

‘GOING HOME TO RUSSIA’?
IRISH WRITERS AND RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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‘Perhaps Ireland is a little Russia
in which the longest way round
is always the shortest way home’
(Moore 1985: 124-25)

0. Introduction

The Russian poet Josef Brodsky once wrote: “I’m talking to you - but it isn’t / my fault if you can’t hear me”. Undoubtedly, Brodsky’s voice was heard: for example, that very line was used as an epigraph by Polish poet Anna Czekanowicz in her own aptly named ‘Travel Poem’ (Czekanowicz 1993: 56). Russian writers, have also been heard, loud and clear, in Ireland for many years now, as is evidenced by Seamus Heaney’s epitaph for Brodsky, ‘Audenesque’, in *Electric Light* (Heaney 2001: 64).

This is one indication of what I would call a ‘special relationship’ between Russian and Irish writing. Indeed, many Russian texts and authors have spoken to Irish writers who have, in turn, been keen to listen in to their Russian counterparts. In the early twentieth-century, for example, George Moore modelled his collection of stories *The Untilled Field* (1903) on Ivan Turgenev’s *A Sportsman’s Sketches* (1852); while Irish language authors, from Padraic Ó Conaire and Padraic Mac Piarais / Pearse to Máirtín Ó Cadhain and after, have been hugely impressed and inspired by Russian masters of the short story, including Nikolaj Gogol’ and Maxim Gorky.

More than listening in, Irish authors have often closely identified with what they have heard ‘across the hearth rug’ (Longley 1982) from Russia: for example, Paul Durcan gave a whole collection of poems the title, *Going Home to Russia* (Durcan 1987). This is a curious title, and collection, but it implies that an Irish writer such as Durcan can feel ‘at home’ (if not *more* at home) in Russia. Why? There are several possibilities or suggestions that arise from a reading of Durcan’s and other Irish texts: firstly, Russia is familiar to the Irish through the former’s art, literature and wider culture; secondly, there is often a vague, general (but not necessarily inaccurate)

assumption that Russia and Russians are, in some ways, like Ireland and the Irish. In the case of rural life, for example, one may be tempted to compare Russian boyars and serfs to the nineteenth-century 'landlord and peasant' relations in Ireland. Certainly, some Irish writers have heard echoes, and seen similarities, between Russian suffering under Tsars and Genseks, and Irish struggles under the English Crown.

Returning to Brodsky's 'talking' and 'listening', there is also evidence of Russian authors tuning in to the Irish: notably, Anna Akhmatova placed Joyce among her three favourite international authors (outside of mother Russia); the others were Proust and Shakespeare. Here, however, I want to concentrate on Russian talking, then Irish listening and answering back.

1. Answering traditions

First, it is worth noting that there are similarities between the literary histories of Ireland and Russia: the latter possesses an ancient and long-standing oral tradition, featuring 'bards'; periods of foreign cultural and linguistic dominance at court; also a resurgence of native language and culture, embodied for Russians in the arrival of Alexander Pushkin who, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's words, 'became the nation' and who 'is the Russian language'. More recently, for aesthetic and linguistic enrichment, the twentieth-century Russian writer such as Marina Tsvetayeva followed the earlier (political) notion of 'going to the people' by immersing herself in folklore, and utilising colloquial Russian speech during at least one inspirational phase of her career.

The echoes with Ireland are obvious. Consider, for example, the history of the Irish language (including its own bardic tradition); both the Celtic Literary and Gaelic Revivals; and, latterly, a contemporary poet such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who has proved the maxim that "culture is a conversation between equals" (Stephens 1988: 179) by following Tsvetayeva's daring example, and answering the former's 'We shall not escape hell' with her own 'Táimid damanta, a dhearfearacha' / 'We are damned, my sisters' – a poem which is based on Tsvetayeva's original but transposed into an Irish-and-international work that is just as timeless and challenging (Ní Dhomhnaill 1991: 14). But why do poets and writers such as Ní Dhomhnaill 'listen in' to Russia in particular?

Poets Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian are two living examples of leading Irish women writers who, finding the Irish literary tradition to be ‘sexist and masculinist to the core’, have sometimes looked outside their own culture in order to be heartened and strengthened by contact with the work of ‘foremothers’ and other (contemporary) international women writers who dedicated their lives to their art. In their searches, they (and other Irish writers) encountered, and were particularly struck by, the work of Akhmatova and Tsvetayeva. Indeed, McGuckian has stated that reading these Russian authors “reduced [her] own state of loneliness” as a woman writer. Their appeal, for McGuckian, is in their mastery, power and international significance as writers who “never disgraced the art”.¹

More controversially, perhaps, McGuckian identifies also with the suffering of Akhmatova and Tsvetayeva: “they had actually suffered, the way we [in Northern Ireland] were now suffering [...]. Their sons were in prison, their husbands were shot”. McGuckian went on to compare Russia after 1917 to Northern Ireland after 1968 when the latter became a ‘seed-bed of conflict, a war-zone’. Most significantly, she admires Akhmatova and Tsvetayeva for producing poems that transcended their actual suffering: for example, poems such as Akhmatova’s ‘Requiem’ which has had a huge impact on women poets,² especially from the South of Ireland (judging from the number of them that have chosen to discuss, quote or translate sections, if not all, of the work). McGuckian links the fascination in (southern) Ireland with ‘Requiem’ to an experiential gap between the south and the north of the island: the South, read in terms of the poem ‘Requiem’, stands outside the prison gates like the woman, or women, in the poem; the North, in this analysis, can be compared to the son, locked up behind the prison wall. McGuckian is not alone in painfully admitting that the North and the South of Ireland have (since partition) travelled in two different directions, and borne two different sets of experiences to the extent where she can surmise that ‘there’s no way we [the South and the North] can talk to each other except maybe through Russian or East European literature’.

¹ These and subsequent quotes from Medbh McGuckian come from an extensive interview which I conducted with her in 1992. The interview was partly published as ‘Medbh McGuckian Talks to Frank Sewell’ in Rumens 1993.

² See Kunitz & Hayward 1974: 98-117.

Mainly, however, poets and writers such as McGuckian do not look to Russian art and literature simply for political parallels but, for the most part, for world-class examples of best practice in the arts, and to stretch themselves as readers and practitioners. Consequently, one finds Russian vocabulary (selected for its sound as well as its meaning) creeping into, for example, McGuckian's poems to the extent where her collection *Marconi's Cottage* included a glossary of Russian terms at the back. In addition, she has written poems to, for, or about Russian literary figures, including Tolstoy, Tsvetayeva, and Lermontov whom she conjures up in the poem 'The Most Emily of All' – a poem whose title actually refers to Emily Brontë (McGuckian, 1992: 38).

Seamus Heaney is another Irish poet who talks to himself,³ and then others, occasionally via Slavonic literature, listening in very closely to Brodsky and his predecessors. One of Heaney's first encounters with Russian literature came through his reading of the stories and plays of Anton Chekhov, recommended to him by an Irish short story writer, Michael MacLaverty. Heaney would also have spotted that the two seminal Irish studies of the short story are both mainly informed by readings of Russian masters of the genre (Ó Faoláin 1970 and O'Connor 1963).

In Heaney's poem 'Chekhov on Sakhalin' (Heaney 1990: 148), attention is drawn to the tension sometimes felt by an artist between the right to the luxury of practising one's art and the residual guilt which an artist may feel and may only discharge by giving witness to the chains and floggings that afflict his class or compatriots (Heaney 1990: 148). This poem shows that Chekhov was an exemplary figure for Heaney – a doctor who chose, or even bothered, to go to Sakhalin (a prison island). Heaney himself did not physically go to the H-Blocks in Ulster or to the neighbourly funeral of a hunger-striker (1981), but he has written about such matters, visiting them and being visited or haunted by them in some of his more political prose, interviews and poetry:

Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless
Like inmates liberated in that yard.
Like the disregarded ones we turned against
Because we failed them by our disregard.

(Heaney 1996: 6)

³ In the Yeatsian sense. See Yeats 1992.

Yet, the Russian author who has made most of an impact on Heaney is, arguably, Osip Mandel'shtam (Heaney 1989: xvii-xx). The Irish poet reveres Mandel'shtam's integrity as a man and an artist, for keeping faith with words and the freedom with words that poetry requires. Consequently, Mandel'shtam is a strong presence in, or behind, many Heaney's poems:

A globe stops spinning. I set my palm
On a contour cold as permafrost
And imagine axle-hum and the steadfast
Russian of Osip Mandelstam.

(Heaney 1996: 57)

What attracts Heaney to Mandel'shtam is the latter's refusal to become "a mouthpiece of orthodoxy", his insistence upon, and celebration of, "all the impulsive, instinctive, non-utilitarian elements in the creative life". Heaney himself has struggled to avoid falling into the trap of becoming a mouthpiece for any limiting orthodoxy, but aims to trust instead in what he has called the "innocent lift-off and push of poetry". This flexible flight path, rather than stance, was confirmed (if not fostered) for Heaney by the examples of Mandel'shtam and, later, the Russian visual artist Mark Shagal.

Heaney also celebrates, in his essays, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, the wife of the Russian poet, and preserver of his words. Notably, Heaney praises her in a highly significant and uniquely Irish manner: "she was like a hunted priest in penal times, travelling dangerously with the altar-stone of the forbidden faith" (Heaney 1989b: 73). This type of comparison provides yet another example of what Paul Durcan calls "going home to Russia", i.e. of an Irish writer identifying with Russian experience, and / or identifying Russian experience with that of Ireland.

2. Meeting the Russians: the road to Damascus

Russian literature has often proved to be enabling and affirming for Irish writers, inspiring at least one Irish author to take up the pen at all. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, writing in the 1950's, became the leading Irish language prose writer of the twentieth century. He described his initiation into the world of letters as a "St. Paul on the road to Damascus" experience. What struck him was no thunderbolt but a short story by Maxim Gorky, which he was

reading (in French) from an old journal which he chanced upon.⁴ His enthusiasm is clear from his own account:

I'd never read the like of it. Why did nobody tell
me there were stories like this? 'I could write that,'
I said to myself. 'That's the kind of work my people
used to do – it's just that the names are different.'

(de Paor 1991: 18)

The telling of Gorky's tale and the depiction of characters and action that he felt to be close to his own experience or knowledge, filled Ó Cadhain with a 'hunger' to recast, in literature, his own home and people in the west Ireland. This seems to have been at the heart of Gorky's appeal to Ó Cadhain: the former was not always writing about the urban 'great and good' but about individuals (sometimes in a rural setting) struggling against adverse conditions of class and nature, for example. Gorky's Socialist Realism was welcomed by Ó Cadhain, a radical Republican who came to label his prison camp (the Curragh) as Sibéir na hÉireann / the Siberia of Ireland, and who compared the provisions of Ireland's draconian Offences Against the State Act (1939) to conditions in Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead*.

Ó Cadhain's reading widened to include Gorky, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Chekhov and Gogol' as well as other European writers. One commentator who has explored direct influences upon Ó Cadhain's work, has found a strong similarity with the work of Gorky in Ó Cadhain's depiction (especially in his early stories) of the surrounding landscape, i.e. of nature itself, as a living presence in his characters' lives (de Paor 1991: 156). Such an influence could, however, have partly derived from Ó Cadhain's reading of various French, English or other European authors, but what cannot be disputed are his enthusiasm for Russian literature, his readiness to quote and refer to Russian authors and texts, or his own account of their direct influence upon him.

3. Font of all knowledge and source of all wonder

The first major signs of indebtedness to Russian writing in Ireland are to be found among early twentieth-century writers of short stories. Chief among the latter were Padraic Mac Piarais / Patrick Pearse and Padraic Ó

⁴ We know that Ó Cadhain carried the journal around with him for some time because he had it on his person when he was arrested as a Republican. Incredibly, Frank O'Connor was also carrying Russian literature when he, too, was arrested for Republican activities.

Conaire who marvelled at, and learnt from, Russian and French authors in particular, advocating that contemporary and future Irish writers should blend their knowledge of indigenous forms such as the folk tale with modern literary forms such as the ‘European short story’ as provided by (and this is Ó Conaire’s own ‘Russian’ list) Gogol, Turgenev, Andreyev, Gorky, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky and, best of all, Tolstoy (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 285).

In an epoch-marking essay, Ó Conaire praised such authors for “not drawing back from any question that interested them”, i.e. what he saw as an unbridled freedom from self-censorship. In his words, they were ‘serious’, and dug deep for truths of human existence:

when they came back up out of the hole that they were searching [or digging] in, they brought back a dirty, smeared thing that bore the shape of a person, and they called out at the top of their voices, ‘This is the human being. This is humanity. This is the truth.’

(quoted in Ní Chionnaith 1995: 285)

Ó Conaire was particularly impressed by what he saw as the bravely imaginative ways in which Russian authors explored the human mind and relationships, our propensities for good and evil: “they know that the human being is the font of all knowledge and the source of all wonder” (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 286). Their unbridled willingness to highlight also the darker sides of human nature, their refusal to censor themselves or their material in order to safely appeal to the majority, consensus, or lowest common denominator, hugely appealed (in early twentieth-century Ireland) to the daring, modernising minds of creative writers and thinkers such as Pearse and Ó Conaire.

Reading short stories by Ó Conaire, in *An Chéad Chloch / The First Stone* (Ó Conaire 1978), for example, one finds that, despite the Biblical overtones of the title, he has learnt some of his technique and stance from Chekhov who believed that “the artist should be, not the judge of his characters and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness [...]. My business is merely [...] to illuminate the characters and speak their language” (Ní Chionnaith 1995: 330). Such a narrative voice and point of view, account for the continuing appeal of Ó Conaire’s texts, which leave room for the reader to ‘complete’ the story.

There are many other instances of Irish writers who have become particularly fascinated to the point of *identifying with* Russian counterparts. The question of which individual Russian writers most 'hit home' to a particular Irish author, is intriguing and revealing. Apocalyptic Aran poet Máirtín Ó Direáin was most struck by Alexander Blok, that singular Russian poet who has the wild winds of revolution and change storming through his verse (Forsyth 1977), and who wrote that "there is no refuge, no peace, none" (Blok 1974: 93). Ó Direáin who himself felt like a proverbial 'fish out of water' in modern, urban Ireland, once even wrote an unpublished play based on the life of Blok, entitled *Éasc Aduain* [An Odd Fish].

A contrasting example is the more contemporary poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh who studied Russian language and literature at Limerick, where he fell under the uplifting influence of the great Yevgeny Yevtushenko. One could say that they have much in common: both, for example, are from the margins - the rail-stops of Caiseal na gCorr (Ó Searcaigh) and Zimá Station (Yevtushenko). In addition, Yevtushenko confirmed Ó Searcaigh's belief that 'no people are uninteresting. / Their fate is like the chronicle of planets'. Consequently, Ó Searcaigh often gives voice in his poetry to people and things that would otherwise slip into obscurity or oblivion. Early in his career, Ó Searcaigh translated some Yevtushenko poems into Irish, and experimented with some of the Russian's trade-mark, Mayakovsky-style indentations (Ó Searcaigh 1993: 170, 210). Latterly, the Irish poet has increasingly adopted some of the more public role of a poet in speaking out against lies and hypocrisy, racism and war – Yevtushenko's own favourite targets. To this list, Ó Searcaigh adds homophobia (Ó Searcaigh 1997).

4. 'Going Home to Russia'? The Case of Paul Durcan

The blurb at the back of Paul Durcan's *Going Home to Russia* (1987) refers to his "deep personal knowledge and love of Russia". As we have seen, many Irish authors have long had various degrees of interest in, and affection for, Russian writing, in particular. But what might be the reasons for this?

In Russia and the former Soviet Union in general, a great revolutionary experiment was tried, even if it failed. The human tragedy and cost of such a history strikes awe into the heart of the Irish no less than any other nation. See, for example, Liam O'Flaherty's *I Went to Russia* (1931).

With a different history from that of Ireland, Russia and its culture sometimes represent (to Irish spectators) an elsewhere, an ‘other’, an exotic, an alternative to any obsession with Ireland or ‘home’. However, the degree of any Irish writer’s real knowledge of this ‘other’ will always vary. Meanwhile, even Russians themselves argue over what constitutes the ‘real Russia’ and the ‘true Russian’.⁵

Paradoxically, therefore, despite the apparent differences between Ireland and Russia, similarities between the two countries are often emphasised or seized upon, especially by literary commentators. Russia, for example, is the home of the ‘Russian soul’ – an abstract concept that is believed in, sometimes, both in Russia and in Ireland where some (rightly or wrongly) perceive an affinity between the Russian and the Celtic ‘soul’. Likewise, Russia is the home, allegedly, of the short story, which is seen as a form or genre native to both countries, each with a strong oral and folkloric tradition.

Contrastingly, Russia sometimes offers Irish writers a locus for comparison or contrast. In Durcan’s ‘Going Home to Russia’, it is contemporary *Ireland* that appears as a place of restriction and corruption, manned by capitalist and / or religious ‘apparatchiks’ while mother Russia beckons as a fairytale land of “mushroom hunting”, a place to become one with “creatures of the forest”. This Russian idyll (in the poem) is oddly reminiscent of Ireland as it *used to be* “before all the trees were cut down”. Here Durcan makes a traditional Irish poetic allusion to Ireland before English conquest and colonisation (see Ó Tuama 1990: 90), mixing Gaelic images and motifs with post-revolutionary Russian political terms.

Viewed as a point of comparison with Ireland, Russia can be found by Irish writers to be just a place like, and among, all others. In some senses, it is not so different from Ireland, say, and Moscow could easily be added to Durcan’s list of the Kalahari, Pimlico and the West of Ireland:

Boy and girl back to back, rubbing backsides:
A ritual of courtship, not to be mocked at.
It is the same in the West of Ireland as in the Kalahari
And Pimlico.

(Durcan 1987: 36)

⁵ For Yevtushenko, a ‘true Russian’ was an ‘anti-anti-semitic’, as in his poem ‘Babij Yar’.

Nor does Ireland appear to be so different from Russia as, for example, in Durcan’s title-poem ‘Going Home to Russia’:

We Irish have had our bellyful of *blat*
And *blarney*, more than our share
Of the *nomenclatura* of Church and Party,
The *nachalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia.

(Durcan 1987: 65)

Russian terms and concepts often seem to prove helpful and enabling for Irish writers who want to express Irish conditions and sentiments.

Moreover, since Ó Conaire, for one, credited Russian prose writers with unearthing essential humanity itself, it should not come as a surprise that such bare, forked animals will most likely be the same in Westport as in Asia or Kursk. Certainly, the Aeroflot pilot in Durcan’s ‘Going Home to Russia’ has

... the look of the long distance bus driver
On the Galway-Limerick-Cork route:
A man much loved by his wife and friends.

(Durcan 1987: 66)

Contemplating ‘cold’ and even nuclear war, the pop singer and composer Sting once made us wonder “if the Russians love their children too”. No ifs about it, according to Durcan.

To return to aesthetics, Russia is the home of a far-reaching and flexible language, a “portmanteau language” (to borrow a phrase from McGuckian) which has contributed much to the language of politics, and even more to the linguistic possibilities of literature, extending the vocabularies of poets such as McGuckian (‘shafery’ and ‘choorka’, for example, in *Marconi’s Cottage*) and Durcan: see, for example, the latter’s coinage of the term ‘Christniks’ in the poignant poem ‘Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno’ (Durcan 1987: 4).

For Irish and other artists, Russia and Eastern Europe offer a host of world-class artistic exemplars: note, for example, the Preface to Durcan’s *Going Home to Russia* where he provides quotes from three inspirational Russians: Pasternak, Ratushinskaya and Rasputin – two poets and, at least, one mystic. Russian literary history in turn provides Irish writers with richly productive opportunities for dialogue. Note that Durcan’s poem

‘Going Home to Russia’ is itself dedicated to Andrei Voznesensky, a poet famous for writing about his own encounters with America; here it is Durcan who encounters and engages with Russia.

An even more striking example of artistic dialogue occurs in Durcan’s ‘Peredelkino: at the Grave of Pasternak’ where the speaker, both addressing and echoing Pasternak directly, is “frantic to grapple with your [Pasternak’s] trinity of pines” and wishes to “paint my soul with leaves of mud”. Part One of the poem ends with Durcan thinking of both Russia and Ireland in one single couplet or maxim:

Closer to God is the atheist opening the door
Than the churchman closing the door in your face.

(Durcan 1987: 78)

In part two, Durcan stands at the grave of Pasternak only to be reminded of the grave and epitaph of archetypal Irish hero and martyr Art O’Leary (see Ó Tuama 1990: 199), to whom he actually *likens* Pasternak:

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.’

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

(Durcan 1987: 78)

A few lines later, Durcan recalls a real-life pilgrimage that Yevtushenko made, to the grave of Art O’Leary:

Over the grave of Art O’Leary at midnight
On a summer’s evening,
Your young priestlike friend from Zima, Yevtushenko,
Broke – broke a bottle of red wine.

(Durcan 1987: 79)

In the same collection, Durcan’s ‘The Fairy Tale of 1937’ pays homage to Osip Mandel’shtam, showing obvious familiarity and deep veneration for the man and artist (Durcan 1987: 90). Both Mandel’shtam and Durcan share a belief in the value, independence and power of art to ‘give ourselves

back to ourselves', to restore our humanity, and (as with Heaney) to affirm our individual liberty and conscience.

Finally, if earlier poets from John Donne to Michael Hartnett went in search of their 'America', Durcan's pursuit of his metaphorical 'home' in Russia, takes the form of a very personal quest in the poem 'Hymn to my Father':

Yet you made me what I am –
A man in search of his Russia.

(Durcan 1987: 95)

The same poem ends with the folkloric image (adapted from Russian and blended with the equally strong Irish folkloric tradition) of the horseman at the crossroads. This becomes an aptly suitable portmanteau image for Durcan as poet, Irishman, and son:

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.

(Durcan 1987: 95)

Which way is home? Russia, whether you are Irish or otherwise, is as good a place to look as anywhere else: 'perhaps Ireland is a little Russia in which the longest way round is always the shortest way home' (Moore 1985: 124-125).

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SUMMARY
ФРАНК СЬЮЭЛ

«Домой, в Россию?» ИРЛАНДСКИЕ ПИСАТЕЛИ И РУССКАЯ
ЛИТЕРАТУРА

В недостаточной мере оценено то влияние, которое оказали классики русской литературы на ирландских писателей и поэтов (как англо-, так и ирландоязычных). Рассматривая творчество Кахала О Шарки, Мартина О Кайна, Мартина О Дироня, Патрика Пирса и Патрика О Конайре, автор уделяет особое внимание литературному и в какой-то мере жизненному опыту русских классиков и особенностям их литературного художественного стиля — всему, что было востребовано и заимствовано ирландскими писателями у Евгения Евтушенко, Максима Горького, Александра Блока, Антона Чехова и Льва Толстого.