The Dublin-Moscow Line: Russia and the Poetics of Home in Contemporary Irish Poetry

A Linha Dublin-Moscou: Rússia e a Poética do Lar na Poesia Irlandesa Contemporânea

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Abstract: *This article opens with an overview of the possibilities offered by the influence of Russian literature on Irish poetry. Subsequently, the focus shifts to Durcan's oeuvre and the way in which Russia presents itself as an "elsewhere" which has allowed him to go beyond Ireland's insularity and broaden his perspective. Hence, this study reveals that Durcan's turning to Russia is an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic notion of identity according to which the links between place and self are indissoluble. Instead, it is here proposed that Russia is envisaged as an imaginary homeland where the self can be freed from Anglo-Irish tradition allowing for the shattering of myths regarding the idea of home.*

Keywords: *Russia; Ireland; Paul Durcan; Poetics of Home.*

Resumo: *Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral acerca das possibilidades engendradas pela influência da literatura russa sobre a poesia irlandesa. Em seguida, o foco se volta para a obra de Paul Durcan e a maneira pela qual a Rússia é apresentada como um "outro lugar" que permitiu a Durcan ir além da insularidade irlandesa e ampliar sua perspectiva. Desse modo, este estudo revela que o fato de Durcan voltar-se para a Rússia é uma tentativa de romper com a noção hegemônica de identidade, segundo a qual a relação entre lugar e sujeito é indissolúvel. Destarte, a Rússia é concebida como uma nação imaginária que permite ao sujeito se libertar da tradição anglo-irlandesa, permitindo a destruição de mitos que existem em torno da ideia de lar.*

Palavras-chave: *Rússia; Irlanda; Paul Durcan; Poética do lar.*

In *Invisible Cities*, Kublai Khan quizzes Marco Polo about his obsession with foreign lands, surmising whether it is to "relive your past" or "recover your future". Marco Polo replies: "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have" (Calvino 26). Elsewheres, whether real or imagined, especially if they seem the antithesis of home, offer escape from the threefold burden of nationality, race, and religion Joyce famously identifies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At the same time, they provide the distance which makes possible alternative readings of home. If the traveller's ethnocentric lenses are abandoned, elsewheres can yield the key to

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unravelling the mysteries of home.

In contemporary Irish poetry, Russia is one of the elsewheres which appears with remarkable frequency.[1] The title of this essay is adapted from Paul Durcan's poem "The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line", one of his many poems connecting Ireland and Russia. However, Durcan is not the only writer for whom Russia is a frequent port-of-call. It is a much-visited destination for a host of Irish poets. Its enormous size, its tormented history and literature, seem to yield a negative mirror, to use Calvino's phrase, which encompasses a whole range of readings about Ireland. As an alternative to the Anglo-American tradition, Russian poetry offers invaluable lessons in the situating of self in relation to politics and in the negotiation of art and history. With its dark history of persecution and suppression, it provides a paradigm of how art can deal with political pressures. This essay explores the role of Russia in the spatial poetics of Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Paul Durcan, Michael O'Loughlin, Seamus Deane, Sean Dunne, Paula Meehan, Mebdh McGuckian, and Frank Ormsby; it examines how Russia operates as a parallel elsewhere that enables a re-visioning of home.

On a psychological plane, Russian poetry frees the Irish poet from the English legacy, its lyric irony a liberating change from the Romantic tradition that English poetry is entrenched in. The literary shift is also politically enabling; it yields an alternative bilateral link, sidestepping the crippling colonial relationship with England. Heaney's essay, "The Impact of Translation", asserts that the complacent tenets of British poetry have been disturbed by the courage of Russian literature which, in its defiance of authoritarian censorship, offers precedents as to how poetry can hold its own with politics. He observes that the "modern martyrology" has made British poets "turn their gaze east" and consequently they have to "concede that the locus of greatness is shifting away from their language". Heaney adds that "our sense of the fate and scope of modern Russian poetry has implicitly established a bench at which subsequent work will have to justify itself" (Heaney 38-9). This is a literary declaration of independence through an alliance with a distant power, allaying the anxiety stemming from the historic subservience to English language and literature.

The turning to such a remote and vast country as Russia is also an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic notion of identity which maintains that the links between place and self are indissoluble. Foreign lands and cultures provide alternative routes to home, while the play with distance and perspective throws received ideas of nation and self into disarray, engendering new views free from absolutes. Terence Brown speculates that the interest in translation is "a sign of the degree to which in contemporary Ireland inherited definitions of national life, of social origins and expectations, fail to account for much individual and collective experience"("Translating Ireland" 138). The choice of Russia as Other, its landlocked mass the antithesis of the small insular shape of Ireland, springs as much from the interest in political parallels as from the geographic and psychological distance it offers from both England and Ireland. The centre is destabilized in the process and the frontier becomes a key to criticizing and understanding home.

Heaney is one of the many contemporary Irish poets who has shifted his gaze eastwards. Torn between the competing calls of artistic commitment and the political events demanding of him a more overt political voice, he looks to the East European and Russian writers for examples of how art can deal with political pressures. Examining the responses of these writers to the violence of history, he observes how each poet achieves release in the moment when the tongue, Heaney's figure for poetic imagination, constrained by either its guilt in the face of the unspeakable or totalitarian policing, affirms its creative powers in lyrical

completion. These poets provide exemplars for "the kinds of pressure which poets from Northern Ireland are subject to": they are models of how "to be true to the negative nature of the evidence and at the same time to show an affirming flame, the need to be both socially responsible and creatively free" (*The Redress of Poetry* 193).

Heaney relates an incident in Chekhov's life which seems insignificant but which he amplifies as the pivotal point of his argument. Following Chekhov's journey to the penal colony of Sakhalin to record the living conditions of the prisoners, Heaney scrutinizes his dilemma as both a doctor and writer. For Heaney, Chekhov's opting to go on this Siberian trip is "a debt to medicine" a peremptory call of social conscience, as well as an "exorcism of the slave's blood in him and an actual encompassing of psychic and artistic freedom". Chekhov, in the hinterland of suffering, is torn between allegiance to his art and the demands of social commitment. On the first night on the island, in a spontaneous moment of pure enjoyment, he empties the bottle of cognac his friends have given him as a parting gift. In this gesture, Heaney discerns an image of the poet "appeased; justified and unabashed by the suffering which surrounds him because unflinchingly responsible to it" (*The Government of the Tongue* xvii).

The incident is recast in poetic form in "Chekhov in Sakhalin", one of the many poems in Station Island arbitrating the tension between the self-justifying rapture of lyric art and the call for social and political responsibility. Chekhov smashes the empty bottle on the stones and the breaking glass "rang as clearly as the convicts' chains" and "like the burden of his freedom // To try for the right tone – not tract, not thesis / And walk away from floggings" (*Station Island* 19). Chekhov's moment of release is overshadowed by his social conscience. This episode illuminates an incident Heaney recounts at the beginning of the essay. Driving with his singer-friend David Hammond to a recording, Heaney is halted by explosions and sirens. Dismayed that another atrocity has occurred, they turn back, their decision dictated by an acknowledgement of art's impotence in the face of suffering. Art retreats in the face of atrocity. Chekhov's "impulse to elevate truth above beauty, to rebuke the sovereign claims which art would make for itself", is compared to Hammond's "refusal to sing" and exercise "his free gift in the presence of the unfree and hurt" (*The Government of the Tongue* xviii).

In Heaney's view, Chekhov presents a contrast to Mandelstam who stands for "the efficacy of song itself, an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave" (*The Government of the Tongue*, xx). Refusing to succumb to the demand for odes lauding Stalin and Stalinist schemes, Mandelstam is not distracted by the voice of social responsibility either, as Chekhov is. His only obligation is to his art and to the poem as aural architectonics, the harmony of sounds cohering like a good building, providing the blueprint for the ideal society. For Heaney, Mandelstam's reading of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* as an organic effort delighting in the creative energies of words seems more attractive than Eliot's more ecclesiastical interpretation, which sees Dante as endeavoring to encompass the theological structure and thought of the Church (Eliot 205-230). Mandelstam confirms what Heaney has always held sacrosanct, that poetry is "a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony" (*The Redress of Poetry* 193). The poetic interplay of the senses is endorsed by Mandelstam as a blueprint for the perfect government and society. This accords with Heaney's synaesthetic approach to language and his faith in "soundings", corroborating his tenet that poetry's coherence-making, while not in itself a political gesture, is healing and the appeasement achieved can be an example to politics. Mandelstam's use of architectural terms is also echoed in Heaney's work. He envisions the "bastion of sensation" (*Seeing Things* 56) as the building bricks of the poem and society, and memory "as a building or a city" (*Seeing Things* 75). In another sonnet, Heaney asks: "How habitable is perfected form?" (*Seeing Things* 78), again testing the coherence of art against the

dismembering forces of history in architectural terms. "M." directly invokes Mandelstam and his auditory poetics. The "deaf phonetician" can tell the sounds by placing his hand over "the dome of a speaker's skull" (*The Spirit Level* 57), suggesting that poetic language can transcend sensory and linguistic boundaries:

> A globe stops spinning. I set my palm
> On a counter cold as permafrost
> And imagine axle-hum and the steadfast
> Russian of Osip Mandelstam (*The Spirit Level* 57).

The synaesthesia reflects not only the sensuous immediacy of language but a deeper level of contact, with sounds becoming corporeal and connecting with the sense of touch, bypassing hearing altogether. The sensuous impact of Mandelstam's voice is such that it becomes tactile and steadies the poetic world.

Tom Paulin also draws upon the Russian experience in the negotiation between art and politics. Bernard O'Donoghue remarks: "Throughout his work, concern for social responsibility and answerability occurs side by side with assertions of the artistic freedom of the individual" (O'Donoghue 175). Paulin castigates critics and writers for isolating poetry from the vortex of history. In his essay "Political Verse", he complains of the New Critics' treatment of poems as if they exist in a timeless vacuum or soundproof museum, adding that this would not be possible in totalitarian societies where "history is an inescapable condition". In such places, he asserts, the poet has "a responsibility both to art and society" (*Writing to the Moment* 103). Russian politics and poetry become for him a space in which Irish concerns can be threshed out. Committed to a cosmopolitan outlook for Ireland, an eclectic vision which accommodates differences, Paulin's political design is more palpable than Heaney's. Mandelstam, in Paulin's work, is a more assertive presence. Where Heaney is cautious to remove the political context from his poem on Mandelstam, Paulin stages Mandelstam's dissenting voice against the pressures of the totalitarian regime.

"The Other Voice" dramatizes the struggle between the claims of art and those of politics. The poem is a polyphonic orchestration of competing voices. It begins in England, where Paulin bids a "gowned schoolmaster farewell" (*The Strange Museum* 42). The gesture is symbolic of Paulin's attitude to the English strain of his inheritance. His only response to the schoolmaster's "We must meet again" is to "pretend to pretend", stressing the ambivalence of his feeling towards the representative of the English tradition. Then follows a ferry crossing back to Ireland, where he has visions of Trotsky and Raskolnikov, all figures of social and political activism. The succeeding poems commute between ideologies and states, interspersed with images of revolution and military suppression, oscillating between political commitment and the pull of art which serves "Only the pure circle of itself" (*The Strange Museum* 45). Paulin's vision combats not only authoritarian suppression but also the totalizing power of myth and history, warning against "The fear of necessity / In an absolute narrative" (*The Strange Museum* 44). Mandelstam has the final word in the poem:

> In Buddhist Moscow,
> In lamp-eyed St. Petersburg,
> Mandelstam is walking

> Through the terrible night.
> His lips are moving
> In a lyric ripple (*The Strange Museum* 46).

Mandelstam recounts that he left "Because I could never stay/ In the same room as Trostsky", counterpointing the earlier image of Trotsky reading Homer (*The Strange Museum* 46). The writer who believes in the absolute devotion to his art refuses to recognize that there is common ground between politics and literature. So, Paulin does not appear to endorse Mandelstam's disengagement from history. The latter's clinching words, echoing the close of Auden's famous elegy for Yeats, are quite the opposite of what Paulin does consciously in his own poetry:

> In the great dome of art
> (It was this we longed for
> In our Petropolis)
> I am free of history.
>
> Beyond dust and rhetoric,
> In the meadows of the spirit
> I kiss the Word (*The Strange Museum* 47).

The longing to be free of history is also an impulse informing Derek Mahon's work. But in contrast to Mahon, who resists political engagement, believing that "a good poem is a paradigm of good politics" (*Twentieth-Century Studies* 93), Paulin entrusts poetry with political viewpoints. Mandelstam's aesthetic stance attracts him but is resisted with a politically committed counterpoint. If Paulin inclines towards the political engage, there is also a pull in the other direction, towards the anti-political or the "condition of supremely unillusioned quietism" which he detects in many Russian and East European poets and also in Derek Mahon.[2] Mahon's chosen ground is almost free from the orbit of history, or at least gives the illusion of being so. Thus, the Russian verses and white nights are seductive to one who gravitates towards bleak and sparsely populated landscapes. Russia, in Derek Mahon's work, is less a lesson in dealing with history than a place where history may be erased. The journey or sojourn in an existential topography enacts a drama of physical and metaphysical displacement. "Night Drive" is an exercise in disengagement rather than a penetration of the Russian landscape which is "forever frozen in the past" (*Selected Poems* 187). It is an example of the car journey poem that Terence Brown identifies as a recurrent motif in poetry from the North (*Ireland's Literature* 215):

> St. Petersburg ceased to exist,
> disclosed that it had never been;
> asked only peace now, as if one
> long mad should find the knot untied
> and watch, recovered and clear-eyed,
> a fixed idea in its Byzantine,
> varnished and adamantine shrine
> spin off from the whirling mind
> and vanish, leaving not a trace behind (*Poems* 187).

The drive is an exit from history, a hasty one at that. With only one full pause, the two sentences evade any political encounter and any confrontation with the historical sufferings of the city or with Dostoevsky's shades.

In contrast, Seamus Deane's obsession with the past has drawn him into the vortex of Russian history and literature. "History Lessons" juxtaposes a suspended moment with the historical flux. A classroom lesson on Russian history is interwoven with scenes from a provincial childhood in Ireland. The montage sequence of historical violence cuts to the silent image of the boy running across football pitches "stretched into wrinkles by the frost" (*Selected Poems* 40) until what seems a picture of innocence and timeless provinciality becomes implicated in the historical process. What the poem suggests, without making any direct statement about the nature of history and violence, is that the quiet provinces of Ireland are not innured to the historical process, that history itself is not a finished product, immutable and separate from the present. Like the poem, it is not a finished artifact, but participates in the evolving present. History alters our perceptions of the present and future and is at the same time transmuted by the act of reading.

The poem begins with an Irish winter but elides into the Russian winter which spelt disaster for the campaigns of Napoleon and Hitler: "A Napoleonic, then a Hitlerian dream / Aborted" (*Selected Poems* 40). The evocative images of "the ambered silence near Pavlovsk" and the "smoking gold of icons at Zagorsk" import Russia into the classroom in Ireland, or rather, transport Ireland to Russia. The demonstrative in "this coal-smoke / Stealing over frost" (*Selected Poems* 40) dislocates the sense of place, so that Russia and Ireland are conflated, preparing us for the interweaving of two narratives, Russian history and Irish politics in the last two stanzas. In the process, Deane also criticizes those conservative elements confining Irish history to Grattan. His journey, real or imaginary, revises the limits of interpretation, highlighting the encounter between the lyric moment and historical contingency. The lesson has expanded in the poem from Russian history to the turbulent present, incorporating the process of individual growth. As in Derek Mahon's "The Snow Party" and Paul Durcan's "The Kilfenora Teaboy", local violence is not dwelt upon but alluded to, unlike the earlier scenes of Russian destruction. This bespeaks the inability to confront home atrocities directly. Thus, the reading of the present is deflected through a historical detour. The last image has, to use a description Deane applies to Mahon's poetry, "incorporated history's force into ... stillness" (*Celtic Revivals* 19). But it is a stillness that is unsettling in its juxtaposition of different histories and geographies.

In "Osip Mandelstam" , Deane, like Heaney and Paulin, venerates the Russian poet as an icon of poetic faith. He is the "Son of Petropolis" who can

> Tell us how to turn into the flesh,
> To lie in the lice-red shirt
> On the bank of the Styx and wait
> For the gossamer of Paradise
> To spider in our dirt-filled eyes (*Selected Poems* 193).

Like Heaney, Deane identifies Mandelstam with the mandate of poetry, its absolute voice overriding the claims of the state. But Deane's poem, though invoking Mandelstam in Biblical terms, sees him first as part of the historical process and then transcending it through art. Thus, poetry has the power to redeem and to liberate from the machinery of history. In accepting the redemptive function of poetry, Deane credits language with the ability to

encompass fragmentation and create order out of chaos. What Deane shares with Heaney and Paulin (all founders of the *Field Day Company*) is a vision of a reconciled Ireland. Poetry is a way of bringing about its realization. However, the aesthetic reconciliation is sometimes too easily achieved and removed from intractable political realities. Heaney, Deane, and even Paulin resort to allusive representations that displace the conflict and violence from the socio-political field into an imaginary framework; their Russian poems, like Heaney's bog poems, can be regarded as a means of aestheticizing politics rather than engaging with it fully.

Michael O'Loughlin's "Mandelstam" plunges the reader into the traumatized mind of Mandelstam, or one whose mental state resembles his. The nightmare of interrogation and torture stalks the sleep of Mandelstam: he is haunted by the "rattle and bark" of the "steel-tongued interrogator" (*Stalingrad* 20). This youthful poem, though flawed, reveals a dislocation of place which dominates O'Loughlin's work. Mandelstam appears again in "Two Women", "stumbling along through the frozen mud" in exile, with "nothing but the broken harp of himself / On the forced march of days ..." (*Atlantic Blues* 21). The lyric captures the moment of exile and its excruciating pain attended only by the palliative faith in poetry. O'Loughlin's youthful imagination enshrines Mandelstam as an exemplary figure of displacement, an alternative to Joyce's version of exile, which new Dubliners like O'Loughlin repudiate. Joyce, who first proved such a liberating influence for those contending with the ghost of Yeats, has now superseded Yeats as an inhibiting father. Ferdia Mac Anna asserts that *Ulysses* is "a nightmare from which Dublin is trying to wake." (Mac Anna 22) In an attempt to elude the nets of Joyce's example, writers like O'Loughlin turn to foreign exemplars. These Russian figures also allow an access to poetic intensity which Joycean humour deflates or excludes.

O'Loughlin's *Stalingrad* is a guide to the Russian literary landscape, but the underlying text is Ireland. His choice of the obsolete name for Volgograd places us back in the era of the purges and internal exiles. The result is a heightening of historical dislocation, and O'Loughlin's attitude to Ireland is reflected, or rather, refracted through a Russian lens. The tormented personae in the poems, with the shadow of persecution and exile over them, let O'Loughlin voice his vehement feelings about home without having recourse to the Joycean mode or becoming too confessional. O'Loughlin is part of the Dublin generation which includes Dermot Bolger and Paula Meehan, taking on the problems of unemployment, emigration, drugs, alcoholism, depression, and breakdown in the housing estates. In *Stalingrad*, he confronts a landscape resembling that of a Dostoevskian novel. Seeing it through a Russian perspective lends an enabling emotional distance and also, via a process of making strange, draws attention to the hidden Ireland missing from the official narrative. The title poem is a scathing indictment of home:

> I was born to the stink of whiskey and failure
> And the scattered corpse of the real.
> This is my childhood and country:
> The cynical knowing smile
> Plastered onto ignorance
> Ideals untarnished and deadly
> Because never translated to action
> And everywhere
> The sick glorification of failure (*Stalingrad* 9).

The frustration and disillusionment with a society which refuses to confront the desolation of reality, and the disjunction between individual experience and the ideological narrative enforced by the State are recurrent themes in *Stalingrad*.

Seán Dunne is another poet from Southern Ireland with a strong Russian presence in his work. His posthumous *Time and the Island* contains two free translations of Anna Akhmatova, and a sequence entitled "Russians in Paris" about the refugees from the Communist Revolution who, though settled and naturalized, still preserve the emblems of the past and home. Beginning with a scene of exodus from Red Russia, the sequence tracks the ways in which the community preserves its identity in exile and ends with the burial of either Nijinsky or Nureyev, with the cortege moving "Across the steppes of time in snow" (Dunne 36). The penultimate poem refers to Mandelstam and Akhmatova; Dunne finds their posters in a shop on the Mont de Ste Geneviève:

> One died in a camp, his poems kept
> By a wife who absorbed them like food.
> Another knew how poems could draw
> Black Marias at the heart of night.
> I know her poems like prayers,
> Their words clustered berries
> On a branch to which I hold.
> When I ask the poster's price
> I am told: *She is not for sale* (*Time and the Island* 36).

The Black Marias which transported Stalin's victims to detention are a regular feature in Akhmatova's life and poems. Mandelstam and Akhmatova are found next to each other, icons as much for the Russians as for Dunne. For Dunne, the Russian poets make access possible to an intensity which the urbane well-made British poem keeps at bay. His own love poems, written with a knowledge of impending death, contain incandescent touches fused with echoes caught from reading Akhmatova's poems "like prayers" (*Time and the Island* 36).

In "The Impact of Translation", Heaney notes that the modern martyrology which Russian poetry embodies is attractive and instructive to poets who feel displaced from the English tradition. For Irish poets like Dunne and O'Loughlin, the pull is even stronger because of their problematic relationship to the English tradition and the sense of not-being-at-home in their own society. O'Loughlin's "A Letter to Marina Tsetaeva" venerates the tragic Russian poet, feeling her presence in the heart of Dublin, in "white rooms looking out on the city" (*Another Nation* 34). This canonization of the Russian women poets and the adoption of them as tutelary spirits point to the apparent absence in Irish poetry of literary mothers who could offset the many daunting forefathers like Yeats and Joyce.

This absence of female precursors in the Irish canon has been an inhibiting factor for many contemporary Irish women poets. Eavan Boland, recounting her struggle as a woman poet in *Object Lessons*, deplores the silencing of Irish women in both Irish history and literature. Paula Meehan also laments that there were "very few women's voices" to follow when she started writing (Dorgan 268). Both have turned abroad for guidance and have named Akhmatova as one of the major influences on their poetry. For Boland, she shows the way to express personal and national grief. Of Akhmatova's "Requiem", written for her only son, one of the countless victims of Stalin's reign of terror, Boland remarks: "What is compelling and instructive is the connection it makes between her womanhood and her sense of a nation as a

community of grief. The country she wishes to belong to, to be commemorated by is the one revealed to her by her suffering" (Boland 149). Boland's poems, like "Mire Eire" and "Anna Liffey", show traces of Akhmatova in the confident first-person narrative and strong lyric voice that refer the poetry back not only to the personal life but outward to sociopolitical contexts.

Paula Meehan's intensely personal lyrics, with their undertow of crisis, reveal a faith in the healing power of poetry, a strength learned no doubt from Akmatova's own ordeal as a poet. The folktale structures and motifs which inform Meehan's lyric narratives are also a result of a close reading of the Russian. "Train to Dublin" acknowledges the debt to the Russian literary mother: "I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap, / sob like a child, thumb in my mouth. She sings me lullabies, eases into the dark" Meehan 33). In both poets, the figure of the poet as witness to the sufferings of her people owes a great deal to Akhmatova's example.

The Russian factor helps shape the poetic voice in Boland and Meehan, enabling it to find its own pitch. In the poems of Medbh McGuckian, the presences of Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam are tangible in a controversial manner. The dense symbolic layers of her texts, the highly wrought syntax and grammar, and the dream-like flow of image and metaphors render them resistant to paraphrase, and have caused debate as to whether they are "an alluring sort of nonsense" (Simmons 27), or constitute a coherent body of work which challenges the hegemonic assumptions about poetry. Difficulties with her work are compounded by the fact that some poems are welded out of extracts from the works of the Russian poets, with little modification and acknowledgement. Here, McGuckian treads dangerously close to plagiarism. Three poems in particular challenge the conventional ideas of poetic influence and translation. "Harem Trousers" contains borrowings from Tsvetaeva, while "The Dream-Language of Fergus" and "The Aisling Hat" thread together quotations from Mandelstam. Her sources are mostly essays and correspondences; she translates the prose into poetry and in the process questions not only the nature of translation but the boundary between literary genres.

Clair Wills defends McGuckian against the charges of plagiarism; she views the Russian presence as part of "the growing Europeanisation of her work, consonant with the political hopes for the North in Europe" and asserts that the borrowed lines from Mandelstam's essays in "The Dream-Language of Fergus", "Conversation about Dante", "About the Nature of the Word", and "Notes About Poetry" assume altered significance as Mandelstam's discussion of the nature of Dante's classicism, or the "European dimension of the Russian language, are placed in the service of thoughts about a child's language acquisition, and the history of language in Ireland" (Wills 385). Wills argues that McGuckian's cryptic montage explores a mother-child relationship and at the same time conducts an exchange with Mandelstam. Her exhaustive analysis relies heavily on personal interviews and a systematic paraphrase of the images. For readers who do not have the benefit of McGuckian's divulgations, there is little to direct them to Mandelstam. The phrases from Mandelstam are stitched together into a hypnotic montage which does not yield any clear narrative. One can argue that McGuckian transplants Mandelstam into an Irish and feminine context and affirms a similar faith in the ineffable potency of the lyric, but it is hard to see any dialogue taking place without an acknowledgement of the Russian poet. Furthermore, the lines "Your tongue has spent the night / In its dim sack as the shape of your foot / In its cave" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 57) are too opaque to suggest the language-learning of the poet's child, unless the narrative context of the poem is revealed.

"The Aisling Hat", composed entirely of phrases from Mandelstam's essays, is McGuckian's elegy for her father. However, nothing in the poem points to her father, except the elegiac tone and the funeral imagery, especially in stanza thirty-eight: "His body is unwashed, his beard / wild, his fingernails broken, / his ears deaf from the silence" (*Captain Lavender* 48). The images are from Mandelstam's "Journey to Armenia", describing the imprisoned King Arshak: his body "is unwashed and his beard has run wild"; the "fingernails of the king are broken" and his "ears have grown stupid from the silence ..." (Mandelstam 48). Shane Murphy asserts that McGuckian is portraying "her father as a political prisoner (King Arshak, Osip Mandelstam, Republican hungerstriker)" (Murphy 124). As with Wills's readings of McGuckian, his interpretation is based on a personal interview with McGuckian. Like Wills, Murphy credits her poems with a social or political agenda, which far from being obvious, is buried or so well-disguised in the texts that they require McGuckian's own revelations to unearth them. Without reference to the poetic intentions, the imposed readings can hardly stand up to scrutiny, as there is insufficient narrative coherence or contextual details to support them. Wills and Murphy assert that the virtue of McGuckian's work lies in its resistance to paraphrase, but paraphrasing is what they do, extracting rather unconvincing narratives from the kaleidoscopic images, installing a schema where all is intended to be flux.

If we accept that an established poet like McGuckian is not committing plagiarism but is engaged in a deliberate move to redefine the hegemonic ideas of writing and literary influence and inheritance, then the Russian presence constitutes a challenge to the native tradition, offering a more experimental approach in poetic procedure as well as new ways of self-definition. The Russian import can be seen as part of McGuckian's project of "repudiating the anglicisation of myself" (Wilson 6), it is a strategy to distance herself from her colonial inheritance. Her radical departure from the mode of empiricism and restraint dominant in English poetry signals a desire to dismantle dominant stereotypes and discourse, and to re-vision identity, both personal and political.

In Paul Durcan's poetry, Russia plays a more blatantly subversive role as a negative elsewhere targeting the myths in which Ireland wraps itself. Russia is an Other which challenges Ireland's myths of itself. If Ireland is to find itself, as Durcan's obsessive naming of foreign places suggests, the inherited notions of identity and place have to be overthrown in an encounter with the Other. Russia, along with a litany of other places, disrupts the illusion of continuity that home embodies, loosening the hold of the centre for freer explorations of what it means to be Irish. Durcan's grafting of Russian elements onto the Irish experience and vice versa celebrates hybridity and plurality, opposing notions of monolithic identity. Russian-bound poems like "The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line" emphasize that home is not a given, but improvised, made, and remade by where one is or is not. The poem gives up the certainty of home for a mobile view of place and identity: "I turn the key on Dublin / And dropping the key in the Seine ...". (*A Snail in my Prime* 238) Intimations of home surface in that which is foreign, underlining a cosmopolitan view:

> Out of the arms of my daughters
> As we tramp up and down Europe
> Having become the migrants that we are –
> Barbarians on the Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow line.
> From the shores of the Aran Islands
> To the foothills the far side of the Caucasus
> These are the terraced streets

> That smell of home to us.
> May I be an actual nobody –
> In Mayo serving burgers (*A Snail in My Prime* 238).

The poem shuttles between home and abroad, self and Other, a procedure defying linear logic. In a cinema in Tbilisi, he watches a documentary by Dermot Bolger, and on the way back to Moscow, Anthony Cronin, another Irish poet, chides his leaps of imagination: "Paul, will you please stop / Saying that things are like things. / Either things are – or they are not' (*A Snail in My Prime* 239). Cronin is described as "the first Dubliner in my life", bringing the poem back to the reality of home. His words underscore Durcan's metamorphic and nomadic imagination that always sees one place in terms of another and translates the self into an Other. He appropriates the migrant condition as metaphor for his contrary state and announces his credo: "May I lack always a consistent vision of the universe / When I am saying my poems" (*A Snail in My Prime* 238). In seeing Ireland as an elsewhere, in mixing the familiar and the strange, Durcan stretches the journey to the extreme reaches and touches the other side of home.

Unlike poets from the North like Heaney and Paulin, who draw on the Russian poets' confrontation with politics, Durcan does not dwell on the Russia of the purges. Rather, Russia is envisaged as an imaginary homeland where the self can be free of Irish fetters and the imprisoning myths of home can shattered. But his Russia is a very real place as well, by virtue of his family history. Besides the relationship with his lover Svetka, Durcan's Russian connection goes back to the time of Maud Gonne. He reveals that his great-grandmother Margaret Wilson was a half-sister of Gonne. To save her father's reputation, Gonne arranged for Wilson to work in Russia and convinced her to part with her daughter Eileen for a year. Wilson never returned and spent the next fifty-six years in Russia and Estonia. In "Estonian Farewell", as Durcan's train departs from Tallinn station, he sees his mother "stumbling through the trees to keep up with the train" and crying "My son, my son, why has thou forsaken me?" (*Going Home to Russia* 82) Durcan sheds light on the poem, revealing that "in 1983, finding myself on a journey to the Soviet Union, I did have these frissons from time to time, in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, and in Leningrad, of being somehow in the presence of my great-grandmother" (Dalton 24). The uncanniness of it all was revealed when Durcan later discovered that his great-grandmother had actually spent her last decades in Estonia near Tallinn. But while Durcan's Russian visions and affiliations are rooted in biographical fact, they are also political gambits to unsettle the myth of Mother Ireland. Depicting the mother/aisling as exiled in Russia unravels the ideas of roots and origins projected on the woman figure. It is also in Russia, more precisely Tblisi, the Georgian capital associated with Stalin, that Durcan declares "love is greater than God or Marx. / A woman's love made the world. / I believe in woman" (*Going Home to Russia* 86).

Women and love are Durcan's antidote to the life-denying strictures of State and Church. As in Muldoon and McGuckian, erotic and sexual energies are used to undermine orthodox positions. "The Woman with the Keys to Stalin's House" is linked to the heart of Irish nationalism by the reference to an earlier poem, "The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage". In both poems, the act of love subverts the symbols of nationalist ideology by being performed on hallowed grounds: in the first poem close to the house of Padraic Pearse, the martyr of Irish nationalism; in the second poem, near the birthplace of Stalin. Durcan's use of spontaneous carnal love to undermine the authority of life-denying ideology also occurs in "Making Love outside Áras an Uachtaráin", where sex is staged outside the mansion of the

President of the Irish Republic. Exulting in the act of transgression, the speaker imagines de Valera bearing down on them in punishment. This vision springs not from guilt or fear, but is part of the fantasy act of subversion. In "The Woman with the Keys to Stalin's House", the speaker has an amorous fling with Galya who "has lived all her life in the town of Gori / Under the statue of Stalin". Stalin is the de Valera figure, but a much lesser threat: "And Jahweh – that old Stalin on his plinth – / Had failed to cow us" (*Going Home to Russia* 88). The poem is an assertion of sexual independence against State-sanctioned morality, subverting the puritan creed with its argument for promiscuity and hybridity: "Can there be anyone in the world who has not got mixed feelings?/ Should there be anyone in the world who has not got mixed feelings?" (*Going Home to Russia* 89).

In "Going Home to Russia", Ireland is pre-glasnost Russia, in the grips of oppression and censorship, while Russia is an Ireland of possibility, the place where an Irishman can feel at home. Directing his salvoes against the intolerance of an Ireland dominated by nationalist and Catholic pieties, the Ireland before the thaw of the late 1980s, Durcan casts himself as "an Irish dissident", "Who knows that in Ireland scarcely anybody is free / To work or to have a home or to read or write" (*Going Home to Russia* 65). The permeability of places is paralleled by a linguistic interchangeability. Durcan juxtaposes foreign terms with the English vernacular, arousing the recognition of the familiar in the foreign, thereby erasing borders and undermining the idea of a coherent native language. Languages, like the places in his poetry, are mobile; they shift and sometimes find themselves in the same carriage:

> We Irish have had our bellyful of *blat*
> And *blarney*, more than our share
> Of the *nomenklature* of Church and Party,
> The *nachalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia (*Going Home to Russia* 65).

The poem typically mixes the carnal and the spiritual. It enacts Durcan's journey to reunion with his lover, Svetka, through the eroticizing of landscape: the pilot wanting to make love not rape; the plane's descent is described as a "prolonged kiss". The poem also triggers a sense of homecoming through the discovery of a pristine Ireland in Russia: "To live again with nature as before I lived / In Ireland before all the trees were cut down" (*Going Home to Russia* 69). Durcan's union with his Russian partner is a marriage of Ireland and Russia; he comes home to a place that is both Ireland and Russia. The birth in the poem is real as well as metaphorical: "nine months in your belly, I can smell your soul; / Your two heads are smiling – not one but both of them – / Isn't it good, Svetka, good, that I have come home?" The advent of a child coincides with Durcan's renewal through his discovery of a foreign mother.

Russia is also the place where Durcan revisits the past, and comes to terms with his father, who when alive was inaccessible and incomprehensible. A judge and a public figure whose allegiance to the nationalist ideology alienated his son, he is now seen in the image of the son. The transgressive mode characteristic of Durcan gives way to reconciliation and acceptance of what the father represents. The father becomes like the son, "a man in search of his Russia" (*Going Home to Russia* 95). The idea of Russia yields the therapeutic distance necessary to realize that father and son are indissolubly intertwined like lovers. This triggers a homecoming which enacts the union of father and son through the reconciling metaphor of Russia:

> O Russian Knight at the Crossroads!
> If you turn to the right, you will lose your horse;
> To the left, your head;
> If you go straight on, your life.
> If you were me – which you are –
> Knight at the Crossroads,
> You would go home to Russia this very night (*Going Home to Russia* 95).

Facing death and the unknown, the father is converted to the son's faith, becoming a knight in quest of his Russia which, in Durcan's cartography, is *terra incognita* and also an Other holding out the promise of salvation and home. Father and son become one on the same quest, the reconciliation taking place in an alien and neutral place which also feels like home.

Durcan's eclectic vision entails a willingness to discard the metaphysics of origins and to embark on forays which expand the possibilities of being Irish. "Peredelkino: at the Grave of Pasternak" is a literary pilgrimage which leaves behind the cultural patrimony binding language and place into a cohesive entity. Durcan stands at the grave with "A blue corduroy cap on my head / That I purchased in a West of Ireland village" (*Going Home to Russia* 77). The provenance of the cap is specified so that it becomes a symbol of nationalist Irishness. Thus, the hegemonic idea of origins is placed in a foreign context, and home values are found wanting. Catholic pieties are skewered in the comparison with Pasternak's atheist humanism:

> At the heart of atheism God is at home;
> Man locked into history opening the door.
> Closer to God is the atheist opening the door
> Than the churchman closing the door in your face (*Going Home to Russia* 78).

Durcan's dialogue with the Russian poet also includes a movement homewards. Gazing at Pasternak's grave initiates an imagined return to the grave of Art O'Leary at midnight. Art O'Leary was the husband of Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill, and his death is mourned in her famous elegy. Durcan recalls how the contemporary Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Broke – broke a bottle of red wine" over the grave (*Going Home to Russia* 79). The complementary scene signals a literary exchange which reveals the ability of Durcan and Yevtushenko to be at home in each other's territory. This prepares for the scene of déjà vu, when Durcan glimpses his dead mother peering at him from the Russian crowd, the mother "who went to Russia when I was three / And who stayed in Moscow" (*Going Home to Russia* 79). Home and abroad become conflated. Again the ground of maternity is rendered suspect. That which is alien yields intimations of home, thus refuting the idea of origins. This realization prompts a subversive act proclaiming a rejection of ancestral myths:

> That night we make love in an apartment beside
> The Cultural Palace of the Ball-Bearing Plant;
> Next morning under Shevchenko's statue by the
> Moskva River
> I set fire to my cap (*Going Home to Russia* 80).

The burning of the cap of Irish provenance symbolizes Durcan's rejection of the West of Ireland as the hallowed ground of Irish identity.

Russia also serves as a pivotal point to dislodge nationalist constructions of identity in Frank Ormsby's "Geography".[3] The poem uses a strategy of disorientation for a lesson in

reorientation. Merging the geographies of Ireland and Russia in a pluralist vision that accommodates differences without effacing them, Ormsby suggests a procedure for the overcoming of the partitionism that has divided the island into warring factions. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc is implicitly an argument for heterogeneity and plurality: "Once there was Russian, once a reliable earth / as fixed as the Urals. Now soviets groaning apart". (*The Ghost Train* 14) Sergei Krikalyov, a Soviet astronaut returning from a space mission "past his splash-down date", finds himself displaced and 'half-homeless', having to revise his map of the 'once-known world' (*The Ghost Train* 14). What was once a coherent whole is now dispersed into autonomous entities, and the nationalist myth of origin and unity is shattered. Ormsby engineers the return so that the astronaut enters the Irish atmosphere and is engaged in an imaginary exchange with Manus McClafferty in Donegal. He acquires an Irish voice and has the "world restored / by the weight of local accent". The dialogue enables an encounter in which self and Other interact as each changes the other's perception:

> Already he has become
> (Crockallyove, Kirklove, Crackallyev) a shifting shape
> in border folklore, the stranger and guest star
> in yarns of the Blue Stack Mountains, extravagant tales
> from the Atlantic seaboard. And Georgia is Donegal
> and Donegal the coast of Estonia, where he too re-shapes
> his place on the planet, the geography of home (*The Ghost Train* 14).

The imagined assimilation of the shape-shifting Russian astronaut into local mythology erases the distinction between the native and the foreign, debunking any idea of home and Irish cultural and linguistic identities as stable givens. The interaction between Donegal, deemed by nationalists to be a stronghold of Irishness, Estonia, and Georgia removes the provincial self-regard responsible for partitionism. Re-visioning Russia and Ireland from aerial perspectives, Ormsby discerns a conversation of parts which implies harmony without enforcing a master narrative. Significantly, he does not mention the big cities but focusses on the provinces in order to emphasize the accommodation of diversity in an inclusive vision. What results is neither Russia nor Ireland, but both. Russia appears again in Ormsby's "Travelling". The grandmother figure is portrayed as an inveterate traveller who has done her travelling "in her head" (*A Northern Spring* 1). A hallowed repository of Irish folklore and culture, she is displaced far from home:

> She died in her Russian phase,
> in the hard winter of 1913,
> sunk between pillows as though
> she struggled through some pass in the Caucasus –
> insisting on local colour to the last stroke,
> ink-stains amok on the next snowy pages (*A Northern Spring* 1).

The itinerant figure refuses any steadfast identity and is receptive to "local colour". Shedding ethnocentric lens, and encountering the Other in its alterity, the traveller is changed by what she sees. Russia is the final testing ground, where the determination not to be confined to one position triumphs.

In his essay on translation, Terence Brown observes that "in recent Irish poetry it is possible to discern a tendency for poets to write as if Ireland itself had been translated into somewhere else, had begun to participate in the life of the other, the stranger, to write indeed of Ireland as if it were an Eastern European state or a cosmopolitan city of the mind" (Brown 2). Russia is a negative elsewhere which, by enabling Ireland to perceive its Otherness and imagine itself as something Other, helps to break the insular mould of perception. For Heaney, Paulin, and Deane, it offers exemplars like Mandelstam and Pasternak who provide models of how poetry can handle the claims of politics, albeit the parallels are sometimes overworked and the confrontation with political realities is compromised by an aestheticization of politics. For O'Loughlin and Mahon, it puts into perspective the relationship between self and home, enabling them to come to terms with the crushing sense of isolation. As tutelary influences in the work of women poets like Boland, Meehan, and McGuckian, the Russian poets help fill the lacunae in the Irish canon, enabling them to dismantle patriarchal structures which exclude the woman's voice. Traversing the border, visible and invisible, between Russia and Ireland, Durcan undercuts the conventional ideas of home, revealing that boundaries are artificial constructs which prevent alternative ways of looking at self and home. For Durcan and Ormsby, Russia is part of the strategy of making Ireland stranger to herself and opening her up to other worlds. The dialogic or polyphonic play of places, geographies, and languages in their poetry marks a new phase in Irish poetry, in which Ireland goes off like Marco Polo to encounter the reality of the Other.

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Notes

1 Other elsewheres include Iceland, England, the Americas, Australia and more recently, Japan in Michael Longley's *The Weather in Japan* and Julie O'Callaghan's *No Can Do.* The need for another place to hold up the mirror to home conforms to Joyce's dictum that "the shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead".

2 In Paulin, *Writing to the Moment*, p.137. 15.

3 In a personal interview I had with him on 25 November 2000, Ormsby revealed that his Russian poems preceded a literary trip to Russia in the company of Tom Paulin, Thomas McCarthy, and others.

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