

Opening speech at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin on 10th June 2009 by Sebastian Barry.

Until last Monday, I don't think I was ever in here. I came in to see Ludmila's work, so I could respond to it, and talk about it here. This 'here' that is fabled in Dublin, and everywhere. How well we know from the outside this great stone ship beached safely above the flood level of the Liffey. The old ship of perfecting Protestantism. Mysterious vessel.

Of course, as a little child coming into Dublin with my grandfather to see the Disney films in Grafton Street, I was told the soles of my shoes would catch fire if I stepped in here, my very soul would shrink and cry out. Dark bastion of Protestantism. Mysterious vessel. Turning on its anchor in the ever-flooding river of Irish history.

I had never been in here.... But family whisper has it that my great great grandmother, Lizzy Finn, a music hall dancer from England, married a Robert Gibson in here, dying later in childbirth, and the unwanted child given away, to become in due course my other grandfather's mother a matter she kept as a great secret; and it was he himself my grandfather, who came here years ago, looking for a marriage license, which he attested to have found. I don't know..... Maybe. So my DNA was here maybe, in the shape of a music hall dancer – and my own mother, an actress in the Abbey theatre, loved, oh loved, the possibility of this forebear, who had shown her legs to the Saturday crowd in Bexhill as may be, then had stood solemnly under this solemn roof – my own mother celebrated her forebear's entry here – my mother, who died two years ago.

I am slowly, perhaps too slowly, approaching Ludmila and her radiant work. The mentioning of a mother nearly has us there. For her own mother died in 1997, and much of her work since has been a secret dialogue with her, almost I might risk saying a secret scripture. There are blurred communications written on some of these paintings and sculptures. These are letters and scripts to her mother, telling her about her life, her beautiful partner, her beautiful daughters. And all this radiates, radiantly, from these core Russian icons you see set about the place, these seed faces and scenes, and when she has fashioned songs to these icons, urgent communiqués half lost in the noise of both her personal and national history, you will see she has figured in vague people, other family members crowding in as may be, gently, looking for a place, for an afterlife maybe, for a consecration in her vivid and completely living imagination. This will not be far from the Irish imagination, in this regard. Ludmila is Russian, of a perhaps vanished Russia before Yeltsin, she met her beloved in Russia in 1992 as the tanks were fuelling up for the approach to that other white house, she left for Sweden in 1993, she is a citizen of vanished countries and newfound ones, and of different languages – just like ourselves. She had Stalin in her history, just as we now know we had ours, a truly shadowy figure formed from the bones of freedom and the blood of a great idea, who created our gulags both physical and spiritual. Ludmila has peered back into the icons of the Russian Orthodox church and has seen there not only unexpected renewal and wonders, but also blood and pain and struggle, and also mired perhaps in that struggle, and perhaps sometimes breaking free, her own family, her own mother, her own self. And You may spot there also people that you knew a face half recalled, You may spot there fleetingly your own self.

Now I am thinking, there is a lot to say about Ludmila and her work, and I have scarcely time to even hint at the effect of it. It sets my mind reeling almost. I remember being in Russia too, also in 1992, with the sane

monk Seamus McAnaidh, and going to Suzdal, and peering at icons, wondering that so many survived the years of iconoclasm – and I remember the beautiful woman who was dying slowly of poisoning because she had been given food meant for Breshnev's son, oh but that is another story, and I remember the perfect church standing with its gold roof in the middle of some flooded plain, and I remember the old old ladies begging for coins at the church doors, strange slight coins that no longer surely were worth the parsing of a farthing in that ruined world, and I remember the wolves and the boars in the woods, with snowlight that would burn your face, and I remember how some of the most beautiful icons were not signed, because the artist did not need to add his or her name, the making was enough, and that these were the people's gospels, and that, and that – but we have no time.

And I so wanted to tell you about working in Canterbury Cathedral just last year, not putting images like these into it, but images of a play, and how I loved talking to the Dean there, and how he explained to me that the priests of Canterbury were catholic also in their way, and had 'gone round' the reformation, and how they were less fearful of images there, and we talked about the Church of England and the Church of Ireland, and about the strain of Presbyterianism in Ireland stemming maybe from James 1st, and we talked about Collett in the mid 1500s being furious at the sale of St Thomas's blood and the shewing of saints' bones and the drunkenness of the pilgrims, and how the much milder Erasmus, who in fact stayed a Roman Catholic, also had some sympathy for this view, but I suspected rather liked the human crowds and was pleased to see them in the cathedral, milling about like Irish people, and we talked about how all through the sixteenth century there was an effort to prevent the images and icons then being banished by the new religion would not only lead to a deafened people, as it were, but also a blind one, and we spoke of the schism between East and West, and I spoke of the loveliness of the little Greek churches, and how happy I was to have a Romanian icon and a Russian icon, a mother and child, and a Christ Pantocrater, protector of the world, and our little living room, and, - but I have no time.

I can see that everything I am saying is inspired by Ludmila, and also by another person here. She has set foot in Christ Church Before me, before many a Dubliner, many an Irish person. Who has brought her in here, so that we feel compelled to follow her in, out of that Twenty First century light, to this calming half light, half darkness?

It is a very interesting Irishman called Dermot Dunne. Dermot Dunne is dean of this place, a place obviously holy and sacred still despite all the flood and turmoil of history. He was lately the rector in the parish where we live, near Tinahely. His story can he said quite quickly. He was once Catholic priest. I am certain he was a wonderful priest. Then he became a Church of Ireland minister. He fell in love with a lovely English person and married her. He has gone from rector of Tinahely to archdeacon to Dean of Christ Church in two beautiful dance-steps that Fred Astaire would have admitted. He is a spiritually dancing man.

He wants us to come in here. He believes in Christ Church. I think he has an entirely unique and original conception of what this place can be. Of what this city and this country can be. Even of what exceptional spaces into which few go, to be entered. He has chosen Ludmila if not to lure us in, at least to entice us. He wants us to look again, with her. It is entirely of the same song. He is an artist who has put her faith in what she does not know, like any artist worth her salt. She is looking in to places where at first she can see nothing. She is sending language back into the halls of the dead and asking for an answer that cannot come but which may come nonetheless. Then we will be surprised!

Dermot I think is saying through Ludmila that Christ Church is in fact a living grove. These pillars are trees, ancient enough, but living, and they reach to a heaven that is not aloof, not out of reach, but whose nature and scenery we can never know if you not hazard it. Ludmila shows us dubious metals hiding in her paint, she shows bullets, she shows above all the woundable human eye, again and again, she shows us moments of fragmented wholeness, a narrative that almost reaches a conclusion but then pitches forward into yet another unknown chapter. Dermot doesn't want us I suspect to come in here and wander sedately among these trees. He wants us, I think, to spy the apples here, he wants us to understand, to eat those apples, he wants us to box the fox of Christ Church, to stand alarmed and uncertain here, and then suddenly realize, as Ludmila seems to do now and here shining work, that we are, astonishingly, at home.