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On Paul Durcan and the Visual Arts: Gender, Genre, Medium

Paul Durcan e as Artes Visuais: Gênero, Identidade, Expressão

Rui Carvalho Homem

Abstract: *The poetry of Paul Durcan finds one of its major attractions in its acknowledgement and crossing of boundaries. Such borderlines are of various types: they are semiotic and intermedial, involving Paul Durcan's deployment of verbal resources to co-opt or challenge representations in other systems of signification – especially visual media; they are cultural and political, concerning the poet's processing of elements from both Irish and global cultures; and they are those proper to gendered identities, highlighting the positions of men and women as both subjects and objects of a variety of inscriptions. This essay approaches Durcan's (literally)* transgressive *writing and the intellectual and disciplinary challenges it poses by questioning our ability to read poems and pictures, and accept the ostensible self-containment of political conformations and modes of identity.*

Keywords: *Visual arts; transgression; gender; genre; medium.*

Resumo: *A obra de Paul Durcan encontra uma das suas feições mais atraentes no modo como reconhece fronteiras e explora travessias. As linhas divisórias que a sua poesia cruza regularmente são de vários tipos: são semióticas e intermediais, quando Durcan interpela verbalmente representações noutros sistemas de significação – em particular nas artes visuais; são culturais e políticas, envolvendo o processamento poético de circunstâncias irlandesas ou globais; e questionam identidades de gênero, salientando as perplexidades de mulheres e homens como sujeitos e objetos de uma multiplicidade de inscrições. Este ensaio aborda a escrita (literalmente)* transgressiva *de Durcan e os desafios intelectuais e disciplinares que ela comporta, ao interrogar o modo como lemos poemas e imagens, mas também como aceitamos a auto-contenção de configurações políticas e identitárias.*

Palavras-chave: *Artes visuais; transgressão; gênero; mídia.*

This essay draws on a major commonplace of contemporary discourses: it acknowledges and interrogates boundaries. The crossings to be discussed are of various types: they are semiotic and intermedial, involving Paul Durcan's deployment of verbal resources to co-opt or challenge representations in other systems of signification – especially visual media; they are cultural and political, concerning the poet's processing of elements from both Irish and global cultures; and they are those proper to gendered identities, highlighting the positions of men and women as both subjects and objects of a variety of inscriptions. Studying such (literally) *transgressive*[1] processes poses challenges of an intellectual and disciplinary nature: it appeals to one's capacity to read both poems and pictures (proving one's literacy as much as "picturacy"[2]); and, in broader cultural terms, it queries the self-containment of political conformations and modes of identity.

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There is a long tradition in European discourses on literature and the arts for the relationship between word and image to be construed either in terms of homology or in terms of *agon*, of conflict. The former model was epitomised in the "sister arts" commonplace, which enjoyed considerable favour for several centuries (cf Mitchell 1986: 42-3). As for the latter, it found historically influential footholds in Leonardo's *paragone delle arti* in his *Tratatto della Pittura* (posthumous, 1542), and, in rather different terms, in the polarization of verbal and visual that G.E. Lessing theorized in Laocoon (1766) (cf Heffernan 1993: 1 and *passim*; Mitchell 1986: 43; Louvel 2002:12).

In my reading of Durcan's poetic processing of visual representations, I will in fact steer clear of the polar opposites of fraternity vs contention as operative models. Instead, I will understand rather the rapport of verbal and visual as marked by ambivalence and a practice of creative, studied – and often characteristically provocative – uncertainty. This uncertainty sometimes hinges on the communicational value of language (the poet's chosen expressive medium), its challenges made more evident by the relationships that Durcan's poems establish with pre-texts both in his own work and that of others. However, it is especially at the interface of verbal and non-verbal that such uncertainty surfaces, in transactions that often take the form of intersemiotic translation. This notion and phrase, famously coined by Roman Jakobson more than sixty years ago to extend an understanding of translation to forms of signification beyond the verbal medium (Jakobson *passim*), will underlie much of what follows precisely because of its critical effectiveness whenever the object of study involves reading texts *both* against other texts *and* artefacts in visual media.

Opportunities for generating meaning arise from challenge more often than from coalescence: this broad perception will here apply both to the general expressive framework (in this case, defined by textual and medial transits), and to those cultural forms around which identities tend to position themselves – often (again) on a relational basis, rather than on a rationale of autarky and entrenchment. It is in this light that I will be discussing Durcan's inclination to deploy a relational poetics in order to address some of the defining myths of contemporary cultures, with a prominent focus on Ireland, puncturing in the process those assumptions of stability, autonomy and continuity on which such myths are often grounded. As argued below, Durcan probes and teases such constructs through forms of referential mismatch, deliberate misreadings that derive additional cogency from the poems' engagement with objects in another medium; and this lends a surprisingly literal import to this poet's reputation for iconoclasm – etymologically, a "breaking of pictures."[3]

Indeed, Durcan's place in the broader contexts of contemporary Irish writing has consistently been one of sustained dissent, characterized by the use of verse for the often perplexed encounters between selfhood and contexts (both Irish and otherwise) that prove challenging in their cultural, ethical and political absurdities.[4] His often denunciatory verse has resorted to strategies for defamiliarising the familiar (and familial) which make 'm'any of his poems take an apparently absurd premise and develop it to a telling extreme", as "representation of the ordinary world is overlaid with shifting, idiosyncratic visions of life" (Collins 2003: 219).

Durcan has tended to derive, verbally, such extraordinary "visions" of an (otherwise) ordinary human scene from prior visual representations, found especially in painting. This has happened with a regularity and intensity that show his intermedial practice to be programmatic rather than incidental, as indeed proved by his two major volumes from the early 1990s responding to museum collections – *Crazy About Women* (1991; The National Gallery of Ireland) and *Give Me Your Hand* (1994; National Gallery, London). Again in a sustained manner, his ekphrastic writing –

i.e., his "verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 1993: 3) – has privileged the challenges posed by human bonds, often taking the form of dysfunctional relations. The particular cogency of such concerns in an Irish context has been pointedly noted by Colm Tóibín: "In Ireland, what happens within the family remains so secretive, so painfully locked within each person, that any writer who deals with the dynamics of family life stands apart" (Tóibín 1996: 22). And Edna Longley has stressed the disturbing but also redressive potential in Durcan's scenarios of troubled families – with an emphasis on gender: "He subverts oppressive patriarchy by playing around with gender roles and with male expectations of women's status and behaviour"; "[his] utopia is predicated on a likely reform of relations between the sexes" (Longley 1994: 215, 224).

The complex ethics and politics of such scenarios are especially brought out when violence or misery characterise the speaker's intents or insights. Such is the case when the persona in "The Vision of St Hubert – *after Breughel*" (from *The Berlin Wall Café*, 1985) reveals: "I decided to hunt down my wife" (69).[5] The poem further constructs this male misogynous voice as violent and fascistic by including references to "Gauleiters" and "Storm-Troopers", even if his account proves ultimately a version of Hubert's Pauline tale of redemption (69-70). Other examples of troubled families and marriages in Durcan's ekphrastic writing include, in *Daddy, Daddy* (1990), "Susannah and the Elders – *after Ludovico Carracci*", in which the biblical episode is translated into a first-person narrative of a son disowned by his father who first rejects his marriage, and then desires his daughter-in law (137-8). Durcan himself has quirkily acknowledged his intense attraction to narratives of family and marriage, and the intermedial indirections he has favoured to express it, when he claimed, in a preface to *Crazy About Women*, that "picture-making" and poetry were "the two preoccupations of my life", and opted to trope himself therefore as an artist with "two spouses" (xi). The reach of this self-description (its cogency, in vehicle as in tenor) can be gauged from how often in his writing an alertness to the ethics and politics of gender relations coexists and overlaps with a willingness to reflect on the makings of his art.

Of these, the element of sociopolitical denunciation may prove more easily apparent to most readers for its explicitness. A relatively early piece, "The Perfect Nazi Family is Alive and Well and Prospering in Modern Ireland" (from his 1983 collection *Jumping the Train Tracks with Angela*), is one of the bluntest examples of Durcan's deployment of ekphrastic readings for challenging narratives of home and family. The poem presents itself explicitly as a rendering of a painting, which is named, in a sub-title, through the formula ("after…") that otherwise identifies a translation: "after the painting *Peasant Family, Kalenberg, 1939*, by Adolf Wissel." The deliberate misreading that the poem hinges on is exposed from the outset through the adjacency of the titles respectively of poem and painting. When they are read one after the other – *Peasant Family, Kalenberg, 1939*; "The Perfect Nazi Family is Alive and Well and Prospering in Modern Ireland" – these titles, as if they were source and target texts in intralingual translation, become a verbal correlative of the intersemiotic rendering that the poem carries out. Additionally, the compounded titles become a synecdoche of the dislocation – cultural, temporal, geographic – to which the poem submits its named pictorial referent. Indeed, the painting was a famous pre-World-War-Two instance of German folk art as promoted by the Reich; but it is wrested from its original context to be satirically misconstrued, through the verbal medium, as a visual representation of rural family life in independent Ireland, already in the final quarter of the twentieth century – as suggested by the trio of TV series (*Dallas, Quicksilver, The Year of the Frenc*h) mentioned half-way down the poem.

As often happens with ekphrasis (especially when the pictorial object is conventionally figurative, as is here the case), Durcan's verbal exercise narrativises the visual representation, providing a personal and family history for the human figures, with particular emphasis on the adult male. The narrative is denunciatory, centred on the uncompromising chauvinism of an overbearing, oppressive, sectarian *pater familias* who, rather than singled out from a given social environment, is construed as an omnipresent type: "There is a photo of him on every sideboard in the county" (33). This ubiquity leaves no doubt that, contrary to the specification that some ekphrastic narratives extract from an otherwise "typical" scene, Durcan's wilful verbal misconstruction of the 1939 German painting as a characteristic depiction of a family in the Irish countryside is of the nature of a caricature, directing laughter at a sociocultural and political setup, rather than individuated human figures. Like all caricature, it will tend to target aspects of identity and behaviour that can be more easily ridiculed – as is the case with sexuality. "Billo," 'the husband," would seem to be secure in hetero-normativity, as "In bed his wife calls him – yummy, yummy, yummy" (34). However, the homophobia attributed to "Billo" at several points in the poem combines with hints of self-pleasuring fantasies and/or bestiality: "He does not dream – except when nobody is looking / Late at night behind the milk parlour / or in the pig battery with the ultra-violet light bulb" (33). This is compounded by suggestions of closet homosexuality, since the pub he owns, "*The OK Corral*," is "on the side of the Buggery Mountains" (34).

There are subtler traits, though, to Durcan's satirical piece. They emerge, for example, in his lines on how Billo "keeps a Granny in a Geranium Pot on the kitchen windowsill, / An Adoring Granny" (34). This is one of the passages in the poem in which the satirical design involves deviating from the visual factuality of the painting. Indeed, declaring the elderly woman a pot plant signals her decorative subaltern status within the family; but it also involves a creative refiguration, as the poet offers his readers a description that is unlikely to prompt a mental reconstruction of Wissel's painting as it *literally* features on the canvas. This becomes another instance of conscious, wilful misconstruction, of much greater consequence in the pre-internet era of the poem's original publication, when readers were not likely to have prompt access to a reproduction and had literally (the phrase is here particularly apt) to take his word for it. Durcan's refiguration attends to the painting's spatial economy, in which the elderly woman is on the outside of the tight overlaps and coextensions that bind the nuclear family. His alertness to her peripherality as an object for satirical re-creation is one of the few passages in the poem in which, rather than offering a literal (item by item) dislocation from one medium and context without significantly inflecting the scene's figurative contents, the pictorial object is dealt with as a representation that becomes the object of another representation; and this has the power to summon to the reader's visual imagination a shape that will hardly coincide with anything to be seen on the canvas.

This swerve from literalness in Durcan's ekphrastic exercises often combines with an ironical salience of his own (re)creative stance, as the poet ponders the scope for crafting a unique voice through a writing that otherwise foregrounds derivation and complex lineages. Such is the case with his piece on Georg Pencz's "Portrait of a Man Aged Twenty-Eight", a mid-sixteenth-century painting addressed in *Crazy About Women* (23-4). The poem opens with an Irish domestication of the portrayee that places him (now made into poetic persona) in the immediate posterity of the authorial precedent many Irish writers would like to take after: "The gravest genius to emanate from Dublin since Joyce – / That's what the pundits say about me although I am only twenty-eight" (23).

The adjective that Durcan combines with "genius", "grave", conjures a pun that is further sustained by a reference to "The Gravediggers", the pub patronised by the persona, as also by the refrain that closes the poem, "*down to the ground*" (24) – and this pun proves central, since writing that predicates itself on afterlives cannot but be obsessed by death. This connection is active in Durcan's consideration both of ordinary human existence and of that bid for the extraordinary that otherwise may define artistic aspirations. Durcan, however, organises these dimensions of the human in a nexus that ultimately endorses the defining singularity and privacy of the lyrical voice: "Art is private relations – not public relations" (23). An ability to honour forebears proves the key issue, even if qualified by the risible extremes to which the poet (through the persona of the portrayee) may push this argument: "My parents are my sole subject of interest" (23). This exclusive focus is confirmed rather than belied by one's realisation that this statement is couched in the voice of a fastidious artistic "genius" – the man in the portrait, whose own representational range is supposedly limited to the figurine he holds in his hands, featuring a cavorting couple. The couple in question are in fact a faun and a nymph, which allows Durcan to render the stern young man's gaze (balanced against his long moustaches and goatee), and his ostentation of a sculpted representation of such supposed "parents", into a discourse of complex domestic affairs in which the erotic is superimposed on the banality of daily concerns – a broken "washing machine", the amount of "marmalade in the pantry" (24).

While foregrounding the attractions of its fictional elaboration, the poem also queries its own ambition and goals by citing (and duly italicising) Walter Pater's famous dictum that "*All art aspires to the condition of music*". Durcan's persona promptly satirises this yearning by equating it with the faun-father's desire: "My mother is a double-bass instrument whom / My father has played with passionate discretion" (24). Nonetheless, introducing this additional art in the equation is far from unproblematic. Indeed, the supposedly non-representational and eminently abstract "condition of music" can be fundamentally at odds with the release of a "narrative impulse" that Heffernan has described as the defining yield of the ekphrastic relation (Heffernan 1993: 5).

The possible doubt that the Pater quotation might cast on Durcan's fictionalising zest is nowhere substantiated in his two collections on paintings; instead, his representations persistently accord voices and stories to the human (and occasionally animal) figures in the paintings that he chooses to address. They also acknowledge, though, that such narratives reflect the determining power that material frameworks may wield over human lives and relations – or at least over the manner in which we represent and view them. Hence, in "An Interior with Members of a Family", on a mid-eighteenth-century painting by Philip Hussey, Durcan addresses a conversation piece (the conventional name of the pictorial genre is here literally relevant) to propose his poem as the painter's obsequious discourse to his portrayees (his patrons) on the assumptions of such a painting. For Durcan's fictionalised practitioner, his art is dominated by the principle that "in family portraiture / Families are incidental to fixtures and fittings" (*Crazy About Women*, 65). By countering a general assumption that human presence trumps material surroundings in the representational hierarchies, this voice undermines itself. In other terms, the persona becomes the poet's ventriloquized feat of art criticism qua social critique, by making the family ostensibly subaltern to the commodities they seem to vaunt as evidence of their status – the velvet-cushioned chairs, the decorated walls, above all the minutely reproduced pattern of the huge carpet on which they pose. Indeed, the poet pulls the proverbial rug from under his painterly persona when he has him declare, in the poem's closing lines: "The family of today / Is the family that gets carried away / By its own carpet" (65). But

this also reflects ironically on the poet himself as an artist on a commission (from a museum) to represent, under the lavish conditions proper to the so-called coffee-table book, the cultural commodities for the sake of which the museum largely exists.

It is telling, therefore, that Durcan's second set of poetic responses to a museum collection – *Give Me Your Hand* (1994), for the National Gallery in London – should open with another piece involving a family, glittering surfaces, a carpet, and a tension between human and otherwise. The painting addressed is Niccolò di Buonaccorso's "The Marriage of the Virgin", a late fourteenth-century piece that is bound to strike viewers today for its concentration of gold and shades of red in the Byzantine pictorial treatment of a topic that otherwise stands (in Christian indoctrination) for modesty and non-wordly aspirations: Mary's marriage to Joseph. If, with its spatial arrangement, its haloed figures and mitred celebrant, Niccolò's painting is today formally evocative of Byzantine icons, then Durcan's treatment of it is brazenly iconoclastic – all the more so since his trademark aggiornamento (that includes allusions to power struggles and current causes, such as gay rights) is voiced through the Virgin. Mary is here the persona who renarrativises not just the original story of the Holy Family but crucially also the ultimate trajectory of her son – who here becomes a to-be-adopted child, glimpsed as an observant diminutive figure in the foreground, to whose envisaged demise ("In the end the hawks will get him") much of the poem is given.

The opening stanza, however, focuses on the topic in the poem's title. Mary breezily remarks on her marriage to someone "thirty years older than me" and offers the line – "I am giving him my hand" (9) – from which the volume itself derives its title. Additionally, she provides a reflection that again brings out Durcan's metapoetic and meta-artistic concerns: "I come to him abstract as an abstract carpet!" (9). The adjective may here carry both that broader sense which opposes it to the physical or empirical, and the specific sense, proper to an art-critical register, which opposes it to the figurative. Noting the noun to which it is applied, viewers may observe that the scene indeed boasts a decorated carpet (its design, rather than "abstract", in fact featuring stylised birds[6]), on which all the central figures stand, but Mary's exclamatory remark takes the form not of a metonymy, but of a simile. Mary's repeated use of the word is striking also because the nexus that Niccolò's painting is bound to conjure for most viewers today, despite its detailed figurative zest, is not that of figuration vs abstraction (the opposition that has so often regulated the manner in which the rapport between art, consciousness and experience has been construed over the past century); indeed, the painting alerts us rather to a nascent perspectivism, towards which it only timidly nods – otherwise still firmly inscribed in a two-dimensionality that marks its historicity and distances it from the conventional expectations of viewers trained in the representational practices that came with so-called Renaissance perspective (cf Dunning 1991: 35-54 and *passim*).

Countering this sense of remoteness, the account that Durcan provides in Mary's voice arguably nudges the narrative conveyed by the painting towards a greater "depth" and "background" – words that here apply in as metaphorical a sense as Mary's description of herself, there and then given in marriage to Joseph, as "abstract." The word proves key to Durcan's commitment to reading the fullness of human relations into the scene. In its general sense, it reminds us that the union commemorated in the painting will be a white marriage, in which love will not be physical, remaining materially unrealised (despite the mystical fertility, which Durcan discards, implied by Joseph's flowering rod[7]); and, when the woman speaker equates herself with a "carpet", the word "abstract" suggests that lack of physical enactment dehumanises the union – as the sexless marriage will render the woman there and then acquired by the aged bridegroom into the arch-oxymoron: a spiritual commodity. In its more

specific implications, Mary's choice of "abstract" to describe the manner in which she gives herself in marriage tropes her virginity through the language of art criticism – signalling her carnally unknown body as undelineated and uninscribed; but "abstract" also applies to the manner in which Joseph receives her, since his gaze will not focus on the particularity of her forms – in today's demotic sense, his view of her is not "graphic". This underlines the extent to which Durcan's verbal appropriations of objects in the visual arts equate desire and figuration: the gaze tends to be consummative and transformative, aiming at deriving from the images as many opportunities for meaning and beauty as the faun-father produced, with "passion", on the body of the nymph-mother in the poem on the Georg Pencz portrait discussed above. This perception repeatedly validates the poet's deployment of the connubial trope to describe his rapport to verbal and visual as that of "a man with two spouses" (*Crazy About Women* xi).

As suggested above, this sense of passionate engagement with the creative stimulus obtained from the other arts combines, in Durcan's major volumes on museum collections (and despite their prevalent provocative and subversive tone), with a particular fascination for religious art. This fascination largely overlaps with the poet's acknowledgement of the persistence of a sense of the sacred in ostensibly secularised environments, such as museums and art centres, celebrated both for their church-like accommodation of their exhibits and as venues for latter-day epiphanies. In some of his more recent work, such as the 2012 collection *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have My Being* (its title a biblical gloss, Acts 17.28), we find such acknowledgement in poems such as "Traces of the Sacred" and "Ici Repose Vincent Van Gogh 1853-1890". The latter, diary-like, records the poet's trajectory on a visit to the painter's grave, its contours as art tourism balanced against the claim "that it is a *day-trip* / As well as a *pèlerinage*" (46) – this point further pressed by the biblical verse that closes each of the poem's two sections. As for the former, it borrows its title from "the logo of the new, big, art show: / TRACES OF THE SACRED' that the poet finds advertised 'on the esplanade of the Pompidou Centre", a setup he admires while noting the contrast between its grandeur and the apparent helplessness of "a middle-aged woman . . . lying on her side" (40). Her presence becomes itself a critique of how the politics of art management may prove incommensurate with their social background: "Is she a solo act or part of the show", the poet wonders for a moment – before moving on to a final rhetorical question that indeed becomes the poem's parting shot: "Or is she a homeless woman on her last legs – / A profane gatecrasher in the sacred world of art?" (40).

Many of these poetic confrontations with the art world in Durcan's more recent collections, while retaining a strong Irish implication through their focus on Catholicism (the iconography, but also ethics and politics) and on traditional social arrangements (families, Holy and otherwise), find the poet playing the tourist in a variety of elsewheres. The ease of such wanderings causes Durcan to muse on the ensuing sense of privilege from a stance that combines elation with shades of guilt – but the poems leave no doubt as to the revelatory power wielded by the experience they represent. In his 2015 collection *The Days of Surprise*, this combination of traits is especially evident in "Il Bambino Dormiente", a poem prompted by the poet's rapport with Giovanni Bellini's "Madonna in trono che adora il Bambino dormiente". The piece is almost self-satirical in some traits of its autobiographical and quasi-journalistic drive, as it feeds its readership with the details of an early twenty-first century mobility that is painfully aware of how frivolous "nipp[ing] over to Venice for a day and a night" may look: "Cheap Aer Lingus flight to Marco Polo", "a Ryanair early flight back to Dublin" (26, 28). This is gradually redeemed by the candid, confessional tone with which the

poet explains that "see[ing] one particular painting in the Gallerie dell'Academia" was there and then something he "needed" to do: in the middle of a personal, family crisis, "I needed to see again / The most affectionate yet sacred family portrait ever painted" (26). As always with Durcan, this striking personal urge is balanced in the course of the poem against intimations that are cultural and political, with signal complexities. Indeed, this particular Madonna is confirmed as having "red hair", which lends her the conditions for an *Irish domestication as* a "most purely West of Ireland peasant princess" – and yet this is promptly universalised by an acknowledgement of Mary's origins that is filtered through present-day identity politics: "Palestinian Jewess" (27).

Ultimately, however, the poem is striking for the existential depth that Durcan touches upon in his process of self-narration through the painting, as that "need" to see it is found to reflect more than the incidental emotional exuberance of a "needy" ageing man with the means to treat himself to a brief trip to Venice: "I needed to see myself as originally I was" (26). This, and its clear admission in verse, sees Durcan, the postmodern iconoclast, embrace and proclaim an understanding of the lyric which has remained with us since the Romantics – as the genre with a privileged vocation for exploring and voicing a selfhood, characteristically at its most intimate and exposed. The selfhood revealed by the line in question is haunted by terminal conditions, since the particular child Jesus that the poet "needed" to gaze upon in that Bellini painting, in order to recognise himself, is "A naked male infant draped across my mother's knees, / Sleeping the sleep of death" (27). And this perception that the Madonna with Child looks forward to, and ineluctably calls for that other pictorial sub-genre of religious art, the mater dolorosa, Mary holding the dead Christ, directly prompts the self-addressed *memento mori* that underlies the poem and prompts its ending, a couplet that brings a self-elegiac note: "[I] get ready for my own little sleep, / Meeting my mother in the big deep" (28).

The poems discussed above bring out the expressive power that Paul Durcan derives from rendering prior representations from a visual to a verbal medium. As often happens in such transits, Durcan's processing of pictorial referents foils any expectations of a literal or "transparent" verbal appropriation of the visual. Each of the poems is grounded in a creatively exploited discontinuity between the ostensible representational import of its referent and the version of the visual-art object that the verbal artefact textualises. In other words, the poems characteristically create opportunities for meaning that may be additional or indeed alien to the cognitive experience that most viewers are otherwise likely to obtain from the paintings addressed – and Durcan's studied, deliberate misreadings become additional footholds for validating and extending his distinctive poetics.

His ekphrastic appropriations establish, with notable continuity, the defining conditions of an authorial stance, and hence of an artistic remit, grounded on an ostensibly public poetic voice, thriving on an extension of his denunciatory poetics into an intermedial design. As also shown above, however, this public utterance is found, in a no less sustained manner, to serve the expressive needs of a voice that is eminently personal and openly autobiographical, often establishing itself through family narratives. Such narratives feature obsessively in Durcan's writing, irrespective of whether families come across as established and engrossed in their worldliness – as suggested with regard to the Hussey painting, "An Interior with Members of a Family" – or rather defined by that spirituality that so seems to intrigue and challenge the poet in his confrontations with paintings of the Holy Family. And the challenge is also perceived and expressed in its general medial conditions: indeed, the close or fraught human relations that such narratives highlight regularly come across as homologous

to the rapport – ranging from collaborative to abrasive – between the media involved, verbal and visual. Through these overlaps and mutualities involving the object and the manner of representation, Paul Durcan's ekphrastic practice empowers his lyrical voice, vindicating the genre as a device for self-discovery – and arguing for the catalysing power that a medial interface can provide for that device to operate at its most powerful.

Notes

1 "transgress, v. (…) Etymology: apparently < French transgresser (14th cent. in Godefroy Compl.), < Latin transgress-, participial stem of transgredī to step across, < trans across + gradī to step" - *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/204775. Accessed 31 July 2020.

2 For the concept of "picturacy", defined simply as 'the capacity to interpret pictures', see Heffernan 2006: *passim*.

3 "iconoclasm, n. (…) Etymology: < Greek εκών icon n. + κλάσμα breaking, < κλν to break: after iconoclast n." - *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/90889. Accessed 31 July 2020.

4 For a more extensive reading of these aspects of Durcan's poetics, with a bearing on the visual arts, see Homem 2012: 282-7.

5 All quotations of poems will be referenced by page numbers (titles and dates of collections are both embedded in the text and included in my final list of references).

6 A quality reproduction of the painting, accompanied by curatorial notes, can be viewed at https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/niccolo-di-buonaccorso-the-marriage-of-the-virgin(last visited 19/07/2020).

7 In the original para-biblical narrative that underlies the painting, there was a competition for Mary's hand, which entailed that "her suitors presented wooden rods at the Temple and the man whose branch miraculously blossomed was to be the victor" – curational note at https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/niccolo-di-buonaccorso-the-marriage-of-the-virgin (last visited 19/07/2020).

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