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# No Place like Home: Encounters between New Zealand and Russian Poetries

In 1989, an open letter appeared in a *samizdat* literary journal in Leningrad that called for a 'new culture' to be established as an alternative to the now hopelessly compromised historical avant-gardes in the 'kingdom-laboratory' of New Zealand:

> It is a fairytale land ruled by the Queen of Great Britain and at the same time a heavenly realm, islands, located at the edge of the world, the most ecologically developed of countries, preserving political and cultural purity, appearing as a miracle that exists in parallel, new and independent in relation to the world. It is precisely that country to which we wish to address our computer-bucolic project of a community of free people (Aleinikov et al., 1989; my translation).

More than half tongue in cheek, the letter writers had as little interest in the actual realities of New Zealand as the advertisers of the Wakefield settlement. Their New Zealand is 'a fairytale land' that 'exists in parallel . . . to the world'—it is quite literally a utopia, a 'no place'.

Such utopian visions play a vital role not only in Russian poetic imaginings of New Zealand but, conversely, in New Zealand poetic imaginings of Russia. In other words, 'no place' is in fact a commonplace of the cross-cultural encounter between Russian and New Zealand poetry. Yet the invocation of a place that is nothing like home and the search for a utopian no place of 'pure poetry' contrive strangely to resemble the very home from which they were meant to depart. This contrivance relates to the problematic reality of utopianism in the twentieth century, which reveals that the avant-garde's dream of an ideal no place of poetry always encounters its often uneasy position in the some place of history.

Although the Russian authors of the 1989 open letter were expressing their own utopian moment rather than any knowledge of the far off land they invoked, their linkage of New Zealand with utopia was strangely appropriate. The reference to a utopian 'laboratory' for the world, of course, strikingly recalls the view of New Zealand as a 'laboratory', as Herbert Asquith first put it, 'in which political and social experiments are every day being made for the information and instruction of the older countries of the world', an idea that has been part of the country's self-image for over one hundred years (quoted in Sinclair, 1965, p. 212). More generally, the notion of



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New Zealand as a utopia or paradise is central to Pākehā literature and culture, albeit, especially in the literary context, with a concomitant sense of dystopia, what Patrick Evans describes as the 'paradise or slaughterhouse' binary. Moreover, the idea of the country as a 'no place'—or an even more removed 'nowhere' spelt backwards in Samuel Butler's early formulation—is wrought with this contradiction, at once providing the 'clean slate' on which British colonialists hoped to create what James Belich calls a 'Better Britain' and suggesting a lack of location, history, mythology. This dual sense of possibility and lack informs, for example, the cultural nationalist but modernist poetics of Allen Curnow and Charles Brasch and the latter's establishment of this very journal.

More than a decade prior to founding *Landfall*, a young Brasch travelled to a different kind of purported utopia—Stalin's Russia. Writing to his father in 1934, just after the end of his trip, he deferred to Maurice Hindus' description in *The Great Offensive* (1933), in which Hindus hails the Soviet Union as 'a symbol of a new age and a guide to a new destiny' (Hindus, 1933, p. 42), writing of the effort 'to recast human society and reconstruct the human personality' (p. 7). Here then was a society that for all its differences might have seemed to Brasch to be confronting the same problems and possibilities of 'no place' as New Zealand—a society that had deliberately wiped the slate clean and was starting afresh to found a 'new age'.

Just as the notion of New Zealand as a 'no place' supports the ongoing abuses and alienation of Māori in their own land, however, so too the drive to 'reconstruct the human personality' becomes deeply troubling in light of the grisly reality of the Soviet Union circa 1934. Stalin was indeed wiping out the old to make the new at the cost of millions of lives through his policies of forced collectivisation, 'de-kulakisation' and deliberate starvation. His terrorisation of an entire society forced writers to adopt the 'genre of silence', and by the end of the decade many were quite literally dead. Taking extensive notes on Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* in the 1950s, Brasch must have later regretted his youthful enthusiasm for Stalin's Soviet Union. His sense of the tragic results of the Russian Revolution would have been enhanced when, after studying Russian, he co-translated a volume of poetry by Sergei Esenin, that passionate and powerful poet whose late work and death in 1925 have come to be seen as premonitions of the impending catastrophe of Stalin's rule.

Yet despite the widespread awareness by the 1960s of the nightmare behind the utopian rhetoric of revolutionary Russia, that rhetoric nevertheless remained deeply attractive to a new wave of New Zealand poets who were again seeking to 'make it new', now by breaking the mould established by Brasch, Curnow and others. Both the utopian impulse and problematic political position of the



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poet revolutionary live on, as Murray Edmond argues elsewhere in this issue, in the anarchic spirit of Alan Brunton, where they are linked especially with the 'poet of the revolution', Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Mayakovsky is a figure of ongoing fascination for New Zealand poets and none more so in recent years than Anna Jackson. He first appears in Jackson's 'My Friendship with Mayakovsky', a piece indebted to Frank O'Hara's 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island'. Like O'Hara's work, Jackson's poem appeals to and performs Mayakovsky's hyperbolic style, placing the poet firmly at the centre of the work and expanding this poet/'I' to the equivalent of a heavenly body to the extent that this 'I' is at once emphasised and dissipated. But while O'Hara and Jackson revel in this expansive vision, both humorously mirror Mayakovsky's own irreverence by placing the utopian claims of the modernist avant-garde at a poetic and geographical distance. O'Hara's lyric subject goes back to sleep, while Jackson's takes the revolutionary poet to the less-than-revolutionary locations of Debrett's on Auckland's High St and Dunedin's Octagon.

If 'My Friendship with Mayakovsky' points to the difference between utopian avant-garde poets and revolutionaries and postmodernists who know better, Jackson's more recent approach to Mayakovsky reflects an interest in the 'essence' or 'no place' of poetry beyond national and linguistic boundaries that is characteristic of Russian modernist poetic utopianism. In *Catullus for Children*, Jackson reworks several Russian poems, at the heart of which are two by Mayakovsky. The first, entitled in her version 'Vladimir Mayakovsky's Kindness to Horses', provides a leitmotif for the entire sequence (Jackson, 2003, pp. 35–6). The sound of hooves near the beginning of Mayakovsky's poem, 'Grib./ Grab'./ Grob. Grub' (Mayakovsky, 1965, p. 139), is translated, unconventionally, by Jackson as 'sto/ ste/ sto/ ste' (Jackson, 2003, p. 35). These hoof-beats are the first of a number of repeated pairs of aurally similar words that pulse through this and subsequent poems.

Jackson's hoof-beat onomatopoeia, suggestive of the stop-start motion of the horse and the poem, recalls the experiments with sound and linguistic roots in the *zaum* or 'trans-sense' poetry of Mayakovsky's fellow Russian Cubo-Futurist poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexander Kruchenykh. These experiments, though grounded partly in beliefs about national linguistic 'essence', have been read as expressing in a most extreme and sustained way the desire in modern and contemporary poetry to create a poetic that exceeds the boundaries of space and time to achieve a utopian 'no place' of 'pure poetry' beyond even language.

Mayakovsky's hoof-beat sounds, though original, all draw on Russian words or roots and could be translated semantically as 'mushroom, rob [the imperative], coffin, rough'. The *zaum*



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play here consists in presenting words out of context as a form of onomatopoeia. Jackson picks up on this technique later in her version with pairs such as 'hearse/ horse' and 'horse/ nurse', which, unlike Mayakovsky's sounds, are semantically relevant to the poem's description in a straightforward way (Jackson, 2003, pp. 35–6). By contrast, although Jackson has noted that 'sto/ ste' is meaningful in some languages (p. 55), the phrase has no literal meaning in English, beyond the suggestion of 'stop/ step', and so gestures towards the magic of created words in the most extreme Russian *zaum*.

For Jackson, the repetition of 'sto/ ste' allows 'it to accrete meanings and come to mean something like poetry itself' (Jackson, 2003, *Sport*, p. 254). The *zaum* of 'sto/ ste' becomes the 'no place' beyond sense where we can reach a putative 'pure poetry' that transcends the linguistic, cultural and historical divide between revolutionary Russia and present-day New Zealand. Thus Jackson's appropriation of Mayakovsky suggests a continuing attraction to the utopian possibilities of the Russian revolutionary example.

If Jackson appeals to the utopian 'no place' of the Russian avant-garde, her sequence also acknowledges the way in which Mayakovsky provides, in Murray Edmond's words in this issue, a 'warning parable for all utopians'. In an implicit acknowledgment of his troubled legacy, she includes in the sequence a modified and augmented version of Mayakovsky's famous last poem, unfinished at the time of his suicide (Mayakovsky, 1961, pp. 236–7). This poem has been read as an acknowledgement of the end of the avant-garde and the fatally flawed attempt to connect poetry and art to the construction of a wholly new society, particularly in its famous line 'Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind', which is rendered by Jackson as 'Love's boat has shattered/ against the frou-frou of the everyday.'

The addition of 'frou-frou' in Jackson's version reflects differences between her poetic position and Mayakovsky's. Like O'Hara, most famously in his *Lunch Poems*, Jackson places the everyday at the fore in works such as *The Long Road to Teatime*, which is full of the domestic, everyday details of life with children. This contrasts with a modernist but also, as Svetlana Boym has argued, particularly Russian hostility towards the everyday (Boym, 1994, p. 29). The rustling sound and repetition of 'frou-frou' recall the repeated 'sto/ ste' beat (picked up again later in Jackson's version of this poem). Instead of appearing antithetical to poetry and love, then, Jackson's version suggests that the rhythms of the everyday are essential to them—especially given the subtly erotic suggestion of rustling dresses and that Jackson takes the onomatopoeic phrase from Arthur Rimbaud's poem 'Ma bohème', where it is associated with stars and poetic inspiration. Moreover, 'frou-frou' through its association with dresses connects a more positive vision



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of the everyday with a feminine perspective, further contrasting a masculine modernist poetics, hostile to the everyday, which comes to a crashing end, with a feminist postmodernist poetics, at home in the everyday, which keeps on beating. And yet, this everyday beat emerges here out of the drumbeat of revolution and Mayakovsky's hyperbolic poetics.

This same paradox is inherent in the ambiguous title of this essay. On the one hand, 'No Place like Home' might refer to the emphasis on a domesticated poetics relating to 'our place' that has been essential to modernist nationalist and now official (as in Te Papa's English name) rhetorics of New Zealand culture. Thus a tame nationalist modernism and capitulation to official nationalist discourses collaborate with a postmodernist turn to the domestic. On the other hand, 'no place like home' might refer to a utopia or 'no place' that is utterly different from home, a role that Russia and Russian poetry have at times played in New Zealand poetry and cultural discourse.

The troubled history of this latter, utopian position is addressed at the conclusion of Jackson's version. Mayakovsky's poem contains only four sections and was unfinished. Jackson provides a fifth, which alludes to the unfinished, long unpublished nature of Mayakovsky's poem and connects it with the hoof-beats of the previous poem: 'when words/ discard you, unprinted, unpublished,/ and gallop off, tightening the saddle-girth,/ ringing for centuries,/ sto/ ste/ sto/ ste.' Here the beat of the poem outlives the poet, echoing with the 'essence' of poetry. In Jackson's version, the utopian 'no place' of poetry triumphs over the historical situation that finally made suicide the only escape for Mayakovsky. How this 'no place' relates to the 'our place' of domestic and national discourses remains unclear or irrelevant in the face of the transnational, trans-linguistic, trans-sense, trans-historical beat of 'poetry itself'.

The epigraph to *Catullus for Children* is by a very different Russian modernist poet, Osip Mandelstam, but also appeals to the notion of a poetic essence beyond the boundaries of national literature and indeed of language itself: 'A quotation is like a cicada. Its natural state is that of unceasing sound. Having once seized hold of the air, it will not let go.' Like the repetition in Jackson's poem, the chirp of the cicada is a metaphor for the relentless, restless sound of poetry and its multiple voices. It also links poetry to a pre- or extra-linguistic sound that might transcend space and time, connecting the Russian modernist with the poets of Ancient Greece and Rome, in whose work the cicada frequently appears. Thus animal noises, be they hoof-beats or cicada chirps, provide the basis for a trans-sense poetic that is at home nowhere and everywhere, as was the Russian Jewish poet Mandelstam's all-encompassing poetic vision. In this way, Jackson finds common ground, or common strangeness, with her Russian



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counterparts. At the same time, however, the pun that links 'quotation' to 'cicada', *tstitata* to *tsikada*, is essentially Russian, resisting translation into English (Mandelstam, 1967, p. 407). Again, a utopian 'nowhere' of poetry is accompanied by a paradoxical assertion of place, of home.

Animal noises present a similar paradox in what is perhaps New Zealand poetry's best known line, the onomatopoeic 'And *Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle*' from Denis Glover's 'The Magpies'. While Bill Manhire views the line as 'determinedly unpoetic' (Manhire, 1995, p. 11), like the other animal noises discussed, it could equally be read as appealing to the utopian dream of poetry that exceeds the boundaries of the expected, the everyday, and even of language—what Jackson terms 'poetry itself' and associates particularly with Russia, but also the 'white noise' that, for Robert Sullivan, provides the 'decoy' distracting our attention from Pākehā settlers' appropriation of Māori land (Sullivan, 2006, p. 12). Glover and the 'The Magpies' themselves have a peculiar history in Russia that reflects this problematic reality behind the utopian poetic dream. Glover's Russian connections go back to his involvement in so-called 'suicide' supply missions to Murmansk during World War Two, and this and his support for the Soviet Union in subsequent decades led him to become something of a pin-up boy for official Soviet literature in the 1970s. After travelling to the Soviet Union to receive an award for his wartime heroism in 1975, two selections of his poems were published in the leading official literary journal of the day, *Novyi mir*, and his work received pride of place in the 1978 Russian anthology of New Zealand poetry, where he was praised for being a 'people's poet' and his work was said to convey the 'essence of poetry' (Goodliffe, 2001, p.129). 'The Magpies' apparently conveyed this 'essence', not through its onomatopoeia, but rather because, as John Goodliffe points out, it fitted well 'with the "party-line" idea that Western-style capitalism crushes the toiling worker' (p. 135). The sound and rhythm, in which Jackson and the Russian modernists might seem to locate this 'essence', meanwhile, is precisely what is lost in translation as 'Glover's roughness is smoothed out' (p. 139). 'The Russified magpies,' Goodliffe observes wryly, 'keep more in rhythm and, in so doing, partly turn into roosters' (p. 135). Here a cross-cultural encounter, like nationalist readings of the New Zealand anti-poetic, obscures the 'no place' of poetry, revealing its inevitable location in a political and historical reality, in this case the reality of the 'official party line'—an ever present danger for those seeking utopia in Russia in the twentieth century.

The recent Russian anthology of New Zealand poetry, *Land of Seas*, in whose wake this issue of *Landfall* was conceived, contains those same 'roosterfied' magpies (Pavlov and Williams, 2005, p. 315). But the anthology's range gives far less of a sense of a single party line,



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negotiating the competing desires for the familiar (home), the unfamiliar (nothing like home) and poetic essence (no place) that seem to be the inevitable concomitants of cross-cultural encounter between Russian and New Zealand poetries. A key figure in the realisation of *Land of Seas*, the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, has written of 'home' and cross-cultural encounter as inherent in language itself: 'every one of these words is as strange as an insect. The insect's antennae quiver from the page. It is looking for something, something to which it might correspond—other insects, a friend, a mate, maybe its meaning.' Recalling Mandelstam's vision of language and literary history as a cicada-like chirp, never isolatable to a single position, Dragomoshchenko's description suggests an unending dialectic between the desire to home in on 'meaning' and to be released from it into the incessant buzz of poetic utopia.

The sound of cicadas is a cliché, a well worn citation from the New Zealand summer. Inversely, for Mandelstam, the 'citation is a cicada' (Mandelstam, 1967, p. 407; my translation). What might be thought of as the trigger for a *mémoire involontaire* of New Zealand identity becomes, half a world away, a symbol seized by 'a cultural orphan growing up in the revolutionary years'. The cicada metamorphoses from a homing beacon into a singer of the poetry of 'no place', 'existing only as movement, in a state of constant change', and answering Mandelstam's 'insatiable need for a continuous construction of a gigantic vision of culture meant to compensate for the impossibility of belonging to a single place' (Freidin, 1978, p. 436). The dream of an all-encompassing vision that is the fairytale of the New Zealand-Russian poetic romance fulfils a similar need, intertwining the heat-panting chirp of cicadas with the muffled crunch of hoof-beats on snow—a dream of somewhere and nowhere comprising a strange, and yet strangely familiar, mix of cliché, citation and impassioned encounter.

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