

Paul Painting Paul: Self-Portraiture and Subjectivity in Durcan's Poetry

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Abstract: *In a significant number of Paul Durcan's poems, a 'character' named Paul Durcan makes an appearance. Part autobiographical trace, part fictional construct, what does this enigmatic persona have to say about authorship, subjectivity and the potential for self-portraiture via poetic form? This article examines the multiple implications of Durcan's apparent self-inscription in light of Barthes's notion of the death of the author, Foucault's author function, and Durcan's own perception of the poetry collection as a verbal picture gallery.*

In his most recent novel, entitled *Invisible*, Paul Auster allows one of his narrators a knowing aside: “(writers do, after all, sometimes inject characters who bear their own names into works of fiction)” (Auster 79). In common with an eclectic range of modern and postmodern authors, Borges and Nabokov, Jack Kerouac and Haruki Murakami among them, Auster is noted for creating characters whose names are identical to, or can be closely identified with, his own. In this regard, he is part of a self-conscious, anti-illusionist literary “tradition” of apparent self-inscription that stretches back at least as far as Cervantes who, in *Don Quixote*, makes an entry as a captive soldier called Cervantes.

Readers of Paul Durcan's poetry will be well acquainted with this practice. While fully acknowledging Banville's anagrammatic appearances, Heaney's Sweeney and Muldoon's namesake games, it is fair to say that Durcan, more consistently than any other Irish writer of his own or previous generations, has experimented with the possibilities inherent in fashioning personae, or presences, who are named Paul Durcan. Startling and intriguing, challenging and sometimes disorientating, this kind of intervention problematises the normal relationship between reader and poem. It draws our attention to the textuality of the poem and at the same time directs our focus on to issues of identity, our own and that of the writer. Clearly the appearance of Paul Durcan in poems by Paul Durcan indicates the poet's concern with questions of authorship and autobiography, of the reflexive possibilities of writing, and of the often serious implications of comedy and self-parody. As a strategy it may have its source in literary models as diverse as Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, Brian Friel's Gar Public and Gar Private, or what H.

Porter Abbot has identified as Beckett's tendency towards "autographical action"; in terms of inter-art examples it owes a debt to the self-portraits of Francis Bacon, R.B. Kitaj and Lucien Freud or the cameo appearances of Hitchcock or Godard. But, as I argue here, this particular form of self-referentiality is closely bound up with fundamental elements in Durcan's poetics. Approached in this way, the presence of Paul discloses much about the importance for Durcan of concepts such as the multiplicity of identity and the extinction of the ego, the understanding that "life is a dream" (*Russia* 11) and "in reality fiction is all that matters" (*Daddy* 71) (implicit in which is the acknowledgement that experience, and our accounts of experience, are subjective, creative constructions), and the crucial vitality of "the mixture," specifically the mixture of poetry with visual and dramatic art. In exploring why Durcan adopts personae bearing his own name and how he deploys these figures within his poems, this article offers some suggestions as to what the technique discloses about this poet's perspectives on issues of identity and subjectivity, authorship and the construction of the poet.

When in 1967 Durcan co-published with Brian Lynch his first collection of poetry, *Endsville*, he opened it with a poem entitled "Animus Anima Amen." In it, a man called Paul falls at first sight in love with a girl called Katherine; they stay together "for about a year or so" before she goes "back to the fellow in the bloody moon" (5). (That the poem also appears, with minor revisions, in *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor* 61 and (rev. ed.) 82, and in *The Selected Paul Durcan* 1, indicates something of its intrinsic importance for Durcan, as well as his eagerness to foreground the presence of Paul in his poetry). The piece combines prose sentences and poetic lineation, a third person speaker and ten lines of spare dialogue. It also marks the first time someone called Paul appears in the poetry and the effect is unsettling. What is the nature of the relationship between Paul in the poem and Paul Durcan, the author of *Endsville* and, more specifically, this poem? Is this the same Paul whose name appears on the cover of the book? Does the poem describe an autobiographical experience or is the name a coincidence, the encounter one the poet overheard or heard about and is simply reporting? And what does the title of this 'threshold' piece suggest not only about soulful connections between lovers but between the writer's inner, imaginative life and the fictional selves he may create?

This early poem raises questions which have proven increasingly pertinent with each new collection. What it indicates is that from the outset of his vocation as poet Durcan was prepared, if not eager, to insert his own name into his poems, that he was unafraid to implicate his 'author self' in the writing. As Auster put it when asked about his brand of "disguised autobiography," the impetus seems to be "to take my name off the cover and put it inside the story. I wanted to open up the process, to break down walls, to expose the plumbing" (*The Art of Hunger*, 308). While Durcan himself claims not to have been consciously aware of implementing this technique until it was drawn to his attention by Donal McCann, who had read some of the poems which were to be published in *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* (Durcan, Interview), the presence of Paul does occur increasingly frequently across the volumes leading up to *Christmas*

Day (1996), *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* (1999) and *Cries of an Irish Caveman* (2001), where it reaches a crescendo before tapering off in the recent collections *The Art of Life* (2004), *The Laughter of Mothers* (2007) and *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have my Being* (2012). For instance, in the 1983 collection *Jumping the Train Tracks with Angela*, “The Problem of Fornication on the Blarney Chronicle” proffers a scathing satire on irresponsible reporting and replies to criticism of Durcan’s poetic responses to ‘The Troubles.’ Here, “Horse-Face Durcan” is shunned as a sentimental editor who would rather run a front page “tear-jerker” about the IRA’s murder of an unemployed Protestant man than focus his attentions on who’s doing what to whom in the reporter’s room and the typists’ pool (17). The Durcan who shows up in the comic, self-parodic “Madame De Furstenberg” is chastised by the eponymous speaker for continually failing to pull up his trousers and for tending “to take a grip of somebody else/Rather than to take a grip of yourself” (*Angela* 22).

These glimpses evolve into the more complex sightings afforded in “Doris Fashions,” “Family Planning Clinic” (*Going Home to Russia*, 1987), “Paul,” “Homage a Cezanne” (*Daddy, Daddy*, 1990), “The Levite and His Concubine at Gibeah,” “The Knucklebone Player” (*Crazy About Women* 1991) and “Woman Washing a Pig” (*Give Me Your Hand*, 1994). Of these “Doris Fashions” and “Paul” lend perhaps the sharpest insight into how these appearances problematise the notion of a single, unified sense of subjective and/or authorial identity. In “Doris Fashions” the speaker is a prisoner on parole who, while he waits for a prison van to collect him and then return him to jail, catches sight of his reflection in the window of a shop called Doris Fashions:

I glimpsed a strange man whom I do not know
 And whom on the odd occasion I have glimpsed him before
 I have not warmed to – his over-intense visage,
 Hurted, hurtful,
 All that ice, and all that eyebrow.

All my life I’ve dreamed of having a motto of my own –
 My own logo – my own signature tune.
 Waiting for the prison van to collect me,
 In the window of Doris Fashions I see through myself
 And adopt as my logo, my signature tune,
 Doris Fashions –
 Trying it out to myself on the road out to the prison:
 Doris Fashions Paul Durcan – Paul Durcan Doris Fashions. (*Russia* 51-2)

The persona here is deeply self-alienated and acutely aware of the gulf between how he perceives himself and how he is perceived by others. His realisation, though, that because “Doris Fashions...there is that much/To be salvaged from the wreckage of the moment” coupled with his seeing through himself is an acknowledgement of the constructed or

“fashioned” nature of identity and, by extension, of poetry. Whether we construe Doris as a variety of female deity or everywoman reader, what the “logo” or “signature tune” seems to imply is that Paul Durcan, the Paul Durcan in the poem, is an author self, an ‘embodiment’ of Barthes’s author entering into his own death through writing (142-8) or of Foucault’s “author function” (101-20). In other words, Paul’s presence serves to remind us that, paradoxically, the poet is not identical with his poem or even *in* it in the autobiographical way he may appear to be, but rather that the relationship between writer and writing is one of estrangement shot through with the sense of a complex multiplicity of selves. As Borges puts it, in “Borges and I,” a contemplative parable on precisely this subject, “I am not sure which of us it is that’s writing this page” (324).

A comparable scenario to that in “Doris Fashions” occurs in “Paul,” the opening poem of Durcan’s 1990 collection *Daddy, Daddy*. Here, the first person speaker is unexpectedly invited by a priest to act as a mourner at the funeral of a stranger. ““He was about the same age as yourself,/All we know about him is that his name was Paul’,” which fact has been verified by a ‘dear John’ letter presumably found on the dead man’s person. Kneeling alongside the coffin, the speaker feels like a new mother “With her infant in the cot at the foot of the bed,” which contrasts with his subsequent intuition at the graveside “that the coffin was empty;/That Paul, whoever he was,/Was somewhere else” (172-3). Reading these lines we get the unnerving impression that the speaker (whom we are encouraged to believe might also be called Paul) has somehow given birth to his own death, or been compelled to bear witness to the displacement, if not the erasure, of his own identity. Here, the presence of Paul draws attention, once again, to the multiplicity and the fragmentation of the self, and in particular to the disappearance, or perhaps more accurately the dispersal, of the writer into writing. As Durcan describes it in “Faith Healer,” apropos of ecstatic entrance into the aesthetic experience of Friel’s play, “To be wholly alive is to be wholly dead” (*Snail* 242).

One way of reading the presence of Paul Durcan in these and in subsequent poems is to regard it as an expression of how Durcan sees his identity as a poet. He is named in the poem not to close the gap between poet and poem or to merely document autobiographical experience, but rather to widen the gap between author and text, to emphasise how no ‘self’ is singular, how one’s identity is necessarily performative, and that what we are reading is a “logo,” a “signature tune” fashioned as much by the reader as the writer. We are reminded in this of Durcan’s enthusiasm for what, referencing Richard Rorty, he describes as “the casual role of the self” and the desirability of multiple shifting and evolving identities as opposed to a single identity, (Interview with the author) as well as his endorsement of Isaiah Berlin’s argument for the manifold over and against the tyranny of the one (436-98). These seminal perspectives dovetail with Durcan’s repeated emphasis on the importance to writing of the extinction of the ego, a philosophy inherited from Buddhist thought via Kavanagh. He has spoken in interview of contemplative moments, such as prayer or daydreaming, when “you let your ego melt away, and then you begin to see things and become aware of things...other than one’s

self,” (Interview with Mike Murphy) an observation akin to the Paul of *Christmas Day*’s declaration “Poetry’s another word/For losing everything/Except purity of heart” (40) and his feeling that he is “Replete with emptiness, the right kind of emptiness” (76-7). It is to this end that the speaker in “A Goose in the Frost” implores “Let my ego die” (*Christmas* 85) and that the lover in “The Toll Bridge” answers the question of what it means to be a writer with “To be a writer is to be nothing” (*Snail* 249). All of which are ways of saying that, far from being an expression of extreme egotism, the presence of Paul tells us just how willing and able this poet is to argue that “The poem is the true story./The true story is a lie” (*Christmas* 57) or, as he so eloquently has in “Around the Lighthouse,” “In reality fiction is all that matters” (*Daddy* 71). These are the creations of a writer who is fully cognisant that to be a poet is to relinquish any notion of unified self or ‘authorhood’ into the work, to accept as one’s motto the epigraph from Arthur Hugh Clough which prefaces Durcan’s recently published collected works, *Life is a Dream*: “I am, I think, perhaps the most perfect stranger present” (np).

Running parallel to those poems in which Paul Durcan makes an appearance are two cognate subsets of pieces in which, as in “Doris Fashions,” speakers regard their reflections in mirrors and windows (for example, “Antwerp, 1984,” “Exterior with Plant, Reflection Listening,” or “Meeting the President”), or which are either explicitly designated “self-portraits” in their titles (“Self-Portrait,” “Self-Portrait, Nude with Steering Wheel,” “Self-Portrait 95,” “Self-Portrait as an Irish Jew”), or might qualify as such by virtue of their verifiably autobiographical content (“Ark of the North,” “Christmas Day” and “Give Him Bondi,” the marriage breakdown and Russia sequences in *The Berlin Wall Café* and *Going Home to Russia*, the “Cries of an Irish Caveman” sequence, the father and mother sections of *Daddy*, *Daddy* and *The Laughter of Mothers*, and a large proportion of *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil*). The relationship of these strains of self-portraiture to the Paul poems is significant. Across his collections Durcan has shown himself to be what some critics might perceive as inordinately invested in regarding himself from a variety of angles, and under a range of diverse guises. “Durcan, Paul, visiting poet” (*Mothers* 68) is depicted as everything from a parodically deflated “epitome of futility” (*Cries* 13) to a comical, herbal tea drinking “exotic creature” (*Christmas* 45) and the chronically lonely “Paul – in the door of his cave pawing air” (*Caveman* 160). Durcan himself has suggested that the many self-reflexive poems, and particularly those which feature his actual name, “could be regarded as, amongst other things, self-portraits. They express the same attitude as the painters, the ones who were doing an awful lot of self-portraits” (Interview with the author). His engagement with the visual arts, not only painting but sculpture, photography and film as well, is evidenced throughout his oeuvre. A large number of poems make ekphrastic responses to visual works, while some have incorporated cinematic or painterly structural and compositional techniques. Together they contribute to the inter-art aesthetic – one aspect of his ethical adherence to the pluralist notion of “The Mixture” (*Snail* 264) – Durcan has cultivated and promoted. That he should undertake a type of literary self-portraiture, especially

one that involves naming himself as the subject, seems both natural and inevitable. In the Foreword to *Life Is A Dream* he writes, “For as long as I can remember I have regarded the publication of each volume of my verse as being akin to an exhibition” (xix). Integral to these “exhibitions” is the distinct line of self-portraiture running from *Endsville*’s “Anima Animus Amen” and “Self-Portrait” through to the Paul Durcan who, in *The Laughter of Mothers*, receives a tortoise’s blessing: “after all these multifarious years/You are entitled indeed to call yourself a poet” (68).

That the inscription of a persona called Paul Durcan constitutes a kind of self-portraiture is most consistently evident in the long poem *Christmas Day* (1996), and in the influx of such occurrences in the immediately subsequent collections *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* (1999) and *Cries of an Irish Caveman* (2001). In an RTE Radio interview with Mike Murphy shortly after the publication of *Christmas Day*, Durcan commented on this aspect of the poem:

As I was writing this piece over two years or so, I had a particular self-portrait by Lucien Freud in my mind right from the start, and then other self-portraits came and went, such as Stanley Spencer’s self-portrait in the Tate in London. And I was trying consciously in language to do what painters do in painting, to maintain the unflinching gaze...to ‘tilt’ it so as to write about things like loneliness without self-pity, to write about other than one’s self, to get out of the trap of one’s self into the whole wide world and try and make a picture a portrait. (Interview with Mike Murphy)

That effort to “write about other than one’s self, to get out of the trap of one’s self” is fundamental to why Paul Durcan appears in Paul Durcan’s poems. To “tilt” one’s vision so radically as to slip the subjectivity of ego, to shift the focus from documented ‘reality’ on to the fictional, to acknowledge the textuality of the poem and the multiplicity of identity are objectives most effectively realised through the presence of Paul Durcan, a persona which for Durcan is a distillation of his fundamental aesthetic concerns.

In the course of *Christmas Day* the narrator regards himself from a number of angles and perspectives, often to comic, self-deflating effect, but equally with brutal honesty and enviable acceptance. Paul, as he is portrayed by Paul Durcan, is by turns courteous and romantic, deeply alone and painfully woman-hungry, an anxious, hilarious, stuttering oddball outsider and an eager-to-be-elated fifty year old child. He is “‘The Tinker Durcan’ – One of life’s travellers” (35) and in company with Frank one of a pair of Russians, of “Dostoy./Old Believers./ Grasshoppers. Crickets./...Dubliners” (42-3). He is “Paul ‘Juan Fangio’ Durcan” (49), “a stoat...an ould saint/With barely the price of the busfare” (62).

This cubistic yet essentially consistent depiction evolves into the diversity of serio-playful self-portraits concentrated in *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* and *Cries of an Irish Caveman*. “Self-Portrait ‘95” invokes a humourously Whitmanesque “Do I contradict myself?”:

Paul Durcan would try the patience of the Queen of Tonga.

When he was in Copacabana he was homesick for
Annaghmakerrig;
When he got back to Annaghmakerrig
He was homesick for Copacabana. (*Brazil* 119)

Humour is the baseline in the self-portraits, as is readily apparent in “Televised Poetry Encounter, Casa Fernando Pessoa, Lisboa.” Here “The Irish poet Mr Paul Durcan” tells his interviewer, ““To be the Irish poet of the twentieth century...Is to be an Irishman playing for England in Brazil!”” It is significant that this “encounter” should take place in the *casa* of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, for as the interviewee discloses, he shares with Pessoa a cultivation of heteronyms:

I write
Under the pen name
Paul Durcan
But my real name –
Like Balthus
Or William Trevor –
Is Tinkerly Luxemburgo. (*Brazil* 28)

Like the compensatory need “to become Patrick Kavanagh myself” (*Brazil* 138) or the assumed names Tulip, The White Ox of Foxrock and Malodorous in the “Cries of an Irish Caveman” sequence, this flirting with heteronyms contributes to Durcan’s portrait of the poet as multi-dimensional, poly-vocal, fluid rather than fixed, his identity capable of “emptying out” and dextrously metamorphosing into multitudes. Tinkerly Luxemburgo is a particularly apt alias in this regard. A comic rewriting of Wanderley Luxemburgo da Silva, the famous Brazilian football manager and former football player, the name conjures Durcan’s great affection for radio, his “tinkering at the dials” to bring in, in his youth, Radio Luxemburg. It also recalls the “Protestant Tinker” and the oppositional disposition which has fuelled Durcan’s vision; while like the maligned “travelling tinker” his ways may raise the ire of the “settleds,” his liminal location favours him with fresh sight-lines, glimpses of the lux of knowledge. Tinkerly is a trickster, thus his amusing antics and his “Wilde” fantasy in “Tinkerly Luxemburgo” (*Brazil* 105-7) are at once pure play and serious statement. As the repeated refrain “*If you are going to be lonely/be lonely in style*” conveys, being Tinkerly is not just a game, it is a vocation.

In her study of Shakespeare, Marjorie Garber observes, “The search for an author . . . reveals more about the searcher than about the sought” (27). The presence of Paul Durcan in the poems unquestionably has a “special relationship” with Paul Durcan, poet, part of which may be to dramatise key aspects of his poetics, in particular a confluence or “mixture” of verbal and visual practice. As “searchers,” though, we are well advised to avoid the temptation of reading that presence as straightforward autobiography. Subject to our own subjectivities, however we choose to regard Paul’s paintings of Paul, we must bear in mind the opening stanza of Durcan’s “Notes Towards a Supreme Reality”:

Because the supreme reality in life is fiction
 It is vital not to meet the writer in person.
 There is no necessary linkage between the egotist who is overweight and vain
 And the magic connections, dreams, constructions of his brain.
 (Brazil 112)

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