Michael Cronin, recently appointed Director of the Trinity Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation (TCLCT) is talking about the mission of the new Centre, which was formally opened in a beautifully renovated Georgian house in Fenian Street in April. The only centre of its kind in Ireland - the nearest equivalents are in the University of East Anglia and the University of California, Santa Barbara - TCLCT was years in the planning. The brainchild of Professor Sarah Smyth of the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies, the idea was first launched at a special event in the college chapel in 2012, entitled ‘Translating Seamus Heaney’, attended by Heaney and five of his translators. Professor Cronin, who took up his new role in April, explains what he calls TCLCT’s three “component parts”:

"There’s the educational programme – the Centre runs the college’s MPhil in Literary Translation, working with the 17 languages taught at Trinity, and we have a translator-in-residence who, this year, is from China.

"The Centre also houses Literature Ireland, which is the national organisation for the international promotion of Irish literature in English and Irish. Literature Ireland commissions translations of Irish works into world languages.

"And, finally, the Centre houses Dalkey Archive Press, which is the most important English-language publisher of translations in the world. It’s a US company – they base their European operations in the Centre.”

Through its three component parts, the Centre cultivates partnerships with relevant cultural institutions around the city – such as the Goethe Institute, Alliance Française and Dublin City Library - and it hosts numerous events, including translation workshops and slams, book clubs and public interviews with writers and their translators, as well as podcasts and live streaming. The day-to-day running of the Centre is done by the newly appointed operations manager, Eithne Bowen, with Cronin providing overall direction.

A few months before taking up the directorship of TCLCT, he received another major appointment within the university: the Professor of French (1776), which is the oldest chair of French in the world.

→ “We want the Centre to be a cultural hub in Dublin, linking Ireland to the world and the world to Ireland. We want to spread the good news about Irish writing; equally we want to showcase the literature and culture of all the people who come to live and settle and work in Ireland. We can’t expect the rest of world to take an interest in our culture if we don’t take an interest in theirs.”
Professor Michael Cronin – Professor of French (1776) and Director of the Trinity Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation
“I have a dual role in the Centre and Department of French but central to both is the active promotion of language learning and teaching.”

As it happens, this has now become a national imperative. For the first time in the history of the state, the Irish government has produced a language policy which sets ambitious targets. This is in reaction to Brexit and the realisation that Ireland will have to orient itself more towards Europe and other markets.

“The Celtic Tiger years – with their focus on FDI from US multinationals and financial services in London and New York – were characterised by a strong move away from foreign languages,” says Cronin “and a significant drop-off in students.”

As a result there is now a crisis in the provision of high-quality language teachers. “Addressing this is the immediate practical challenge, but more widely, how do you situate Ireland in a post-Brexit Europe? There’s been a lot of debate, nationally, about the economic dimension for Ireland after Brexit, but almost none on the cultural dimension. We need to be thinking about this.”

Cronin was brought up in Dublin in a family with some connections to France. “My grandmother taught in Dijon during the First World War. I never knew her but my mother would re-tell some of the stories she was told and ours was quite a Francophile household. Then, in my teens, I discovered the joys of existentialism. Reading The Mandarins by de Beauvoir, I was enthralled by the sense of curiosity and freedom which contrasted with the dreadful homogeneity of 1970s Ireland.”

He came to Trinity to study French, spending his holidays “grape-picking in the south of France or working on building sites. That was invaluable experience. I remember staying in a squat near Orleans with anarchists and Trotskyites – it was political education in all of three weeks.”

After a Masters in UCD, he did his PhD in Trinity on French Canadian novelists. As a junior lecturer in DCU, his first academic posting, he became interested in Translation Studies – a new interdisciplinary dealing with the theory, application, sociology and politics of translation.

“My first book, Translating Ireland, looks at how cultural political changes in Irish history have coincided with big translation drives. This happened in the medieval, Elizabethan and French revolutionary periods. Often this gets left out of the story because it’s happening outside the national territory. I was trying to re-write the transnational element back into Irish history.”

This has now developed into his current research area of Eco-Translation. “We are now into a post-humanities world and the end of human exceptionalism. With climate change and biodiversity loss, we have to reconsider the human role and where we stand in relation not only to other species but to the inorganic world of rocks, hills, rivers. Translation is a relationship across difference – not just across different languages but across different ways of being. I’m interested in exploring how Translation Studies might help us negotiate our relationship to the natural world.”

He has just published a book on this – Eco-Translation: translation and ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene (2017) – and is currently developing a global research network of researchers interested in the paradigm that he’s developing. This is a key aim for the next few years, and he will also be developing networks within the college: “I hope to build a real sense of interdisciplinary connectivity around this. For instance, I know there’s great work being done in Zoology on animal communication systems – bringing a translation perspective to bear on that body of research has huge potential.”

In terms of his dual role within the Centre and the Department of French, he has two key goals for the next few years:

First, he wants to make the contribution of modern languages to society more public. “If I turn on the radio, I hear historians, political scientists, sociologists, English Lit academics being consulted on national issues. When was the last time I heard a professor of French or German or Spanish commenting? I think there’s a terrible mismatch between the knowledge base we have and the public square, and I want to address that.”

Relatedly, his primary focus is “to increase the local, national and international visibility of the Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation. We want to work with the faculty and School, our internal partners and our alumni to ensure that the Centre becomes a landmark for the city and for the whole Trinity community.”
Professor Michael Cronin – Professor of French (1776) and Director of the Trinity Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation
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