic cyber-winds. They could land anywhere, in New Mexico for instance, or in Berlin.<sup>36</sup>

### Rosenstock as a translator of German poetry

Gabriel Rosenstock has translated from the works of a number of German poets and has published the following collections: Günter Grass: *An Cloigeann Muice Glóthaithe (Die Schweinskopfsülze)*. Coiscéim, 1991; *Damhsaí Deireanacha. Dánta (Letzte Tänze. Gedichte)*. Coiscéim, 2009; Elke Schmitter: *Tá na clocha ag cur do thuairisce. Dánta (Die Steine fragen mich nach Dir. Gedichte)*. Coiscéim, 2008; Michael Krüger: *An tAonú Aithne Déag. Rogha Dánta (Das elfte Gebot. Ausgewählte Gedichte)*. Coiscéim, 2008; Günter Kunert: *Agallamh an tSeanóra lena Anam. Dánta (Der alte Mann spricht mit seiner Seele. Gedichte)*. Coiscéim, 2007.<sup>37</sup> His translation of some of the work of Peter Huchel, published under the title *An Spealadóir Polannach* with illustrations by Bernd Rosenheim, was awarded Irish-language Book of the Year.<sup>38</sup> He considers Huchel to be “an interesting figure”.<sup>39</sup> He also enjoyed translating the works of Georg Trakl and Georg Heym, two poets prized by his father.

Since 2000 Rosenstock has collaborated with Hans-Christian Oeser on a wide-ranging series of modern German poetry translated into Irish and English: Said: *Sei Nacht zu mir / Be to Me the Night / Bíse domhsa i d'óiche. Liebesgedichte / Love Poems / Laoithe Cumainn* (2000); Michael Augustin: *Ad infinitum. Gedichte und Epigramme / Poems and Epigrams / Dánta agus burduín*. Coiscéim (2001); Hansjörg Schertenleib: *Gib mir dein Aug / Give Me Your Eye / T'rom do shúil. Ausgewählte Gedichte / Selected Poems / Rogha dánta*. Coiscéim (2003); Johann P. Tammen: *... und himmelwärts Meere / ... and skywards the sea / ... farraigi i dtreo na spéire*. Coiscéim, 2005; Hilde Domin: *Crann almóinní milis agus searbh. Rogha Dánta (Bittersüßer Mandelbaum. Ausgewählte Gedichte)*. Coiscéim, 2006; Günter Kunert: *Der alte Mann spricht mit seiner Seele / The Old Man Speaks with His Soul / Agallamh*

36 Ibid.

37 <http://www.goethe.de/INS/se/prj/uar/gae/ueb/ros/gaindex.htm> (accessed 30 December 2013). For a more complete list of Rosenstock's translations, see Ní Ghearrbhuigh, Gabriel Rosenstock, pp. 116-118.

38 Interview with the author.

39 Ibid.

*an tSeanóra lena Anam. Gedichte / Poems / Dánta*. Coiscéim, 2007; Michael Krüger: *Das elfte Gebot / The Eleventh Commandment / An tAonú Aithne Déag. Ausgewählte Gedichte / Selected Poems / Rogha Dánta*. Coiscéim, 2008. He admits, however, that he has not always been impressed by his source material:

I think apart maybe from Hilde Domin and the Iranian poet who writes in German, Said, I can't say that my heart was enraptured by all of the material we were working on. A lot of modern poetry, in all European languages, apart from some of the lesser known languages such as Estonian, has gone astray. I don't think it speaks to people anymore. My Irish volumes by Estonian poet Kristiina Ehin and Macedonian poet Nikola Madzirov are of far more interest to me, as poetry, than quite a lot of the German volumes.<sup>40</sup>

He is critical of a lot of modern German poetry which he perceives to be “self-reflexive” and “heavily intellectualised”:

[...] it no longer speaks from the heart, no longer sings from one heart to another. So really, a lot of it is quite tortuous. Torture might be a better word because for a poet and a literary translator, a poem is throbbingly alive, and to see a poetic tradition atrophy is a terrible thing.<sup>41</sup>

He is also sceptical about the enduring quality of contemporary German poetry:

It is far too early to say anything about contemporary German poetry but I think 90% of it won't last whereas when I look to some of the eastern European poets that I have translated, I can sense purer wellsprings of poetry there and a deeper music than I find in a lot of German poetry today. Put bluntly, Kristiina and Nikola are magicians. Why has the magic gone out of much German poetry today?<sup>42</sup>

Rosenstock believes that this is an important issue that needs to be addressed and offers the following explanation for why he believes contemporary Estonian poetry to be superior to contemporary German poetry:

Why is Estonian poetry – and the poetry of Kristiina Ehin in particular – in a superior vein to a lot of contemporary German poetry? [...] Where does that magical power come from? From a shamanic tradition of course. She is a poet who lived as a nature warden for a number of months on an island. Alone.<sup>43</sup>

He points to the legacy of the two world wars in which Germany was involved as a reason for the loss of “magic” from German poetry:

One of the reasons why magic has gone from a lot of modern German poetry is because after two World Wars the notion of ‘national’, ‘natural’ wellsprings for poetry was something disdained by the modern German intellectual. With good reason. Folk songs and romping in the early-morning dew were frowned upon as being suspiciously linked to Blut-und-Boden literature.

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40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

A magical connection with nature and folk arts? This notion was abused by the Nazis and the Hitler Youth, so out goes the baby with the bathwater. Now the Estonians would never dream of throwing all of that stuff out, their magical connections with landscape and with nature and with song and dance and with music. The Germans did it and poetry has suffered because of that. Slowly but surely a generation has arisen that says we are no longer going to take the shame and the blame because of what our grandfathers did. We have to shake this off. We have to renew our roots in a common humanity, never forgetting the horrors of war and of genocide, but nevertheless returning to some wellsprings of real connectivity with the life of the planet, the forests and hills, the mountain streams and the early dew, the Frühtau, blindly rejected by a whole generation. I'm not talking Eichendorff here (whom I love) or a return to Romanticism. Connectivity to the wellsprings of poetry. Yes, and to race and history, and memory, and language, even if people want to forget. How can you?<sup>44</sup>

He believes that the Japanese poetic form *haiku* can help us to re-connect with nature: "Haiku can teach us to reconnect with the earth and with the seasons, with the heavens, with natural elements, air, water, fire, earth – and poetry that is disconnected from such wellsprings becomes dry-throated and painful."<sup>45</sup>

For Rosenstock therefore, poetry that is "intellectualised" and that ignores nature has an inferior quality. Together with Hans-Christian Oeser, Rosenstock has recently published a trilingual volume, in German, Irish and English, of the poems of Martin Walser, taken from prose diaries. He is not uncritical of his source material, however, and he considers Walser's poetry as lacking in the magic he has identified in Estonian poetry, with its negativity and emphasis on intellectualism. Rosenstock offers the following reason for a decline in interest in such poetry: "And, 'here we go again', as Ray Charles sang: cynicism, despair, anguish, neurosis, intellectualism ... do poets not realise that they are killing off poetry? Do they not wonder why readers have deserted them en masse? [...]."<sup>46</sup>

Cultural mediation can also function as a two-way process and a selection of Rosenstock's own work has been translated into German by Hans-Christian Oeser under the title *Ein Archivar großer Taten: Ausgewählte Gedichte* (Edi-

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44 Ibid. Rosenstock's explains his understanding of race as follows: "You can be a citizen of a country and not belong to the dominant race or tribe. You can live all your life in Ireland, for instance, without ever appreciating Gaelic sports or Irish music or the Irish language. You don't know what you're missing, literally. As an anarchist, I would gladly see the end of all nations, borders, flags, currencies and so on; but languages [...] 'racial' or 'national' characteristics, traits, temperament, humour. It would be a robotic world without them, wouldn't it? Even certain prejudices are preferable to an obsession with political correctness and neutral blandness". Personal communications from Rosenstock.

45 Interview with the author.

46 Ibid.

tion Rugerup, 2007), which has received critical acclaim.<sup>47</sup> Rosenstock would like to see more outward translation from the Irish language taking place:

I'd love to see more work coming out of Irish and into the world. Not just myself, of course, but my contemporaries Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, Liam Ó Muirthile, Colm Breathnach, Bidy Jenkinson, Paddy Bushe and so on. They and many others – and those are just some of the poets – have created a serious body of work that needs to be translated into the languages of Europe and beyond. It's sad to see how little is being done in this regard. It's a form of criminal negligence if the truth be told.<sup>48</sup>

The first step, Rosenstock believes, if Irish-language literature is to reach a wider audience worldwide, is to translate it firstly into English. The problem, however, is that there are not enough translations of Irish literature into English. He emphasises the need, therefore, for the provision of a large corpus of contemporary and classical Irish language literature available in English so that others can translate it into other languages. He argues that using a bridge language should not be perceived as a limiting factor: “If you are a good literary translator you will be able to do a very good job on a novel or a book of poems by using a bridge language”.<sup>49</sup> He points to the fact that he has read the works of the Albanian novelist, Kadare, in English via a French translation: “I don't know of the existence of any Albanian work of his in English translation so French as a bridge language into English has been very satisfactory for me as a reader”. He believes that his aim as a translator is “to provide a rounded literary or reading experience for the reader” and gives as an example his recent translations of poems by the Hindi poet Rati Saxena into Irish based on English cribs:

The poems in English were often no more than cribs. They weren't really great poems in the form that I got them. I had to recreate them, a bit like reconstructive surgery. I had to dig a bit to find the poetry, excavate. I found it. I know how to find it if it's there. I have fulfilled my task if I have created poems that are interesting enough

47 [http://www.rugerup.de/Ein+Archivar+gro%C3%9Fer+Taten\\_AID1542.html](http://www.rugerup.de/Ein+Archivar+gro%C3%9Fer+Taten_AID1542.html) (accessed 12 December 2013).

48 Interview with the author.

49 This method of translating may also be termed ‘mediated’, ‘intermediate’, ‘second-hand’ or ‘indirect’ translation. It has been a common practice throughout the ages although it still occupies a marginal position within Translation Studies today. For a discussion, see Martin Ringmar, ‘Roundabout Routes’. Some remarks on indirect translations. <http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/cetra/papers/files/ringmar.pdf> (accessed 10 May 2014). Due to French cultural predominance in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, translators often used intermediate French translations as source texts even though a copy of the original language was available. In this manner German readers were introduced to British philosophy, fiction and drama. See Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2009, p. 415.

for people to sit down and write blurbs which say that these poems are provocative or that they raise questions about whatever the poems raise questions about – maybe women’s rights in India or that kind of thing or other poems of a more philosophical nature. One could find a very long continuous stream of thought and feeling in her work which you don’t find in a lot of poems from Europe where traditions have been broken, as I alluded to earlier on. So we’re back to the West-East Divan again!<sup>50</sup>

Rosenstock prefers to use the verb “transcreate” to describe his activities as a translator: “Discovering the word ‘transcreated’ in an Indian volume was liberating. Anybody can pull you up if you write ‘translated by’; who can object to anything if you write ‘transcreated by’? How others do their work, what is common or uncommon practice is of no great interest to me”.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Gabriel Rosenstock is a creator of world literature in the sense that his own creative literary output is informed by his work as a translator and cultural mediator. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of his translations of German poetry is his reason for doing so. Despite his view that much of contemporary German poetry has lost its way, he nevertheless believes that every body of work that he translates has qualities that will enrich his own creative output and provide him with access to thoughts, themes, words and phrases that he might not have had he not translated that particular body of work. His ultimate goal is to create texts that will be enjoyed by his readers:

In all the translations that I have done, my hope is that I have made something out of these texts that can be read with interest and even with joy because, ultimately, I am not interested very much in reading things simply out of interest or in translating things out of interest. Interest? No, joy! There must be joy. Joy is the factor. Joy is one of the essential ingredients which infuses true creativity and joy is missing from a lot of modern poetry, for reasons we needn’t analyse now but we have alluded to some of them. Without joy there is no true creation. There’s no point in sharpening your pencil or opening your computer without joy. We’re not doing it for the money! The money doesn’t even cover your costs. The act of translating and the act of creating, the act of writing is an ode to joy. Or why get up in the morning?<sup>52</sup>

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The following selection only lists those translations by Rosenstock which might be of particular interest to *Irish-German Studies* readers.

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