

# *“Giving a Sense of History”: Brecht, Rimbaud and Akhmatova in a Northern Irish Context*

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**Abstract:** *Tom Paulin is one of the major Northern Irish poets attempting to communicate a new perspective on contemporary Northern Ireland through the lens of different literary traditions. He chooses translation as a mode of discourse and seizes upon the differences and similarities of Northern Ireland and various European countries. Through the identification with foreign cultures, histories and political conflicts, Paulin challenges established interpretations of the Northern Irish Troubles. This article focuses on Paulin’s versions of poems by Bertold Brecht, Arthur Rimbaud and Anna Akhmatova. It sets out to examine the deconstruction and redefinition of Irish identities through displacement. Taken out of the context of their culture of origin, the poems transformed by Paulin gain new meanings and new relevances against the background of the Northern Irish conflict. Considering Paulin’s versions of German, French and Russian poems, I will explore the role of poetry in a particular historical and cultural environment. In this context, the article is intended to shed light on the question why Paulin feels urged to strive for otherness and “elsewheres” outside Ireland in order to overcome the established political framework of Irish Nationalism and British Unionism.*

Tom Paulin is one of the most important Northern Irish poets who strives for alternative visions of contemporary Northern Ireland. Like Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian, Paulin draws from different literary traditions in order to explore the Northern Irish conflict through displacement and otherness. Choosing translation as a mode of discourse, he engages with poems by a large number of European poets. The most prominent poets whose works form the basis for Paulin’s translations and transformations are Alexander Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Heinrich Heine and Bertolt Brecht. Paulin seizes upon the differences and similarities between Northern Ireland and different European countries in order to challenge traditional interpretations of the Northern Irish Troubles. Referring to foreign cultures, histories and political conflicts, he sets out to

expose the shortcomings of his own cultural environment. As a poet he feels responsible both to art and to society. In his poetic work he intends to “give a sense of history” (Haffenden 1981. 168) in order to promote an understanding of the Northern Irish situation. The three poems discussed here are examples of the different ways in which Paulin engages with the German, French and Russian literary traditions to reinvent Northern Ireland in his own imaginative terms.

Paulin’s poem “The Emigration of the Poets” is based on Brecht’s “Die Auswanderung der Dichter” (trans.: “The Emigration of the Poets”). Although Paulin’s translation is relatively faithful to the German original, it is rather to be regarded as a transformation as it is altered through a play with German and French terms as well as slang. Choosing a poem by Brecht as a source text for “The Emigration of the Poets”, Paulin engages with one of the most controversial German authors, who became famous as a playwright, novelist and poet. Until recently Brecht was accused by certain parts of German society of undermining the state’s authority through the promotion of communist ideas (cf. Knopf 2006. 119). Due to his identification with socialism and his rejection of war, Brecht was subjected to severe repression in Nazi Germany. Regardless of the fact that he was an internationally renowned author, the Nazis started to censor his work and to disturb the performances of his plays as early as 1930. The increasing political tensions pushed Brecht to turn his back on his native country. Like many other writers and artists, he left Germany immediately after the Reichstag fire in February 1933, as it became clear that the Nazis would use the event in order to persecute those who were not in line with their ideology. On the 10th of May Brecht’s books were burned and one day later his whole literary work was banished by the German state. In 1935 he was also deprived of his German citizenship (cf. Midgley 2000. 17f.). As a political dissident Brecht continued to write anti-Nazi literature during his fifteen years of exile. He considered it his mission to comment on the political situation in Germany in order to participate in the anti-fascist struggle. Brecht firmly believed in literature as a subversive tool to expose Germany’s alarming development towards a totalitarian state. Raising an awareness of the exacerbating political situation, he hoped to incite the German population to overthrow the socio-economical system imposed by the Nazi regime (cf. Schwarz 1978. 28).

Brecht’s sense of social and political responsibility might have had some bearing on Paulin’s identification with the German poet. Like Brecht, Paulin intends to achieve with his poetic writing “a kind of freedom which is contemplation and vision” (Haffenden 168). He also considers himself to be a political dissident. As a member of the Protestant community, Paulin feels disaffected from his ethno-religious background and sympathises with the Catholic community: “I had always hated Ulster Unionism very bitterly and supported the Civil Rights movement from the beginning” (Paulin 1984. 16). Pleading for a secular united Ireland, he cherishes the ideal of a Republican state in which all cultural traditions would be guaranteed full expression. Thus, Paulin refuses to accept the status quo in Northern Ireland in the same way as Brecht rejected the repressive

regime in Germany. Paulin's disagreement with Ulster Protestantism turned him into an "internal émigré" in his own community. Being equally critical of the institution of the Catholic Church, Paulin cannot be clearly associated with either community. In Seamus Deane's words he could be described as "neither Irish or British while also being both" (1983. 24). Having spent his childhood in Belfast, Paulin went to live in England, where he regards himself as an immigrant moving between different cultures (cf. Haffenden 17). In Northern Ireland he occupies the position of an outsider because of his rejection of a clear ethno-religious allegiance. In England, however, he does not blend into the local population due to his Northern Irish background. In this way, Paulin remains as much an outcast in his native country as in his chosen "exile". Paulin's "internal" and "external" emigration can be seen as a parallel to Brecht, who felt mentally alienated from the totalitarian regime in Nazi Germany and lived at a geographical distance from his home country for many years. The biographical similarities between himself and the German poet must have encouraged Paulin to engage with Brecht's poetic work.

"Die Auswanderung der Dichter" was written in 1934, one year after Brecht's emigration to Denmark. Translating but maintaining the title of Brecht's work, Paulin draws attention to the two central themes of his poem, which are exile and displacement. In this way, Paulin indirectly alludes to his own "exile" in England and his ideological disaffection with the ethno-religious community in which he was raised. In the German original Brecht conjures up nine poets from different historical periods and different literary traditions. Historically, the condition of exile evokes an association with the intellectual and the poet. In Brecht's poem the understanding of exile bears an ancient and international dimension. Exile is not seen as a punishment for wrongdoing but rather perceived as a proof of virtue and integrity. Through the reference to authors who were subjected to repression and suffered different kinds of "internal" or "external exile", Brecht draws a parallel between himself and the legendary poets. Identifying with the fate of free thinking spirits, he engages with his own exile. Thus, he points out that political and social dissent is not restricted to Nazi Germany but reaches across time and space. Taking Brecht's poem as a basis for "The Emigration of the Poets", Paulin establishes a correlation between himself and the German author as well as the mentioned historical writers. In this way, he ranks himself among the "exiled poets" and sets Northern Ireland into an international context.

In the opening lines of his poem Brecht evokes the ancient Greek poet Homer, the Italian fourteenth-century writer Dante and the two Chinese poets Tu Fu and Li Po, who both lived in the eighth century. Each of the poets experienced deracination and the loss of home. Whereas Homer spent his life as a wandering minstrel, Dante was sent into exile because of his secular political convictions. Tu Fu and Li Po exercised their art travelling through China's war-torn provinces. Due to their condemnation of warfare, both poets were sent into exile and underwent periods of severe poverty and hunger:

Homer hatte kein Heim Und Dante  
 mußte das seine verlassen.  
 Li-Po und Tu-Fu irrten durch  
 Bürgerkriege Die 30 Millionen  
 Menschen verschlangen

(Brecht 1967. 495)

Homer did not have a home and  
 Dante had to leave his.  
 Li-Po and Tu-Fu erred through civil  
 wars which engulfed 30 million  
 human beings

(my translation<sup>1</sup>)

Homer belonged nowhere, and  
 Dante he'd to leave home as for Tu  
 Fu and Li Po they did a flit through  
 the smoke – 30 million were no  
 more in those civil wars

(Paulin 1999. 71)

Through the allusion to poets who were exposed to voluntary or involuntary exile and experienced extreme personal hardships, Brecht gives voice to his feelings about his own situation as an exile. Banned from his native country and separated from his audience, he considered his emigration not only as a geographical but also a spiritual exile (cf. Schwarz, 35). Through his reference to “civil wars” he implicitly hints at the violent seizure of power by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s. With the “30 million engulfed human beings” Brecht anticipates the 70 million deaths of the Second World War and gives voice to his rejection of warfare. Paulin’s opening line “Homer belonged nowhere” reads as an allusion to his political position located “in between” the two ethno-religious communities in Northern Ireland. Suggesting that politically and geographically he does not belong anywhere, he highlights his rank as an outsider. In this way, Paulin underscores that his political ideals lie outside the established framework of British Unionism and Irish Nationalism. Dante’s leaving home reminds us of Paulin’s move to England. Letting Tu Fu and Li Po’s make “a flit through the smoke”, Paulin nods to the two poets’ flight from political violence. On a second narrative level, however, he evokes his own emigration from his home country at a time when it was torn by social unrest. In this way, he self-ironically points at the fact that he left Northern Ireland to live in the country of the coloniser. With the Chinese “civil wars” Paulin enforces his reference to the Northern Irish Troubles and establishes a link between a historical political struggle and a contemporary one. By mentioning the thirty million deaths, he implicitly draws a parallel between the victims of the Chinese wars and the casualties of the Northern Irish conflict. Thus, he sets Northern Ireland into an international framework and hints at the irrationality of warfare regardless of the cause for which it is carried out.

Like most of the poems written during Brecht’s exile, “Die Auswanderung der Dichter” stands out for its free rhyme. Rejecting traditional rhyme schemes, Brecht attempts to create a new language in order to expose new political realities and to engage with the Nazi regime (cf. Knopf 1984. 89). He argues that the use of a regular rhythm would produce an “unpleasantly dreamy mood” interfering with the reader’s rational thinking (1976: 470). Thus, Brecht advocates a poetic style, which provokes thought and does not bypass the reader’s critical analysis. His quest for new ways of expression is taken up by Paulin. Whereas Brecht sets out to create an alternative poetic voice through the rejection of traditional rhythmic patterns, Paulin introduces slang and colloquial terms in order to subvert the established discourse of the Northern Irish Troubles. Like the German poet, Paulin rejects predictable generalisations and formulaic vocabulary, which in Brecht’s words would “glide past the

ear” (Brecht 1976. 469). Using in his poem the colloquial short form “he’d to leave home” and employing the slang term “flit” for a “hurried departure” (cf. Ayto 2003. 286), Paulin works against traditional forms of poetic expression. Being at odds with their native country, both poets search for new languages in which to express their political dissent in a coded way.

In the following lines of his poems Brecht alludes to the ancient Greek poet Euripides and the English writer Shakespeare:

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Dem Euripides drohte man mit<br>Prozessen Und dem sterbenden<br>Shakespeare hielt man den<br>Mund zu. | Euripides was threatened with trials<br>and the dying Shakespeare got his<br>mouth shut. | [...] the high courts tried to stuff<br>Euripides under the floor and even<br>Shakespeare got a gagging order as<br>he lay dying in Stratford |
|---|--|---|

(Brecht 1967. 495)

(my translation)

(Paulin 1999. 71)

Tried for his liberal views, Euripides was sent into exile to Macedonia. Through his reference to the Greek poet’s fate, Brecht seems to allude to the trials which the Nazis conducted against him. In this way, he creates a parallel between himself and Euripides and draws attention to his own escape from Germany. As to silencing Shakespeare, Brecht implicitly hints at the writing ban, which was imposed on him by the German state already before his emigration to Denmark. In Paulin’s version of the poem the reference to Shakespeare could be interpreted as a reference to the British establishment, which tried to suppress dissenting voices during the Troubles. In this context, especially internment without trial and the arrest of innocent people suspected of terrorism spring to mind. Speaking about Euripides’ trial, Paulin uses colloquial language in order to give his lines an ironic tone. “Stuffing Euripides under the floor”, evokes the attempts made by the Greek state to silence the poet. The mentioned “high courts” stand for the abuse of power. Paulin’s allusion to the abusive Greek state authority could be read as a subversive hint at the British government, which used torture and biased methods of policing in order to settle the conflict in Northern Ireland. Considered in a Northern Irish context, the term “gagging order” reminds us of the ban of Gerry Adam’s voice on radio and television in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom from 1988-1994. Alluding to repression carried out by the state against the Catholic community, Paulin gives voice to his criticism of British politics in Northern Ireland.

Referring in the following lines to the French poet François Villon, Brecht turns to another writer, who entered in conflict with the state:

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Den François Villon suchte nicht<br>suchte nicht nur die Muse Sondern<br>auch die Polizei. | François Villon was not only looked<br>for by the Muse but also by the<br>police. | Villon who wrote “Les Pendus” had<br>visits from the Muse and from the<br>Beast – i.e. the police |
|--|---|---|

(Brecht 1967. 495)

(my translation)

(Paulin 1999. 71)

In contrast to the other writers in the poem, Villon was not persecuted by the police because of his poetry but due to his criminal record, which included robbery and manslaughter. For his crimes Villon was condemned to be hanged and strangled. However, he appealed to the Parliament and his sentence was commuted to ten years of banishment from Paris. Mentioning Villon's persecution, Brecht implicitly alludes to the harassment he was exposed to in Nazi Germany. Through the creation of a parallel between himself and the French poet accused of murder, he launches an ironic attack on the German state, suggesting that for the Nazis his literary work represented a crime as serious as manslaughter. In his version of the poem Paulin does not only refer to the French poet but also to one of his most famous poetic works, the "Ballade des Pendus" ("The Ballad of the Hanged Men"). Written while Villon was under the sentence of death, the ballad depicts the poet hanging on the scaffold with his body rotting away. Through the image of death and decay Paulin suggests the foulness of British politics carried out during the Troubles. With the biblical connotation of the word "Beast" he attributes to his lines an apocalyptic overtone. Calling the police "the Beast", Paulin hints at the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which until 2001 was the official police force in Northern Ireland. Consisting almost exclusively of Protestants, the RUC frequently acted in favour of its own community and discriminated against Catholics. With his reference to the biased police force, Paulin alludes to corruption and social inequality. Mentioning "The Ballad of the Hanged Men", he implies that during the Northern Irish conflict the Catholic community was "executed", falling prey to the British establishment.

In the closing lines of his poem Brecht establishes an explicit parallel between himself and the Roman poet Lucretius and the German writer Heinrich Heine. While in ancient Rome Lucretius was branded an enemy of religion due to his secular world views, Heine in nineteenth century Germany was demonised because of his rejection of the existing monarchy:

„Der Geliebte“ genannt ging Lukrez  
in die Verbannung  
So Heine, und so auch floh Brecht  
unter das dänische Strohdach.

(Brecht 1967. 495)

Called the "loved one", Lucretius  
went into banishment as did Heine.  
In the same way  
Brecht fled under the Danish  
thatched roof.

(my translation)

Though at least Lucretius was  
nicknamed "Le bien aimé" and  
slipped away from *Heim* just like  
Heine  
- now watch me here Bertolt Brecht  
I'm a pike shtuck in this Danish  
thatch.

(Paulin 1999. 71)

By mentioning two poets who rejected the established power structures of their time, Brecht draws attention to his own political dissent and his refusal to succumb to the Nazis. Through the reference to Lucretius and Heine's exile, he yet again points at his own emigration. With "Danish Thatch" Brecht evokes the farmhouse with a high thatched roof in which he lived during his exile in Denmark. In his poetry the "thatched

house” occurs as a frequent image for displacement and banishment. The fact that Brecht referred to his Danish residence as “Danish Siberia” (Brecht 2000. 204) expresses his feelings of remoteness and spiritual solitude, which he takes up in “Die Auswanderung der Dichter”. He ends his poem with a direct reference to his emigration to underscore his place among the historically exiled poets. Considered in a broader context, Brecht’s poem can also be interpreted as a hint at the expulsion of the German intelligentsia, which was almost entirely driven out of Germany by the Nazis.

In Paulin’s poem the closing lines stand out due to an unconventional play with different languages. Through the use of foreign vocabulary and slang, Paulin, attempts to add emphasis to the German source text. Calling Lucretius “Le bien aimé” without translating his nickname into English, he creates a link to the Latin as well as the French literary traditions. With his reference to Heine and the use of the German word “Heim” (“home”), Paulin establishes a further connection to Germany. Speaking about Heine and Lucretius, he enforces his parallel between the two poets’ banishment and his own spiritual exile in England. Through the word “shtuck” Paulin imitates the sound of German word and ends his poem on a subversive note. The pike “stuck” in the Danish thatch reminds us of weapons hidden by Irish rebels in the roofs of Irish thatched houses. In this way, Paulin links the German context of Brecht’s poem to Irish history. The slang term “shtuck”, meaning “in great trouble” (Ayto 2003. 241), further reads as an allusion to Brecht’s persistent persecution by the German state. Implying that Brecht was as much hounded by the Nazis as the Irish rebels were by the British Crown, Paulin alludes to state repression in different historical contexts. Letting the speaker of the poem refer to himself as a pike hidden in a thatched roof, Paulin expresses his belief in the revolutionary power of poetry. He suggests that the task of the poet living in a suppressed society is to undermine the existing social order in a hidden way, using his art as a weapon against oppressive power structures. Through the German original and the different literary traditions mentioned in the source text, Paulin establishes a link between foreign histories and political conflicts and the Northern Irish Troubles. Conflating in his poems a number of different cultures and languages, the poet creates a multifaceted image of nomadism and exile. Thus, he employs otherness and displacement as a lens in order to view the Northern Irish situation from an alternative angle.

In his poem “The Rooks” Paulin is inspired by the French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud to explore the consequences of warfare. “The Rooks” is based on Rimbaud’s poem “Les Corbeaux”, which translates as “The Ravens”. Paulin’s transformation of Rimbaud’s title from “The Ravens” to “The Rooks” does not have any underlying symbolic function as in literature the two birds are commonly not distinguished from each other. Due to their habit of eating corpses, the traditional association with rooks and ravens is imminent death. As they thrive on battlefields, the two carrion birds are generally employed as symbols for ill omen (cf. Ferber 2007. 167-168). By naming his poem after a bird embodying death and destruction, Rimbaud creates an apocalyptic atmosphere already in the title. “Les Corbeaux”, written in 1971, refers to the defeat of France in the French-Prussian war. Conceived as a criticism of warfare, the poem belongs to Rimbaud’s early works which bear a political dimension. Following anarchist ideals, Rimbaud rejects religion and the authority of the state. His conception of poetic realism is to “see everything up close, to describe modern life with fearless precision” to expose

every detail of modern society “in order to hasten its destruction” (quoted in Robb 2001. 55-81). As a critic of Napoleon III, Rimbaud writes about the consequences of the very war, which brought the Second Empire to an end. He opens his poem with the images of coldness and destruction and in this way communicates an apocalyptic atmosphere:

Seigneur, quand froide est la prairie,  
Quand, dans les hameaux abattus,  
Les longs angélus se sont tus...  
Sur la nature defleurie  
Faites s'abattre des grands cieux  
Les chers corbeaux délicieux.

(Rimbaud 1972. 36)

Lord, when the prairie is cold, when  
in the worn-out hamlets the long  
Angelus fell silent ...  
Let from the high skies delicious  
dear ravens swooped down on the  
faded nature.

(my translation)

When the ground's as hard as rock  
and the Angelus has gone dead in  
each crushed village  
Lord let the rooks – those great  
clacky birds sweep down from the  
clouds onto fields and ridges

(Paulin 2004. 31)

Rimbaud hints at Christianity by beginning his poem with the word “Lord” and by mentioning the Angelus, a series of prayers traditionally recited in Catholic churches three times a day. Rimbaud’s references, however, might be read as an ironic subversion of religious belief. In the poem, the “Lord” is depicted as powerless: with the long prayers falling silent, he is defencelessly exposed to devastation and ruin. In this way, Rimbaud suggests that neither the Lord nor the prayers have an influence on the political situation. The cold prairie illustrated in the poem reminds us of a battle field and the descending ravens evoke impending death. Rimbaud does not only hint at the dead of the French-Prussian war but also refers to the rigid totalitarian structures of the Second Empire. Rejecting any kind of authority and imposed politics, Rimbaud rebels against the existing civic order in nineteenth-century France. The “delicious dear ravens” have to be considered on two narrative levels. On the one hand they communicate the atmosphere of melancholy favoured by the Parnassian poets, on the other they read as an ironic attack at the Catholic Church, as priests are commonly referred to as “ravens” by French atheists. Thus, Rimbaud does not only voice his rejection of religion but also his opposition to its institutionalisation.

Paulin takes up Rimbaud’s central image of the raven or rook as a foreboder of disaster and gives his poem an equally gloomy atmosphere. The described battlefield with its “crushed villages” points at Northern Ireland during the Troubles. With the “Angelus has gone dead” Paulin alludes to Catholicism and the inability of the Catholic Church to prevent bloodshed in a dispute which many sides perceive to be a religious one. Seen in a broader context, the death of the “Angelus” implies the general absence of religion. In this way, Paulin presents the Northern Irish conflict as a self-interested struggle devoid of religious aims. The ground being “as hard as rock” can be seen as a reference to the uncompromising positions adopted by the two communities perpetuating the conflict. Thus, Paulin illustrates Northern Irish society as fossilised and opposed to change and progress. The mentioned ridges evoke the bare mountains and cliffs of Ireland and suggest emptiness and stagnation. The “great clacky birds”



take on the form of messengers reminding us of the victims of the Troubles. With the symbolism employed Paulin underlines the horrors of warfare and gives voice to his rejection of political violence.

In the second stanza of his poem Rimbaud dwells on the images of war and destruction. Mentioning “ditches” and “holes”, he illustrates the battlefield of the French-Prussian war. Paulin, however, uses the same imagery in order to portray the consequences of the sectarian clashes in Northern Ireland. In his poem the “holes” allude to the craters left by bomb explosions and the “ditches” recall the hiding places of snipers. Rimbaud speaks of cold winds attacking the ravens’ nests in order to hint at instability and political turmoil. Paulin takes up the image used by Rimbaud in his line “the wind’s bashing your nest” to remind us of the harsh winds frequently sweeping over Ireland. At the same time the wind creates an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. In this way, Paulin implicitly points at political upheaval and echoes the mood of public anxiety reigning during the Troubles. In the third stanza of “Les corbeaux” Rimbaud’s allusions to the French-Prussian war become more explicit:

Par milliers, sur les champs de  
France,  
Où dorment des morts d’avant-hier,  
Tournoyez, n’est-ce pas, l’hiver,  
Pour que chaque passant repense!  
Sois donc le crieur du devoir,  
Ô notre funèbre oiseau noir!

(Rimbaud 1972. 36)

In your thousands do swirl on the  
fields of France, where yesterday’s  
dead are asleep so that every passer-  
by remembers them, fly about, it’s  
not winter! Therefore, our mournful  
black bird, be the messenger of duty!

(my translation)

turn in your thousands over the fields  
of France where the recent dead lie  
maimed and broken – in your clattery  
dance our black funeral bird reminds  
us how they bled!

(Paulin 2004. 31)

Through the countless ravens swarming over the deserted battlefields, Rimbaud creates a threatening picture: winter enforces the feeling of coldness and embodies the approaching end of life. The appeal to the birds to “be the messenger of duty” is not to be seen as an incitement to fight against the German oppressors but as a plea to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the war. Thus, Rimbaud uses images of grief and destruction in order to point at the fatal consequences of warfare. With the thousands of birds Rimbaud implies the omnipresence of death and suggests that destruction is looming at every corner. Paulin in his poem uses the French-Prussian war as a prism to engage with the Northern Irish conflict. The “recent dead” that lie “maimed and broken” recall the victims of the Troubles, mutilated by bomb explosions and violent riots. The use of the adjective “broken”, might hint at the psychological and emotional scars suffered by the Northern Irish through the experience of political violence. With the sentence “remind us how they bled” he pleads us to remember the fate of those who fell prey to the Troubles and points at the irrationality of political violence by implying that in a battle there is nothing to be achieved apart from devastation during political conflicts.

Rimbaud finishes his poem on a dark note, alluding to eternal death and the impossibility of a future:

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Mais, saints du ciel, en haut du<br>chêne;   | But, saints of the sky in the top of<br>the oak tree – the lost flagpole in the<br>charmed evening – leave the May<br>warbles for those who are chained<br>by the eternal defeat in the grass in<br>the thicket of the woods, which<br>nobody can escape. | you sky saints in the treetops draped<br>on that dusky mast above paradise<br>lost please let the May songbirds be<br>– for our sake who’re trapped beaten<br>servile unfree in the hawthorn’s<br>green dust. |
| Mât perdu dans le soir charmé,<br>Laissez les fauvettes de mai<br>Pour ceux qu’au fond du bois<br>enchaîne,<br>Dans l’herbe d’ou l’on ne peut fuir,<br>La defaite sans avenir. |   |   |

(Rimbaud 1972. 36)

(my translation)

(Paulin 2004. 31)

In the last stanza of his poem, Rimbaud yet again gives voice to his anarchist ideals. Underscoring his rejection of the Church as well as the state, he expresses his refusal to recognize both authorities as part of the current civic order. He uses the “oak tree” as a symbol for both institutions. Being the largest and strongest of common European trees, it is traditionally employed as a symbol of rootedness and steadfastness (cf. Ferber 143-144). In Rimbaud’s poem, however, the tree is likened to a “lost flagpole”. Described as weak and powerless, the oak tree reads as an allusion to the French state, which failed to defeat the Prussians. In this way, Rimbaud implies that the state, similar to the tree, has lost its strength and its authority. On a second narrative level the oak tree seems to allude to the Church and its receding influence. The home of saints but at the same time lost in time and space, the oak tree embodies the weak position of the institution. Thus, Rimbaud suggests that in a country which had just been ravaged by a bloody battle, the religious establishment is as powerless as the saints in the tree. Rimbaud undermines the authority of the state and the Church and pleads for the destruction of the existing social order and for the creation of a state devoid of repressive power structures. In his closing lines he uses the image of the “May warbles”, which could be interpreted as a prediction of an eternal defeat. The song birds which traditionally embody spring and regeneration take on a negative connotation in Rimbaud’s poem and are associated with the dead: they become as much symbols of death as the ravens. In this way, Rimbaud gives voice to his nihilism and creates a feeling of looming catastrophe.

Like Rimbaud, Paulin ends his poem on a gloomy note. Ironically calling the saints mentioned in Rimbaud’s poem “sky saints”, he suggests that they have lost their connection to earth and reality. Thus, he launches a subversive attack on the Catholic Church and implies that it has failed to be an institution for the living as it did not end the conflict but, on the contrary, contributed to its escalation. By letting the saints hover over a “paradise lost”, Paulin seems to point at the war-torn state of Northern Ireland. In a Northern Irish context, however, the word “paradise” takes on an ironic tone. Paulin alludes to the fact that even before the outbreak of the conflict the region was far from being a faultless place. He subversively implies that Northern Ireland represented a paradise only for one part of the local population: while the Protestant community benefited from unjustified privileges, the Catholic community was suppressed and discriminated against. In the closing lines he returns to the image of social inequality. With “beaten”, “servile” and “unfree” he alludes to the Catholic community, presenting

it as subjugated to the British coloniser. With the “hawthorn” and the colour green, Paulin employs two images which regularly occur in his poetry as symbols for Ireland. Alluding to those how are trapped in the “hawthorn’s green dust”, he refers to the Northern Irish Catholics, who are unfree in their own country. In this way, he communicates his sympathy with the Catholic community and advocates a new social order in which each ethno-religious group can find its free expression. Considering Paulin’s criticism of the Unionist establishment and the Catholic Church, his poem can be read as a plea for a non-sectarian united Ireland shaped by a secular value system, which works against religious prejudice.

Paulin refers to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in order to examine the theme of identity in an international context. Paulin’s “My Name” is based on Akhmatova’s poem “Name”, which was written in 1962. Whereas Akhmatova engages with the creation of her own artistic identity, Paulin sets out to explore the influence of colonial stereotypes on the creation of an Irish identity. In “Name” Akhmatova refers to the fact that she was forced to change her surname in order to become a poet.

When Akhmatova started to compose poetry in her teens, her father objected to her writing. Fearing that her poems would bring shame on him, he insisted that his name would not be associated with his daughter’s art. Consequently, Anna Andreevna Gorenko decided to reinvent herself by adopting the pseudonym Akhmatova, the name of a Tatar princess among her maternal ancestors. The poet Joseph Brodsky regarded her choice of name as her “first poem” (Feinstein 2006. 10). In “Name” Akhmatova plays with the Tatar origins of her pseudonym:

Tatar, thick,

Татарское, дремучее  
Пришло из никуда,  
К любой беде липучее,  
Само оно - беда.

(Akhmatova. 1995.364)

It came from nowhere Sticking to  
every disaster,  
Itself is disaster.

(My translation)

Tatar coarsegrained it came from  
nowhere my name and it sticks aye  
sticks like a burr to any disaster –  
no it is disaster

(Paulin 2004. 16)

By changing her name for professional reasons, Akhmatova elevates her art to a crucial dimension of her identity. In the above mentioned poem, Akhmatova’s name stands for her poetry. Thus, engaging with the origins of her pseudonym, she implies that her identity receives its shape through her art. Suggesting that her name is followed by catastrophe and disaster, Akhmatova refers to the fateful effects which her poetry had on her life. Considering the fact that the poem was written four years before her death, “Name” reads as a retrospective of Akhmatova’s life. With “disaster” Akhmatova hints at the difficulties of being a poet in Soviet Russia. As she refused to put her writing at the service of the state, her poetry was banned for many years under Stalin and she was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers for allegedly “poisoning the

minds of Soviet youth” (Hemschemeyer 1990. 5). The fact that Akhmatova did not cease to compose poetry made her lead a life of risk and anxiety. Under constant state surveillance, she feared to be deported at any time. To see fellow-writers such as Mandelstam die in prison camps did not prevent her from exercising her art. With the allusion to “disaster” in her poem, Akhmatova implies that the urge to write poetry condemned her to an insecure and unstable existence. By establishing a parallel between her name and her lyric work, the poet points at the fact that both her name and her profession as a writer were chosen deliberately.

In his version of the Russian poem Paulin plays with the different connotations of the word “Tatar”. In English “tatar” does not only refer to an ethnic group from Mongolian descent but also to a fierce and terrifying person. With the adjective “coarsegrained” Paulin emphasises the second meaning of the word and implies barbarism and wildness. The poem receives its location in time and space through the employed language. With the line – “it sticks aye sticks like a burr” – he imitates Northern Irish speech and thus sets “My Name” in Northern Ireland. Through the word “burr”, he hints at the harsh sound of the local speech. Referring to the coarse sound of the Northern Irish dialect and playing with the connotations of the word “tatar”, Paulin implies roughness and crudity. With the evoked image of primitivism he echoes Edmund Spenser’s conception of the Irish as a “barbarous nation” devoid of civility (Spenser 1977. 17). In *A View of the State of Ireland*, published in 1633, Spenser describes the Irish as wild, untameable and inferior to the English colonisers. In order to illustrate their cultural “lowliness”, he exposes the uncivilised nature of Irish agricultural practices, marriage costumes and politics. Spenser further argues that in order to civilise the “barbarians” they have to be defeated and forced to obey the English system of common law. Thus, Spenser presents England as the centre of power and civilisation in contrast to Irish wilderness. Based on national stereotypes, Spenser’s opposition between English civilisation and Irish barbarism communicates the condescending view of the Protestant coloniser. Spenser’s concept of the “wild Irishman” subsequently has been dwelled upon by many writers and academics. Seamus Deane argues that English commentators on Irish affairs have consistently established a relationship between civilisation and Protestantism (cf. Deane 1985. 35). He further points out that the discourse of the Northern Irish conflict continues to be dominated by the division between barbarism and civilisation. In this way, Deane suggests that seventeenth-century stereotypes continue to perpetuate a contemporary conflict.

Paulin ironically echoes Spenser’s image of the “Irish barbarian” through the word “tatar”. Establishing a parallel between “tatar” and “my name”, he points to the speaker’s Irish identity. Through the line “it came from nowhere” Paulin suggests that the “name” was not chosen deliberately by the speaker but was imposed on him/her by somebody else. Thus, Paulin alludes to the fact that the Irish were “made” barbarians through the prejudice of the English coloniser. In the sentence “it sticks to any disaster” Paulin alludes to Spenser’s parallel between Irishness and savagery and points at the

negative images evoked by an Irish identity. The closing line “no it is disaster” hints at the stigma attached to Irishness and the impossibility of freeing oneself from established clichés. In this way, Paulin suggests that the Irish are marked as barbarians simply through their nationality. Playing with the image of the “wild Irishmen” promoted by the Protestant coloniser, Paulin expresses his contempt for Ulster Unionism, which he regards as “fundamentally ridiculous” (Haffenden 1981. 158). In *Viewpoints* he argues: “It’s a culture which could have dignity, and it had once – I mean that strain of radical Presbyterianism, free-thinking Presbyterianism, which more or less went underground after 1798” (Haffenden 158). Qualifying Ulster Unionism as an undignified culture, Paulin subverts the clichés furthered by Spenser and presents the coloniser as “barbarian”. Through his ironic closing line Paulin exposes Unionist prejudice and self-righteousness. Turning established stereotypes upsidedown, he suggests that ethno-religious boundaries can only be overcome by a political movement similar to the United Irishmen, in which both communities struggle for a common state. Thus, Paulin pleads for the creation of a national identity outside the established framework of Irish Nationalism and British Unionism. Inspired by Akhmatova’s poem, Paulin suggests that the question of identity and name is as fundamental in a Russian context as it is in a Northern Irish one. In Stalinist Russia Akhmatova’s pseudonym marked her as a political dissident and made her lead a life of oppression. By displaying her artistic identity, her name took on a political dimension. In Northern Ireland, the Catholics were discriminated against due to the stigma attached to their Irish identity. The parallel between Northern Ireland and Stalinist Russia, implies that both countries suffered similar kinds of oppression.

Paulin engages with Brecht, Rimbaud and Akhmatova in order to contemplate Northern Ireland through the lens of German, French and Russian poetry. Through the exploration of foreign cultures and histories, Paulin strives for a geographical and mental distance to come to terms with the Northern Irish situation. Basing “The Emigration of the Poets” on Brecht’s “Die Auswanderung der Dichter”, Paulin refers to Nazi Germany to explore the themes of banishment and alienation. With his allusions to the German poet, he implies that he experienced a comparable form of “internal” and “external” exile. In his poem “The Rooks” Paulin nods to nineteenth-century France to express his criticism of the Unionist establishment and the Catholic Church. Furthermore he translates and transforms Akhmatova’s poem “Name” to engage with the topic of identity and national allegiance. Based on the Russian poet’s quest for an artistic identity, Paulin questions established colonial stereotypes and expresses his sympathy with the Northern Irish Catholic community.

Through a play with difference and perspective Paulin attempts to communicate alternative perspectives on Northern Ireland which are free from absolutes. It is however arguable how far the established correlations between the different poets and the respective national histories are justifiable. In the case of “The Emigration of the Poet”, the parallel between Brecht and Paulin seems to amount to an overstatement. Whereas Brecht was banished, persecuted and stripped of his citizenship, Paulin left Northern

Ireland on his own initiative without being exposed to the repression of a totalitarian state. In contrast to Brecht, who suffered from being expelled from his native country, Paulin seems to feel at home in his chosen “homelessness” between England and Northern Ireland. Paulin’s references to nineteenth-century France and twentieth-century Russia also appear daunting. Considering the fact that the French-Prussian war overthrew the entire power structures of central Europe and that under Stalin millions of people were randomly killed, it can be argued that the created parallels are out of proportion. However, Paulin might have deliberately chosen to magnify in order to make his voice heard and to draw attention to the Northern Irish situation on an international level. Trying to rework traditional power structures through amplification, he pleads for an innovative discourse of the Northern Irish conflict, a discourse which is held in secular and not in sectarian terms.

## Note

- 1 My translations of the poems by Brecht, Rimbaud and Akhmatova quoted in this article are not to be regarded as lyrical translations as they aim at pure accuracy.

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