The Poet Durcan & I

O Poeta Durcan & Eu

Alan Gilsenan

Abstract: *A personal and subjective reflection by writer and film-maker Alan Gilsenan on his memories and relationship with Paul Durcan and his poetry. Gilsenan has collaborated with Durcan on three film projects: an experimental film of the long poem* Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno*; a documentary profile,* Paul Durcan: The Dark School *(1944- 1971); and the poet provided the voice for* ULYSSES | FILM*, a visual installation in response to the iconic novel by James Joyce, commissioned for Dublin's new MOLI (Museum of Literature Ireland).*

Keywords: *memory; subjective reflection; Paul Durcan.*

Resumo: *Uma reflexão pessoal e subjetiva do escritor e cineasta Alan Gilsenan sobre suas memórias e relacionamento com Paul Durcan e sua poesia. Gilsenan colaborou com Durcan em três projetos cinematográficos: um filme experimental do longo poema* Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno*; um perfil documental,* Paul Durcan: The Dark School *(1944-1971); e o poeta emprestou a sua voz para* ULISSES | FILM*, uma instalação visual em resposta ao romance icônico de James Joyce, encomendada para o novo MOLI (Museum of Literature Ireland) de Dublin.*

Palavras-chave: *memória; reflexão subjetiva; Paul Durcan.*

The main thing - the first and last - to say
About the poetry reading last night in the Royal Hibernian Hotel
Is that the Royal Hibernian Hotel does not exist[1]

We pulled in at the Galloping Green, the Poet Durcan and I, a pub on what was once known rather quaintly as the Stillorgan by-pass, in the southern hinterland of County Dublin. Paul remembered it from years gone by. It had been a favoured watering hole of the great Séan Ó Riada. The legendary piper had lived somewhere close-by, the poet recalled, but the place, like everywhere, had changed beyond belief. It seems that Durcan had a memory for every passing corner, that the ghosts of the past were endlessly alive to him. Whenever he ventured out – and that is seldom these days – from what he terms his "cave" in Ringsend, he would recall people and places vividly wherever we went.

In this – if little else – he had much in common with his forbidding father, recalled with poignant affection in his poem "Hymn to My Father" from his collection *Going Home to Russia*:

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> You had a history for every milestone,
> A saga for every place name –
> The Bovril Sign, the Ballast Office Clock, the Broadstone –
> And so, at your knee, at your elbow, I became you.
> Estranged as we are,
> I am glad that it was in this life
> I loved you,
> Not the next.

As we drove south that evening, we passed the Royal Dublin Society Show Grounds in Ballsbridge, on down the Merrion Road to St Vincent's Hospital and turning right, up past Elm Park Golf Club and on to the home of RTÉ (the national broadcaster), turning left and out the main road past University College Dublin and – as the venerable poet throws a wary glance in its direction – past the ominous spectre of St John of God's. "John-o-Gods", as it's known colloquially, is a psychiatric hospital for the lost and deranged of South County Dublin.

It was now turning seven o'clock on the evening of the poet's 75th birthday. We continue driving, on our way to a modest birthday celebration, when the poet requests a brief pit-stop. A quick one to break the journey southwards. Just like the old days. Just the one. I pull over and am about to turn the engine off, when we hear RTÉ radio's evening arts programme begin with a brief tribute for the poet's birthday. Sean Rocks, the presenter, says some kind words and then introduces a recording by Paul of his "The Drimoleague Blues":

> Oh I've got the Drimoleague Blues, I've got the Drimoleague Blues,
> I've got the Drimoleague Blues so bad I can't move:
> Even if you were to plug in Drimoleague to every oil well in Arabia –
> I'd still have the Drimoleague Blues.

As the rush-hour traffic streams by beyond the dividing bush, Durcan listens intensely to his own voice as we sat in my jeep on the lay-by. He seemed transfixed by his own sonorous voice, his punchy, bluesy incantation. When the poem ends, the radio programme segues into his powerful spoken word collaboration with Van Morrison:

> Justin, gentler than a man
> I am down on my knees
> At the wireless knobs
> I am down on my knees
> At those wireless knobs
> *Telefunken, Telefunken*
> And I'm searching for
> Luxembourg, Luxembourg,
> Athlone, Budapest, AFN,
> Hilversum, Helvetia
> In the days before rock 'n' roll.[2]

By now, he is head down, intent, singing along with growing intensity. "*Telefunken, Telefunken*". He seemed pleased by the tribute, something of the troubling day salvaged. "In the days before rock 'n' roll" When the song finished, we go into the pub for a pint. Just the one. He asks for an

unfashionable pint of Smithwicks, if memory serves me and we sit together, content for a moment.

A woman at the next table is reading a book. A novel perhaps. There is a cold cup of coffee on the table in front of her. I suspect that she recognises Paul. I toast the poet's birthday, trying to inject a small modicum of celebration into the moment. The women notices this and offers to take our photograph. We agree and I sit in close to Paul. Click, or whatever artificial sound iPhones make. But she hasn't recognised Paul. She's just a kindly woman who possibly imagines that we are, perhaps, a father and son, out celebrating a quiet birthday together. Seventy-five. A fine age and not done yet.

We might have been an estranged father and son, I imagine she thinks. (I don't know why I think estranged?). Paul asks her what her name is. It's an old-world courtesy that he often displays. She tells us and then returns to her book. I don't remember her name but I suspect that Paul might. For Paul Durcan remembers everyone and every place. Their spirits never leave him.

The ghosts are always with him. They populate the real and imaginary landscapes upon which he lightly treads. His fellow poet and great friend Michael Harnett is one such ghost. Hartnett once wrote a poem in celebration of Durcan – "The Poet as Black Sheep" which concludes:

> Let the bourgeoisie beware,
> who could not control his head
> and kept it in their care
> until the brain bled;
> this head is a poet's head,
> this head holds a galaxy.[3]

When they were young men, struggling bards together, they would stroll on Sandymount Strand before the pubs opened and talk of James Joyce. He was a poet to them. The king of them all. They dreamed of becoming James Joyce. "No", laughs Durcan, "Hartnett thought he was James Joyce!"

Years later, when I asked Paul to record passages from *Ulysses* for a film work that I was making, he re-read it seven times. We would talk about it endlessly and, when he read it aloud, he would effortlessly find its elusive internal rhythms and make the words sing – a wild operetta of voices, accents and tones. As if the book was coming from deep within him. Or vice versa.

He loved the lists especially, Joyce's litanies of names. And fragments of song. They had that in common too. The mundane and the magical. He inhabited each part, played each role. For, like Joyce himself, as Hartnett so neatly put it, Durcan's head holds a galaxy.

One can forget what an extraordinary performer Paul Durcan is. His readings are theatrical events in themselves. But there is a cost, of course. The crushing nerves before. The flights missed and phone calls not taken. Even backstage, in the dark embrace of the Gate Theatre's wings, the Poet Durcan seems petrified. There will have been rituals and procedures to bring him to this brink, into this darkness of the edge of the footlights. Exact instructions about when he should be collected and what he might eat. A strong cappuccino with two sugars must be standing by.

But here he is finally – *standing by* himself – as a voice beyond draws to the end of a fulsome introduction. *Ladies and gentlemen, Paul Durcan!* The applause erupts. He hesitates, his bony fingers to his forehead in a feeble gesture of protection. His hawkish eyes blink quickly,

twice, and his face allows itself one pained grimace and, then, steeling himself, he nods to you. "*Okay*" he might whisper, "...*and thank you.*" Always thank you although none is needed. And then he is off – like a shot. Into the light of his magnificence.

He would, invariably, be magnificent too. The consummate performer once again. Our tragic clown. A man of many voices. He could be uproariously funny too, of course, and then, with one subtle unseen shift of emphasis or tone, heart-breaking. At that reading in the Gate Theatre in 2015, to mark the publication of *The Days of Surprise*, Durcan read his long poem "Visiting Elizabeth at Home" which recalls a visit to his dear and dying friend, Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy. His reading took us back to that seemingly banal afternoon which is transformed, by times, into a tragi-comic masterpiece:

> Mother, dead, is very happy.
> I had to go to the bank this morning.
> Did you know – banks
> are not for people any more?
> Still, I said to the girl, "I am meeting
> Paul Durcan at two o'clock –
> Wouldn't you like to be me?
> Of course, you would. I can see the envy
> written all over your face."

Each reading of a poem, regardless of its length, seemed a complete aria in which time stood still for a moment. In between reading, he would shuffle between the marked pages of his books and random scraps of paper, speaking occasionally, and then, perhaps – before resuming – casting a brief glance left and right, smiling a surprised smile to spirits unknown.

He steadies himself and begins another poem. "Breaking News", the next in sequence from *The Days of Surprise*. He begins with the news of the sudden death of Seamus Heaney, announced on the radio as Durcan drives through the Mayo countryside. Setting a fire back in his cottage, he hears Heaney's voice address him from beyond:

> "Are you all right down there, Poet Durcan?"
> (that's how he always addressed me down thirty-seven
> years –
> "Poet Durcan")
> "Calm down, I'm only dead, I'm only beginning
> The new life, only hours and minutes into it;

The mood of the reading changes. Throughout the brief trajectory of the poem, Durcan gently guides the audience from the mundane to the shocking and beyond into a transcendent moment of hope and grace. And, amidst it all, an acknowledgement of Heaney's gentle concern for the man upon whom he bestowed the title "Poet Durcan."

That title – the "Poet Durcan" – and the respect that it confers upon the bearer means a huge amount to him. For the biggest insult to his very being is this perceived lack of respect for the role of the poet in society, especially in the world of conservative, "official" Ireland. Over the years, there have often been murmurs of discontent about this pressing matter, memories of brusque dismissals in doctor's surgeries and elsewhere. "They have no respect for the poet" Paul would often observe with sadness and anger.

This conservative arena is the world of his father, too, of course. The Judge. That dark, stern and beloved shadow that haunts so many of his poems and the landscape of his childhood in Dartmouth Square in Dublin. A man who had scant regard for the role of poet. Who, perhaps, saw his student-poet of a son as a disappointment. A man who called Paul "a sissy" and would later organise for Paul to be abducted from the legendary O'Donoghue's pub and strong-armed away to a psychiatric hospital in Grangegorman. It would be the first of many such "interventions". (One senses that Paul has spent much of his life glancing over his shoulder for the doctors coming to get him). But his father was also the man who bought him his first long-player record on Grafton Street and bought his first copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*:

> When a few weeks later
> I got to reading *Ulysses* myself
> I found it as strange as my father
> And as discordant.
> It was not until four years later
> When a musical friend
> Gave me my first lessons
> That Ulysses began to sing for my father:
> Daddy, Daddy,
> My little man, I adore you.[4]

Ironically, it was in the Grangegorman Mental Hospital that Paul finally received some small benediction from the Judge. In another poem in his collection *Daddy, Daddy*, he recalls his twenty-first birthday and a Gaelic football match against the Mullingar Mental Hospital. Durcan played in goals and made a few spectacular saves:

> I may not have been mesmeric
> But I had not been mediocre.
> In your eyes I had achieved something at last.
> On my twenty-first birthday I had played on a winning tree
> The Grangegorman Mental Hospital team
> Seldom if ever again in your eyes
> Was I to rise to these heights.[5]

But the Poet Durcan would never quite escape the feeling of being an outsider. A man on the edge of society. The wise fool who saw through our hypocrisies, who sang our praises and shared our sorrows. In this, he is like Patrick Kavanagh, one of the poets and people that he admires most. Kavanagh is now the patron saint of the spectral ghosts that haunt Durcan's imaginary landscape – stretching down the Grand Canal from Dartmouth Square towards Parsons bookshop on Baggot Street bridge and then swinging left towards Merrion Row with its famous watering holes like Toners and Doheny & Nesbitt's. In the late-Sixties and Seventies, this was Durcan's literary world, sometimes called Baggotonia – a cultural underworld stretching back to the 1950's, a rag-tag community that he shared with his friends like Brian Lynch (with whom he shared his first poetry collection *Endsville*), Leland Bardwell, Macdara Woods, John Jordan, Caitlín Maude, James Liddy and Dickie Riordan.

Kavanagh was both Durcan's mentor and lodestar. Together they would discuss poetry and other less important things. Once, the elder Kavanagh asked him to transcribe the lyrics of Bob Dylan's *Desolation Row* so they could examine his poetic structure together. At

that time, Kavanagh once remarked: "I put all my faith in Paul Durcan... Wait until he has his second wind." That meant a lot to Poet Durcan. And the second wind blew.

On occasion, sometimes I drive Paul to the supermarket to do some shopping. What they used to call "*doing the messages*". Often, parked outside the Tesco supermarket in Irishtown, we would talk of this and that. Other ghosts – past and present: Derek Mahon, Tom Hickey, Anthony Cronin, Francis Bacon, Munira Mutran, President Michael D Higgins (*and Sabina!*), Caitriona Crowe, Ivor Browne, Donal McCann and the philosopher mystic John Moriarty.

Another outsider, the great John Moriarty would also hail Paul as "Poet Durcan" on the streets of Dublin on his rare visits of the city. Speaking in 2002 of Moriarty's autobiography *Nostos* during his popular radio column, Durcan could almost be talking about himself:

> He is a man who after a lifetime's sometimes wonderful, sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic struggle has become a Christian for the first time. He sees Christ as the Hero of Evolution and he hears Christ beseeching humanity to follow Christ out of official Christianity into a new evolution of mankind. (*Paul Durcan's Diary*)

There is, perhaps, something a fellow pilgrim soul about Durcan – a man with high regard for the great sermons of our time, who invokes Christian imagery and symbolism in his poetry and who might even be found some afternoon, sitting silently in the incensed-infused coolness of St Patrick's Church in Ringsend, a mere stone's throw from the Tesco supermarket.

Afterwards, he might even light a lonely candle perhaps, dropping a euro coin into the copper slot, hearing it fall. I can see him there, standing at the back of the church, searching through the community newsletters and donation envelopes, looking for a spare missal from the previous Sunday's mass to bring home and read. He would then slip it into his tweed jacket's inside pocket, alongside his small and crumpled note book and pen, and then glide out into the nebulous world beyond to walk home.

But, in truth, I suspect that he is always really going home to Mayo, back towards the golden western light of his childhood. In an early collection, *Sam's Cross,* he accompanies his father in the winter of 1949:

> Leaving behind us the alien, foreign city of Dublin
> My father drove us through the night in an old Ford Anglia,
> His five-year-old son in the seat beside him,
> The rexine seat of red leatherette,
> And a yellow moon peered in through the windscreen.
> "Daddy, Daddy," I cried, "Pass out the moon,"
> But no matter how hard he drove he could not pass out the moon.
> Each town we passed through was another milestone
> And their names were magic passwords into eternity:
> Kilcock, Kinnegad, Strokestown, Elphin,
> Tarmonbarry, Tulsk, Ballaghedereen, Ballyvarry;
> Now we were in Mayo and the next stop was Turlough,
> The village of Turlough in the heartland of Mayo,
> And my father's mother's house, all oil-lamps and women,
> And my bedroom over the public bar below,
> And in the morning cattle-cries and cock-crows:

> Life's seemingly seamless garment gorgeously rent
> By their screeches and bellowings. And in the evenings
> I walked with my father in the high grass down by the river
> Talking with him – an unheard-of thing in the city.

But there was always the pathos on their return to the city and the family home in Dartmouth Square:

> But home was not home and the moon could be no more outflanked
> Than the daylight nightmare of Dublin city:
> Back down along the canal we chugged into the city
> And each lock-gate tolled our mutual doom;
> And railings and palings and asphalt and traffic lights,
> And blocks after blocks of so-called "new" tenements –
> Thousands of crosses of loneliness planted
> In the narrowing grave of the life of the father;
> In the wide, wide cemetery of the boy's childhood.[6]

Later, in his 2007 collection *The Laughter of Mothers*, Durcan imagines his mother, suffering with Alzheimer's, absconding with two other residents and driving west to their death:

> What colours were the dressing gowns? she was asked.
> "They are wearing gold" – she replied.
> Wreathed on the weir downstream from the bridge
> Police sub-aqua divers retrieved the three bodies,
> One of whom, of course, was my own emaciated
> mother,
> Whose fingerprints were later found on the wheel of
> the car.
> She had been driving west, west to Westport,
> Westport on the west coast of Ireland
> In the County of Mayo,
> Where she had grown up with her mother and sisters
> In the War of Independence and the Civil War,
> Driving west to Streamstown three miles outside
> Westport,
> Where on afternoons in September in 1920,
> Ignoring the roadblocks and the assassinations,
> They used walk down Sunnyside by the sea's edge,
> The curlews and the oystercatchers,
> The upturned black currachs drying out on the stones,
> And picnic on the machair grass above the seaweed,
> Under the chestnut trees turning autumn gold
> And the fuchsia bleeding like troupes of crimson-tutu'd
> ballerinas in the black hedgerows.[7]

He can go missing too. This Poet Durcan. Disappears into the gloaming. Into his own spiraling darkness. The phone-calls unanswered, the messages unreturned. It can be frustrating sometimes, of course, and worrying too. But just when you are on the verge of despair, a

message will emerge out of the ether, a golden nugget offered to the world – full of tenderness and thanks – and all seems well again.

Notes

1 "The Poetry Reading Last Night in the Royal Hibernian Hotel".
2 "The Days before Rock 'n' Roll".
3 Michael Hartnett: Notes on My Contemporaries, 3, "The Poet as Black Sheep".
4 "Ulysses"
5 "Sport"
6 "Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949".
7 "Golden Mothers Driving West".

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