

## ***JOHN LIDDY***

### **Desmond O'Grady: Influences**

Desmond O'Grady began writing at the age of fifteen. His first encounter with any person or group concerning poetry was with Kitty Breedin who brought together a Poetry Circle in Limerick once a week. He went regularly and although there were people there much older than he, people of his parent's generation, he sat and listened to them reading T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He had already read some Eliot and Pound.

Both aware of it  
we put no words  
nor rash act on it.

Especially you,  
part of my straight start  
in Limerick's sitting rooms with blue

wallpaper and stuffed birds  
on a table in their flower  
glass bower

size of a high hat.

from Kitty Breedin: *Separations* (1973)

In boarding school, around this time, attending the Cistercian College at Roscrea, he met with other young student writers who acted as a source of encouragement. Whilst there he became friendly with Augustine Martin, Thomas Kilroy and Tom McIntyre. He used to play a lot of rugby in those days and played it more and more

vigorously so that he would play on the first team and get to Dublin. After the match he would spend his time talking poetry with John Jordan and Denis Donoghue, who were teaching Anglo-Irish literature in University College, Dublin.

His uncle, Feathery Mickey Bourke, lived with the O'Gradys when Desmond was a child. He was his uncle's fair-haired boy because he was the eldest and his uncle took a shine to him even in later years when he wouldn't talk to anybody. His uncle always liked to see him coming back because he had been away in foreign places, places he had been to. In one period in his uncle's life he had been to the Mediterranean and so he lived vicariously through the young poet as old people will do through young people. Feathery was very much a prominent person in his early life who talked a great deal about the history of Limerick families and told him about Irish saga and Irish mythology. 'There is always a member of the family who affects you. It might be a baby brother, it might be a teacher, a maid, a nanny, a gardener. In my case it was Feathery, my uncle.'

But for me as a child, in that long toyleless night of the  
War,  
his presence was brightly Homeric. While Hitler's huns  
converged on the Channel and Goering came nightly  
to hammer  
down Coventry, I sat by the fire while he told me of other  
times and their heroes: the mad Black and Tans or  
Cuchulainn,  
The Great O'Neill, Dan O'Connell, or Niall of the  
Nine Hostages,  
the children of Lir or the Wooing of Emer, the  
Salmon of knowledge  
or the story of Deirdre, the Coming of Patrick,  
the Three Sons of Uisneach, the return of Ossian or  
death

of Cuchulainn, the Danes and the Normans, Hogan  
the poet of Thomond  
or the ballad The Blacksmith of Limerick,  
the Civil War that divided the family, my  
grandmother's curse on her sons'  
children. He distrusted success and any characteristic  
trait of a questionable ancestor. His greatest hate  
was proud independence in youth, or any sign that might  
lead to it; frequently warning individualistic  
action from pride could only end badly – and cited  
relations.

from Memories Of An Influential Uncle, *The Dark  
Edge of Europe* (1967)

After publishing *Chords and Orchestrations* (1956), financed by Nora McNamara, he left Limerick at nineteen to work as an Instructor in the Berlitz School in Paris. These were exciting times for a young fellow in Paris after all those years in boarding school. He met Picasso, who sprinkled the petals of a flower onto a table in the shape of a bull and he had a good painter friend called Francis Newton Souza. Sam Beckett was there also. Paris was still war-scarred. It was only ten years after the war. Everybody was trying to find themselves. It was the time of the Sartre Existential Movement. He also met a man called Gallagher who was teaching in the Berlitz School, and who figures prominently in Joyce's *Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*.

At my back the madness of the town  
In my face a remote sanity of my own.

from Self-Exile: *The Road Taken* (1996)

Before moving to Rome he stayed for a year with Dom. Eugene Boylan, a Cistercian abbot, on the monastic island of Caldey, off the coast of Wales. There, he planned his second book *Reilly* and began translating from the Irish. On moving to Rome he worked in the British Institute and, on 9 July, 1958, on his arrival in Naples, he met Ezra Pound who had been in prison since 1945. Pound had read *Chords and Orchestrations* which O'Grady sent to him in America. The first cheque for his poetry O'Grady ever got in his life came from Ezra Pound from the mad house in Washington for *Chords and Orchestrations*. He wrote to him asking for a poem for an anthology that he was editing while he was confined. O'Grady sent Pound a translation of Raftery – 'Miss Raftery an file lan dochas is grá, le suaines gan solas, le cuaines' . . . It is one of the most difficult poems in the Irish language to translate in its purity, its direct active statement.

I'm Raftery the poet.  
My eyes stare blind  
I've known love, still hold hope,  
live in peace of mind.

Weary and worn  
I walk my way  
by the light of my heart  
to my death's marked day.

Look at me now,  
with my face to the wall,  
playing for people  
who have nothing at all.

from Raftery *The Poet: Trawling Tradition* (1994)

He knew Pound very closely by correspondence. They wrote

to each other several days a week while Pound was locked up. Afterwards, when he came back to Europe, they saw each other, more or less, every day in a very friendly way, nothing to do with the public. Pound would ask O'Grady to comment on whatever he was working on so 'What he did for young people when he was a young vigorous man, he expected me now to do for him as an ageing man.' (*The Stony Thursday Book*, 1997)

Apart from that, Pound became his master. He was the man he learned to write from. He taught him his craft. Pound had translated Anglo-Saxon into English for the first time. He had made Anglo-Saxon available to the modernist English. He translated the Latins and the late Renaissance Italians, and afterwards, the Chinese. Those three particular attitudes towards a making of art, of translation, had a profound influence on O'Grady's work. He also began translating from the Irish, from the 6th century Welsh Gododdin and from the Arabic. He did not feel he needed America. His great poetic mission was to link the Classical World with the Greco-Roman world with the Arabic world. That stands as O'Grady's statement, and that is what he is trying to do: link the classical world of our sensibility. That is what he wants for himself and his own life and that is what he wants to give some statement to in his work.

I looked at my days and saw that,  
with the first affirmation of summer,  
I must leave all I knew: the house,  
the familiarity of family,  
companions and memories of childhood;  
a future cut out like a tailored suit,  
a settled life among school friends.

I looked face to face at my future:  
I saw voyages to distant places,

saw the daily scuffle for survival  
in foreign towns with foreign tongues  
and small rented rooms on companionless  
nights with sometimes the solace  
of a gentle, anonymous arm on the pillow.  
I looked at the faces about me  
and saw my days' end as a returned ship,  
its witness singing in the rigging.

I saw my life and I walked out to it  
as a seaman walks out alone at night from  
his house down to the port with his bundled  
belongings, and sails into the dark.

from Purpose: *Sing Me Creation* (1977)

Pound was his example. Representing the fact that you could turn Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, Latin and Greek into your own language and make it work. Pound called it 'creative translation' and O'Grady calls it 'creative translation' (*The Stony Thursday Book*, 1977). His early education saw him read Greek and Latin and he spoke Irish from childhood. This fundamental classical background, involving Celtic and especially Munster Irish, which is the closest connection to Sanskrit of any language in the western hemisphere, brought him to further study of the Classics at Harvard University and eventually to the study of Arabic. The following is a poem by Badawi Al-Jabal (Syria 1907–1981):

This sickness won't stop: stitches  
My shroud before my time.

It suffocates my soul's song,  
But my heart still beats for beauty.

Beauty bewitches, uplifts to love.  
Before springwater I suffer thirst.

from *Beauty: Trawling Tradition* (1994)

Pound's influence can be seen in O'Grady's translation of *The Gododdin* (1977). It is a free rendering of the heroic middle Welsh poem, *Y Gododdin* of Aneirin, with maps and illustrations by Louis Le Brocquy. The Dolmen Press published it. The poem, divided into eighty-four poems about a battle between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, is written in 6th century Welsh, which is very different from the Anglo-Saxon language, but, according to O'Grady, the only way for him to get it across in English was to write it in an Anglo-Saxon idiom. It stands as one of O'Grady's greatest achievements.

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No disgrace in his high horse.

After their gutfill of wine  
he armed his kin  
led them to battle,  
a pestilence of bravery  
before the Gododdin.

In his home,  
high stepping horses,  
the shine of shone armour.  
This hand a herald's staff  
in attack a hurricane's havoc.  
Beaker bearer.  
Land leveller.

from *The Gododdin* (1977)

Whilst at Harvard he met Robert Lowell and later John Berryman who was on Sabbatical from University in Minneapolis. Lowell died in a taxi and O'Grady was happy it happened like that and not in a mad house, as was Berryman, who read in Spoleto (Italy) along with Pound, Ginsberg, Yevtushenko and O'Grady. They spent several weeks in each other's company and Berryman promised him that he would never commit suicide. These two poets are portrayed in O'Grady's poems.

He's done it. Did it decisively waving  
goodbye down his final long drop,  
though he swore he wouldn't, that noon  
over lunch, Spoleto, Italy, crackling whiskey  
still from mad Ireland and the Dublin pubs his  
hero Yeats never entered. And I believed him,  
sort-of. How disbelieve such brave, brazen  
bearded head, blessing hands of a maker,  
crowfoot eyes like Irish seaboard inlets  
of my childhood?

From John Berryman: *Separations* (1973)

In 1967 he published *The Dark Edge of Europe*, a book concerned with themes such as arrival and departure, separation and alienation, love and the celebration of love. It is a tightly knit book with an Odyssean or Sinbad the Sailor element about it. There is also the feel of the Celt and what that means. O'Grady is very strong on this point. He is aware of what it means to be a Celt, not just an Irishman but to belong to a particular people like the Arabs belong to a particular people. The book has a structure, a time factor, whether it is morning, afternoon or night, seasonal or to do with friends and places. There are objects, things, bits and

scraps, a bone, a skull of a friend who did not make it and 'you had to go back and get him in the desert and all that was left was the skull and the bones so you take his skull home and you keep it on your desk, not for morbid reasons.' (*The Stony Thursday Book*, 1977)

It is a question of the place, the people, the paraphernalia and the pendulum – the time sequence and always returning to that other island, Ireland.

Pulling home now into the station. Cunneen waving  
A goatskin of wine from the Spain he has never seen  
Like an acolyte swinging a thurible.  
My father, behind him, as ever in clerical grey,  
White hair shining, his hand raised,  
Talking of life to 'The Poet' Ryan.  
Then, after a drink at the White House, out home.

from Homecoming: *The Dark Edge of Europe* (1967)

He had set out from Limerick to go to the Island of Patmos because the story goes that St John wrote the gospel, his gospel, on that Island and O'Grady wanted to go there because 'In the beginning was the word.' On a Turkish ship heading for Istanbul, he stepped out at another wonderful Island, walked into a Café on the harbour and realised he did not have to go any further, that the word was there on Paros island. The word is not necessarily where they say it is!

Two fruits from that experience are *Hellas* (1971) and *Stations* (1976). The former is the poet's sense of revulsion against Fascism and Neo-Nazi militaristic Junta politics in Greece from 1967 to 1974, and the latter is a celebration of the liberation after Greece had got rid of Papadopolous.

Here, because of the shock, the sudden  
Rising gorge of our outrage, incredulity;

Because brute thoroughness of execution  
Brought quick death, sorry wedding,  
Greece and you focus all our thoughts.

from Hellas: *Hellas* (1967)

In 1968 he published *The Dying Gaul*, a long poem in 33 parts. It is a very fixed structure. The twelve middle poems are concerned with the battle of Cuchulainn and the battles of Hercules. It begins in Spain and ends in Winter and includes references to the agricultural cycle of the year, and, as Eliot said, 'birth, copulation and death.' The book ends with 'I am my father's son.' In many ways this book set O'Grady off on the search for the answer to Pound's Cantos. He began to take on the end of the estuary which Pound left us at the end of the Cantos. O'Grady's work in this area is brought together under the titles of *The Suras* or *The Wandering Celt*. A Sura is an Arabic expression meaning a verse from the Koran, a revelation, but in Classical Arabic it could mean a stone in a wall, like the walls of the West of Ireland or a stitch in a cloth. It can mean a prophesy or what Joyce called an epiphany. It is a moment of insight. Perhaps, as O'Grady once told me, it is like drawing a line on a page of vellum in the book of Kells.

Irish Christianity not directly from Rome  
But Gaul through Britain  
National the emphasis.  
As with translation  
The new renews.  
The national oral memory written out in Gaelic,  
In that 'quiet habitation of sanctity and learning'  
while Europe's put to the barbarian sword.  
Northumbrian monks learned from that.  
Hence Beowulf.

from Irish-Christian Sura: *The Wandering Celt*

O'Grady has always been a schoolteacher. Because he believes all art is fundamentally moralistic, it is also a kind of teaching and that is why so many writers teach to make a living. There is a kind of mission involved. It is like a priest, it is a sense of vocation. Therefore, poets end up teaching. They cannot surface roads and they are seldom electricians, carpenters or computer scientists. Teaching, for O'Grady, is not a pull towards scholarship. He maintains that there is no creative function in the scholar. Dr Kenneth Jackson at Edinburgh University did a very beautiful edition, word by word, piece by piece, syllable by syllable of *The Gododdin*, but he did not make it literature. O'Grady believes his own achievement was to make it a living literature for the first time in a thousand years. Nevertheless, he does recognise the scholar's valuable contribution.

Limerick, of course, is always present in the work, and the collection that most concerns him now is *The Suras of the Wandering Celt*. They begin with a personal question 'Who am I?' which comes up in the last poem of *The Dying Gaul*. So, in order to explain the *who am I* to himself, he decided to begin at the beginning. The poems explore the origin of the Celts and one of the earliest settlements in the British Isles, Lough Gur. People lived there 6,000 years before Christ and he has dug up bronze artefacts. He wants to explain to himself and to his children's children, forever and forever and forever the Lough Gur of 6,000 BC to the Lough Gur of today.

He is also working on an autobiographical piece which begins with a description of Lough Gur and talks about local things and local people. It is what he refers to as a carpet page in a Celtic manuscript; it meanders all over the field. His uncle Feathery Burke figures also. He is the gargoyle. However, he is not sure if it is a novel, biographical memoir

or imaginative prose piece. Nowadays, on visits to Limerick, he looks and sees what he wants to see because life is running out. He reads what he has to read because he will use it to make what he wants to make. But there are moments when he switches off. And we, the reader switch on. All in all, O'Grady is your European poet, a poet's poet. You can learn so much from his unswerving dedication to the pursuit of truth in the word.

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### **Bibliography**

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### **Note**

This article is gleaned from an interview carried out by the author with Desmond O'Grady in Limerick, 1977, for a special edition of *The Stony Thursday Book* dedicated to the poet and his work.