"Nachalstvo", "Blat" and "Blarney" Paul Durcan Between Ireland and Russia

"Nachalstvo", "Blat" e "Blarney" Paul Durcan entre a Irlanda e a Russia

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Abstract: *In Durcan's poetic work, a strong interest in Russian history and culture can be observed. The poet's fascination with Russia manifests itself predominantly in his poetry collection* Going Home to Russia *published in 1987. The poems featuring in the book geographically cover the entire Soviet Union, reaching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the White to the Black Sea, while at the same time moving back and forwards between Ireland and Russia. One of the most striking features of Durcan's volume is his outspokenness, "a slap in the face of public taste", using the title the Russian cubofuturists' manifesto published at the beginning of the twentieth century. Durcan's satirical approach to contemporary Irish society could be seen as of post-modern nature as established societal values become undermined through mockery and sarcasm.*

Keywords: *Russia; ostranenie; Soviet Union; Ireland.*

Resumo: *Pode ser observado um forte interesse pela história e cultura russas na obra poética de Durcan. O fascínio do poeta pela Rússia se manifesta predominantemente em sua coletânea de poesia* Going Home to Russia*, publicada em 1987. Os poemas apresentados no livro cobrem geograficamente toda a União Soviética, do Báltico ao Pacífico e do Mar Branco ao Mar Negro, ao mesmo tempo, indo e voltando entre a Irlanda e a Rússia. Uma das características mais marcantes do volume de Durcan é sua franqueza, "um tapa na cara do gosto do público", como no título do manifesto dos cubofuturistas russos publicado no início do século XX. A abordagem satírica de Durcan à sociedade irlandesa contemporânea pode ser vista como de natureza pós-moderna, à medida que os valores sociais estabelecidos são minados por zombaria e sarcasmo.*

Palavras-chave: *Rússia; ostranenie; União Soviética; Irlanda.*

I met a poet standing in the rush-hour
My name, he said as he swayed, is Paul Durcan
And I'm going home to Russia. I wished him
A safe journey and hoped he wouldn't be delayed
Ned Power

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Introduction: "Becoming the Other"

Paul Durcan is one of the most popular contemporary Irish poets, whose books "sell in tens of thousands to those who normally regard a poet without rhyme as an emperor without clothes" (O'Driscoll 149). David Wheatley even goes so far as to call Durcan a "national shaman in the life of the Irish Republic" (311). The importance of the poet's work became highlighted by Mary Robinson's choice to quote from his poem "Backside to the Wind" in her inauguration speech as president of Ireland (311). According to Yoenmini Kim, Durcan is a member of the so-called "blank generation" (381), which grew up in Ireland between the 1960s and the 1980s. Richard Kearney describes the poets belonging to this generation as a "new breed of urbanized and internationalized youth" (321). Durcan's international outlook on the world runs through his poetry and shows itself particularly in his interest in "the other". He explains: "I always try to become the other […]. The writer has to become the other. It's a truism to say that only by becoming the other, do you become yourself" (Knowles 22). John Knowles rightly observes that the poet's "ability to absorb himself in places and events" is central to his writing (22).

In Durcan's poetic work, a strong interest in Russian history and culture can be observed. The poet's fascination with Russia manifests itself predominantly in his poetry collection *Going Home to Russia* published in 1987. The poems featuring in the book geographically cover the entire Soviet Union, reaching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the White to the Black Sea, while at the same time moving back and forwards between Ireland and Russia. Dennis T. Hannan describes *Going Home to Russia* as "a fine eclectic collection" containing the "usual battered bishops", "pounded politicians" and "satirized citizens" (104). One of the most striking features of Durcan's volume is his outspokenness, "a slap in the face of public taste", using the title the Russian cubofuturists' manifesto published at the beginning of the twentieth century (Burliuk, Khlebnikov, Kurchenykh, Mayakovsky). Durcan's satirical approach to contemporary Irish society could be seen as of post-modern nature as established societal values become undermined through mockery and sarcasm. Gerald Dawe underlines that it would be wrong to suggest that Durcan merely documents Irish life with "a provocative laugh", as this very "laugh" bears a "chastening image" allowing to "cope with life" (15). In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan targets among others politics, the Church as well as taboos such as sex. Poem titles such as "Priest Accused of not Wearing Condom", or "Diarrhoea Attack at Party Headquarters in Leningrad" reflect his ironic and at the same time humorous style.

Among contemporary Irish poets, Durcan is not the only one for whom Russia is "a frequent port-of-call" (Cheng Boey 353). Writers from Northern Ireland such as Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Dean, Frank Ormbsy and Medbh McGuckian, repeatedly refer to tsarist Russia or the Stalinist area in order to create a subversive connection between the two historical periods of political violence and the Northern Irish conflict. Thus, they attempt to use Russian history as a lens in order to draw attention to the shortcomings of their own society. Authors from the Republic of Ireland who show an interest in Russia are among others Derek Mahon, Michael O'Loughlin, Paul Mehan and Séan Dunne. In contrast to their northern counterparts, they follow a different discourse in their references to Russian history, literature and culture. In a number of cases, they establish a parallel between the suffering of the Irish under the coloniser and the fate of the Russian people oppressed by their numerous authoritarian rulers. Cheng Boey argues that in their poetry "Russia operates as a parallel elsewhere that enables a re-visioning of home" (353). Due to its "enormous size, its

tormented history and literature", the country functions as "a negative mirror" encompassing "a whole range of readings about Ireland" (353).

It is, however, difficult to compare Durcan with his northern and southern Irish fellow-writers as the poet seems to have a strong emotional connection with the country, which on the one hand springs from his personal history and on the other from his empathy with Soviet life. Durcan notes: "Growing up in Ireland in the fifties was a bit like living behind an iron curtain, with the Catholic hierarchy taking the place of the Kremlin, just another group of old men controlling the country. There was a fierce atmosphere of control, orthodoxy, conformity at all costs" (Kelly 297). Furthermore, the poet's interest in Russia is rooted in biographical fact. Apart from his relationship with his Russian lover Svetka (Cheng Boey 366), Durcan reveals that his great-grandmother emigrated to the Soviet Union, spending the last fifty-six years of her life in Russia and Estonia (Dalton 23). While Svetka is the main character in Durcan's poems "Going Home to Russia" (Durcan 65-69) and "The Red Arrow" (70-71), the poet's family ties are in the centre of "Estonian Farewell" (82).

Durcan undertook his first visit to Russia in 1983, an experience which did not leave him unimpressed. From his first journey on, he establishes a mental link between Ireland and the Soviet Union. Describing his trip from Moscow to the Armenian capital Erevan in an interview, Durcan notes:

> you could see out of the portholes of the aircraft the great holy pilgrimage mountain Ararat and when I looked out that porthole what I was seeing was Croagh Patrick, the Reek, the very same shape, the very same texture, personality, contour, everything, and the land of the Bible, underneath the Mountain Ararat, and Noah's Ark… (Dalton 23)

In his statement, the poet creates a connection between Ireland's holy mountain Croagh Patrick, informally called the Reek, and Armenia's sacred Mount Ararat, which is said to be the resting place of Noah's Ark. Glorifying both mountains, Durcan establishes a link between them through their comparable physical shape and their similar "personality". Throughout his poetry collection *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan establishes multiple parallels between Ireland and the Soviet Union. Cheng Boey maintains that in Durcan's poems, Russia plays a "blatantly subversive role as a negative elsewhere targeting the myth in which Ireland wraps itself" (365). Russia and its satellite states thus serve the poet as a lens in order to reconsider his home country from a mentally and geographically detached angle.

1. *Druzhniki, gribniki, apparatchiki*: Playing with the Russian language

A salient feature of Durcan's poetics in *Going Home to Russia* is the inclusion of Russian terms. In this way, the poet does not only attribute to his poems an exotic dimension, he also transposes the reader into the reality of Soviet life. In this context, Cheng Boey notes that through the juxtaposition of foreign terms with the English vernacular, Durcan arouses "the recognition of the familiar in the foreign, thereby erasing borders and undermining the idea of a coherent native language" (367). A play with transliterated Russian vocabulary can be detected in "Going Home to Russia", the opening poem of the eponymous collection. The speaker of the poem is about to board the "Havana-Moscow Illushin 62" in order to join his lover Svetka in the Russian capital. Stepping into the plane, he muses:

> We Irish had our bellyful of *blat*
> and *blarney*, more than our share
> Of the *nomenklatura* of Church and Party,
> The *nachalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia.
> Going down the airbridge, I slow my step,
> Savouring the moment of liberation. (65)

The subversive link created between Irish and Soviet society can only be grasped by the reader who is able to understand the meaning of the Russian words *blat, nomenklatura, nachalstvo* and the Irish vernacular term *blarney*. The term blat contains several layers of meaning. In the first sense, it signifies cronyism and favoritism (Oshegov, Shvedova 48). In colloquial Russian, it refers to influential connections allowing one to achieve professional promotion or to obtain unavailable goods. "Having *blat*" was central to Soviet life as society was marked by hierarchy and corruption, as well as a constant shortage of all kinds of merchandise. The term *nachalstvo* in the context of the Soviet Union, refers to the almighty bureaucracy. Against the background of contemporary Ireland, the *nachalstvo* of the "legal and medical mafia" reads as a hint at the reactionary politics concerning abortion and contraception promoted by the Irish state (Goodby 2, 59). Through this allusion, the poet points at the restriction of personal freedom of choice. The Hiberno-English word "blarney" means flattering and misleading talk and can also be translated as "nonsense" (Sinclair 137). In *Going Home to Russia*, "blarney" hints at the double standards of the politicians, the representatives of the Church and the medical system concerning the issue of birth control.

Nomenklatura refers to the elite of the communist party (Hosking 447) and the immutable political hierarchy of the time. In a larger sense, it alludes to the privileges which the leading party members managed to ensure for themselves and their families. Applying the term to "Church" and "Party", Durcan suggests that the central role, which the Party played in Soviet Russia, was taken over in Ireland by the Catholic Church. Thus, he juxtaposes two institutions, which stand for the monopolization of power. In line with Victor Shklovsky's concept of "ostranenie", meaning "defamiliarisation", Russia functions in the poem as a prism through which Durcan is able to present Ireland from an unconventional angle. According to Shklovsky, the only way of rendering things visible through art is to "make them strange" in order to capture the observer's attention (12). Through his reference to the Soviet Union, Durcan represents Ireland as a country dominated by an authoritarian social structure. When the speaker of the poem walks down the air bridge, he is "savouring the moment of liberation". This suggests that Russia is seen as a place of "liberty" in contrast to Ireland, which is presented as a repressive country.

A further play with Russian terms can be observed in "Zina in Murmansk". The poem opens up with the following lines:

> As a schoolgirl, Zina
> Was all that a Pioneer instructor
> Could dream of, and her parents –
> *Druzhniki, gribniki,*
> Peace-keepers, mushroom-hunters –
> Were proud of her as a mushroom,
> Their own miniscule red mushroom.
> (84)

In the poem, politics and the personal become intertwined when Durcan describes Zina's parents as *druzhniki* and *gribniki*. The Russian word *druzhniki* is an imprecise transliteration of *druzhinniki*. The poet might have opted for this slight phonetic modification in order to maintain the internal rhyme with *gribniki*. Durcan translates *druzhniki* and *gribniki* in the subsequent line with "peace-keepers" and "mushroom-hunters" without providing further explanations to the non-initiated reader. Letting his audience wonder about the meaning of the terms, Durcan creates an alienating effect. In the Soviet Union, *druzhinniki* were members of the community policing groups, who acted as a vigilante force for law and order on the urban streets. These groups were implemented by Nikita Khrushchev with the intention to make all soviet citizens participate in public life (Service 360-361). In this way, Durcan hints at the political convictions of Zina's parents which seem to be in line with Soviet ideology.

The term *gribniki*, on the contrary, refers to individuals who enjoy looking for mushrooms in their spare time. Through *gribniki*, Durcan alludes to a popular Russian leisure activity. A further Russian concept which Durcan integrates into the opening lines of his poem is the "pioneer instructor", that is a leader of a mass youth organization of the Soviet Union. The fact that Zina's parents see their daughter as "their own minuscule red mushroom" suggests that she is the perfect product of the soviet educational system. Through the reference to the colour red, the colour of the Communist flag, Durcan yet again establishes a connection between politics and Zina's parents' private life, as their daughter is described as a "red" mushroom conforming to soviet ideology.

The use of Russian terms can also be observed in the poem "The Puppet Theatre in Akopyan Street". In the attic of the theatre, the speaker meets a girl with whom he wishes to start a love affair. The unimpressed girl, however, merely asks him: "Why don't you write a poem about *Glasnost*?" (72). The term *glasnost* [transparency] was used in 1986 by Mikhail Gorbachev as a political slogan together with *perestroika* [restructuring] in order to promote the reorganization and democratization of the Communist party. Both notions are associated with the reformation and later with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In Durcan's poem, the speaker seems, however, keener on inviting the girl to his flat than writing poetry about *glasnost*. This attitude might not only be rooted in the speaker's interest in the women but also motivated by his belief in the soviet system. Perceiving it as an advanced form of society, he is not in favour of its reformation. The speaker's concern about the decline of the Soviet Union is also manifested in the following lines:

> Downstairs on the sidewalk there are *apparatchiks* in blue jeans
> Smoking Marlborough and drinking Pepsi through straws,
> Conspiring to open a McDonald's Hamburger Restaurant in Gorki (72-72)

In the context of the Soviet Union, the term *apparatchik* [agent of the apparatus] refers to a full-time professional functionary of the Soviet Party, defined by James Billington as "a man not of grand plans but of a hundred carefully executed details" (455). In Durcan's poem, the *apparatchiks*, traditionally faithful to the state, show rebellious behavior by wearing western blues jeans, consuming American goods – such as Pepsi and Marlborough – and by planning to open a McDonald's. In this way, Durcan evokes American cultural and economic imperialism, which the speaker observes with suspicion. The speaker's critical attitude shows in the two closing lines of the poem: "Nobody can perceive me praying to Lenin/ Have mercy on me! Power to the children" (73). Letting the speaker praise Lenin and his ideology, Durcan ends his poem with a clear rejection of the capitalist world.

2. From intellectuals to polar bears: stereotypic representations of Russia and the Russians

In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan plays with a certain number of stereotypes, creating a mythologized image of Russia. The scholar Svetlana Korolyova has explored the representation of Russia in British popular imagination, singling out a number of key images of the country and its population. Korolyova lists the following images depicting Russia as a "'submarginal' mighty, partly monstrous space"; "a pseudo-Christian, primitive 'aboriginal' country"; "a powerful, despotic, barbaric state-aggressor", "a country of mechanical work and total control" inhabited by a "religious, mentally and spiritually endowed people"; and, last but not least, as "a world of eternal turmoil, unpredictable events and unlimited possibilities of self-understanding".[1] In Durcan's poetry collection, however, the images of Russia pointed out by Korolyova are either mocked, distorted or entirely absent.

In *Going Home to Russia*, the Soviet Union is not illustrated as a frightening "monstrous" country but rather as an enigmatic place of evasion. The Russian cities evoked in the collection reach from Moscow to Leningrad, from Ryazan to Murmansk and from Novosibirsk to Gorki. Further exotic locations situated in the former republics of the Soviet Union are the Estonian capital Tallinn and the Uzbek city Samarkand. Apart from that, Durcan refers to three Georgian cities: Tbilisi, the capital of the country, Batumi – a popular seaside resort – as well as Gori, the town in which Stalin was born. Juxtaposing places which are located on opposite ends of the Soviet Union, Durcan creates the sensation of an enormous space. For most of the Western readers these cities are either entirely unknown or represent mysterious places in a remote part of the world.

The image of Russia as a "primitive 'aboriginal country'", as mentioned by Korolyova, becomes undermined in "Zina in Murmansk". Zina, the central character of the poem, is a bright girl who is expected to study at the Literary Institute in Moscow, or the Art College in Leningrad. However, instead of embarking on a career in one of the two metropolises, she chooses to go to live in Murmansk, a distant city in the artic region. Her move to the Far North is motivated by her desire to find herself an "old-fashioned man". Zina's dreamed-of-husband is described as

> A Mesolithic Man of the twentieth century
> Who would fish for shark in the White Sea
> And hunt polar bear in the tundra,
> Who would live with her in a log cabin. (84)

At first glance, the girl's ideal of masculinity seems to reflect the values of an "aboriginal Russia". The longed for "Mesolithic sexuality" (85) stands in contrast to the "pasteurized blood" (85) of Muscovite men. The archetype of a rustic man becomes, however, subverted in the following lines, in which the reader learns that the ideal fishing and bear-hunting spouse should also be able to recite Russian literature. Seen in the context of the Soviet Union, Zina's choice is unsurprising for a member of the Russian intelligentsia. Individuals perceiving themselves as belonging to the intellectual elite refused to live in the main cities, which were well provided with goods and food. Their decision was often seen as absurd by their surroundings, as the great majority of the population was keen on obtaining the permission to live in one of the two cities. The members of the intelligentsia, however, saw the striving for material benefit as petty bourgeois and therefore opted for remote places. Their romantic and

optimistic worldview and their striving for a better world made them reject capitalist materialism.

Apart from Zina's intellectual convictions, another cultural factor might have influenced her ideal of manliness. In the late 60s and 70s, Ernest Hemingway functioned as a role model and was considered as a sex symbol in the milieu of the Russian intelligentsia. His portrait in a coarse wool sweater could be found in many homes of intellectuals, often simply printed out in black and white. The archetype associated with this image was the man who was at the same time rough and refined, a fighter and a philosopher, "a sophisticated primitive", as Durcan puts it in his poem "Tbilisi Cabaret (Ortachala Belle with a Fan)" (86). However, Zina is unable to find this kind of "specimen of manhood" (84) in Murmansk and "goes nightly to her bunk/ As to her beloved grave (85)". Thus, Durcan ironically suggests that the ideal of an "aboriginal" Russia only existed in the mind of idealistic intellectuals.

The image of a "powerful, barbaric state-aggressor" pointed out by Korolyova also appears in an ironic light in Durcan's collection. In "Going Home to Russia", the speaker is the only passenger to board on the flight to Moscow. Stepping into the plane, he is pitied by the immigration officer:

> I am the solitary passenger joining the flight at Shannon;
> The Irish immigration officer eyes me mournfully;
> "Good luck", he mutters as if to say "you will need it";
> He does not know that I am versed in luck
>
> "Good luck", he mutters as if to a hostage or convict,
> Not knowing that he is speaking to an Irish dissident
> Who knows that in Ireland scarcely anybody is free
> To work or to have a home or to read and write.
> (65)

Whereas the Irish immigration officer sees Russia as a place of hostages or convicts, the speaker of the poem perceives the country as a place of liberation. With the terms "hostage" and "convict", Durcan alludes to labour camps and the Stalinist era, and thus plays with the image of a "barbaric state". However, the sensation of terror and fear is not at all felt by the speaker, who is excited and enthusiastic about his trip to Russia.

Instead of the Soviet Union, Ireland becomes the target of criticism. The speaker's statement that in Ireland not everybody is allowed to work and have a place to live most likely refers to the discrimination of the Catholic community in the north of the island, where uneven distribution of council houses and work places among the Northern Irish population generated social unrest and gave rise to the Northern Irish conflict in the late 1960s (Dixon 69). Evoking the fact that in Ireland not everybody is allowed to read or the write, Durcan refers to Irish history and the so-called Penal Laws established by the British Government in the seventeenth century. According to these laws, Catholics were refused education (Ross 159). Alluding to social inequality in Irish society, Durcan implicitly praises communist ideology, according to which everybody would enjoy free education, have a place to live and be granted work (Service 94). In so doing, the poet glorifies Soviet Russia as a superior form of society.

The image of Russia as "a country of mechanical work and total control" as mentioned by Korolyova does not feature in Durcan's poetry collection. Neither does the image of the Russian population as "religious people". This might be due to the fact that

Durcan is particularly interested in the Soviet Union, a country in which religion was officially non-existent. In the poem "Red Square – The Hours", Durcan suggests that the belief in soviet doctrine has replaced the faith in God. The second stanza of his poem opens with the misleading line "God lives in Red Square". As the poem goes on, the reader understands, that people come to Red Square not to go to church but to pray at Lenin's grave. This suggests that Lenin has turned into the God of the Soviet Union:

> The people are yearning to pray
> At the tomb of the Son of Man;
> At the heart of the heartless world
> Pilgrims from Uzbekistan
> And Siberia at the tomb of Lenin. (97)

In "Tbilisi Cabaret (Ortachala Belle with a Fan)", Durcan ironically juxtaposes religion and communist ideology, as well as the sacred and the profane. Addressing his lover, the speaker of the poems states "that love is greater than God and Marx" (86). In this way, Durcan mockingly puts God and Marx on the same level. Later on in the poem, he establishes an ironic connection between Palm Sunday and the May Day celebrations on Red Square.

> I am a citizen of a secret society.
> Although God was born in Russia
> It is a well-kept secret.
> In Red Square on Palm Sunday
> I looked through Brezhnev's eyes
> When they were open, and I saw
> Ten thousand secrets wave up at me.
> "Jesus, it's May Day!" he said to me.
> (87)

The fact that God's birth in Russia is a "well-kept secret" suggests that nobody is actually aware of God's existence. General Secretary Brezhnev's exclamation: "Jesus, it's May Day", reads as a comic subversion of soviet discourse, in which references to religion were entirely absent. The ten thousand waving secrets refer to the crowd, which traditionally gathered on Red Square for the Celebrations of the 1st of May, the International Worker's Day. Replacing Palm Sunday, a Christian feast, with the celebration of laborers, Durcan once again hints at the absence of religion.

In the subsequent stanza, the spiritual and the material become interlinked:

> Our Lady of Red Square, pray for us.
> Midnight Trolleybus, pray for us.
> Ice cream in Winter, pray for us.
> Queen of the Moscow Metro, pray for us.
> Leaf of Gold, pray for us.
> Hammer and Sickle, pray for us.
> Mother of Intercourse, pray for us.
> Taxi at Dawn, pray for us. (87)

In this stanza, materiality becomes elevated over religion, as the speaker is praying to profane things such as ice cream, the metro, the trolleybus, the taxi and the Soviet flag. With the "Lady of Red Square", Durcan creates a kind of communist Mother Mary, which finds her echo in the "Mother of Intercourse". In this way, the material and the carnal replace religious belief.

Even if the image of Russians as religious people is absent in Durcan's poetry, the stereotype of the Russian population as "mentally and spiritually endowed" individuals can be found. Music and literature seem to play an important role for a number of characters occurring *in Going Home to Russia*. In "The Red Arrow", Svetka proposes to the speaker – with whom she has just made love on a train between Moscow and Leningrad – to meet up the next day in the Melodiya Music store in the Classical Russian Music section. She specifies: "Look me up under Rachmaniov" (70). In "Zina in Murmansk", Zina dreams of a man who would "read to her from Tolstoy,/ Valentin Rasputin and Chingitz Aitmatov" (84).

The last stereotype mentioned by Korolyova is the one of "another world", a world of "eternal turmoil, unpredictable events and unlimited possibilities of self-understanding". In the context of *Going Home to Russia*, it could be argued that Durcan presents Russia as a counter-image of Ireland, offering "alternative routes to home" (Cheng Boey 254). In this sense, Russia provides for the poet "unlimited possibilities of self-understanding" as through a glance to Russia, he is exploring his own cultural environment. Durcan uses images of nature in order to create a contrast between Ireland and Russia. To the poet, Russia is the epitome of natural life. Returning to nature seems to enable the speaker to find himself.

In "Going Home to Russia", he states while speaking to his lover:

> To sleep with you on the settee and to become with you
> Creatures of the forest, crushed deer;
> […]
> To live again with nature as before I lived
> In Ireland before all the trees were cut down;
> Again collecting leaves in Moscow in October,
> Closer to you than I am to myself. (69)

The reference to "Ireland before all trees were cut down" is an allusion to the period preceding the colonization of the island, as at their arrival, the colonizers cut down a substantial amount of trees in order to cultivate the land. In this way, Durcan presents Ireland as disfigured place lacking in nature. However, contrary to Ireland, Russia abounds with nature. "Creatures of the forest" are mentioned next to autumn leaves, "riverbanks", "mountain huts" and "Russian plains". A further recurrent natural image Durcan uses to depict Russia is snow. In "Going Home to Russia", the speaker looks out of his plane window and discovers Russia "under a mantle of snow and forest" (67). In "The Red Arrow", Svetka tells her lover "I am the little horse in your snow" (70), in "Estonian Farewell" the reader is confronted with the "snowed-up port of Tallinn" (82), and in "Red Square – the Hours" courting couples walk "at midnight in the snow" (98). With the reference to snow, Durcan enforces the exotic image of Russia.

3. Durcan and his Russian counterparts

In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan alludes to a number of soviet writers. Seamus Heaney points out the importance of Russian poetry for the contemporary western poet, observing that "our

sense of the fate and scope of modern Russian poetry has implicitly established a bench mark at which subsequent work will have to justify itself" (38-39). In his poetry collection, Durcan engages with the fate of Ossip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, while making passing references to Anna Akhmatova, Lev Tolstoi, Chingiz Aitmatov and Tisian Tabidze.

In "The Fairy Tale of 1937", Durcan explores Mandelstam's deportation. The poem opens up with the following lines "Once upon a time there a czar called S/ Who was afeard of a wanderer called M" (90). Throughout the poem, Durcan does not name Mandelstam explicitly but merely refers to him with "M." The reader familiar with Russian history and literature understands that Mandelstam is in the centre of the poem. In *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, the two autobiographical books which Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote about the Stalinist time, she refers to her husband with the letter "M". Furthermore, Heaney wrote a famous poem about Mandelstam, which he entitled "M" The initial S in Durcan's poem is a clear reference to Stalin. Mandelstam was born in 1891 and died in 1938 at the age of 47 in the Gulag. He was deported for a satirical poem he had written on Stalin. Until today the exact time and manner of his death are unknown (Brown 7). Throughout his life, Mandelstam refused to write in line with the requirements of Socialist realism.

In the second stanza of his poem, Durcan engages with state control and censorship:

> The Czar S became so afeard of M
> That he issued a ukase
> That every telephone in Russia was to be shot dead (90).

The lines hint at Mandelstam's persecution by the secret police and allude to the fact that in the 1930s, the poet's writing was entirely banned by the state (Gary Haris ix).

In the following lines, Durcan refers to Mandelstam's deportation:

> So that in 1937 the Czar S had M interned
> And committed to an empty psychiatric hospital
> In a derelict cul-de-sac on the docks,
> Sentencing him to total and solitary confinement forever
> To this day nobody has ever set foot in that house. (90)

The house that nobody "sets foot" implies an inaccessible place in which Mandelstam's poetry was kept. It alludes to the fact that for years, Mandelstam's work had disappeared as it had been confiscated by the state. The authorities made a great effort to delete Mandelstam's name systematically in order to pretend that the poet had never existed (Service 365). Consequently, over two thirds of his poetry remained officially unavailable to Russian readers for decades (Brown 3).

A further Russian poet having suffered under Stalin mentioned by Durcan is Boris Pasternak. Similarly to Mandelstam, Pasternak was exposed to the repressions of the totalitarian system. While he did not have to fear for his life, he was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and was urged to turn down the Nobel Prize in 1958 (Service 365). Erik Martiny sees Pasternak as Durcan's "poetic father" and "mentor" (98-99). In "Peredelkino: at the Grave of Pasternak", the poet venerates the Russian writer, while at the same time establishing parallels between Ireland and Russia. Contemplating Pasternak's grave, the speaker is mentally transposed to Ireland:

> I am borne back to another railing'd grave
> In Kilcrea in West Cork:
> Lo Arthur Leary, generous, handsome brave.
> Slain in his bloom lies in this humble grave. (78)

Art O'Leary was the husband of the poet Eibhlín Ní Chonaill, who died at a young age due to a feud with the Protestant landowner Abraham Morris. O'Leary refused to sell Morris the horse he had brought back from his service in the Austro-Hungarian army for £5. At the time, the Penal Laws stated that a Catholic was not allowed to own a horse which was worth more than £5. If despite the law he did, he could be forced by a Protestant to sell his more valuable horse at this price. Declining the deal, O'Leary was shot after having been proclaimed an outlaw (Brennan 128-129). The two last lines of the above quotes stanza of "Peredelkino – at the grave of Pasternak" is the epitaph on O'Leary's gravestone, which had been composed by his wife (Cater Hall 101). Creating a parallel between Irish and Russian history, Durcan associates the epitaph with Pasternak:

> Slain in his bloom like you
> Lo Boris Leonidovich,
> Who died for the right to ride a white horse;
> You – generous, handsome, brave. (78)

Through his connection between Pasternak's and O'Leary's grave, Durcan links historic social inequality in Ireland with social injustice under Stalin. While in reality O'Leary, and not Pasternak, "died for the right to ride a white horse", the Russian poet was discriminated by the state for his poetry.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a further soviet poet occurring in *Going Home to Russia*. Durcan refers to Solzhenitsyn in "The Return of Solzhenitsyn" and "The Kindergarten Archipelago". In "The Return of Solzhenitsyn", the speaker of the poem implores the writer to come back: "Alexander Isayevich, for how much longer/ Will we have to wait for you to come home?" (76). Thus, he refers to Solzhenitsyn's exile in the United States due to his outspoken criticism of the Soviet Union and the penal system. The title of the second poem is an allusion to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1971) in which the Russian writer documents the horrors of the concentration camps. Referring Mandelstam, Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn in his collection, Duncan venerates the writers' integrity and their refusal to put their work at the service of the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that in *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan establishes a connection between Ireland and the Soviet Union in order to obtain a fresh view on his home country. According to Shklovsky's theory of "ostranenie", the Irish poet generates an outside perspective with the intention of working against a habitual or "automatic" perception of Ireland (12). In Durcan's poetry, the Soviet Union is either illustrated as an alternative, more advanced form of society, or depicted as an exotic place of evasion full of mystery. In his poetry, Durcan shows a thorough knowledge of the Soviet Union, a country which at times he seems to be glorifying. However, his engagement with the fate of persecuted Russian poets shows his consciousness of the repressive system of the Stalinist era. The parallels which

Durcan establishes between Ireland and Russia throughout his poetry collection are nevertheless not to be seen as a naïve way of perceiving Soviet life. His poems are rather to be read as subversive overstatements, relying on a play with the paradoxical and contradictory. Through the use of humour and irony, he achieves an alienating view on Ireland in order to communicate to the reader the shortcomings of his own society.

Notes

1 http://myth-of-russia.lunn.ru/en/the-british-myth-of-russia

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