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The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies

Celebrating Paul Durcan

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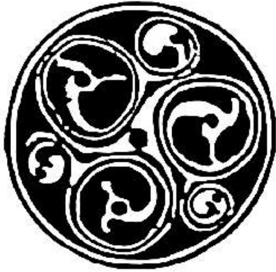

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Editors
Mariana Bolfarine
Laura P. Z. Izarra

Special Issue

Guest Editors
Alan Gilsenan
Munira H. Mutran
Mariana Bolfarine

ABEI Journal, Special Issue, Volume 22, Number 2, December 2020.

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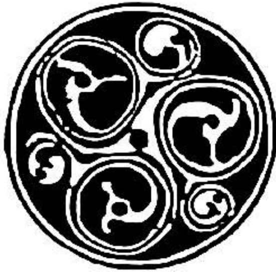

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Diagramação
Victor Augusto da Cruz Pacheco

Celebrating Paul Durcan on his 76th Birthday

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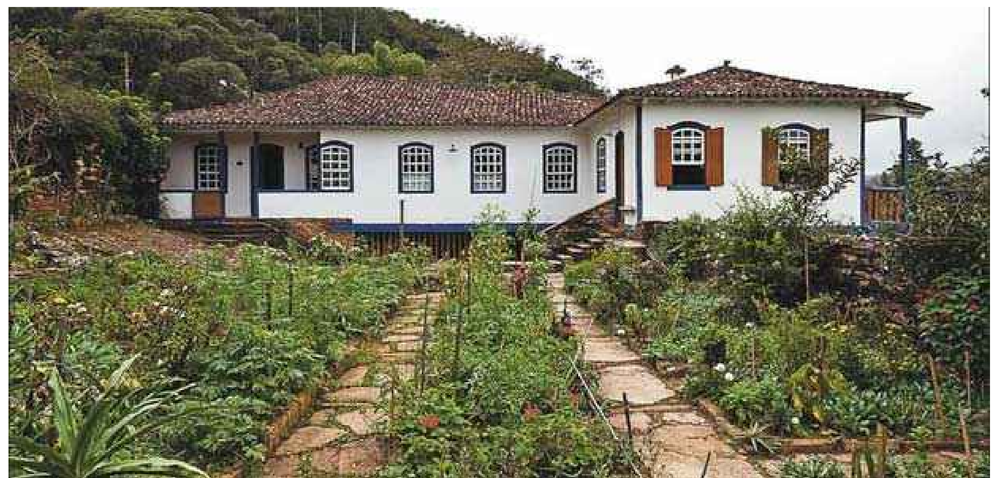
Preface

As friends and admirers of Paul Durcan's poetry we wish to celebrate his achievement as he reaches his 76th birthday. Durcan's travels around the world and the time he spent in Brazil is reflected on some of the poems that inform his vast oeuvre. Since 2019, we have been in touch with writers, translators, and scholars in order to publish this tribute as a special number of the *ABEI Journal* whose Introduction was written by Alan Gilsenan, filmmaker and also a friend of Durcan's. This issue opens with "Paul Durcan's Poems Around the World", which presents translations by Jorge Fondebrider and Maria Graciela Eliggi (Argentina); Eduardo Bohéme Kumamoto, Gisele Giandoni Wolkoff, Heleno Godoy, José Roberto O'Shea, Luci Collin, Sílvia Guerra, Noélia Borges and Monique Pfau (Brazil); Madeleine Descargues Grant (France); Stephanie Schwerter (Germany); Marina Tsvetkova (Russia); Yolanda Fernández Suárez (Spain), and Moya Canon (Ireland). This selection of poems reveals multifaceted and cosmopolitan traits that form his production. The second part of this volume, "Paul Durcan's Poetry from the Irish and the International Perspectives", presents original and republished essays by friends and scholars on Durcan's work from Ireland and abroad, such as Kathleen McCracken, Kim Cheng Boey, Munira H. Mutran, Rui Carvalho Homem, Stephanie Schwerter and Marina Tsvetkova. The third part of this tribute presents "Poems for a Poet" by Celia de Fréine, Damian Grant and Moya Cannon, that is followed by "Recollections of Paul Durcan", by Niall MacMonagle, Paul Muldoon, Katie Donovan and the recently deceased Derek Mahon. Finally, in "Voices from Brazil", a special feature of the *ABEI Journal*, writer and scholar Heleno Godoy contributed with an original piece that plays with the idea of Durcan "dancing down" to Brazil. We thank the contributors for sharing our enthusiasm in embarking on this adventure.

Alan Gilsenan, Munira H. Mutran, Mariana Bolfarine.



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Introduction
For the Poet Durcan, in his Seventy-sixth Year

Alan Gilsenan

On My Sixty-First Birthday

Late in the afternoon
The sun is going down
It is getting colder and colder
Darkness is spreading.

In my striped pyjamas
I stand at the window
Shouting into the street below
'Help! Help!'

Nobody takes any notice,
All seems hopeless,
But then a surprise occurs:
The street lights come on.

This poem, from the 2007 collection *The Laughter of Mothers*, is how Paul Durcan marked his sixty-first birthday. In the charged moment of this piece, we see many of Durcan's hallmark motifs – the pathos, the mundane, the surreal and then, when one least expects it, an unannounced moment of luminosity. This collection of essays, translations and poems, curated to celebrate Paul Durcan's seventy-sixth year, seem to offer up some similar surprising sparks of illumination, birthday gifts for the Poet Durcan, bestowed into the gloaming of a dark and fearful year.

It is interesting that this tribute comes from Brazil as the birthday celebrations in Paul Durcan's native land were a little muted. This is possibly because the man himself is a little reticent, even reclusive at times, despite his electric performance energy and potency of his famed readings. Yet, despite widespread affection for him, I sense a certain reluctance in official cultural circles to acknowledge his place in the canon – whatever that might be. Perhaps it is his edginess, his awkwardness, his unrelenting and unerring gaze that provokes suspicion.

It is often observed that Durcan is both a chronicler of the private and the public realms. I suspect the truth is closer to the fact that Durcan doesn't really differentiate between these two worlds. His sensibility lies at the painful confluence of these two states. There are few poets who could respond to a tragic public event with a poem appearing in the front page of a Sunday newspaper whilst also engaging in the most intimate minutiae of his family life.

Durcan writes lovingly about his daughters, Sarah and Siabhra, and his former wife Nessa O'Neill:

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> Dear Nessa – Now that our marriage is over
> I would like you to know that, if I could put back the clock
> Fifteen years to the cold March day of our wedding,
> I would wed you again and, if that marriage also broke,
> I would wed you yet again. (*The Berlin Wall Cafe*)

But he also engages with the complex ghosts of his parents – his stern and disapproving father, John Durcan, and his beloved mother Sheila MacBride Durcan. In his many poems about her, she is a kindly figure, seemingly always basking in a golden light:

> Thank you, O golden mother,
> For giving me life,
> A spear of rain.
> After a long life searching for a little boy who lives down the lane
> You never found him, but you never gave up;
> In your afterlife nightie
> You are pirouetting expectantly for the last time. (*The Laughter of Mothers*)

In his poems about his troubled relationship with his father, Durcan never stops, somehow, in seeking his approval. But nor is he miserly in his love nor understanding, as he writes in "Hymn to My Father":

> We had no life together – or almost none.
> Yet you made me what I am –
> A man in search of his Russia. (*Going Home to Russia*)

Durcan has spoken of his father's distaste of his young black-shirted self and how – while drinking in O'Donoghue's pub on Dublin's Merrion Row – the young man was bundled into a car and taken to a psychiatric hospital, an event that led to a certain unravelling in his life. It is tempting to see his conservative father's rejection of his son's idiosyncratic vision, his vulnerable presence and gentle soul, as reflecting something of the attitude of official Ireland towards him, while his mother's more tolerant understanding echoes something of the love that Paul Durcan engenders in his many readers and listeners.

For there is something in the life and work of Paul Durcan that stops the Irish nation – along with his father – heralding him as a national treasure or as our unofficial Poet Laureate. His friend Seamus Heaney certainly inspired many of these notions and somewhat meaningless honours although he certainly did not seek them out. In Durcan's poem about hearing of Heaney's death – *Breaking News* – he imagines a sympathetic Heaney consoling him in his shock:

> '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 Days of Surprise*)

In this poem, Heaney – the accepted "official" national poet of Ireland – reaches out from the vast beyond to offer a kindly and respectful hand to Durcan, recognising him as the fragile and vulnerable man that he is, the poet as outsider. For Paul Durcan is a puckish figure on the imaginative landscape of Ireland, a maverick in a conformist world, a dissident in a repressive and hypocritical society. But this paints an overly simplistic portrait of the poet as a punk-ish spirit, an irreverent and raucous rebel, for it ignores Durcan's innate dignity. His personal grace.

Crying in the wilderness, Paul Durcan seems closer in spirit to his beloved Patrick Kavanagh. If one was to substitute Ringsend for Baggot Street, the opening verse of one of Kavanagh's most famous poems might be Durcan's:

> If ever you go to Dublin town
> In a hundred years or so
> Inquire for me in Baggot Street
> And what I was like to know,
> O he was a queer one
> Fol dol the di do,
> He was a queer one
> I tell you. (*Collected Poems*)

Another kindred spirit, his good friend Michael Hartnett ("the Poet King", Durcan calls him), wrote of him as *The Poet as Black Sheep*, in the third section of *Notes on My Contemporaries*:

> I have seen him dine
> in middle-class surroundings,
> his manner refined,
> as his family around him
> talk about nothing,
> one of their favourite theses.
>
> I have seen him lying
> between the street and the pavement,
> atoning, dying
> for their sins, the fittest payment
> he can make for them,
> to get drunk and go to pieces. (*Collected Poems*)

Speaking publicly about Kavanagh in 2004, Paul Durcan sounds a stern warning about the dangers of mythologising or romanticising writers like Patrick Kavanagh and his "life of degradation". It is a warning that we should heed when thinking about Durcan too. For all this casual mythologising of the poet as outsider belittles him and somehow reflects an inherent lack of respect for the role of poet in our society. It is a lack of respect that Paul Durcan feels acutely. Respect is really all the Poet Durcan demands.

Kindliness is also a trait that Paul Durcan values hugely. For it is the flip side of respect. And this collection of writings about the man and his work is a real manifestation of respect and kindliness. It has been lovingly initiated and led by Professor Munira Hamud Mutran (ably assisted by Professor Mariana Bolfarine with some modest input from myself). An inspiring and generous presence, Professor Mutran was honoured by President Michael D.

Higgins in 2018 with the Presidential Distinguished Service Award for her almost forty years of commitment to Irish Studies at the University of Sao Paulo. Paul Durcan himself visited Brazil in 1995 and dedicated one of his poems in his collection *Greetings to our Friends in Brazil* to Munira ("The Daring Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze").

The pieces carefully gathered here between these covers – passionate, engaged and humane – draw us inevitably and joyfully back to a remarkable body of work from this unique and rare individual. The poems now seem both born of their time but utterly timeless, lights coming on in our darkness, still urgent and utterly necessary. Long may the Poet Durcan run. As he concludes "How I Envy the Homeless Man" from his collection *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have my Being*:

> Even in these last years of my life
> I might make a go of it – sing
>
> As I have always yearned to sing
> The song of my silence, the song
> Of the men and women I love
> Of the places that make me feel at home.

County Wicklow.
September 3rd, 2020

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Paul Durcan's Poems Around the World

Argentina

Brazil

France

Germany

Russia

Spain

Ireland

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The Divorce Referendum, Ireland, 1986

Paul Durcan

By the time the priest started into his sermon
I was adrift on a leaf of tranquility,
Feeling only the need and desire to praise,
To feed praise to the tiger of life.
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna.
He was a gentle-voiced, middle-aged man,
Slightly stooped under a gulf of grey hair,
Slightly tormented by an excess of humility.
He talked felicitously of the Holy Spirit –
As if he really believed in what he was preaching –
Not as if he was aiming to annotate a diagram
Or to sub-edit the gospel,
But as if the Holy Spirit was real as rainwater
Then his voice changed color –
You could see it change from pink into white.
He remarked icily: "It is the wish of the Hierarchy
That today the clergy of Ireland put before you
Christ's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage
And to remind you that when you vote in the Divorce Referendum
The Church's teaching and Christ's teaching are one and the same."
Stunned, I stared up at him from my pew
As he stood there supported by candles and gladioli,
Vestments, and altar boys at his feet;
I could feel my breastplate tighten and my shoulder blades quiver;
I knew the anger that Jesus Crist felt
When he drove from the temple the traders and stock brokers.
I have come into this temple today to pray
And be healed by, and joined with, the Spirit of Life;
Not to be invaded by ideology.
I say unto you, preacher, and orators of the Hierarchy,
Do not bring ideology into my house of prayer.
I closed my eyes
And I did not open them again until I could hear
The priest murmuring the prayers of the Consecration.
At Holy Communion I kept my eyes on a small girl
To whom the priest had to bend low to give her the host.
Curtseying, she smiled eagerly, and flew back down the aisle,
Carrying in her breast the Eucharist of her innocence:
May she have children of her own
And as many husbands as will praise her –
For what are husbands for, but to praise their wives?

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El referéndum del divorcio, Irlanda, 1986

Para cuando el sacerdote comenzó su sermón
yo andaba a la deriva sobre una hoja de sosiego,
sintiendo solamente la necesidad y el deseo de alabar,
de dar loas al tigre de la vida.
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna.
Era un hombre de voz suave, de mediana edad,
ligeramente encorvado bajo entradas de pelo canoso,
ligeramente atormentado por un exceso de humildad.
Hablaba con regocijo del Espíritu Santo –
como si realmente creyera en lo que estaba predicando –
no como si se propusiera comentar un diagrama
o corregir el evangelio,
sino como si el Espíritu Santo fuera real como el agua de lluvia.
Entonces su voz cambió de color –
podría verse ese cambio del rosa al blanco.
Advirtió friamente: "Es el deseo de la Jerarquía
que hoy el clero de Irlanda ponga ante ustedes
las enseñanzas de Cristo sobre la indisolubilidad del matrimonio
y recordarles que cuando voten en el Referendum del Divorcio
las enseñanzas de la Iglesia y las enseñanzas de Cristo son una y la misma."
Pasmado, clavé los ojos en él desde mi banco
mientras se erguía allí rodeado por velas y gladiolos,
sabanillas de altar, y monaguillos a sus pies;
sentí que me apretaba el pecho y que mis omóplatos temblaban;
conocí la ira que sintió Jesucristo
cuando expulsó a los mercaderes y a los comisionistas del templo.
Había ido al templo ese día para alabar
y para ser curado por y reunirme con el Espíritu de Vida;
no para ser invadido por la ideología.
Os digo, sacerdote y oradores de la Jerarquía,
no lleves ideología a mi casa de oración.
Cerré mis ojos
y no los abrí de nuevo hasta que escuché
al sacerdote murmurando las plegarias de la Consagración.
Durante la Santa Comunión presté atención a una niñita
ante la cual el sacerdote tuvo que inclinarse para darle la hostia.
Reverente, ella sonrió impaciente, y voló por el pasillo,
llevando en su pecho la Eucaristía de su inocencia:
ojalá tenga hijos
y tantos maridos como le plazca –
¿Para qué sirven los maridos, si no para alabar a sus esposas?

Translated by Jorge Fondebrider (Argentina)

The Most Extraordinary Innovation

Paul Durcan

What an extraordinary thing it is to be nursed!
Ordinarily I'd be skulking in my den!
Nursed! All of a sudden to be taken in hand,
In the public ward of a general hospital,
Mayo General Hospital in Castlebar,
Nurtured, nourished by a female stranger!
Can you believe that it happens?
Human nature being what it is:
Oppressive, manipulative, malicious, callous?
Kindness, support, gentleness, humour,
Warmth, conversation, food, sleep,
Conviviality, confiance, companionship.
For me these are freakish things.
Whether you're a boy of thirteen from a dysfunctional family
Or a man of sixty-four living alone like a wounded animal,
To have women at your hospital bedside
Emptying buckets of tenderness over your head,
Hosing you down with solicitude,
Is something ridiculously out of the ordinary.
Prayer would seem abstract by comparison.
Did Virgil or Dante ever witness such scenes?
You cry out: " I am not used to this!
Hold on! Wait a minute!
What have I done to merit such treatment?
All I have done is to get myself injured."
But she cannot wait, she is busy,
Twenty-six other patients to attend to before the Angelus
As she gives you an intravenous injection.
Whether you like it or not
She injects you with smiles also
And all the while you lie there transfixed
Like a cornered hedgehog.
Her eyes run up and down your hairy, lumpy, veiny body
Like rabbits in a sandhill.
To nurse! To be nursed!
To be nursed back to health or unto death.
From the Latin: to nourish.
Slim, sturdy, buxom nourishers, almost anonymous:
Teresa, Joan, Niamh, Anne-Marie, Helena, Louise, Nicola, Marie.
Of all the innovations of human kind
Nursing is the most extraordinary innovation of all.

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La más extraordinaria innovación

¡Que cosa tan extraordinaria es que alguien te cuide!
¡Por lo general estaría dando vueltas y vueltas en mi guarida!
¡Ser cuidado! Y de pronto que alguien te lleve de la mano,
En la sala común de un hospital general,
El hospital general de Mayo en Castlebar,
¡Nutrido, alimentado por una mujer extraña!
¿Pueden creer que esto ocurre?
Siendo la naturaleza humana lo que es:
¿Opresiva, manipuladora, maliciosa, cruel?
Amabilidad, apoyo, dulzura, humor,
Calidez, conversación, alimento, descanso,
Cordialidad, confiance, compañerismo.
Para mi estas son cosas extrañas.
Ya seas un muchacho de trece de una familia disfuncional
O un hombre de sesenta y cuatro que vive solo como un animal herido,
Tener esas mujeres al lado de tu cama de hospital
Que derraman baldes de ternura sobre tu cabeza,
Que te asean con solicitud,
Es algo absolutamente fuera de lo común.
Decir una plegaria parecería algo abstracto por comparación.
¿Fueron alguna vez Virgilio o Dante testigos de escenas como estas?
Gritas: "¡No estoy acostumbrado a esto!
¡Espera! ¡Un minuto!
¿Qué hice para merecer este trato?
Todo lo que hice fue lastimarme a mi mismo."
Pero ella no puede esperar, está ocupada,
Otros veintiséis pacientes que atender antes del Angelus
Mientras te da una inyección endovenosa.
Te guste o no
Ella te inyecta también sonrisas
Y todo ese tiempo yaces ahí, paralizado
Como un erizo arrinconado
Sus ojos recorren de arriba a abajo tu cuerpo velludo, tosco, venoso
Como los conejos en sus madrigueras.
¡Cuidar! ¡Ser cuidado!
Ser cuidado hasta recobrar la salud o encontrar la muerte.
Del latín: nutrir.
Mujeres que nutren, delgadas, robustas, rollizas, casi anónimas:
Teresa, Joan, Niamh, Anne-Marie, Helena, Louise, Nicola, Marie.
De todas las innovaciones de la humanidad
Las enfermeras son la más extraordinaria innovación de todas.

Translated by María Graciela Eliggi (Argentina)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.24-25.

The Old Guy in the Aisle Seat

Paul Durcan

On the eight hour flight from Dublin to Chicago
I chattered non-stop to the passenger
In the seat inside me. I was on the aisle.

"Am I going mad?" is a question
I have asked myself in the last three years.
More and more I ask myself.

If you were a woman in the inside seat
On an eight-hour flight and the man outside you
In the aisle seat spouted for eight hours

In a monologue as wide as the Mississippi
And as long as the Nile with tributaries
And digressions and flood plains and whatnot

Would you consider him a little – you know?
More than a little?
Maybe even in the process of…?

Of going not stark raving mad but
Of going timidly, fully-clothed to bits?
It was like watching a white haired waterfall

The key to which has been lost.
It never stops falling but
Goes on and on and on and on and on,

The foam of its toothless grinning
Flecking his jaw,
His eyes hopping up and down in their pigeonholes.

The answer has to be – yes –
I am an old guy going out of my mind
With isolation virginal as an adolescent girl in a lobotomy ward on a trolley
waiting her slot

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O Cara no Assento do Corredor

No voo de oito horas de Dublin a Chicago
Conversei sem parar com o passageiro
No assento dentro de mim. Eu estava no corredor.

“Estou ficando louco?” é uma pergunta
Que me tenho feito nos últimos três anos.
Mais e mais eu me pergunto.

Se você fosse uma mulher no assento ao lado
Num voo de oito horas, e o homem
No assento do corredor tagarelasse as oito horas

Num monólogo largo como o rio Mississippi
E longo como o Nilo, com afluentes
E meandros e várzeas e tudo o mais

Você o consideraria um pouco... sabe?
Mais que um pouco?
Talvez até em vias de...?

Não de ficar completamente insano, mas
De timidamente, recatadamente perder o juízo?
Foi como observar uma cascata de cabelos brancos

Cuja chave foi perdida.
Nunca para de cair, apenas
Continua e continua e continua e continua,

A espuma de seu sorriso desdentado
Maculando sua mandíbula,
Seus olhos saltando para cima e para baixo nas órbitas.

A resposta deve ser – sim –
Que sou um velho perdendo a cabeça
Num isolamento virginal, como uma adolescente na ala de lobotomia, numa maca, esperando sua vez

Translated by Eduardo Boheme Kumamoto (Brazil)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.26-29.

The Last Shuttle to Rio

Paul Durcan

It's been a bad day in São Paulo.

Paulistas have a saying
"Life is a game of the hips"
But today my hips had a bad game.
My knees have been up to the mark
But my hips have been pathetic.

Standing up at the counter of a cafe
In the airport at Congonhas,
Stirring my coffee with my right hand,
Holding my mobile phone in my left hand,
I am whispering to my publisher;
Whispering in low, steadfast, tightlipped whines
"Why were my books not there?"
"Where were my books?"
"Why was Ivan Kerr in Belo Horizonte
When he was supposed to be in São Paulo?"

Through the condensed perspiration of my hysterical whispers
I discern a small, lean, nine-year-old black boy
With a shoebox on his shoulder pointing down at my shoes.
Yet another intrusion in a day of multiple intrusions.
I bounce my skull angrily: *Sim, sim, sim*.
Hopping the ball of my skull off the tiled floor of my anger.

I resume berating my publisher
Immediately erasing from my mind
The shoeshine boy kneeling at my feet
Until I feel a tapping at my knee.
What do you want now?
He wants my left foot.
He's done with my right.

I glimpse the frills of his jet black hair.
They are perfect frills
Perfectly formed pasta frills.
What a shine he is giving me!
For the first time today
I feel a pang of wellbeing.

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A Última Ponte-Aérea ao Rio

Foi um dia ruim em São Paulo.

Os paulistas têm um ditado assim:
"A vida é um jogo de cintura"
Mas hoje a minha cintura mal se moveu.
Os meus joelhos moveram-se bem acima do esperado
Mas meus quadris foram mesmo patéticos.

Em pé, no balcão de um café
No aeroporto de Congonhas
Enquanto mexo meu café com a mão direita,
Seguro o celular com a esquerda,
Sussurro ao meu editor
Em um tom firme, gemidos atrapalhados
"Por que os livros não vieram?"
"Para onde foram os meus livros?"
"Por que Ivan Kerr estava em Belo Horizonte,
quando deveria estar em São Paulo?"

Em meio a expiração intensa dos meus sussurros históricos
Vejo um menino negro de uns nove anos, pequeno, magro
Com uma caixa de engraxate no ombro, apontando os meus sapatos.
Mais uma intromissão num dia cheio das mais variadas intromissões.
Balanço a cabeça com raiva: *Sim, sim, sim.*
Sacolejando no piso frio da minha raiva, despreendo-me.

Volto a repreender o meu editor
Apagando imediatamente da mente
O engraxate ajoelhado aos meus pés
Até que sinto uma batidinha no joelho.
O que você quer agora?
Ele me pede o pé esquerdo.
Já terminou o direito.

Olho os cachos do seu cabelo preto, azeviche.
São cachos perfeitos
Rolinhos de massa perfeitamente ordenados.
Que brilho ele me traz!
Pela primeira vez no dia
Sinto uma pontada de bem-estar.

All the while he is polishing me
He is watching me
With hot, scooped eyes staring up
Out of his yellow T-shirt
Inscribed PACIFIC WAVES.
I am no longer abusing
My hurting publisher.

The shoeshine boy is sprinting.
He is putting his right arm into it.
Putting everything into his right arm.
Putting everything into his rag.
He leaps to his feet.
He has finished. He squashes
A coke tin in his small fist.
I beg my publisher's forgiveness.
I hang up,
Clipping my mobile
Back on to my hip.
I thank him for giving me
Such a brilliant shine.
I say: "Obrigado."
He replies with a shy shrug:
"De nada."

My God, you have made
My day in São Paulo
And you have the audacity
To reply "De nada".

With your shoebox on your shoulder
You repeat with unconditional candour
"De nada"
Gazing up unblinking into my eyes.

I stutter: "What is your name?"
Out of your mouth-womb
Leaps your divine name:
"Einstein! Einstein João Luis Soares!"

Enquanto me faz o engraxe
O menino me observa
Com os seus olhos ávidos, arredondados
Saltando de sua camiseta amarela
Com a inscrição PACIFIC WAVES.
Já não ralho mais
Com o meu magoado editor.

O garoto engraxate avança.
Com o braço direito, imprime toda a sua força.
Com o braço direito, dá tudo de si.
E, assim, inflige força à flanela.

Num salto, retorna a si mesmo.
Terminou. Esmaga
Uma latinha de coca em seu pequeno punho.
Rogo ao editor que me perdoe.
Desligo.
Dobrando o celular
De volta à cintura.
Agradeço o garoto
Pelo brilho cintilante
Digo: "Obrigado."
Ele timidamente encolhe os ombros:
"De nada."

Meu Deus, você alegrou
o meu dia em São Paulo
E tem a audácia
De responder "De nada."

Com a caixa de engraxate no ombro
Você repete com candura incondicional
"De nada"
Olhando pra cima, fitando-me os olhos sem piscar.

Balbucio: "Como você se chama?"
E de seus lábios-ventre
Salta o seu nome surpreendente
"Einstein! Einstein João Soares!"

Translated by Gisele Wolkoff (Brazil)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.30-32.

The Daring Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze

to Munira Mutran

Paul Durcan

The sort of travel I'm into nowadays in São Paulo
Is going to bed early with my wife,
Staying in bed late in the mornings with my wife.
However, when I heard that on June 16
In Finnegan's Pub in Sao Paulo
A Japanese actor would be declaiming in Portuguese
Extracts from *Ulysses*
My wife persuaded me to fly with her to Dublin.
I remonstrated with her: "Fly?" She insisted: "Dublin is a gas,
Dirty, ordinary, transcendental city – just like Sao Paulo!"

We stayed in the YWCA in Sandymount –
Radcliffe Hall in St John's Road:
£13 per person sharing for a chalet
In the rose garden behind the Hall.
I liked the Hall because it was beside
Not only the Martello Tower on Sandymount Strand
But the Church of Ireland in St John's Road
Which is so C of E
It makes the Roman Catholic Church
On the far side of Sandymount Village –
The Star of the Sea –
Appear Low – so very Low!
Myself, I am Brazilian Armenian Orthodox.
(Last year I had some of my ashes buried in Armenia
After my left leg was amputated below the knee
Following an accident during Carnaval –
A loose nut on my trapeze.)

I liked Radcliffe Hall most of all for the rose garden:
Kingsize, queensize double beds of roses;
Red roses, white roses, yellow roses.
At midnight – 9 p.m. Sao Paulo time –
We sat out in the rose garden under a Howth moon
Listening to motor traffic – the Japanese actor
Declaiming *Ulysses* in Portuguese
In Finnegan's Pub in São Paulo –

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O Audaz Homem de Meia Idade no Trapézio Voador

para Munira Mutran

O tipo de viagem em que estou interessado hoje em dia, em São Paulo,
É ir para a cama cedo com minha mulher.
Ficar na cama até tarde com minha mulher.
No entanto, quando ouvi que em 16 de junho,
No Finnegan's Pub, em São Paulo,
Um ator japonês iria declamar em português
Fragmentos de *Ulisses*,
Minha mulher persuadiu-me a voar com ela para Dublin.
Protestei: – Voar?
Ela insistiu: – Dublin é uma graça[2],
Uma suja, ordinária e transcendental cidade – igualzinha a São Paulo.

Ficamos na YWCA[3] em Sandymount –
No Radcliffe Hall, na rua São João:
13 libras[4] por pessoas dividindo um chalé
No jardim de rosas atrás do edifício.
Eu gostava do edifício porque ele ficava ao lado
Não só da Torre do Martelo[5] na orla da praia de Sandymount
Mas também da Igreja da Irlanda na rua São João,
Que é tão I. da I.[6]
Que faz a Igreja Católica Romana,
Do outro lado da Vila de Sandymount –
A Estrela do Mar[7] –,
Parecer Humilde – tão Humilde!
Quanto a mim, sou um brasileiro armênio ortodoxo.[8]
(No ano passado tive parte de minhas cinzas enterradas na Armênia,
Após minha perna esquerda ser amputada abaixo do joelho,
Depois de um acidente durante o Carnaval –
Uma peça solta no meu trapézio.)

Eu gostava do Redcliffe Hall principalmente por seu jardim de rosas:
Grandes e pequenas camas duplas de rosas;
Rosas vermelhas, rosas brancas, rosas amarelas.
À meia-noite – 9 da noite no horário de São Paulo –
Nós nos sentamos no jardim de rosas sob uma lua de Howth,[9]
Ouvindo o ruído do tráfego – o ator japonês
Declamando *Ulisses* em português –
No Finnegan's Pub em São Paulo –

The rose petals staggering off their stems.

I sat with my hands on my knees
(I have still got my *two* knees)
Thinking how simple a thing peace is
In spite of man's addiction to war.
Although I am a middle-aged man on one leg,
When my wife asked –
Will you walk me along Sandymount Strand –
Actually, what she said was
"Let's check out the modality of the visible" –
I said "Yes" and I saw her –
I saw her quite simply, clearly, wholly –
Skip down the strand ahead of me,
Her meagre, white blouse billowing,
Her brown shoulders gleaming.
I thought:
James Joyce is the only man in the world who comprehends
women;
Who comprehends that a woman can never be adumbrated,
Properly praised
Except by a Japanese actor
In Finnegan's Pub in São Paulo
Declaiming extracts from *Ulysses*.

As pétalas das rosas caindo cambaleando de seus caules.

Sentei-me com as mãos em meus joelhos
(Ainda tenho meus *dois* joelhos),
Pensando o quão simples é a paz,
Apesar do vício do homem pela guerra.
Embora seja um cara de meia idade com uma só perna,
Quando minha mulher me perguntou –
Você andaria comigo pela rua da Praia de Sandymount –
Na verdade, o que ela disse foi
"Vamos conferir a modalidade do visível"[10] –
Eu disse – Sim, e eu a vi –
Eu a vi muito simples, clara e totalmente –
Correr para a orla da praia à minha frente,
Sua parca blusa branca ondulando,
Seus ombros castanhos brilhando.
Eu pensei:
James Joyce é o único homem no mundo que compreende as mulheres;
Que compreende que uma mulher não pode nunca ser adumbrada,
Apropriadamente elogiada,
Exceto por um ator japonês
No Finnegan's Pub em São Paulo
Declamando fragmentos de *Ulisses*.

Translation: Heleno Godoy (Brazil)

Casa Mariana Trauma

Paul Durcan

Under her window in Ouro Prêto
She is wringing locutions, wringing shrunken,
Faded, threadbare words
To squeeze oil paint out of tubes of language:
The trauma of the painter as a poet.

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Trauma na casa Mariana

Debaixo de sua janela em Ouro Preto
Ela torce locuções, torce palavras
Desbotadas, esfarrapadas,
Para espremer tinta a óleo de tubos de linguagem:
O trauma da pintora como poeta.

Translated by José Roberto O'Shea (Brazil)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.36-43.

Man Walking the Stairs: After Chaim Soutine

Paul Durcan

Odd to overhear that you think I am saying
"Man walking the stars"
When all my life I have been saying
"Man walking the stairs".

Living alone in a semi-detached villa
Between the mountains and the sea
I spend a great deal of time on the stairs.
Halfway up the stairs
I pause at the window overlooking
The entrance to our cul-de-sac,
The lancet window in our gable;
I pause or climb on.

When I get to the top of the stairs
I cannot remember why in the first place
I came up the stairs
But that is in the nature of living alone:
I am neither perplexed nor perturbed.
I go back downstairs and start
All over again, read another page,
Drink another cup of tea, hover
At the kitchen window, hover
At the front window, hover
In the hallway, hover
At the letterbox, hover
Before the looking-glass in the coat rack
That we bought in Christy Bird's for two-and-sixpence.

I know what it is I must do.
I must go back upstairs and search
Under my bed for that book I have mislaid –
The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations.
I am searching for a line from Donne:
"Make my dark poem light"
But I pause again at the gable window
This time to behold pine trees
Clutching at one another in a gale,
Pair of pines reprieved by the developer.

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Homem a Andar por Escadas: Inspirado em Chaim Soutine

Curioso entreouvir que tu achas que eu disse
"Homem a andar por estrelas"
Quando toda a minha vida tenho dito
"Homem a andar por escadas".

Vivendo só em um casarão geminado
Entre as montanhas e o mar
Passo muito tempo em escadas.
No meio da subida da escada
Faço uma pausa na janela que dá para
A entrada da nossa rua sem saída,
A janela lanceta em nosso frontão;
Faço uma pausa ou subo.

Quando chego ao topo da escada
Já não me lembro porque, pra começo de conversa,
Eu subi as escadas
Mas isso faz parte da natureza do viver sozinho:
Não fico perplexo nem perturbado.
Desço as escadas e começo
Tudo outra vez, leio outra página,
Bebo outra xícara de chá, me demoro
Na janela da cozinha, me demoro
Na janela da frente, me demoro
No corredor, me demoro
Na caixa de correio, me demoro
Na frente do espelho do cabideiro
Que compramos na Christy Bird's por dois xelins e pouco.

Sei o que é que devo fazer.
Devo voltar lá em cima e procurar
Debaixo da minha cama aquele livro que perdi –
O Dicionário Oxford de Citações.
Estou buscando um verso de Donne:
"Torne meu sombrio poema iluminado"
Mas paro novamente na janela do frontão
Desta vez para contemplar pinheiros
Agarrados um ao outro num vendaval,
Par de pinheiros absolvidos pela construtora.

When I conquer the top of the stairs
I fall down the stairs,
All the way down to the foot of the stairs.
Lying at the foot of the stairs
For three days and three nights
I behold bills – gas bills
And telephone bills – Final Notices –
Swirl through the lips of the letterbox
And the attic trap door at the top of the stairs
Is flying, descending, circling, advancing.
It keeps getting closer to my face.
If they ever find me and I am still alive
They will accuse me of having been drinking,
Of having been at the sherry.
What is wrong with being at the sherry?
Pale dry sherry - her throat, her lips, her eyes.

I could never understand people
At any time but especially people
Advising me I ought to sell my home
Because of the stairs. "What you must do
Is to find yourself a convenient bungalow
And save yourself the stairs."
Like advising a man to swim in a pool with no water.
The whole point of my home
Is the stairs. Can you conceive
Of a life without stairs?

My life is the saga of a life on stairs.

When I was nine with my cousin William
Sliding down bannister rails
To crashland on beaches of linoleum
My father peering over cliffs down stairwells
Already unbuckling his trousers' belt.

From thirteen to seventeen years
I sat on the stairs keeping vigil
With myself and the stair rods
Watching through bannister uprights
My father and mother coming and going.
I could not speak to them
Because when I spoke I stammered.
I clung to the bannisters,
Creature of the stairs.

Quando conquisto o topo da escada
Eu desabo da escada,
Todo o caminho abaixo até o pé da escada.
Reclinado ao pé da escada
Por três dias e três noites
Observo as contas – contas de gás
E contas telefônicas – avisos de vencimento –
Rodopiarem pelos lábios da caixa de correio
E o alçapão do ático no topo da escada
Está voando, descendo, circulando, avançando.
Ele chega cada vez mais perto do meu rosto.
Se me encontrarem e eu ainda estiver vivo
Me acusarão de ter estado bebendo,
De ter caído no xerez.
O que há de errado em cair na bebida?
Xerez suave e seco – a garganta, os lábios, os olhos dela.

Nunca consegui entender as pessoas
Em momento algum, mas especialmente as pessoas
Me aconselhando a vender minha casa
Por causa das escadas. "O que você deve fazer
É encontrar um bangalô adequado
E evitar escadas."
É como aconselhar um homem a nadar numa piscina vazia.
Todo o significado da minha casa
São as escadas. Você consegue conceber
Uma vida sem escadas?

Minha vida é a saga de uma vida nas escadas.

Aos nove anos com meu primo William
Deslizava corrimão abaixo
Até um pouso forçado em praias de linóleo
Meu pai espiando por cima de rochedos desce as escadas
Já desafivelando o cinto das calças.

Dos treze aos dezessete anos
Sentei-me nas escadas em vigília
Eu e as cantoneiras do carpete da escada
Assistindo através das colunas do corrimão
Ao meu pai e à minha mãe indo e vindo.
Eu não conseguia falar com eles
Porque quando falava eu gaguejava.
Agarrei-me aos corrimões,
Criatura das escadas.
Casamento aos vinte e três e dezessete anos
De passar aspirador nas escadas;

Marriage at twenty-three and seventeen years
Of hoovering the stairs;
A flight of stairs and a hoover
And I was the sainted spouse.
Upstairs mowing away, I could hear
My wife downstairs whistling away
Scanning the morning paper.

Stairs into stairs.

One stair at a time or
Three stairs at a time or
Four or five stairs at a time
In our forties when she and I
Were to our bedroom racing
In the middle of the day
Barely able to reach it in time,
Slipping, clambering, getting there,
Her arms around my knees,
Or to the bathroom to bathe
Together in the same bath and make
A mess of water on the floor;
A pot of phlox on the window sill
Or a cruet of lambs' tails from the hazel tree.

Days when we were not speaking
Or, truth to tell, days when
I was sulking and she kept out
Of my way, I'd sit all day
On the stairs, my knees tucked up
Under my chin, my elbows
Around my shinbones. I preferred
Sitting on stairs to sitting on chairs,
Sitting on the stairs facing the front door,
Facing south, facing south to the sea,
Remembering the Café Neptune in Batumi.

Man is the inventor of stairs.

How many miles of stairs
Have we walked together?
A great many, yet much less
Than the thousands of miles of stairs
I have walked alone.
I like to look around me on these long
Walks on the stairs;
Redwoods convulsed in gales, Scots pines,
Olive trees, sycamores, my wife's ashes.

Um lance de escadas e uma aspirada
E eu era o santo marido.
Lá de cima, aparando a grama, eu podia ouvir
Minha esposa lá embaixo assobiando
Passando os olhos pelo jornal matutino.

Escadas dando em escadas.

Um degrau de cada vez ou
Três degraus de cada vez ou
Quatro ou cinco degraus de cada vez
Lá pelos quarenta, quando ela e eu
Íamos pro nosso quarto correndo
No meio do dia
Mal conseguindo alcançá-lo a tempo,
Escorregando, escalando, chegando lá,
Seus braços em volta dos meus joelhos,
Ou íamos ao banheiro para tomar banho
Juntos na mesma banheira e fazer
Uma bagunça de água no chão;
Um vaso de flox no peitoril da janela
Ou um galheteiro com um cacho de flores da aveleira.

Dias em que não estávamos nos falando
Ou, verdade seja dita, dias em que
Eu estava amuado e ela ficou fora
Do meu caminho, eu passava o dia todo sentado
Nas escadas, os joelhos dobrados
Sob meu queixo, os cotovelos
Ao redor das canelas. Eu preferia
Sentar em escadas a sentar em cadeiras,
Sentar na escada que dá pra porta da frente,
Voltado pro sul, voltado pro sul e pro mar,
Lembrando do Café Netuno em Batumi.

O homem é o inventor das escadas.

Por quantas milhas de escadas
Nós andamos juntos?
Muitas, mas muito menos do que
As centenas de milhas de escadas
Pelas quais andei sozinho.
Gosto de olhar ao meu redor nesses longos
Passeios pelas escadas;
Sequóias agitadas nos vendavais, pinheiros escoceses,
Oliveiras, plátanos, cinzas da minha esposa.

Man walking the stairs.
Man doing nothing else
Except walking the stairs.
Man scattering his wife's ashes
Either side of the stairs.
Sower stalking the stairs.

Our only son lived a long
And good life, only to be
Knocked down by a motorcar
On Leeson Street Bridge.
We buried him in the front garden
Along with our two black cats.
I think of him on the stairs –
How he used crawl face forwards
Down the stairs if I promised
To catch him at the foot of the stairs.

I carry my stairs in my arms
Up through the treetops of Provence,
All my treads and all my raisers.
Love is not love that is not courtly;
That's what every woman knows.

Man walking the stairs
Is man treading water.
Our house of water:
Do not open the door.

Odd to overhear that you think I am saying
"Man walking the stars"
When all my life I have been saying
"Man walking the stairs".

Homem a andar por escadas.
Homem não fazendo nada mais
Do que andar por escadas.
Homem espalhando as cinzas de sua esposa
De ambos os lados da escada.
Semeador seguindo as escadas.

Nosso único filho viveu uma longa
E boa vida, até ser simplesmente
Atropelado por um automóvel
Na ponte da Rua Leeson.
Nós o enterramos no jardim da frente
Junto aos nossos dois gatos pretos.
Eu penso nele nas escadas.
Como costumava engatinhar atrevido avante
Descendo as escadas se eu prometesse
Apanhá-lo ao pé da escada.

Carrego minhas escadas nos braços
Acima das copas das árvores de Provença,
Todos os meus passos e todas as minhas fichas.
Amor não é amor se não é cortês;
Isso é o que sabe toda mulher.

Homem a andar por escadas
É o homem patinhando na água.
Nossa casa de água:
Não abra a porta.

Curioso entreouvir que tu achas que eu disse
"Homem a andar por estrelas"
Quando toda a minha vida tenho dito
"Homem a andar por escadas".

Translated by Luci Collin (Brazil)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.44-45.

Samambaia

Paul Durcan

Living in the clouds in Brazil
Or living in the clouds in Ireland
Is vast of a vastness –

Fern
Behind whose face paint
My Indian eyes blink.

Night is day:
Nothing stays the same.
Everything changes.

Sunlight is rain:
Nothing should stay the same.
Everything should change.

If you love her
You will never
Take her for granted

Nor will you think twice
If the choice
Is between love and fame.

I, Elizabeth,
Do take you, Lota,
For my lawful, wedded cloud.

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Samambaia

Viver nas nuvens no Brasil
Ou viver nas nuvens na Irlanda
É de uma imensa imensidão –

Samambaia
Por trás de um rosto pintado
Piscam meus olhos indígenas.

Noite é dia:
Nada fica igual
Tudo varia.

Luz do sol é chuva
Nada ficaria igual
Tudo mudaria.

Se você a ama
Nunca poderá
Tomá-la como certa

Nem pensará duas vezes
Se a escolha
For entre o amor e a fama.

Eu, Elizabeth,
Aceito você, Lota,
Como minha legítima nuvem.

Translated by Noélia Borges, Monique Pfau
and the translation group at UFBA (Brazil)

ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.2, 2020, pp.46-47.

The Geography of Elizabeth Bishop

Paul Durcan

There is a life before birth
On earth – oh, yes, on earth –
And is called Brazil
Call it paradise, if you will.

Reared in New England, Nova Scotia
I was orphaned in childhood.
Despite the fastidiousness of aunts
I could know myself only as an alien –
An authority of courtesy –
Until aged forty on a voyage round Cape Horn
I stepped off in Rio, stayed, discovered
My mind in Brazil. Became again an *infanta*!
A thinking monkey's *companero*!
Fed, cuddled, above all needed.
In the treetops of Samambaia
I made a treehouse;
In Ouro Preto I made a nest
In a niche in a cliff in a valley
Of nineteen golden churches.

At forty I discovered that my voice –
That cuckoo hymen of mine, mine, mine –
Was a Darwinian tissue:

That in God's *cinéma vérité*
I was an authentic *bocadinho*.

Back in Boston, a late-middle-aged lady,
I became again an orphan,
Put an orphan uniform.
Endured the timetable of the orphanage –
All these invigilators sliding
In and out their Venetian blinds
With not a baby elephant in sight
Nor chimp not toucan not parakeet.
I stilled the pain with alcohol
And with self-pity – in spite
Of which, death waxed merciful.

There is a life before birth
On earth – oh, yes, on earth –
And is called Brazil
Call it paradise, if you will.

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A Geografia de Elizabeth Bishop

Há uma vida antes do nascimento
Na terra – oh, sim, na terra –
E se chama Brasil.
Chame-a de paraíso, se quiser.

Criada na Nova Inglaterra, Nova Escócia,
Fiquei órfã na infância.
Apesar dos cuidados excessivos de minhas tias
Eu me via apenas como uma estranha –
Uma autoridade em matéria de cortesia –
Até a idade de quarenta anos, quando fiz uma viagem ao redor de Cape Horn
Cheguei no Rio, lá fiquei e me descobri
No Brasil. Lá me tornei outra vez uma infanta!
Companero de um macaco pensante!
Alimentada, afagada e, acima de tudo, necessária.
Nas copas da Samambaia
Fiz uma casa na árvore;
Em Ouro Preto, fiz um ninho
Em um nicho num penhasco de um vale
Com dezenove igrejas de ouro.

Aos quarenta anos, descobri que minha voz –
Aquele hímen do cuco, meu, meu, meu –
Era um tecido darwiniano:
E que, no cinema vérité de Deus
Eu não passava de um autêntico bocadinho.

De volta a Boston, já uma senhora de meia idade,
Novamente, fiquei órfã,
Vesti um uniforme de órfã –
Suportei os horários do orfanato
Todos aqueles supervisores entrando e saindo
Pelas venezianas
Sem nenhum filhote de elefante à vista
Nem chimpanzé, nem tucano, nem periquito.
Adormeci minha dor com álcool
Mas apesar da autopiedade
A morte me pareceu um consolo.

Há uma vida antes do nascimento
Na terra – oh, sim, na terra –
E se chama Brasil.
Chame-a de paraíso, se quiser.

Translated by Sílvia Maria Guerra Anastácio (Brazil)

In memory of Those Murdered in the Dublin Massacre, May 1974

Paul Durcan

In the grime-ridden sunlight in the downtown Wimpy bar
I think of all the crucial aeons – and of the labels
That freedom fighters stick onto the lost destinies of unborn children;
The early morning sunlight carries in the whole street from outside;
The whole wide street from outside through the plate-glass windows;
Wholly, sparklingly, surgingly carried in from outside;
And the waitresses cannot help but be happy and gay
As they swipe at the table-tops with their dishcloths –
Such a moment as would provide the heroic freedom fighter
With his perfect meat.
And I think of those heroes – heroes? – and how truly
Obscene is war.

And as I stand up to walkout –
The aproned old woman who's been sweeping the floor
Has mop stuck in bucket, leaning on it;
And she's trembling all over, like a flower in the breeze.
She'd make a mighty fine explosion now, if you were to blow her up;
An explosion of petals, of aeons, and the waitresses too, flying breasts and limbs,
For a free Ireland.

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À la mémoire des victimes du massacre de Dublin (mai 1974)

Dans la lumière sale du wimpy-bar du centre ville
Je pense au passage inéluctable des siècles, et à l'inscription
Apposée par les combattants de la liberté sur la destinée perdue des enfants qui n'ont pas vu le jour ;
La lumière de l'aube fait entrer la rue entière ;
La large rue toute entière entre par les baies vitrées ;
Elle est là toute entière, elle brille, elle déferle, venue du dehors ;
Et les serveuses – c'est plus fort qu'elles - sont heureuses et gaies,
Elles qui essuient les tables avec leur torchon.
À cet instant précis l'héroïque combattant de la liberté trouverait
Une matière première de choix pour sa boucherie.
Et je pense à eux, à ces héros - vous avez dit héros ? – et à la guerre
Dans toute son obscénité.

Je me lève pour sortir ;
La vieille femme en tablier qui balayait le sol
S'appuie maintenant sur son balai à franges dans le seau ;
Elle tremble comme une feuille, comme une fleur dans le vent.
Quelle magnifique explosion ce serait, si on la faisait sauter...
Une explosion de pétales, de siècles, et de serveuses aussi, seins et membres épars,
Pour l'Irlande libre.

Translated by Madeleine Descargues Grant (France)

The Poetry Reading Last Night in the Royal Hibernian Hotel

Paul Durcan

The main thing – the first and last thing – to say
About the poetry reading last night in the Royal Hibernian Hotel
Is that the Royal Hibernian Hotel does not exist;
It was demolished last year to make way for an office block.
If, therefore, anyone was to ask me what a poetry reading is,
I should have the utmost difficulty in enlightening them,
All the more so after having attended last night's poetry reading
In the Royal Hibernian Hotel which does not exist.
A poetry reading appears to be a type of esoteric social ritual
Peculiar to the cities of northern Europe and North America.
What happens is that for one reason or another,
Connected usually with moods in adolescence
To do with Family and School and Sexuality,
A chap – or a dame – begins writing things
Which he – she – calls "Poetry"
And over the years – especially between the ages of fourteen and sixty-four –
What with one kind of wangling or another,
He – she – publishes seventeen or nineteen slim volumes
Entitled Stones or Bricks or Pebbles or Gravel;
Or History Notes or Digs or French Class.
He – she – is hellbent on boring the pants off people
And that's where the poetry-reading trick comes in.
The best poets are the poets who can bore you the most,
Such as the fellow last night who was so adept at boring us
That for the entire hour that he stood there mumbling and whining
My mind was altogether elsewhere with the reindeer
In Auden's Cemetery for the Silently and Very Fast.
A poetry reading is a ritual in communal schizophrenia
In which the minds of the audience are altogether elsewhere
While their bodies are kept sitting upright or in position.
Afterwards it is the custom to clap as feebly as you can –
A subtle exercise appropriate to the overall scheme.
To clap feebly – or to feebly clap – is as tricky as it sounds.
It is the custom then to invite the poet to autograph the slim volume
And while the queue forms like the queue outside a confessional,
The poet cringing archly on an upright chair,
You say to your neighbour "A fine reading, wasn't it?'
To which he must riposte
"Indeed – nice to see you lying through your teeth.' '

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Die Gedichtlesung gestern Abend im Royal Hibernian Hotel

Die wichtigste Sache, aber auch die einzige Sache,
Die es über die Gedichtlesung gestern Abend im Royal Hibernian Hotel zu sagen gibt
Ist, dass das Royal Hibernian Hotel nicht existiert;
Es ist im letzten Jahr abgerissen worden, um für ein Bürogebäude Platz zu machen.
Sollte mich jemand fragen, was eine Gedichtlesung eigentlich ist,
Dann hätte ich daher größte Mühe, ihm eine erhellende Antwort zu geben.
Insbesondere nach der gestrigen Gedichtlesung im Royal Hibernian Hotel das nicht existiert.
Eine Gedichtlesung ist ein sonderbares esoterisches Ritual,
Das insbesondere in Städten Nord Europas und Nord Amerikas anzutreffen ist.
Was sich normaler Weise zuträgt ist, dass aus irgendeinem Grund,
Ein Bürschchen oder ein adeliges Fräulein anfängt, etwas zu schreiben was mit Jugendlaunen,
Familie, Schule oder Sex zu tun hat,
Und das er oder sie dann „Lyrik" nennt.
Und über die Jahre –meistens zwischen 14 und 64 – schafft er oder sie es
Durch irgendwelche Schiebereien
Siebzehn oder neunzehn schmale Heftchen zu veröffentlichen, die Titel
Wie Steine oder Backsteine oder Kieselsteine oder Schotter tragen;
Oder Geschichtsnotizen oder Bruchbuden oder Französischunterricht.
Er oder sie ist ganz darauf besessen, Leute zu Tode zu langweilen
Und so der Dichtkunst freien Lauf zu lassen.
Die besten Poeten sind die, die einen am meisten langweilen können
genau wie der Kerl, der uns gestern Abend so brillant angeödet hat,
dass während der ganzen Stunde die er nuschelnd lamentierend herumstand
Meine Gedanken auf einem anderen Planeten waren, bei Audens Rentierherde
Auf dem Friedhof der Leisen und sehr Schnellen.
Eine Gedichtlesung ist ein kollektives Ritual der Schizophrenie bei dem die Gedanken der
[Zuhörer allesamt woanders sind,
Während ihre Körper in aufrechter Stellung gehalten werden.
Nachher ist es Sitte, so schwach wie möglich zu klatschen,
eine subtile Gepflogenheit gänzlich der Form der Veranstaltung entsprechend.
Schwaches Klatschen – oder schwach zu klatschen – ist genauso schwierig wie es sich anhört.
Nachher ist es Sitte, den Dichter zu bitten, das dünne Heftchen zu signieren
Und während sich wie vor einem Beichtstuhl eine Schlange bildete
Und der Poet krumm auf einem Stuhl hockt,
sagt man dann zu seinem Nachbarn: „Eine tolle Lesung, nicht wahr?",
worauf er dann antwortet:
„In der Tat – gut gelogen."

The fully clothed audience departs, leaving the poet
Who bored the pants off them
Laughing all the way to the toilet
Of a hotel that does not exist,
Thence to the carpark that does exist
Where he has left his Peugeot with the broken exhaust pipe.
“Night-night” – he mews to the automatic carpark attendant
Who replies with one bright, emphatic, onomatopoeic monosyllable:
Creep.

Das lebende Publikum verlässt den Saal und den Dichter, der es zu Tode gelangweilt hat.
Lachend marschiert der Poet zur Toilette in dem Hotel das nicht existiert
und läuft danach zu dem existierenden Parkplatz
auf dem er seinen Peugeot mit einem kaputten Auspuff abgestellt hat.
„Gut Nächtle" mauzt er dem automatischen Parkplatzwächter zu.
Dieser antwortet darauf mit einem hellen, inständigen, einsilbigen, onomatopoetischen
„Schuft".

Translated by Stephanie Schwerter (Germany)

Zina in Murmansk

Paul Durcan

As a schoolgirl, Zina
Was all that a Pioneer instructor
Could dream of, and her parents –
Druzhniki, gribniki,
Peace-keepers, mushroom-hunters –
Were proud of her as a mushroom,
Their own miniscule red mushroom.
She was droll, elegant, gay,
Her company always a pleasure.
It was expected that after schooldays
She would attend the Literary Institute
In Moscow, or the Leningrad Art College.
Instead, she became a grade-A typist
And applied for a resident's permit
In Murmansk, in the arctic region
Of the Far North.
Zina – diminutive of Zinaida –
Had always been a dreamer
With her feet on the ground.
She was certain that Murmansk
Was the kind of town she would find
The old-fashioned man she yearned for,
A specimen of manhood whose ancestors
Had been living the same sort of life
For thousands and thousands and thousands of –
A Mesolithic Man of the twentieth century
Who would fish for shark in the White Sea
And hunt polar bear in the tundra,
Who would live with her in a log cabin
And at night read to her from Tolstoy,
Valentin Rasputin and Chingitz Aitmatov,
While she darned his mighty socks,
Or applied her awl to his boots,
Boring tunnels for thong piping.
But such men are no more extant
In Murmansk than in Moscow.
She could not find even one man
Who had a drop of Mesolithic sexuality
Left in his pasteurised blood.

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Зина в Мурманске Пол Деркан

Будучи школьницей, Зина
Воплощала собой все сразу,
О чем пионервожатой
Только можно мечтать.
Родители – папа с мамой –
Простые советские люди:
Дружинники, грибники,
Гордились ей, как грибочком.
Их маленьким красным грибком.
Мила, весела и изящна.
С ней было всегда интересно.
Считалось, она поступит в московский Литинститут,
В худ. училище в Ленинграде.
Однако вместо того,
Первоклассной став машинисткой,
Девушка завербовалась в Мурманск,
На Крайний Север,
В Арктический регион.
Зина – краткое от Зинаида –
Всегда была фантазеркой,
Но не без здравого смыла.
Она полагала, что Мурманск
Будет тем самым местом,
Где встретит она мужчину
Старой закалки, который виделся ей в мечтах.
Мужчина, которого предки
Жили похожей жизнью тысячи тысяч лет.
Мужчина из Мезолита, но только в двадцатом столетье,
Что ловит акул в Белом море,
Охотится на медведя, его преследуя в тундре,
С которым они будут жить
В простом бревенчатом доме,
И вечерами он будет читать ей разные книжки:
Распутина и Толстого, Айтматова и других.
А она пока будет штопать дырки в носках могучих
И шилом делать отверстья
В бутсах его для шнурков.
Но только такие мужчины больше не существуют.
И в Мурманске их оказалось
Не более, чем в Москве.
Она отыскать не сумела
Никого, в чьей крови стерильной

To this day Zina remains
A single girl in Murmansk,
Typing out the correspondence of the chairman
Of the White Sea Shipping Company,
At 18 Kornintern Street,
While he attends to his fourth wife
And the nightly routine of television and fornication.
It is the same the wide world over
From Murmansk to Batumi,
From Novosibirsk to Shamaka:
A question of whether or not there *is time*
– Time, I said, time, time and time again –
To squeeze in a quick fornication
Between the 9 p.m. newscast
And the 9.30 p.m. current affairs, musical chairs programme.
Soon shark and bear will be extinct –
And women too:
Soon there will be no more women.
Zina goes nightly to her bunk
As to her beloved grave.
Reading in bed late at night in Murmansk,
Am I the last woman left alive in the world?

Осталась хотя бы капля
Сексуальности древних времён.
Оттого и по сей день Зина
В Мурманске одинока.
Печатает документы директору пароходства
На улице Коминтерна, Дом 18. Директор
Уходит домой с работы к жене. Четвёртой по счёту.
К ежевечерней рутине из телепрограмм и секса.
И там все одно и то же:
Огромной страны просторы
От Мурманска до Батуми
От Кеми до Новосибирска
И тот же самый вопрос:
Найдётся сегодня время,
– Я говорю тебе, время, время, ещё раз время –
По-быстрому втиснуть секс
Между программой Время, начавшейся ровно в 9
И музыкальной программой, что позже на полчаса.
Скоро медведи, акулы вымрут
И женщины вместе с ними.
Их не останется больше.
Идёт каждый вечер Зина
Занять своё спальное место,
Где ей – как в любимой могиле.
И там допоздна читает,
в Мурманске, лёжа в кровати,
И думает: неужели
Последняя я живая женщина на Земле?

Translated by Marina Tsvetkova (Russia)

What Shall I Wear, Darling, to The Great Hunger?

Paul Durcan

"What shall I wear, darling, to *The Great Hunger*?"
She shrieked at me helplessly from the east bedroom
Where the west wind does be blowing betimes.
I did not hesitate to hazard a spontaneous response:
"Your green evening gown –
Your see-through, sleeveless, backless, green evening gown."
We arrived at the Peacock
In good time for everybody to have a good gawk at her
Before the curtain went up on *The Great Hunger*.
At the interval everybody was clucking about, cooing
That it was simply stunning – her dress –
"Darling, you look like Mother Divinity in your see-through,
Sleeveless, backless, green evening gown – it's so visual!"
At the party after the show – simply everybody was there –
Winston Lenihan, Consolata O'Carroll-Riviera, Yves St. Kierkegaard –
She was so busy being admired that she forgot to get drunk.
But the next morning it was business as usual –
Grey serge pants, blue donkey jacket – driving around Dolphin's Barn
In her Opel Kadett hatchback
Checking up on the rents. "All these unmarried young mothers
And their frogspawn, living on the welfare –
You would think that it never occurred to them
That it's their rents that pay for the outfits I have to wear
Whenever *The Great Hunger* is playing at the Peacock.
No, it never occurs to them that in Ireland today
It is not easy to be a landlord and a patron of the arts.
It is not for nothing that we in Fail Gael have a social conscience:
Either you pay the shagging rent or you get out on the street.
Next week I have to attend three-a-half *Great Hungers*,
Not to mention a half-dozen *Juno and the Paycocks*. "

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Cariño, ¿qué me pongo para La Hambruna?[1]

Cariño, ¿qué me pongo para *La Hambruna*?
Chilló desesperada desde el dormitorio este
Donde a veces sí que sopla el viento del oeste
No dudé en aventurar una respuesta espontánea:
"El vestido de noche verde –
El vestido de noche transparente, verde, sin mangas, con la espalda al aire."
Llegamos al teatro Peacock
Con tiempo de sobra para que todos se la quedasen mirando embobados
Antes de que subiera el telón de *La Hambruna*.
En el entreacto todos cacareaban, decían con seductores arrullos
Que era simplemente deslumbrante – el vestido –
"Querida, te pareces a la Diosa Madre con el vestido de noche
Transparente, verde, sin mangas y con la espalda al aire – ¡es tan gráfico!"
En la fiesta tras la obra – sencillamente todo el mundo estaba allí.
Winston Lenihan, Consolata O'Carroll-Riviera, Yves St. Kierkegaard.
Era tal la admiración que causaba que olvidó emborracharse.
Pero al día siguiente todo volvió a la normalidad
Pantalones de sarga grises, chaquetón amplio de lana – por Dolphin's Barn[2]
En el Opel Kadett con portón trasero
Comprobando el pago de las rentas. "Todas estas madres solteras
Y sus renacuajos, viviendo de los subsidios –
Parece que jamás pensaron
Que es su alquiler lo que paga los trajes que he de llevar
Cuando ponen *La Hambruna* en el Peacock.
No, jamás se les ocurre que en la Irlanda de hoy día
No es fácil ser casero y patrón de las artes y las letras.
Por algo nosotros los del Fail Gael[3] tenemos conciencia social:
"O pagas la jodida renta o te vas a la calle
La semana que viene tengo que acudir a tres Grandes Hambrunas y media
Por no mencionar media docena de *Juno y el Pavo Real*."[4]

Translated by Mª Yolanda Fernández Suárez (Spain)

Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949

Paul Durcan

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 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.

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Ag Dul Abhaile go Maigh Eo, Geimhreadh, 1949

Thugamar cúl ar chathair choimhthíoch Bhaile Átha Cliath.
Thiomáin m'athair a shean Ford Anglia trí dhubh na hoíche,
A mhac, cúig bliana d'aois, sa suíochán in aice leis,
Suíochán dearg leathairéid
Agus gealach bhuí ag lonrú tríd an ngaothscáth.
A Dhaid a Dhaid, a scairt mé, Tiomáin chun tosaigh ar an ngealach,
Ach ba chuma cé comh gasta is a thiomáin sé
D'fhan an ghealach romhainn amach.
Ba chloch-mhíle gach baile a chuir muid tharainn,
A nainmneacha, pasfhocail dhraíochta sa tsíoraíocht –
Cill Chóca, Cionn Átha Gad, Béal na mBuillí, Áil Fin,
Tearmann Bearaigh, Tuilsce, Bealach an Doirín, Béal Átha Bhearaigh,
Anois bhí muid i Maigh Eo, an chéad stad eile ná Turlach,

Sráidbhaile Thurlaigh i gcroí is i gceartlár Mhaigh Eo,
Agus teach mathair m'athar, lán lampaí ola is mná,
Agus mo sheomra leapa díreach os cionn an teach tábhairne,
Agus ar maidin glaoch eallaigh is glaoch coilligh:
A screadaí is a mbuirthí mar stróic ghalánta
Ar éadach mín na beatha. Agus, um thráthnóna,
Tríd an fhéar ard cois abhann, shiúlfhainn le m'athair,
Sinn ag comhrá, rud do-chreidthe sa chathair.

Ach níorbh é an baile é i ndáiríre,
Is ba dheacra ná dul chun tosaigh ar an ngealach,
Éalu ó thromluí laethúil chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath :
Ar ais linn, ag tiomáint go mall, stadach, cois canála,
Gach geata loic canála, buile cloig ár ngruaime is ár gcreiche,
Agus ráilí agus fáilí agus asfalt agus soilse tráchta,
Agus bloc i ndiadh bloic d'árasáin bhochta nua –
Croiseanna an uaignis, na mílte acu, curtha
San uaigh chúng, fáiscithe de bheatha an athar
Sa reilig fhairsing, fairsing óige a mhic.

Aistriúchán, Máire Ní Chanainn (Moya Cannon, Ireland)

Notes

"O Audaz Homem de Meia Idade no Trapézio Voador", pages 30-33

1 O título do poema "The Daring Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze" constitui uma referência dupla. A primeira é ao título de um conto do escritor norte-americano, de origem armênia, William Saroyan (1908-1981): "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze", pela primeira vez publicado na revista *Story*, em 1934, e depois em livro: *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1934). Existe edição em português: *O jovem audaz no trapézio voador e outras histórias* (Trad. Fausto Wolf. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2004). A segunda referência é à canção "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" ou "The Flying Trapeze" ou, ainda, "The Man on the Flying Trapeze", que toma como base a fama do francês Jules Léotard (1838-1870), artista acrobático, inventor do trapézio voador e da vestimenta que em inglês leva seu nome "leotard", um colante em uma só peça, usada por outros artistas circenses, assim como ginastas, dançarinos, patinadores, atletas, atores, lutadores. A canção, de 1867, tem letra de George Leybourne e música de Gaston Lyle. Em sua segunda estrofe e refrão aparece: "He floats thro' the air with the greatest of ease/ The daring young man on the flying trapeze/ Ele voava no ar com a maior facilidade/ Aquele audaz jovem no trapézio voador". Foi este último verso que Saroyan aproveitou como título de seu famoso conto.

2 No original, "a gas", que na gíria usada no inglês da Irlanda, sendo referência a uma coisa, situação ou pessoa, significa "engraçado/a, graça"; por exemplo: "This fella is gas" = Esse cara é engraçado.

3 Referência à "YWCA Ireland (Young Women's Christian Association of Ireland)", fundada em 1875, com sede no número 64 da Baggot Street Lower, no distrito Dublin 2. Na época a que o poema se refere existia uma seção da YWCA na St. John's Road (rua São João), bem ao lado da igreja de Saint John the Evangelist, na esquina da Park Ave., próxima a outras referências a lugares do distrito.

4 Referência à moeda em uso na Irlanda ao tempo da primeira edição do livro *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil*, em 1999. A libra esterlina irlandesa saiu de uso a partir de 2002, quando a Irlanda passou a integrar a União Europeia, adotando o euro. O valor aproximado seria hoje de € 16.51 (algo em torno de R$ 76,83).

5 Martello Tower (a no 10, em Sandymount – não confundir com a Martello Tower em Sandycove, bem mais ao sul, em Dublin, hoje "James Joyce Tower & Museum", onde James Joyce (1882-1941) morou por pouco tempo e onde ocorre a cena inicial de *Ulisses*. Outra referência a lugar em Sandymount inclui a Strand Road (rua da Praia). Ver Notas 6. e 7.

6 Referência à Igreja da Inglaterra (no original, "C. of E. [Church of England]" forma tradicional reduzida de referência à Igreja Anglicana Inglesa). A igreja de São João Evangelista na St. John's Road (rua São João) pertence à Igreja Anglicana Irlandesa.

7 Referência à igreja católica "Santa Maria, Nossa Senhora Estrela do Mar", ao norte de Sandymount, distrito Dublin 4, ao sul da região central de Dublin. Sandymount tornou-se um distrito famoso de Dublin em razão de lá ter nascido William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) e de todas as outras referências que aparecem neste poema de Paul Durcan.

8 Outra referência ao escritor armênio-americano William Saroyan, cujo pai, Armenak Saroyan (1874-1911), poeta e filósofo, pregava em igrejas da Igreja Ortodoxa Armênia nos Estados Unidos, depois que para lá a família imigrou. Evidentemente, Durcan também não é brasileiro.

9 Referência à península de Howth, na baía de Dublin, ao norte do estuário do rio Liffey, que corta a capital da Irlanda ao meio, do oeste para o leste. O poeta considera que a lua vista de Howth não tem interferência das luzes da cidade, assim podendo ser mais brilhante e clara.

10 Referência à famosa passagem, "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes/ Inelutável modalidade do visível: ao menos isso, se não mais, embora através de meus olhos", com que James Joyce dá início ao terceiro capítulo, "Proteus", do romance *Ulisses*, em que o personagem Stephen Dedalus está pensando na capacidade humana da visão, buscando um equilíbrio entre a visão profética e o empirismo aristotélico que o ocupou no início do segundo capítulo do livro, "Nestor", durante e depois da aula de história que ministra.

Ele tenta ver se pode acessar a realidade suprema transcendendo as aparências sensoriais, mas como a modalidade da visão é "inelutável", isto é, inevitável, Stephen decide que não pode. Ele passa o resto do capítulo prestando atenção às coisas e também sons ao seu redor. Ver o sítio "The Joyce Project" em <http://m.joyceproject.com>, e em muitos outros sítios especializados em *Ulisses* na internet.

"Cariño, ¿qué me pongo para La Hambruna?" pages 59-60

1 Escrito en 1987, el poema es una sátira a una pareja de clase media que está arreglándose para asistir al teatro Peacock a la adaptación de Tom MacIntyre del poema de Patrick Kavanagh.

2 Barrio marginal en el sur de Dublín.

3 Juego de palabras donde se combinan los nombres de los dos partidos que constituyen el monopolio conservador: *Fine Gael* (lit. Pueblo Celta), democristiano, y *Fianna Fáil* (lit. Soldados del Destino), centrista. El partido que propone Durcan con ironía podría traducirse como "Fracaso Celta."

4 Obra de Sean O'Casey escrita en 1924 y parte de la trilogía – junto con *La sombra de un Fusilero* (1922) y *El Arado y las Estrellas* (1926) – donde se representa poco favorablemente la lucha pro-independentista.

Durcan's Poetry from the Irish and the International Perspectives

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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Paul Painting Paul: Self-Portraiture and Subjectivity in Durcan's Poetry
Paul Pintando Paul: Autorretrato e Subjetividade na Poesia de Durcan

Kathleen McCracken

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.*

Keywords: *Self-Portraiture; subjectivity; poetry; Paul Durcan.*

Resumo: *Em um número significativo de poemas de Paul Durcan, um "personagem" chamado Paul Durcan faz uma aparição. Em parte, traço autobiográfico, em parte, construção ficcional, o que essa persona enigmática tem a dizer sobre autoria, subjetividade e potencial para autorretratos via forma poética? Este artigo examina as múltiplas implicações da aparente auto-inscrição de Durcan à luz da noção de Barthes acerca da morte do autor, de Foucault sobre a função do autor e da própria percepção de Durcan da coleção de poesia como uma galeria de imagens verbais.*

Palavras-chave: *Autorretrato; subjetividade; poesia; Paul Durcan.*

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

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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," "Hommage 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 emphasize 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 is 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 "Dostoys./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 dexterously 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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The Dublin-Moscow Line: Russia and the Poetics of Home in Contemporary Irish Poetry

A Linha Dublin-Moscou: Rússia e a Poética do Lar na Poesia Irlandesa Contemporânea

Kim Cheng Boey

Abstract: *This article opens with an overview of the possibilities offered by the influence of Russian literature on Irish poetry. Subsequently, the focus shifts to Durcan's oeuvre and the way in which Russia presents itself as an "elsewhere" which has allowed him to go beyond Ireland's insularity and broaden his perspective. Hence, this study reveals that Durcan's turning to Russia is an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic notion of identity according to which the links between place and self are indissoluble. Instead, it is here proposed that Russia is envisaged as an imaginary homeland where the self can be freed from Anglo-Irish tradition allowing for the shattering of myths regarding the idea of home.*

Keywords: *Russia; Ireland; Paul Durcan; Poetics of Home.*

Resumo: *Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral acerca das possibilidades engendradas pela influência da literatura russa sobre a poesia irlandesa. Em seguida, o foco se volta para a obra de Paul Durcan e a maneira pela qual a Rússia é apresentada como um "outro lugar" que permitiu a Durcan ir além da insularidade irlandesa e ampliar sua perspectiva. Desse modo, este estudo revela que o fato de Durcan voltar-se para a Rússia é uma tentativa de romper com a noção hegemônica de identidade, segundo a qual a relação entre lugar e sujeito é indissolúvel. Destarte, a Rússia é concebida como uma nação imaginária que permite ao sujeito se libertar da tradição anglo-irlandesa, permitindo a destruição de mitos que existem em torno da ideia de lar.*

Palavras-chave: *Rússia; Irlanda; Paul Durcan; Poética do lar.*

In *Invisible Cities*, Kublai Khan quizzes Marco Polo about his obsession with foreign lands, surmising whether it is to "relive your past" or "recover your future". Marco Polo replies: "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have" (Calvino 26). Elsewheres, whether real or imagined, especially if they seem the antithesis of home, offer escape from the threefold burden of nationality, race, and religion Joyce famously identifies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At the same time, they provide the distance which makes possible alternative readings of home. If the traveller's ethnocentric lenses are abandoned, elsewheres can yield the key to

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unravelling the mysteries of home.

In contemporary Irish poetry, Russia is one of the elsewheres which appears with remarkable frequency.[1] The title of this essay is adapted from Paul Durcan's poem "The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line", one of his many poems connecting Ireland and Russia. However, Durcan is not the only writer for whom Russia is a frequent port-of-call. It is a much-visited destination for a host of Irish poets. Its enormous size, its tormented history and literature, seem to yield a negative mirror, to use Calvino's phrase, which encompasses a whole range of readings about Ireland. As an alternative to the Anglo-American tradition, Russian poetry offers invaluable lessons in the situating of self in relation to politics and in the negotiation of art and history. With its dark history of persecution and suppression, it provides a paradigm of how art can deal with political pressures. This essay explores the role of Russia in the spatial poetics of Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Paul Durcan, Michael O'Loughlin, Seamus Deane, Sean Dunne, Paula Meehan, Mebdh McGuckian, and Frank Ormsby; it examines how Russia operates as a parallel elsewhere that enables a re-visioning of home.

On a psychological plane, Russian poetry frees the Irish poet from the English legacy, its lyric irony a liberating change from the Romantic tradition that English poetry is entrenched in. The literary shift is also politically enabling; it yields an alternative bilateral link, sidestepping the crippling colonial relationship with England. Heaney's essay, "The Impact of Translation", asserts that the complacent tenets of British poetry have been disturbed by the courage of Russian literature which, in its defiance of authoritarian censorship, offers precedents as to how poetry can hold its own with politics. He observes that the "modern martyrology" has made British poets "turn their gaze east" and consequently they have to "concede that the locus of greatness is shifting away from their language". Heaney adds that "our sense of the fate and scope of modern Russian poetry has implicitly established a bench at which subsequent work will have to justify itself" (Heaney 38-9). This is a literary declaration of independence through an alliance with a distant power, allaying the anxiety stemming from the historic subservience to English language and literature.

The turning to such a remote and vast country as Russia is also an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic notion of identity which maintains that the links between place and self are indissoluble. Foreign lands and cultures provide alternative routes to home, while the play with distance and perspective throws received ideas of nation and self into disarray, engendering new views free from absolutes. Terence Brown speculates that the interest in translation is "a sign of the degree to which in contemporary Ireland inherited definitions of national life, of social origins and expectations, fail to account for much individual and collective experience"("Translating Ireland" 138). The choice of Russia as Other, its landlocked mass the antithesis of the small insular shape of Ireland, springs as much from the interest in political parallels as from the geographic and psychological distance it offers from both England and Ireland. The centre is destabilized in the process and the frontier becomes a key to criticizing and understanding home.

Heaney is one of the many contemporary Irish poets who has shifted his gaze eastwards. Torn between the competing calls of artistic commitment and the political events demanding of him a more overt political voice, he looks to the East European and Russian writers for examples of how art can deal with political pressures. Examining the responses of these writers to the violence of history, he observes how each poet achieves release in the moment when the tongue, Heaney's figure for poetic imagination, constrained by either its guilt in the face of the unspeakable or totalitarian policing, affirms its creative powers in lyrical

completion. These poets provide exemplars for "the kinds of pressure which poets from Northern Ireland are subject to": they are models of how "to be true to the negative nature of the evidence and at the same time to show an affirming flame, the need to be both socially responsible and creatively free" (*The Redress of Poetry* 193).

Heaney relates an incident in Chekhov's life which seems insignificant but which he amplifies as the pivotal point of his argument. Following Chekhov's journey to the penal colony of Sakhalin to record the living conditions of the prisoners, Heaney scrutinizes his dilemma as both a doctor and writer. For Heaney, Chekhov's opting to go on this Siberian trip is "a debt to medicine" a peremptory call of social conscience, as well as an "exorcism of the slave's blood in him and an actual encompassing of psychic and artistic freedom". Chekhov, in the hinterland of suffering, is torn between allegiance to his art and the demands of social commitment. On the first night on the island, in a spontaneous moment of pure enjoyment, he empties the bottle of cognac his friends have given him as a parting gift. In this gesture, Heaney discerns an image of the poet "appeased; justified and unabashed by the suffering which surrounds him because unflinchingly responsible to it" (*The Government of the Tongue* xvii).

The incident is recast in poetic form in "Chekhov in Sakhalin", one of the many poems in Station Island arbitrating the tension between the self-justifying rapture of lyric art and the call for social and political responsibility. Chekhov smashes the empty bottle on the stones and the breaking glass "rang as clearly as the convicts' chains" and "like the burden of his freedom // To try for the right tone – not tract, not thesis / And walk away from floggings" (*Station Island* 19). Chekhov's moment of release is overshadowed by his social conscience. This episode illuminates an incident Heaney recounts at the beginning of the essay. Driving with his singer-friend David Hammond to a recording, Heaney is halted by explosions and sirens. Dismayed that another atrocity has occurred, they turn back, their decision dictated by an acknowledgement of art's impotence in the face of suffering. Art retreats in the face of atrocity. Chekhov's "impulse to elevate truth above beauty, to rebuke the sovereign claims which art would make for itself", is compared to Hammond's "refusal to sing" and exercise "his free gift in the presence of the unfree and hurt" (*The Government of the Tongue* xviii).

In Heaney's view, Chekhov presents a contrast to Mandelstam who stands for "the efficacy of song itself, an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave" (*The Government of the Tongue*, xx). Refusing to succumb to the demand for odes lauding Stalin and Stalinist schemes, Mandelstam is not distracted by the voice of social responsibility either, as Chekhov is. His only obligation is to his art and to the poem as aural architectonics, the harmony of sounds cohering like a good building, providing the blueprint for the ideal society. For Heaney, Mandelstam's reading of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* as an organic effort delighting in the creative energies of words seems more attractive than Eliot's more ecclesiastical interpretation, which sees Dante as endeavoring to encompass the theological structure and thought of the Church (Eliot 205-230). Mandelstam confirms what Heaney has always held sacrosanct, that poetry is "a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony" (*The Redress of Poetry* 193). The poetic interplay of the senses is endorsed by Mandelstam as a blueprint for the perfect government and society. This accords with Heaney's synaesthetic approach to language and his faith in "soundings", corroborating his tenet that poetry's coherence-making, while not in itself a political gesture, is healing and the appeasement achieved can be an example to politics. Mandelstam's use of architectural terms is also echoed in Heaney's work. He envisions the "bastion of sensation" (*Seeing Things* 56) as the building bricks of the poem and society, and memory "as a building or a city" (*Seeing Things* 75). In another sonnet, Heaney asks: "How habitable is perfected form?" (*Seeing Things* 78), again testing the coherence of art against the

dismembering forces of history in architectural terms. "M." directly invokes Mandelstam and his auditory poetics. The "deaf phonetician" can tell the sounds by placing his hand over "the dome of a speaker's skull" (*The Spirit Level* 57), suggesting that poetic language can transcend sensory and linguistic boundaries:

> A globe stops spinning. I set my palm
> On a counter cold as permafrost
> And imagine axle-hum and the steadfast
> Russian of Osip Mandelstam (*The Spirit Level* 57).

The synaesthesia reflects not only the sensuous immediacy of language but a deeper level of contact, with sounds becoming corporeal and connecting with the sense of touch, bypassing hearing altogether. The sensuous impact of Mandelstam's voice is such that it becomes tactile and steadies the poetic world.

Tom Paulin also draws upon the Russian experience in the negotiation between art and politics. Bernard O'Donoghue remarks: "Throughout his work, concern for social responsibility and answerability occurs side by side with assertions of the artistic freedom of the individual" (O'Donoghue 175). Paulin castigates critics and writers for isolating poetry from the vortex of history. In his essay "Political Verse", he complains of the New Critics' treatment of poems as if they exist in a timeless vacuum or soundproof museum, adding that this would not be possible in totalitarian societies where "history is an inescapable condition". In such places, he asserts, the poet has "a responsibility both to art and society" (*Writing to the Moment* 103). Russian politics and poetry become for him a space in which Irish concerns can be threshed out. Committed to a cosmopolitan outlook for Ireland, an eclectic vision which accommodates differences, Paulin's political design is more palpable than Heaney's. Mandelstam, in Paulin's work, is a more assertive presence. Where Heaney is cautious to remove the political context from his poem on Mandelstam, Paulin stages Mandelstam's dissenting voice against the pressures of the totalitarian regime.

"The Other Voice" dramatizes the struggle between the claims of art and those of politics. The poem is a polyphonic orchestration of competing voices. It begins in England, where Paulin bids a "gowned schoolmaster farewell" (*The Strange Museum* 42). The gesture is symbolic of Paulin's attitude to the English strain of his inheritance. His only response to the schoolmaster's "We must meet again" is to "pretend to pretend", stressing the ambivalence of his feeling towards the representative of the English tradition. Then follows a ferry crossing back to Ireland, where he has visions of Trotsky and Raskolnikov, all figures of social and political activism. The succeeding poems commute between ideologies and states, interspersed with images of revolution and military suppression, oscillating between political commitment and the pull of art which serves "Only the pure circle of itself" (*The Strange Museum* 45). Paulin's vision combats not only authoritarian suppression but also the totalizing power of myth and history, warning against "The fear of necessity / In an absolute narrative" (*The Strange Museum* 44). Mandelstam has the final word in the poem:

> In Buddhist Moscow,
> In lamp-eyed St. Petersburg,
> Mandelstam is walking

> Through the terrible night.
> His lips are moving
> In a lyric ripple (*The Strange Museum* 46).

Mandelstam recounts that he left "Because I could never stay/ In the same room as Trostsky", counterpointing the earlier image of Trotsky reading Homer (*The Strange Museum* 46). The writer who believes in the absolute devotion to his art refuses to recognize that there is common ground between politics and literature. So, Paulin does not appear to endorse Mandelstam's disengagement from history. The latter's clinching words, echoing the close of Auden's famous elegy for Yeats, are quite the opposite of what Paulin does consciously in his own poetry:

> In the great dome of art
> (It was this we longed for
> In our Petropolis)
> I am free of history.
>
> Beyond dust and rhetoric,
> In the meadows of the spirit
> I kiss the Word (*The Strange Museum* 47).

The longing to be free of history is also an impulse informing Derek Mahon's work. But in contrast to Mahon, who resists political engagement, believing that "a good poem is a paradigm of good politics" (*Twentieth-Century Studies* 93), Paulin entrusts poetry with political viewpoints. Mandelstam's aesthetic stance attracts him but is resisted with a politically committed counterpoint. If Paulin inclines towards the political engage, there is also a pull in the other direction, towards the anti-political or the "condition of supremely unillusioned quietism" which he detects in many Russian and East European poets and also in Derek Mahon.[2] Mahon's chosen ground is almost free from the orbit of history, or at least gives the illusion of being so. Thus, the Russian verses and white nights are seductive to one who gravitates towards bleak and sparsely populated landscapes. Russia, in Derek Mahon's work, is less a lesson in dealing with history than a place where history may be erased. The journey or sojourn in an existential topography enacts a drama of physical and metaphysical displacement. "Night Drive" is an exercise in disengagement rather than a penetration of the Russian landscape which is "forever frozen in the past" (*Selected Poems* 187). It is an example of the car journey poem that Terence Brown identifies as a recurrent motif in poetry from the North (*Ireland's Literature* 215):

> St. Petersburg ceased to exist,
> disclosed that it had never been;
> asked only peace now, as if one
> long mad should find the knot untied
> and watch, recovered and clear-eyed,
> a fixed idea in its Byzantine,
> varnished and adamantine shrine
> spin off from the whirling mind
> and vanish, leaving not a trace behind (*Poems* 187).

The drive is an exit from history, a hasty one at that. With only one full pause, the two sentences evade any political encounter and any confrontation with the historical sufferings of the city or with Dostoevsky's shades.

In contrast, Seamus Deane's obsession with the past has drawn him into the vortex of Russian history and literature. "History Lessons" juxtaposes a suspended moment with the historical flux. A classroom lesson on Russian history is interwoven with scenes from a provincial childhood in Ireland. The montage sequence of historical violence cuts to the silent image of the boy running across football pitches "stretched into wrinkles by the frost" (*Selected Poems* 40) until what seems a picture of innocence and timeless provinciality becomes implicated in the historical process. What the poem suggests, without making any direct statement about the nature of history and violence, is that the quiet provinces of Ireland are not innured to the historical process, that history itself is not a finished product, immutable and separate from the present. Like the poem, it is not a finished artifact, but participates in the evolving present. History alters our perceptions of the present and future and is at the same time transmuted by the act of reading.

The poem begins with an Irish winter but elides into the Russian winter which spelt disaster for the campaigns of Napoleon and Hitler: "A Napoleonic, then a Hitlerian dream / Aborted" (*Selected Poems* 40). The evocative images of "the ambered silence near Pavlovsk" and the "smoking gold of icons at Zagorsk" import Russia into the classroom in Ireland, or rather, transport Ireland to Russia. The demonstrative in "this coal-smoke / Stealing over frost" (*Selected Poems* 40) dislocates the sense of place, so that Russia and Ireland are conflated, preparing us for the interweaving of two narratives, Russian history and Irish politics in the last two stanzas. In the process, Deane also criticizes those conservative elements confining Irish history to Grattan. His journey, real or imaginary, revises the limits of interpretation, highlighting the encounter between the lyric moment and historical contingency. The lesson has expanded in the poem from Russian history to the turbulent present, incorporating the process of individual growth. As in Derek Mahon's "The Snow Party" and Paul Durcan's "The Kilfenora Teaboy", local violence is not dwelt upon but alluded to, unlike the earlier scenes of Russian destruction. This bespeaks the inability to confront home atrocities directly. Thus, the reading of the present is deflected through a historical detour. The last image has, to use a description Deane applies to Mahon's poetry, "incorporated history's force into ... stillness" (*Celtic Revivals* 19). But it is a stillness that is unsettling in its juxtaposition of different histories and geographies.

In "Osip Mandelstam" , Deane, like Heaney and Paulin, venerates the Russian poet as an icon of poetic faith. He is the "Son of Petropolis" who can

> Tell us how to turn into the flesh,
> To lie in the lice-red shirt
> On the bank of the Styx and wait
> For the gossamer of Paradise
> To spider in our dirt-filled eyes (*Selected Poems* 193).

Like Heaney, Deane identifies Mandelstam with the mandate of poetry, its absolute voice overriding the claims of the state. But Deane's poem, though invoking Mandelstam in Biblical terms, sees him first as part of the historical process and then transcending it through art. Thus, poetry has the power to redeem and to liberate from the machinery of history. In accepting the redemptive function of poetry, Deane credits language with the ability to

encompass fragmentation and create order out of chaos. What Deane shares with Heaney and Paulin (all founders of the *Field Day Company*) is a vision of a reconciled Ireland. Poetry is a way of bringing about its realization. However, the aesthetic reconciliation is sometimes too easily achieved and removed from intractable political realities. Heaney, Deane, and even Paulin resort to allusive representations that displace the conflict and violence from the socio-political field into an imaginary framework; their Russian poems, like Heaney's bog poems, can be regarded as a means of aestheticizing politics rather than engaging with it fully.

Michael O'Loughlin's "Mandelstam" plunges the reader into the traumatized mind of Mandelstam, or one whose mental state resembles his. The nightmare of interrogation and torture stalks the sleep of Mandelstam: he is haunted by the "rattle and bark" of the "steel-tongued interrogator" (*Stalingrad* 20). This youthful poem, though flawed, reveals a dislocation of place which dominates O'Loughlin's work. Mandelstam appears again in "Two Women", "stumbling along through the frozen mud" in exile, with "nothing but the broken harp of himself / On the forced march of days ..." (*Atlantic Blues* 21). The lyric captures the moment of exile and its excruciating pain attended only by the palliative faith in poetry. O'Loughlin's youthful imagination enshrines Mandelstam as an exemplary figure of displacement, an alternative to Joyce's version of exile, which new Dubliners like O'Loughlin repudiate. Joyce, who first proved such a liberating influence for those contending with the ghost of Yeats, has now superseded Yeats as an inhibiting father. Ferdia Mac Anna asserts that *Ulysses* is "a nightmare from which Dublin is trying to wake." (Mac Anna 22) In an attempt to elude the nets of Joyce's example, writers like O'Loughlin turn to foreign exemplars. These Russian figures also allow an access to poetic intensity which Joycean humour deflates or excludes.

O'Loughlin's *Stalingrad* is a guide to the Russian literary landscape, but the underlying text is Ireland. His choice of the obsolete name for Volgograd places us back in the era of the purges and internal exiles. The result is a heightening of historical dislocation, and O'Loughlin's attitude to Ireland is reflected, or rather, refracted through a Russian lens. The tormented personae in the poems, with the shadow of persecution and exile over them, let O'Loughlin voice his vehement feelings about home without having recourse to the Joycean mode or becoming too confessional. O'Loughlin is part of the Dublin generation which includes Dermot Bolger and Paula Meehan, taking on the problems of unemployment, emigration, drugs, alcoholism, depression, and breakdown in the housing estates. In *Stalingrad*, he confronts a landscape resembling that of a Dostoevskian novel. Seeing it through a Russian perspective lends an enabling emotional distance and also, via a process of making strange, draws attention to the hidden Ireland missing from the official narrative. The title poem is a scathing indictment of home:

> I was born to the stink of whiskey and failure
> And the scattered corpse of the real.
> This is my childhood and country:
> The cynical knowing smile
> Plastered onto ignorance
> Ideals untarnished and deadly
> Because never translated to action
> And everywhere
> The sick glorification of failure (*Stalingrad* 9).

The frustration and disillusionment with a society which refuses to confront the desolation of reality, and the disjunction between individual experience and the ideological narrative enforced by the State are recurrent themes in *Stalingrad*.

Seán Dunne is another poet from Southern Ireland with a strong Russian presence in his work. His posthumous *Time and the Island* contains two free translations of Anna Akhmatova, and a sequence entitled "Russians in Paris" about the refugees from the Communist Revolution who, though settled and naturalized, still preserve the emblems of the past and home. Beginning with a scene of exodus from Red Russia, the sequence tracks the ways in which the community preserves its identity in exile and ends with the burial of either Nijinsky or Nureyev, with the cortege moving "Across the steppes of time in snow" (Dunne 36). The penultimate poem refers to Mandelstam and Akhmatova; Dunne finds their posters in a shop on the Mont de Ste Geneviève:

> One died in a camp, his poems kept
> By a wife who absorbed them like food.
> Another knew how poems could draw
> Black Marias at the heart of night.
> I know her poems like prayers,
> Their words clustered berries
> On a branch to which I hold.
> When I ask the poster's price
> I am told: *She is not for sale* (*Time and the Island* 36).

The Black Marias which transported Stalin's victims to detention are a regular feature in Akhmatova's life and poems. Mandelstam and Akhmatova are found next to each other, icons as much for the Russians as for Dunne. For Dunne, the Russian poets make access possible to an intensity which the urbane well-made British poem keeps at bay. His own love poems, written with a knowledge of impending death, contain incandescent touches fused with echoes caught from reading Akhmatova's poems "like prayers" (*Time and the Island* 36).

In "The Impact of Translation", Heaney notes that the modern martyrology which Russian poetry embodies is attractive and instructive to poets who feel displaced from the English tradition. For Irish poets like Dunne and O'Loughlin, the pull is even stronger because of their problematic relationship to the English tradition and the sense of not-being-at-home in their own society. O'Loughlin's "A Letter to Marina Tsetaeva" venerates the tragic Russian poet, feeling her presence in the heart of Dublin, in "white rooms looking out on the city" (*Another Nation* 34). This canonization of the Russian women poets and the adoption of them as tutelary spirits point to the apparent absence in Irish poetry of literary mothers who could offset the many daunting forefathers like Yeats and Joyce.

This absence of female precursors in the Irish canon has been an inhibiting factor for many contemporary Irish women poets. Eavan Boland, recounting her struggle as a woman poet in *Object Lessons*, deplores the silencing of Irish women in both Irish history and literature. Paula Meehan also laments that there were "very few women's voices" to follow when she started writing (Dorgan 268). Both have turned abroad for guidance and have named Akhmatova as one of the major influences on their poetry. For Boland, she shows the way to express personal and national grief. Of Akhmatova's "Requiem", written for her only son, one of the countless victims of Stalin's reign of terror, Boland remarks: "What is compelling and instructive is the connection it makes between her womanhood and her sense of a nation as a

community of grief. The country she wishes to belong to, to be commemorated by is the one revealed to her by her suffering" (Boland 149). Boland's poems, like "Mire Eire" and "Anna Liffey", show traces of Akhmatova in the confident first-person narrative and strong lyric voice that refer the poetry back not only to the personal life but outward to sociopolitical contexts.

Paula Meehan's intensely personal lyrics, with their undertow of crisis, reveal a faith in the healing power of poetry, a strength learned no doubt from Akmatova's own ordeal as a poet. The folktale structures and motifs which inform Meehan's lyric narratives are also a result of a close reading of the Russian. "Train to Dublin" acknowledges the debt to the Russian literary mother: "I lay my head on Akhmatova's lap, / sob like a child, thumb in my mouth. She sings me lullabies, eases into the dark" Meehan 33). In both poets, the figure of the poet as witness to the sufferings of her people owes a great deal to Akhmatova's example.

The Russian factor helps shape the poetic voice in Boland and Meehan, enabling it to find its own pitch. In the poems of Medbh McGuckian, the presences of Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam are tangible in a controversial manner. The dense symbolic layers of her texts, the highly wrought syntax and grammar, and the dream-like flow of image and metaphors render them resistant to paraphrase, and have caused debate as to whether they are "an alluring sort of nonsense" (Simmons 27), or constitute a coherent body of work which challenges the hegemonic assumptions about poetry. Difficulties with her work are compounded by the fact that some poems are welded out of extracts from the works of the Russian poets, with little modification and acknowledgement. Here, McGuckian treads dangerously close to plagiarism. Three poems in particular challenge the conventional ideas of poetic influence and translation. "Harem Trousers" contains borrowings from Tsvetaeva, while "The Dream-Language of Fergus" and "The Aisling Hat" thread together quotations from Mandelstam. Her sources are mostly essays and correspondences; she translates the prose into poetry and in the process questions not only the nature of translation but the boundary between literary genres.

Clair Wills defends McGuckian against the charges of plagiarism; she views the Russian presence as part of "the growing Europeanisation of her work, consonant with the political hopes for the North in Europe" and asserts that the borrowed lines from Mandelstam's essays in "The Dream-Language of Fergus", "Conversation about Dante", "About the Nature of the Word", and "Notes About Poetry" assume altered significance as Mandelstam's discussion of the nature of Dante's classicism, or the "European dimension of the Russian language, are placed in the service of thoughts about a child's language acquisition, and the history of language in Ireland" (Wills 385). Wills argues that McGuckian's cryptic montage explores a mother-child relationship and at the same time conducts an exchange with Mandelstam. Her exhaustive analysis relies heavily on personal interviews and a systematic paraphrase of the images. For readers who do not have the benefit of McGuckian's divulgations, there is little to direct them to Mandelstam. The phrases from Mandelstam are stitched together into a hypnotic montage which does not yield any clear narrative. One can argue that McGuckian transplants Mandelstam into an Irish and feminine context and affirms a similar faith in the ineffable potency of the lyric, but it is hard to see any dialogue taking place without an acknowledgement of the Russian poet. Furthermore, the lines "Your tongue has spent the night / In its dim sack as the shape of your foot / In its cave" (*On Ballycastle Beach* 57) are too opaque to suggest the language-learning of the poet's child, unless the narrative context of the poem is revealed.

"The Aisling Hat", composed entirely of phrases from Mandelstam's essays, is McGuckian's elegy for her father. However, nothing in the poem points to her father, except the elegiac tone and the funeral imagery, especially in stanza thirty-eight: "His body is unwashed, his beard / wild, his fingernails broken, / his ears deaf from the silence" (*Captain Lavender* 48). The images are from Mandelstam's "Journey to Armenia", describing the imprisoned King Arshak: his body "is unwashed and his beard has run wild"; the "fingernails of the king are broken" and his "ears have grown stupid from the silence ..." (Mandelstam 48). Shane Murphy asserts that McGuckian is portraying "her father as a political prisoner (King Arshak, Osip Mandelstam, Republican hungerstriker)" (Murphy 124). As with Wills's readings of McGuckian, his interpretation is based on a personal interview with McGuckian. Like Wills, Murphy credits her poems with a social or political agenda, which far from being obvious, is buried or so well-disguised in the texts that they require McGuckian's own revelations to unearth them. Without reference to the poetic intentions, the imposed readings can hardly stand up to scrutiny, as there is insufficient narrative coherence or contextual details to support them. Wills and Murphy assert that the virtue of McGuckian's work lies in its resistance to paraphrase, but paraphrasing is what they do, extracting rather unconvincing narratives from the kaleidoscopic images, installing a schema where all is intended to be flux.

If we accept that an established poet like McGuckian is not committing plagiarism but is engaged in a deliberate move to redefine the hegemonic ideas of writing and literary influence and inheritance, then the Russian presence constitutes a challenge to the native tradition, offering a more experimental approach in poetic procedure as well as new ways of self-definition. The Russian import can be seen as part of McGuckian's project of "repudiating the anglicisation of myself" (Wilson 6), it is a strategy to distance herself from her colonial inheritance. Her radical departure from the mode of empiricism and restraint dominant in English poetry signals a desire to dismantle dominant stereotypes and discourse, and to re-vision identity, both personal and political.

In Paul Durcan's poetry, Russia plays a more blatantly subversive role as a negative elsewhere targeting the myths in which Ireland wraps itself. Russia is an Other which challenges Ireland's myths of itself. If Ireland is to find itself, as Durcan's obsessive naming of foreign places suggests, the inherited notions of identity and place have to be overthrown in an encounter with the Other. Russia, along with a litany of other places, disrupts the illusion of continuity that home embodies, loosening the hold of the centre for freer explorations of what it means to be Irish. Durcan's grafting of Russian elements onto the Irish experience and vice versa celebrates hybridity and plurality, opposing notions of monolithic identity. Russian-bound poems like "The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line" emphasize that home is not a given, but improvised, made, and remade by where one is or is not. The poem gives up the certainty of home for a mobile view of place and identity: "I turn the key on Dublin / And dropping the key in the Seine ...". (*A Snail in my Prime* 238) Intimations of home surface in that which is foreign, underlining a cosmopolitan view:

> Out of the arms of my daughters
> As we tramp up and down Europe
> Having become the migrants that we are –
> Barbarians on the Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow line.
> From the shores of the Aran Islands
> To the foothills the far side of the Caucasus
> These are the terraced streets

> That smell of home to us.
> May I be an actual nobody –
> In Mayo serving burgers (*A Snail in My Prime* 238).

The poem shuttles between home and abroad, self and Other, a procedure defying linear logic. In a cinema in Tbilisi, he watches a documentary by Dermot Bolger, and on the way back to Moscow, Anthony Cronin, another Irish poet, chides his leaps of imagination: "Paul, will you please stop / Saying that things are like things. / Either things are – or they are not' (*A Snail in My Prime* 239). Cronin is described as "the first Dubliner in my life", bringing the poem back to the reality of home. His words underscore Durcan's metamorphic and nomadic imagination that always sees one place in terms of another and translates the self into an Other. He appropriates the migrant condition as metaphor for his contrary state and announces his credo: "May I lack always a consistent vision of the universe / When I am saying my poems" (*A Snail in My Prime* 238). In seeing Ireland as an elsewhere, in mixing the familiar and the strange, Durcan stretches the journey to the extreme reaches and touches the other side of home.

Unlike poets from the North like Heaney and Paulin, who draw on the Russian poets' confrontation with politics, Durcan does not dwell on the Russia of the purges. Rather, Russia is envisaged as an imaginary homeland where the self can be free of Irish fetters and the imprisoning myths of home can shattered. But his Russia is a very real place as well, by virtue of his family history. Besides the relationship with his lover Svetka, Durcan's Russian connection goes back to the time of Maud Gonne. He reveals that his great-grandmother Margaret Wilson was a half-sister of Gonne. To save her father's reputation, Gonne arranged for Wilson to work in Russia and convinced her to part with her daughter Eileen for a year. Wilson never returned and spent the next fifty-six years in Russia and Estonia. In "Estonian Farewell", as Durcan's train departs from Tallinn station, he sees his mother "stumbling through the trees to keep up with the train" and crying "My son, my son, why has thou forsaken me?" (*Going Home to Russia* 82) Durcan sheds light on the poem, revealing that "in 1983, finding myself on a journey to the Soviet Union, I did have these frissons from time to time, in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, and in Leningrad, of being somehow in the presence of my great-grandmother" (Dalton 24). The uncanniness of it all was revealed when Durcan later discovered that his great-grandmother had actually spent her last decades in Estonia near Tallinn. But while Durcan's Russian visions and affiliations are rooted in biographical fact, they are also political gambits to unsettle the myth of Mother Ireland. Depicting the mother/aisling as exiled in Russia unravels the ideas of roots and origins projected on the woman figure. It is also in Russia, more precisely Tblisi, the Georgian capital associated with Stalin, that Durcan declares "love is greater than God or Marx. / A woman's love made the world. / I believe in woman" (*Going Home to Russia* 86).

Women and love are Durcan's antidote to the life-denying strictures of State and Church. As in Muldoon and McGuckian, erotic and sexual energies are used to undermine orthodox positions. "The Woman with the Keys to Stalin's House" is linked to the heart of Irish nationalism by the reference to an earlier poem, "The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage". In both poems, the act of love subverts the symbols of nationalist ideology by being performed on hallowed grounds: in the first poem close to the house of Padraic Pearse, the martyr of Irish nationalism; in the second poem, near the birthplace of Stalin. Durcan's use of spontaneous carnal love to undermine the authority of life-denying ideology also occurs in "Making Love outside Áras an Uachtaráin", where sex is staged outside the mansion of the

President of the Irish Republic. Exulting in the act of transgression, the speaker imagines de Valera bearing down on them in punishment. This vision springs not from guilt or fear, but is part of the fantasy act of subversion. In "The Woman with the Keys to Stalin's House", the speaker has an amorous fling with Galya who "has lived all her life in the town of Gori / Under the statue of Stalin". Stalin is the de Valera figure, but a much lesser threat: "And Jahweh – that old Stalin on his plinth – / Had failed to cow us" (*Going Home to Russia* 88). The poem is an assertion of sexual independence against State-sanctioned morality, subverting the puritan creed with its argument for promiscuity and hybridity: "Can there be anyone in the world who has not got mixed feelings?/ Should there be anyone in the world who has not got mixed feelings?" (*Going Home to Russia* 89).

In "Going Home to Russia", Ireland is pre-glasnost Russia, in the grips of oppression and censorship, while Russia is an Ireland of possibility, the place where an Irishman can feel at home. Directing his salvoes against the intolerance of an Ireland dominated by nationalist and Catholic pieties, the Ireland before the thaw of the late 1980s, Durcan casts himself as "an Irish dissident", "Who knows that in Ireland scarcely anybody is free / To work or to have a home or to read or write" (*Going Home to Russia* 65). The permeability of places is paralleled by a linguistic interchangeability. Durcan juxtaposes foreign terms with the English vernacular, arousing the recognition of the familiar in the foreign, thereby erasing borders and undermining the idea of a coherent native language. Languages, like the places in his poetry, are mobile; they shift and sometimes find themselves in the same carriage:

> We Irish have had our bellyful of *blat*
> And *blarney*, more than our share
> Of the *nomenklature* of Church and Party,
> The *nachalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia (*Going Home to Russia* 65).

The poem typically mixes the carnal and the spiritual. It enacts Durcan's journey to reunion with his lover, Svetka, through the eroticizing of landscape: the pilot wanting to make love not rape; the plane's descent is described as a "prolonged kiss". The poem also triggers a sense of homecoming through the discovery of a pristine Ireland in Russia: "To live again with nature as before I lived / In Ireland before all the trees were cut down" (*Going Home to Russia* 69). Durcan's union with his Russian partner is a marriage of Ireland and Russia; he comes home to a place that is both Ireland and Russia. The birth in the poem is real as well as metaphorical: "nine months in your belly, I can smell your soul; / Your two heads are smiling – not one but both of them – / Isn't it good, Svetka, good, that I have come home?" The advent of a child coincides with Durcan's renewal through his discovery of a foreign mother.

Russia is also the place where Durcan revisits the past, and comes to terms with his father, who when alive was inaccessible and incomprehensible. A judge and a public figure whose allegiance to the nationalist ideology alienated his son, he is now seen in the image of the son. The transgressive mode characteristic of Durcan gives way to reconciliation and acceptance of what the father represents. The father becomes like the son, "a man in search of his Russia" (*Going Home to Russia* 95). The idea of Russia yields the therapeutic distance necessary to realize that father and son are indissolubly intertwined like lovers. This triggers a homecoming which enacts the union of father and son through the reconciling metaphor of Russia:

> O Russian Knight at the Crossroads!
> If you turn to the right, you will lose your horse;
> To the left, your head;
> If you go straight on, your life.
> If you were me – which you are –
> Knight at the Crossroads,
> You would go home to Russia this very night (*Going Home to Russia* 95).

Facing death and the unknown, the father is converted to the son's faith, becoming a knight in quest of his Russia which, in Durcan's cartography, is *terra incognita* and also an Other holding out the promise of salvation and home. Father and son become one on the same quest, the reconciliation taking place in an alien and neutral place which also feels like home.

Durcan's eclectic vision entails a willingness to discard the metaphysics of origins and to embark on forays which expand the possibilities of being Irish. "Peredelkino: at the Grave of Pasternak" is a literary pilgrimage which leaves behind the cultural patrimony binding language and place into a cohesive entity. Durcan stands at the grave with "A blue corduroy cap on my head / That I purchased in a West of Ireland village" (*Going Home to Russia* 77). The provenance of the cap is specified so that it becomes a symbol of nationalist Irishness. Thus, the hegemonic idea of origins is placed in a foreign context, and home values are found wanting. Catholic pieties are skewered in the comparison with Pasternak's atheist humanism:

> At the heart of atheism God is at home;
> Man locked into history opening the door.
> Closer to God is the atheist opening the door
> Than the churchman closing the door in your face (*Going Home to Russia* 78).

Durcan's dialogue with the Russian poet also includes a movement homewards. Gazing at Pasternak's grave initiates an imagined return to the grave of Art O'Leary at midnight. Art O'Leary was the husband of Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill, and his death is mourned in her famous elegy. Durcan recalls how the contemporary Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Broke – broke a bottle of red wine" over the grave (*Going Home to Russia* 79). The complementary scene signals a literary exchange which reveals the ability of Durcan and Yevtushenko to be at home in each other's territory. This prepares for the scene of déjà vu, when Durcan glimpses his dead mother peering at him from the Russian crowd, the mother "who went to Russia when I was three / And who stayed in Moscow" (*Going Home to Russia* 79). Home and abroad become conflated. Again the ground of maternity is rendered suspect. That which is alien yields intimations of home, thus refuting the idea of origins. This realization prompts a subversive act proclaiming a rejection of ancestral myths:

> That night we make love in an apartment beside
> The Cultural Palace of the Ball-Bearing Plant;
> Next morning under Shevchenko's statue by the
> Moskva River
> I set fire to my cap (*Going Home to Russia* 80).

The burning of the cap of Irish provenance symbolizes Durcan's rejection of the West of Ireland as the hallowed ground of Irish identity.

Russia also serves as a pivotal point to dislodge nationalist constructions of identity in Frank Ormsby's "Geography".[3] The poem uses a strategy of disorientation for a lesson in

reorientation. Merging the geographies of Ireland and Russia in a pluralist vision that accommodates differences without effacing them, Ormsby suggests a procedure for the overcoming of the partitionism that has divided the island into warring factions. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc is implicitly an argument for heterogeneity and plurality: "Once there was Russian, once a reliable earth / as fixed as the Urals. Now soviets groaning apart". (*The Ghost Train* 14) Sergei Krikalyov, a Soviet astronaut returning from a space mission "past his splash-down date", finds himself displaced and 'half-homeless', having to revise his map of the 'once-known world' (*The Ghost Train* 14). What was once a coherent whole is now dispersed into autonomous entities, and the nationalist myth of origin and unity is shattered. Ormsby engineers the return so that the astronaut enters the Irish atmosphere and is engaged in an imaginary exchange with Manus McClafferty in Donegal. He acquires an Irish voice and has the "world restored / by the weight of local accent". The dialogue enables an encounter in which self and Other interact as each changes the other's perception:

> Already he has become
> (Crockallyove, Kirklove, Crackallyev) a shifting shape
> in border folklore, the stranger and guest star
> in yarns of the Blue Stack Mountains, extravagant tales
> from the Atlantic seaboard. And Georgia is Donegal
> and Donegal the coast of Estonia, where he too re-shapes
> his place on the planet, the geography of home (*The Ghost Train* 14).

The imagined assimilation of the shape-shifting Russian astronaut into local mythology erases the distinction between the native and the foreign, debunking any idea of home and Irish cultural and linguistic identities as stable givens. The interaction between Donegal, deemed by nationalists to be a stronghold of Irishness, Estonia, and Georgia removes the provincial self-regard responsible for partitionism. Re-visioning Russia and Ireland from aerial perspectives, Ormsby discerns a conversation of parts which implies harmony without enforcing a master narrative. Significantly, he does not mention the big cities but focusses on the provinces in order to emphasize the accommodation of diversity in an inclusive vision. What results is neither Russia nor Ireland, but both. Russia appears again in Ormsby's "Travelling". The grandmother figure is portrayed as an inveterate traveller who has done her travelling "in her head" (*A Northern Spring* 1). A hallowed repository of Irish folklore and culture, she is displaced far from home:

> She died in her Russian phase,
> in the hard winter of 1913,
> sunk between pillows as though
> she struggled through some pass in the Caucasus –
> insisting on local colour to the last stroke,
> ink-stains amok on the next snowy pages (*A Northern Spring* 1).

The itinerant figure refuses any steadfast identity and is receptive to "local colour". Shedding ethnocentric lens, and encountering the Other in its alterity, the traveller is changed by what she sees. Russia is the final testing ground, where the determination not to be confined to one position triumphs.

In his essay on translation, Terence Brown observes that "in recent Irish poetry it is possible to discern a tendency for poets to write as if Ireland itself had been translated into somewhere else, had begun to participate in the life of the other, the stranger, to write indeed of Ireland as if it were an Eastern European state or a cosmopolitan city of the mind" (Brown 2). Russia is a negative elsewhere which, by enabling Ireland to perceive its Otherness and imagine itself as something Other, helps to break the insular mould of perception. For Heaney, Paulin, and Deane, it offers exemplars like Mandelstam and Pasternak who provide models of how poetry can handle the claims of politics, albeit the parallels are sometimes overworked and the confrontation with political realities is compromised by an aestheticization of politics. For O'Loughlin and Mahon, it puts into perspective the relationship between self and home, enabling them to come to terms with the crushing sense of isolation. As tutelary influences in the work of women poets like Boland, Meehan, and McGuckian, the Russian poets help fill the lacunae in the Irish canon, enabling them to dismantle patriarchal structures which exclude the woman's voice. Traversing the border, visible and invisible, between Russia and Ireland, Durcan undercuts the conventional ideas of home, revealing that boundaries are artificial constructs which prevent alternative ways of looking at self and home. For Durcan and Ormsby, Russia is part of the strategy of making Ireland stranger to herself and opening her up to other worlds. The dialogic or polyphonic play of places, geographies, and languages in their poetry marks a new phase in Irish poetry, in which Ireland goes off like Marco Polo to encounter the reality of the Other.

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Notes

1 Other elsewheres include Iceland, England, the Americas, Australia and more recently, Japan in Michael Longley's *The Weather in Japan* and Julie O'Callaghan's *No Can Do.* The need for another place to hold up the mirror to home conforms to Joyce's dictum that "the shortest way to Tara is via Holyhead".

2 In Paulin, *Writing to the Moment*, p.137. 15.

3 In a personal interview I had with him on 25 November 2000, Ormsby revealed that his Russian poems preceded a literary trip to Russia in the company of Tom Paulin, Thomas McCarthy, and others.

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Paul Durcan's Poetry – A Self-Portrait in Contemporary Ireland

A Poesia de Paul Durcan – Um Autorretrato na Irlanda Contemporânea

Munira H. Mutran

Abstract: *Paul Durcan's poems have represented his social, historical and cultural experiences, in Ireland and in the places he has visited, for many decades. Thus, among the many approaches that his poetic work inspires, one of them privileges the "documental" aspect of his achievement as a "poet – journalist". This article aims at discussing another significant aspect of Durcan's multiple attitudes towards reality by arguing that his poems are parts of a long autobiography containing events and feelings since early childhood to the present day. The reader's task is to piece together in a time sequence the loose threads of Durcan's autobiographical weaving; his reward will be to discover a fascinating and unique self-portrait of the poet.*

Keywords: *autobiographical poetry; narrative in verse; modern Sisyphus.*

Resumo: *Os poemas de Paul Durcan representam suas experiências sociais, históricas e culturais, na Irlanda e nos países que visitou. Assim, dentre as muitas abordagens que sua obra poética inspira, seu reconhecimento como um "poeta-jornalista" é destacado. Este artigo tem o objetivo de discutir outro relevante aspecto das múltiplas atitudes de Durcan em relação à realidade em que vive, argumentando que seus poemas são parte de uma longa autobiografia que contém acontecimentos e emoções, desde a tenra infância até os dias de hoje. A tarefa do leitor será juntar numa sequência temporal os fios soltos da tessitura autobiográfica; sua recompensa será vislumbrar um fascinante e único autorretrato do poeta.*

Palavras-chave: *poesia autobriogáfica; narrativas em verso; Sísifo moderno.*

Born in 1944, Paul Durcan has been the protagonist of, and witness to, many great changes occurring in Irish society and history. His collections of poems, published since 1967, mirror all sorts of experience in his own country and the world at large, for he has travelled to Russia, Japan, Australia, Canada, the USA, Brazil and many other places. He calls himself a Traveller. In this, he is like many Irish men and women of his generation, who, no longer living in an isolated country as that of the first half and part of the second half of the twentieth century, are now integrated into the international scene. The ease with which the Irish live abroad and at home is well defined by Stephen Rea: "Nowadays the whole world is available to us" (Zucker 97). For Fintan O'Toole, "to imagine Ireland is to imagine a journey. The nature of the journey has changed, however. What used to be a voyage beyond the point of no return is

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now, increasingly, a series of temporary shifts" (157). Durcan's travels in Dublin (like many of the characters in *Dubliners*) and all over Ireland may be measured by his great pleasure in naming places as in "Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949", with a litany of towns whose names "were magic passwords into eternity" (*A Snail in My Prime* 34).

Other countries offer Durcan new angles and elements of difference in modes of behaviour and living like those seen in the poems of *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* and other collections as well. Most of his poetry is of a narrative kind – about himself, his family and friends, about people he meets, events, atmospheres. His narratives in verse surprise us because they have a large variety of ways of narration: through letters, monologues, dialogues, reliable and unreliable narrators; in the form of interviews for radio and TV; irony, satire, humour or an absurd view of reality – all these give his narrative poems a special flavour.

Through the poet's eyes and memories, the Ireland of today is contrasted with the Ireland of the past – family relations, religion, political violence, the place that women, men and children have in society and many other issues provide a good picture of contemporary life. Like many other literary works by other authors, which are considered as sources of information about economic, social, political, religious and psychological realities of a given time and space, Paul Durcan's poetry, besides its aesthetic dimension, is valuable because it shows life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The epigraph for *A Snail in my Prime* is a key to Durcan's creative process, to what he aims at in his poems. He quotes Francis Bacon:

> I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime. (*A Snail in my Prime*)

In the book *The End of Irish History?* the authors set to discuss the transformations that have attended the era of the Celtic Tiger and where it might be going. Durcan aims at the same thing with the help of his imagination, but he is far from "the new national consensus that constantly reminds us how we have never had it so good" (Kennedy 95). Let us take family relations, for example: in "Interior with Members of a Family", inspired in one of the paintings at the National Gallery of Ireland, Durcan shows the emergence of the global consumer: "The family of today / Is the family who gets carried away / By its own carpet" (*Crazy About Women* 65). The economic boom produces young couples like the one in "What shall I wear, Darling, to the Great Hunger?" which is full of references to the suffering of the past and insensitiveness of the present.

In the "new" family, the female figure stands out in a kind of reversed role. "Nessa" shows a young woman' self assurance: "She took me by her index finger/ And dropped me in her well" (*A Snail in My Prime* 2). The same Nessa, in "She Mends an Ancient Radio" is a loving mother, a competent housewife who can fix anything in the house, and who holds down a job in the city from morning to dusk. With all her duties and achievements the "new woman" of the twenty-first century does not seem very happy, as has been pointed out by historians and social commentators. Sinead Kennedy, for example, emphasizes the fact that "Irish women have seen their lives transformed in recent years. However, the feminization of the workforce has also been a contradictory experience for most women because of the 'double burden' as they try to reconcile work and family."

How does Durcan show the effects of "the double burden" pointed out by Kennedy? In "The Wife who Smashed Television Gets Jail", the violent behaviour of the wife is very revealing.

Marrying the new woman is a challenge: like the woman in "The Pietà's Over" who will not hesitate to break a marriage if it does not satisfy her:

> The Pietà's Over – and, now, my dear, droll, husband,
> As middle age tolls its bell along the via dolorosa of life
> It is time for you to get down off my knees
> And learn to walk on your own two feet. (*The Berlin Wall Café* 54)

One more aspect concerning women is worth mentioning: sometimes, in her newly acquired freedom, too much emphasis on sexuality annoys her, as in the poem in the form of an interview, "The Woman Who Keeps Her Breasts in the Back Garden". She explains why she does that: "I have other things on my mind besides my breasts. Australia – for example – Australia" (*A Snail in My Prime* 76).

So far, these brief comments have given us a glimpse at some of Durcan's approaches to reality and of the documental characteristics of his poetry. Because his work represents life in Ireland so thoroughly and in such various ways, and perhaps also because of his frequent use of titles of newspaper headlines and the format of TV and radio interviews in his poetry, he is considered by a few critics a poet-journalist. One must bear in mind, though, that reality is conceived by the artist and therefore, of his own imagining. The notion that "The poem is the true story. / The true story is a lie", is found in Durcan's long poem, Christmas Day (57) in reference to a documentary he saw about "the true story behind Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening': "Did it really happen? / If it was fictional, it happened. / Only the fictional is real" (*The Berlin Wall Cafe* 32), he concludes.

Among the titles as headlines such as "Archbishop of Dublin to Film Romeo and Juliet" (*The Berlin Wall Cafe* 26), "Catholic Father Prays for his Daughter's Abortion" (*The Berlin Wall Café* 32) and "Irish Hierarchy Bans Colour Photography" (*A Snail in My Prime* 29) and many others which show Durcan's ironic views of Catholicism in Ireland and the changes he sees in the Church, sometimes for the worse; the poet misses the old, spiritual ways he was used to, and resents the priests' behaviour as pop-stars:

> I have come into this temple today to pray
> And be healed by, and joined with the Spirit of Life
> Not to be invaded by ideology. (*A Snail in My Prime* 121)

However, among the poems concerning religious life, "Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno" reveals Durcan's sadness for the Loretto nuns, who died in a fire on 2 June, 1986. That poem illustrates the difference between the tragic event as narrated by the poet and the newspaper headlines, and comments on the same event. On the front page of *The Irish Times* 3 June, one reads: "Gardai still seek cause of convent disaster"; in the same newspaper, in 4 June front page issue, the question: "Convent last checked in 1908? Corporation calls on army to clear rubbish"; and again, on 6 June, at last a reference to the nuns: "Hundreds mourn six nuns". In The New York Times, the headline "Six Nuns Die in Dublin Convent Fire", is followed by the comment: "Fifteen other nuns were able to escape from the top-floor dormitory. It took fire-fighters two hours to control the blaze at the convent on Stephen's Green".

Instead of seeking the cause of the disaster, or asking questions on why and how it happened, who is to clear the rubbish and how long it took the fire-fighters to control the blaze, Durcan throws light on an old nun, on the choice she had made and on her memories of happier

moments:

> To opt out of the world and to choose such exotic loneliness
> Such terrestrial abandonment
> A lifetime of bicycle lamps and bicycle pumps
> A lifetime of galoshes stowed under the stairs
> A lifetime of umbrellas drying out in the kitchens. (*A Snail in My Prime* 112)

The secluded beach remembered becomes the fire that consumes the old nun:

> There we were, fluttering up and down the beach,
> Scampering hither and thither in our starched bathing costumes.
> Tonight, expiring in the fire, was quite much like that
> Only, instead of scampering into the waves of the sea,
> Now we were scampering into the flames of the fire. (144)

Even a touch of black humour is added to the nun's portrait: she asks God to "have mercy on the unfortunate, poor fire-brigade men / whose task it will be to shovel up our ashes and shovel / What is left of us into black plastic refuse bags" (115). And she is worried because the book she was reading, borrowed from her niece, (and it cost £23) will be destroyed (116).

As one can see, the fire in the convent has been transformed by the artist's imagination so as to reveal the lonely life of an old nun (the poem is six pages long, from her youth until and after her death):

> If you'll remember us – six nuns burnt to death
> Remember us for the frisky girls we were,
> Now more than ever kittens in the sun. (116)

Another poem that has little to do with its title is "Protestant Old Folks' Coach Tour to the Ring of Kerry" in which the summer day is as rainy as if it were winter. Among the tourists sitting in the bus, a middle-aged woman closes her eyes and remembers swimming in the coves of Kerry with her boy-friend, "blown to bits at Ypres" and sadly concludes:

> And now I'm keeping house for brother Giles
> Who stayed at home today to milk the cows;
> Myself, I am a great jowled cow untended
> And when I die I'd like to die alone. (*A Snail in My Prime* 29)

As illustrated, a text may have documental value or artistic value or both, but as the Portuguese critic Antonio Jose Saraiva reminds us in his essay "Art and Document", "the poorest kind of praise of a work of art is to place its value in the fact that is a 'document of'". "The ideal document", Saraiva states, "is involuntary as a stone" (71). Paul Durcan is quite aware of that – he asks in "Acis and Galatea" (*Crazy About Women* 39): "is there anything / more ephemeral than newspaper news or more dispiriting?" Further criticism of newspapers can be perceivecl in "Headlines", included in the volume *The Art of Life* (23).

I think that the difference between a newspaper columnist and storytelling as art form can be noticed more clearly with the help of Colm Tóibín's reflections on the subject in his lecture "The Reverse of the Picture: Fiction and Fact" (2007). In his view, "reporters make what was secret, public" – there's little left to the imagination. As a journalist, he wrote about

torture in Argentina; three or four years later, he wrote a novel on the same subject. The real event, he says, has been corrected by fiction. Another example given by Tóibín concerns his short story "A Priest in the Family" (*Mothers and Sons* 149-70). This story, he says, could only be written with "levels of silence". Too much had been written about child abuse by Catholic priests – he wanted to see how the priest's mother behaved and felt upon knowing that her son would soon be tried for the offence. By focusing on the mother and at the end, on mother and son, Tóibín makes his story unique. Paul Durcan also uses this method of "shifting the focus" from the fact into the fictional truth of the fact, by shifting the interest into the human being, as in "September 11, 2001" (*Laughter of Mothers* 122-25). Against all the expectations that the poem raises of the fateful date, it is in fact about the death of the poet's mother and about "a human presence and memory trace of past events".

> The 42" TV flows on with the sound turned down
> A skyscraper –is it the same one? –
> Is on fire and then a second skyscraper beside it
> Falls down erupting in smoke-spew like lava.
> We stare at it, for there is nothing else to do.
> […]
> Who was a young mother on her back,
> Sick with laughter, on the sunny shore,
> Is strewn on her bed
> Like a model in a fashion shoot.
> Her sheep's eyes staring at me,
> Imploring all that sheep's eyes can implore:
> Why hast thou forsaken me? (*Laughter of Mothers* 124)

The excerpts above show Durcan's use of autobiographical elements which at the same time provide the reader with a view of a new Ireland and the world at large.

To argue that Durcan's poetic work is a long autobiography, narrating events and feelings since his childhood to the present day, goes against traditional concepts of the autobiographical mode. Our knowledge of well-known documents of the self such as those of Saint Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Charles Darwin, John S. Mill, Bertrand Russell, Henry Newman, George Moore, W.B. Yeats and so many others, has imprinted in our minds a format and content one expects from the mode. Philippe Lejeune, for example, has summarized its characteristics as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence where the focus is on his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (*On Autobiography* 4). Lejeune, like other critics, stresses the fact that most autobiographies are written in prose:

> As for verse proper [...] we can count on the fingers of one hand the autobiographies in verse, if we understand by "autobiography" a narrative that recapitulates a life: Wordsworth always cited for the Prelude (whose subtitle is "An autobiographical Poem"), Hugo with *Les Contemplations*, Aragon with *Le Roman Inachevé*. Since then, it is true, I have come across several others, naïve or sophisticated, but the total still does not exceed the number of fingers on two hands. (*On Autobiography* 128)

Still according to Lejeune, those poets mentioned have produced texts which are simultaneously poetic, "built from a series of practices derived from language combinations

and which use poetry and aim at, as poetry, to achieve a kind of secret or ocular truth in a discursive, a narrative autobiographical text representing the subject's efforts to build his own identity" (*Le Pacte Autobiographique* 247).

If we apply the definition by Lejeune to Durcan's work, it will be noticed that his is a retrospective verse narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence and the genesis of his personality, where author and narrator are one person. One can see those traits in the following excerpts from "Give him Bondi", a long poem on how the poet almost drowned while swimming in one of Sydney's beaches:

> Pounding forwards I am surging backwards
> Instead of me catching the waves,
> The waves are dumping me backwards!
> […]
> I wave, but no one sees me
> And, as I wave, I begin to sink.
> I'm being eaten alive
> […]
> Why are you standing in water
> Out of your depth dying?
> Far from your own bed?
> Being buried alive?
> Dying, Durcan, dying
> In your own standing?
> […]
> There is nothing I can do –I realize–
> Except shout, cry, whimper
> In the cot of the sea,
> On the rails of the waves
> I bang my little knuckles
> The sea seethes: Paul Durcan, you are
> The epitome of futility. ("Cries of an Irish Caveman" 9-11)

If we then take Paul Durcan's poetic work as an autobiography – Lejeune does remind us that acceptance of verse depends, as a matter of fact, on the degree of poetry the reader considers compatible with the autobiographical pact – let us see how Durcan's poems can be perceived as a life story. His autobiographical achievement is made up of scenes, feelings and moments recaptured from his memory or his consciousness. The reader will get the autobiography by arranging and piecing together in a time sequence the life narrated. The task becomes easier due to the poet's concern with time: days, months, years, even hours; days of the week and seasons are mentioned both in titles and inside the poems. For example: "November 1967", "Ireland 1972", "En Famille, 1979", "World Cup'82", "10:30 a.m. Mass, 16 June 1985" and so on. As in the beginning line of "The Crucifixion":

> Friday afternoon 3 p.m.,
> Visiting my daughter in the Psychiatric Unit,
> Killing time in her cubicle.
> I sit. She stands. (*Crazy About Women* 5)

Durcan also frequently uses markers for time as in "When I was 5" (or 13, 14, 23, 45, 47, 49) to suggest the flowing of time whose pace is different according to phases of his life. The attempt to piece together in a time sequence the loose threads of Durcan's autobiographical weaving would be a fascinating experience. I will just highlight a few, more characteristic aspects of an autobiography which can be traced in Durcan's volumes. Childhood memories show how happy or how painful this part of his life has been. In "Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949" we have a lovely, nostalgic memory:

> My father drove 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.
> (*A Snail in My Prime* 34)

However, in "On the Road to the Airport" the view of family relations is very sad:

> The most terrible person I ever met was my father.
> Only my mother was occasionally not terrible.
> Terrible terrible
> Was my father. (*Paul Durcan's Diary* 114)

Many of Paul Durcan's poems are devoted to family relations during childhood and adolescence. *A Snail in my Prime* starts with "To Sheila Mac Bride" as an epigraph:

> Mother most missed, for all
> The films, plays, books
> You gave, brought me to,
> Who when I lost all
> Stood by me always

At 47 (his mother 75) he still feels as if he were a child; memories of his mother are always comforting. Inspired by "The Virgin and the Child", by Lorenzo Ghiberti, he writes:

> When I visit her
> In her apartment
> In the solitary suburbs
> I jump at into her arms.
> She hugs me, holding me up
> With her left hand under my bottom
> "O my curly-headed
> Little golden wonder
> What has become of You?" (*Crazy About Women* 8)

The relationship with his father is far more complex, and more thoroughly remembered. From the very short poem, "Madman" – "Every child has a madman on their street / The only trouble about our madman is that he is our father" (*A Snail in My Prime* 6) to

"Hymn to my Father" Durcan shows nuances and shades of their life together:

> Daddy and I were lovers
> From the beginning, and when I was six
> We got married in the church of Crinkle near Birr
> ….
> My mother gave me away
> My sister was best man. (*A Snail in My Prime* 187)

In "Geronimo" we hear about the marriage again:

> Although we were estranged lovers
> For almost thirty years
> When Daddy knew that he was going to die
> I asked that we marry again. (*A Snail in My Prime* 198)

Another unforgettable presence in the life being unfolded is Durcan's wife; they were married for seventeen years. "Nessa" tells us how he met her and "was nearly drowned"; in "She Mends an Ancient Radio" he wonders at her special talents "to rear two dancing daughters" with much love, to hold down a job in the city, to knit, to fix things in the house. The second part of the collection, the *Berlin Wall Cafe*, describes happy moments but above all the terrible sense of loss after their marriage is broken; such poems as "Hymn to a Broken Marriage", "The Pietà's Over" and "At the Funeral of the Marriage" reveal pain and despair:

> At the funeral of the marriage
> My wife and I paced
> On either side of the hearse,
> Our children racing behind it...
> As the coffin was emptied
> Down into the bottomless grave,
> Our children stood in a half-circle
> Playing on flutes and recorders.
> My wife and I held hands. (*The Berlin Wall Café* 66)

Loss and loneliness are perhaps Paul Durcan's main themes. Read, for example, the short poem, Aughawall Graveyard: "Lonely lonely lonely lonely: / The story with a middle only" (*A Snail in My Prime* 9). Thoughts of death –"I've become so lonely, I could die"– (*A Snail in My Prime* 40) and awareness of the futility of life permeate his collections, as for example, the poem "Walking the Stairs":

> When I conquer the top of the stairs
> I fall down the stairs,
> All the way down to the foot of the stairs.
> […]
> My life is a saga of a life on stairs
> […]
> Man is the inventor of stairs.
> How many miles of stairs
> Have we walked together?

> A great many, yet much less
> Than the thousands of miles of stairs
> I have walked alone. (*A Snail in My Prime* 215)

This modern Sisyphus perceives that as he goes up and down the stairs, time goes by quickly and brings death along: "In the autumn of my days I am looking forward / To hibernation, facing extinction" (*Paul Durcan's Diary* 118).

New events, however, show that time may be also seen through a circular perspective –the marriage of Durcan's daughter and the birth of Rosie Joyce. After so much suffering which culminates in *Cries of an Irish Caveman* (2001), one can discern in his poetic work a hopeful, quiet, joyful note. About the newly married, he writes: "You are the meaning of my life / And I of yours" (77). The arrival of his granddaughter represents renewal, a new beginning, a blessing in the poet's life:

> Rosie Joyce! May you some day in May
> Fifty six years from today be as lucky
> As I was when you were born that Sunday.
> …
> Never before had I felt so fortunate.
> Thank You, O Lord, for the Descent of Rosie onto Earth.
> (*Paul Durcan's Diary* 56)

In *Paul Durcan's Diary* (in prose), while writing about John Moriarty's autobiography, the poet praises "its stories, its poems, its memories, its prayers, its laughter, its tears, its songs, its passions, ... its terrible suffering, its amazing physical presence, its amazing spirituality" (43). One might think that if some of Durcan's poems were published as an autobiography in verse, it would contain all these and many other ingredients which Durcan admired in Moriarty's life story.

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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 French*) 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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"Nachalstvo", "Blat" and "Blarney" Paul Durcan Between Ireland and Russia

"Nachalstvo", "Blat" e "Blarney" Paul Durcan entre a Irlanda e a Russia

Stephanie Schwerter
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Abstract: *In Durcan's poetic work, a strong interest in Russian history and culture can be observed. The poet's fascination with Russia manifests itself predominantly in his poetry collection* Going Home to Russia *published in 1987. The poems featuring in the book geographically cover the entire Soviet Union, reaching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the White to the Black Sea, while at the same time moving back and forwards between Ireland and Russia. One of the most striking features of Durcan's volume is his outspokenness, "a slap in the face of public taste", using the title the Russian cubofuturists' manifesto published at the beginning of the twentieth century. Durcan's satirical approach to contemporary Irish society could be seen as of post-modern nature as established societal values become undermined through mockery and sarcasm.*

Keywords: *Russia; ostranenie; Soviet Union; Ireland.*

Resumo: *Pode ser observado um forte interesse pela história e cultura russas na obra poética de Durcan. O fascínio do poeta pela Rússia se manifesta predominantemente em sua coletânea de poesia* Going Home to Russia*, publicada em 1987. Os poemas apresentados no livro cobrem geograficamente toda a União Soviética, do Báltico ao Pacífico e do Mar Branco ao Mar Negro, ao mesmo tempo, indo e voltando entre a Irlanda e a Rússia. Uma das características mais marcantes do volume de Durcan é sua franqueza, "um tapa na cara do gosto do público", como no título do manifesto dos cubofuturistas russos publicado no início do século XX. A abordagem satírica de Durcan à sociedade irlandesa contemporânea pode ser vista como de natureza pós-moderna, à medida que os valores sociais estabelecidos são minados por zombaria e sarcasmo.*

Palavras-chave: *Rússia; ostranenie; União Soviética; Irlanda.*

I met a poet standing in the rush-hour
My name, he said as he swayed, is Paul Durcan
And I'm going home to Russia. I wished him
A safe journey and hoped he wouldn't be delayed
Ned Power

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Introduction: "Becoming the Other"

Paul Durcan is one of the most popular contemporary Irish poets, whose books "sell in tens of thousands to those who normally regard a poet without rhyme as an emperor without clothes" (O'Driscoll 149). David Wheatley even goes so far as to call Durcan a "national shaman in the life of the Irish Republic" (311). The importance of the poet's work became highlighted by Mary Robinson's choice to quote from his poem "Backside to the Wind" in her inauguration speech as president of Ireland (311). According to Yoenmini Kim, Durcan is a member of the so-called "blank generation" (381), which grew up in Ireland between the 1960s and the 1980s. Richard Kearney describes the poets belonging to this generation as a "new breed of urbanized and internationalized youth" (321). Durcan's international outlook on the world runs through his poetry and shows itself particularly in his interest in "the other". He explains: "I always try to become the other […]. The writer has to become the other. It's a truism to say that only by becoming the other, do you become yourself" (Knowles 22). John Knowles rightly observes that the poet's "ability to absorb himself in places and events" is central to his writing (22).

In Durcan's poetic work, a strong interest in Russian history and culture can be observed. The poet's fascination with Russia manifests itself predominantly in his poetry collection *Going Home to Russia* published in 1987. The poems featuring in the book geographically cover the entire Soviet Union, reaching from the Baltic to the Pacific and from the White to the Black Sea, while at the same time moving back and forwards between Ireland and Russia. Dennis T. Hannan describes *Going Home to Russia* as "a fine eclectic collection" containing the "usual battered bishops", "pounded politicians" and "satirized citizens" (104). One of the most striking features of Durcan's volume is his outspokenness, "a slap in the face of public taste", using the title the Russian cubofuturists' manifesto published at the beginning of the twentieth century (Burliuk, Khlebnikov, Kurchenykh, Mayakovsky). Durcan's satirical approach to contemporary Irish society could be seen as of post-modern nature as established societal values become undermined through mockery and sarcasm. Gerald Dawe underlines that it would be wrong to suggest that Durcan merely documents Irish life with "a provocative laugh", as this very "laugh" bears a "chastening image" allowing to "cope with life" (15). In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan targets among others politics, the Church as well as taboos such as sex. Poem titles such as "Priest Accused of not Wearing Condom", or "Diarrhoea Attack at Party Headquarters in Leningrad" reflect his ironic and at the same time humorous style.

Among contemporary Irish poets, Durcan is not the only one for whom Russia is "a frequent port-of-call" (Cheng Boey 353). Writers from Northern Ireland such as Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Dean, Frank Ormbsy and Medbh McGuckian, repeatedly refer to tsarist Russia or the Stalinist area in order to create a subversive connection between the two historical periods of political violence and the Northern Irish conflict. Thus, they attempt to use Russian history as a lens in order to draw attention to the shortcomings of their own society. Authors from the Republic of Ireland who show an interest in Russia are among others Derek Mahon, Michael O'Loughlin, Paul Mehan and Séan Dunne. In contrast to their northern counterparts, they follow a different discourse in their references to Russian history, literature and culture. In a number of cases, they establish a parallel between the suffering of the Irish under the coloniser and the fate of the Russian people oppressed by their numerous authoritarian rulers. Cheng Boey argues that in their poetry "Russia operates as a parallel elsewhere that enables a re-visioning of home" (353). Due to its "enormous size, its

tormented history and literature", the country functions as "a negative mirror" encompassing "a whole range of readings about Ireland" (353).

It is, however, difficult to compare Durcan with his northern and southern Irish fellow-writers as the poet seems to have a strong emotional connection with the country, which on the one hand springs from his personal history and on the other from his empathy with Soviet life. Durcan notes: "Growing up in Ireland in the fifties was a bit like living behind an iron curtain, with the Catholic hierarchy taking the place of the Kremlin, just another group of old men controlling the country. There was a fierce atmosphere of control, orthodoxy, conformity at all costs" (Kelly 297). Furthermore, the poet's interest in Russia is rooted in biographical fact. Apart from his relationship with his Russian lover Svetka (Cheng Boey 366), Durcan reveals that his great-grandmother emigrated to the Soviet Union, spending the last fifty-six years of her life in Russia and Estonia (Dalton 23). While Svetka is the main character in Durcan's poems "Going Home to Russia" (Durcan 65-69) and "The Red Arrow" (70-71), the poet's family ties are in the centre of "Estonian Farewell" (82).

Durcan undertook his first visit to Russia in 1983, an experience which did not leave him unimpressed. From his first journey on, he establishes a mental link between Ireland and the Soviet Union. Describing his trip from Moscow to the Armenian capital Erevan in an interview, Durcan notes:

> you could see out of the portholes of the aircraft the great holy pilgrimage mountain Ararat and when I looked out that porthole what I was seeing was Croagh Patrick, the Reek, the very same shape, the very same texture, personality, contour, everything, and the land of the Bible, underneath the Mountain Ararat, and Noah's Ark… (Dalton 23)

In his statement, the poet creates a connection between Ireland's holy mountain Croagh Patrick, informally called the Reek, and Armenia's sacred Mount Ararat, which is said to be the resting place of Noah's Ark. Glorifying both mountains, Durcan establishes a link between them through their comparable physical shape and their similar "personality". Throughout his poetry collection *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan establishes multiple parallels between Ireland and the Soviet Union. Cheng Boey maintains that in Durcan's poems, Russia plays a "blatantly subversive role as a negative elsewhere targeting the myth in which Ireland wraps itself" (365). Russia and its satellite states thus serve the poet as a lens in order to reconsider his home country from a mentally and geographically detached angle.

1. *Druzhniki, gribniki, apparatchiki*: Playing with the Russian language

A salient feature of Durcan's poetics in *Going Home to Russia* is the inclusion of Russian terms. In this way, the poet does not only attribute to his poems an exotic dimension, he also transposes the reader into the reality of Soviet life. In this context, Cheng Boey notes that through the juxtaposition of foreign terms with the English vernacular, Durcan arouses "the recognition of the familiar in the foreign, thereby erasing borders and undermining the idea of a coherent native language" (367). A play with transliterated Russian vocabulary can be detected in "Going Home to Russia", the opening poem of the eponymous collection. The speaker of the poem is about to board the "Havana-Moscow Illushin 62" in order to join his lover Svetka in the Russian capital. Stepping into the plane, he muses:

> We Irish had our bellyful of *blat*
> and *blarney*, more than our share
> Of the *nomenklatura* of Church and Party,
> The *nachalstvo* of the legal and medical mafia.
> Going down the airbridge, I slow my step,
> Savouring the moment of liberation. (65)

The subversive link created between Irish and Soviet society can only be grasped by the reader who is able to understand the meaning of the Russian words *blat, nomenklatura, nachalstvo* and the Irish vernacular term *blarney*. The term blat contains several layers of meaning. In the first sense, it signifies cronyism and favoritism (Oshegov, Shvedova 48). In colloquial Russian, it refers to influential connections allowing one to achieve professional promotion or to obtain unavailable goods. "Having *blat*" was central to Soviet life as society was marked by hierarchy and corruption, as well as a constant shortage of all kinds of merchandise. The term *nachalstvo* in the context of the Soviet Union, refers to the almighty bureaucracy. Against the background of contemporary Ireland, the *nachalstvo* of the "legal and medical mafia" reads as a hint at the reactionary politics concerning abortion and contraception promoted by the Irish state (Goodby 2, 59). Through this allusion, the poet points at the restriction of personal freedom of choice. The Hiberno-English word "blarney" means flattering and misleading talk and can also be translated as "nonsense" (Sinclair 137). In *Going Home to Russia*, "blarney" hints at the double standards of the politicians, the representatives of the Church and the medical system concerning the issue of birth control.

Nomenklatura refers to the elite of the communist party (Hosking 447) and the immutable political hierarchy of the time. In a larger sense, it alludes to the privileges which the leading party members managed to ensure for themselves and their families. Applying the term to "Church" and "Party", Durcan suggests that the central role, which the Party played in Soviet Russia, was taken over in Ireland by the Catholic Church. Thus, he juxtaposes two institutions, which stand for the monopolization of power. In line with Victor Shklovsky's concept of "ostranenie", meaning "defamiliarisation", Russia functions in the poem as a prism through which Durcan is able to present Ireland from an unconventional angle. According to Shklovsky, the only way of rendering things visible through art is to "make them strange" in order to capture the observer's attention (12). Through his reference to the Soviet Union, Durcan represents Ireland as a country dominated by an authoritarian social structure. When the speaker of the poem walks down the air bridge, he is "savouring the moment of liberation". This suggests that Russia is seen as a place of "liberty" in contrast to Ireland, which is presented as a repressive country.

A further play with Russian terms can be observed in "Zina in Murmansk". The poem opens up with the following lines:

> As a schoolgirl, Zina
> Was all that a Pioneer instructor
> Could dream of, and her parents –
> *Druzhniki, gribniki,*
> Peace-keepers, mushroom-hunters –
> Were proud of her as a mushroom,
> Their own miniscule red mushroom.
> (84)

In the poem, politics and the personal become intertwined when Durcan describes Zina's parents as *druzhniki* and *gribniki*. The Russian word *druzhniki* is an imprecise transliteration of *druzhinniki*. The poet might have opted for this slight phonetic modification in order to maintain the internal rhyme with *gribniki*. Durcan translates *druzhniki* and *gribniki* in the subsequent line with "peace-keepers" and "mushroom-hunters" without providing further explanations to the non-initiated reader. Letting his audience wonder about the meaning of the terms, Durcan creates an alienating effect. In the Soviet Union, *druzhinniki* were members of the community policing groups, who acted as a vigilante force for law and order on the urban streets. These groups were implemented by Nikita Khrushchev with the intention to make all soviet citizens participate in public life (Service 360-361). In this way, Durcan hints at the political convictions of Zina's parents which seem to be in line with Soviet ideology.

The term *gribniki*, on the contrary, refers to individuals who enjoy looking for mushrooms in their spare time. Through *gribniki*, Durcan alludes to a popular Russian leisure activity. A further Russian concept which Durcan integrates into the opening lines of his poem is the "pioneer instructor", that is a leader of a mass youth organization of the Soviet Union. The fact that Zina's parents see their daughter as "their own minuscule red mushroom" suggests that she is the perfect product of the soviet educational system. Through the reference to the colour red, the colour of the Communist flag, Durcan yet again establishes a connection between politics and Zina's parents' private life, as their daughter is described as a "red" mushroom conforming to soviet ideology.

The use of Russian terms can also be observed in the poem "The Puppet Theatre in Akopyan Street". In the attic of the theatre, the speaker meets a girl with whom he wishes to start a love affair. The unimpressed girl, however, merely asks him: "Why don't you write a poem about *Glasnost*?" (72). The term *glasnost* [transparency] was used in 1986 by Mikhail Gorbachev as a political slogan together with *perestroika* [restructuring] in order to promote the reorganization and democratization of the Communist party. Both notions are associated with the reformation and later with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In Durcan's poem, the speaker seems, however, keener on inviting the girl to his flat than writing poetry about *glasnost*. This attitude might not only be rooted in the speaker's interest in the women but also motivated by his belief in the soviet system. Perceiving it as an advanced form of society, he is not in favour of its reformation. The speaker's concern about the decline of the Soviet Union is also manifested in the following lines:

> Downstairs on the sidewalk there are *apparatchiks* in blue jeans
> Smoking Marlborough and drinking Pepsi through straws,
> Conspiring to open a McDonald's Hamburger Restaurant in Gorki (72-72)

In the context of the Soviet Union, the term *apparatchik* [agent of the apparatus] refers to a full-time professional functionary of the Soviet Party, defined by James Billington as "a man not of grand plans but of a hundred carefully executed details" (455). In Durcan's poem, the *apparatchiks*, traditionally faithful to the state, show rebellious behavior by wearing western blues jeans, consuming American goods – such as Pepsi and Marlborough – and by planning to open a McDonald's. In this way, Durcan evokes American cultural and economic imperialism, which the speaker observes with suspicion. The speaker's critical attitude shows in the two closing lines of the poem: "Nobody can perceive me praying to Lenin/ Have mercy on me! Power to the children" (73). Letting the speaker praise Lenin and his ideology, Durcan ends his poem with a clear rejection of the capitalist world.

2. From intellectuals to polar bears: stereotypic representations of Russia and the Russians

In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan plays with a certain number of stereotypes, creating a mythologized image of Russia. The scholar Svetlana Korolyova has explored the representation of Russia in British popular imagination, singling out a number of key images of the country and its population. Korolyova lists the following images depicting Russia as a "'submarginal' mighty, partly monstrous space"; "a pseudo-Christian, primitive 'aboriginal' country"; "a powerful, despotic, barbaric state-aggressor", "a country of mechanical work and total control" inhabited by a "religious, mentally and spiritually endowed people"; and, last but not least, as "a world of eternal turmoil, unpredictable events and unlimited possibilities of self-understanding".[1] In Durcan's poetry collection, however, the images of Russia pointed out by Korolyova are either mocked, distorted or entirely absent.

In *Going Home to Russia*, the Soviet Union is not illustrated as a frightening "monstrous" country but rather as an enigmatic place of evasion. The Russian cities evoked in the collection reach from Moscow to Leningrad, from Ryazan to Murmansk and from Novosibirsk to Gorki. Further exotic locations situated in the former republics of the Soviet Union are the Estonian capital Tallinn and the Uzbek city Samarkand. Apart from that, Durcan refers to three Georgian cities: Tbilisi, the capital of the country, Batumi – a popular seaside resort – as well as Gori, the town in which Stalin was born. Juxtaposing places which are located on opposite ends of the Soviet Union, Durcan creates the sensation of an enormous space. For most of the Western readers these cities are either entirely unknown or represent mysterious places in a remote part of the world.

The image of Russia as a "primitive 'aboriginal country'", as mentioned by Korolyova, becomes undermined in "Zina in Murmansk". Zina, the central character of the poem, is a bright girl who is expected to study at the Literary Institute in Moscow, or the Art College in Leningrad. However, instead of embarking on a career in one of the two metropolises, she chooses to go to live in Murmansk, a distant city in the artic region. Her move to the Far North is motivated by her desire to find herself an "old-fashioned man". Zina's dreamed-of-husband is described as

> A Mesolithic Man of the twentieth century
> Who would fish for shark in the White Sea
> And hunt polar bear in the tundra,
> Who would live with her in a log cabin. (84)

At first glance, the girl's ideal of masculinity seems to reflect the values of an "aboriginal Russia". The longed for "Mesolithic sexuality" (85) stands in contrast to the "pasteurized blood" (85) of Muscovite men. The archetype of a rustic man becomes, however, subverted in the following lines, in which the reader learns that the ideal fishing and bear-hunting spouse should also be able to recite Russian literature. Seen in the context of the Soviet Union, Zina's choice is unsurprising for a member of the Russian intelligentsia. Individuals perceiving themselves as belonging to the intellectual elite refused to live in the main cities, which were well provided with goods and food. Their decision was often seen as absurd by their surroundings, as the great majority of the population was keen on obtaining the permission to live in one of the two cities. The members of the intelligentsia, however, saw the striving for material benefit as petty bourgeois and therefore opted for remote places. Their romantic and

optimistic worldview and their striving for a better world made them reject capitalist materialism.

Apart from Zina's intellectual convictions, another cultural factor might have influenced her ideal of manliness. In the late 60s and 70s, Ernest Hemingway functioned as a role model and was considered as a sex symbol in the milieu of the Russian intelligentsia. His portrait in a coarse wool sweater could be found in many homes of intellectuals, often simply printed out in black and white. The archetype associated with this image was the man who was at the same time rough and refined, a fighter and a philosopher, "a sophisticated primitive", as Durcan puts it in his poem "Tbilisi Cabaret (Ortachala Belle with a Fan)" (86). However, Zina is unable to find this kind of "specimen of manhood" (84) in Murmansk and "goes nightly to her bunk/ As to her beloved grave (85)". Thus, Durcan ironically suggests that the ideal of an "aboriginal" Russia only existed in the mind of idealistic intellectuals.

The image of a "powerful, barbaric state-aggressor" pointed out by Korolyova also appears in an ironic light in Durcan's collection. In "Going Home to Russia", the speaker is the only passenger to board on the flight to Moscow. Stepping into the plane, he is pitied by the immigration officer:

> I am the solitary passenger joining the flight at Shannon;
> The Irish immigration officer eyes me mournfully;
> "Good luck", he mutters as if to say "you will need it";
> He does not know that I am versed in luck
>
> "Good luck", he mutters as if to a hostage or convict,
> Not knowing that he is speaking to an Irish dissident
> Who knows that in Ireland scarcely anybody is free
> To work or to have a home or to read and write.
> (65)

Whereas the Irish immigration officer sees Russia as a place of hostages or convicts, the speaker of the poem perceives the country as a place of liberation. With the terms "hostage" and "convict", Durcan alludes to labour camps and the Stalinist era, and thus plays with the image of a "barbaric state". However, the sensation of terror and fear is not at all felt by the speaker, who is excited and enthusiastic about his trip to Russia.

Instead of the Soviet Union, Ireland becomes the target of criticism. The speaker's statement that in Ireland not everybody is allowed to work and have a place to live most likely refers to the discrimination of the Catholic community in the north of the island, where uneven distribution of council houses and work places among the Northern Irish population generated social unrest and gave rise to the Northern Irish conflict in the late 1960s (Dixon 69). Evoking the fact that in Ireland not everybody is allowed to read or the write, Durcan refers to Irish history and the so-called Penal Laws established by the British Government in the seventeenth century. According to these laws, Catholics were refused education (Ross 159). Alluding to social inequality in Irish society, Durcan implicitly praises communist ideology, according to which everybody would enjoy free education, have a place to live and be granted work (Service 94). In so doing, the poet glorifies Soviet Russia as a superior form of society.

The image of Russia as "a country of mechanical work and total control" as mentioned by Korolyova does not feature in Durcan's poetry collection. Neither does the image of the Russian population as "religious people". This might be due to the fact that

Durcan is particularly interested in the Soviet Union, a country in which religion was officially non-existent. In the poem "Red Square – The Hours", Durcan suggests that the belief in soviet doctrine has replaced the faith in God. The second stanza of his poem opens with the misleading line "God lives in Red Square". As the poem goes on, the reader understands, that people come to Red Square not to go to church but to pray at Lenin's grave. This suggests that Lenin has turned into the God of the Soviet Union:

> The people are yearning to pray
> At the tomb of the Son of Man;
> At the heart of the heartless world
> Pilgrims from Uzbekistan
> And Siberia at the tomb of Lenin. (97)

In "Tbilisi Cabaret (Ortachala Belle with a Fan)", Durcan ironically juxtaposes religion and communist ideology, as well as the sacred and the profane. Addressing his lover, the speaker of the poems states "that love is greater than God and Marx" (86). In this way, Durcan mockingly puts God and Marx on the same level. Later on in the poem, he establishes an ironic connection between Palm Sunday and the May Day celebrations on Red Square.

> I am a citizen of a secret society.
> Although God was born in Russia
> It is a well-kept secret.
> In Red Square on Palm Sunday
> I looked through Brezhnev's eyes
> When they were open, and I saw
> Ten thousand secrets wave up at me.
> "Jesus, it's May Day!" he said to me.
> (87)

The fact that God's birth in Russia is a "well-kept secret" suggests that nobody is actually aware of God's existence. General Secretary Brezhnev's exclamation: "Jesus, it's May Day", reads as a comic subversion of soviet discourse, in which references to religion were entirely absent. The ten thousand waving secrets refer to the crowd, which traditionally gathered on Red Square for the Celebrations of the 1st of May, the International Worker's Day. Replacing Palm Sunday, a Christian feast, with the celebration of laborers, Durcan once again hints at the absence of religion.

In the subsequent stanza, the spiritual and the material become interlinked:

> Our Lady of Red Square, pray for us.
> Midnight Trolleybus, pray for us.
> Ice cream in Winter, pray for us.
> Queen of the Moscow Metro, pray for us.
> Leaf of Gold, pray for us.
> Hammer and Sickle, pray for us.
> Mother of Intercourse, pray for us.
> Taxi at Dawn, pray for us. (87)

In this stanza, materiality becomes elevated over religion, as the speaker is praying to profane things such as ice cream, the metro, the trolleybus, the taxi and the Soviet flag. With the "Lady of Red Square", Durcan creates a kind of communist Mother Mary, which finds her echo in the "Mother of Intercourse". In this way, the material and the carnal replace religious belief.

Even if the image of Russians as religious people is absent in Durcan's poetry, the stereotype of the Russian population as "mentally and spiritually endowed" individuals can be found. Music and literature seem to play an important role for a number of characters occurring *in Going Home to Russia*. In "The Red Arrow", Svetka proposes to the speaker – with whom she has just made love on a train between Moscow and Leningrad – to meet up the next day in the Melodiya Music store in the Classical Russian Music section. She specifies: "Look me up under Rachmaniov" (70). In "Zina in Murmansk", Zina dreams of a man who would "read to her from Tolstoy,/ Valentin Rasputin and Chingitz Aitmatov" (84).

The last stereotype mentioned by Korolyova is the one of "another world", a world of "eternal turmoil, unpredictable events and unlimited possibilities of self-understanding". In the context of *Going Home to Russia*, it could be argued that Durcan presents Russia as a counter-image of Ireland, offering "alternative routes to home" (Cheng Boey 254). In this sense, Russia provides for the poet "unlimited possibilities of self-understanding" as through a glance to Russia, he is exploring his own cultural environment. Durcan uses images of nature in order to create a contrast between Ireland and Russia. To the poet, Russia is the epitome of natural life. Returning to nature seems to enable the speaker to find himself.

In "Going Home to Russia", he states while speaking to his lover:

> To sleep with you on the settee and to become with you
> Creatures of the forest, crushed deer;
> […]
> To live again with nature as before I lived
> In Ireland before all the trees were cut down;
> Again collecting leaves in Moscow in October,
> Closer to you than I am to myself. (69)

The reference to "Ireland before all trees were cut down" is an allusion to the period preceding the colonization of the island, as at their arrival, the colonizers cut down a substantial amount of trees in order to cultivate the land. In this way, Durcan presents Ireland as disfigured place lacking in nature. However, contrary to Ireland, Russia abounds with nature. "Creatures of the forest" are mentioned next to autumn leaves, "riverbanks", "mountain huts" and "Russian plains". A further recurrent natural image Durcan uses to depict Russia is snow. In "Going Home to Russia", the speaker looks out of his plane window and discovers Russia "under a mantle of snow and forest" (67). In "The Red Arrow", Svetka tells her lover "I am the little horse in your snow" (70), in "Estonian Farewell" the reader is confronted with the "snowed-up port of Tallinn" (82), and in "Red Square – the Hours" courting couples walk "at midnight in the snow" (98). With the reference to snow, Durcan enforces the exotic image of Russia.

3. Durcan and his Russian counterparts

In *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan alludes to a number of soviet writers. Seamus Heaney points out the importance of Russian poetry for the contemporary western poet, observing that "our

sense of the fate and scope of modern Russian poetry has implicitly established a bench mark at which subsequent work will have to justify itself" (38-39). In his poetry collection, Durcan engages with the fate of Ossip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, while making passing references to Anna Akhmatova, Lev Tolstoi, Chingiz Aitmatov and Tisian Tabidze.

In "The Fairy Tale of 1937", Durcan explores Mandelstam's deportation. The poem opens up with the following lines "Once upon a time there a czar called S/ Who was afeard of a wanderer called M" (90). Throughout the poem, Durcan does not name Mandelstam explicitly but merely refers to him with "M." The reader familiar with Russian history and literature understands that Mandelstam is in the centre of the poem. In *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, the two autobiographical books which Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote about the Stalinist time, she refers to her husband with the letter "M". Furthermore, Heaney wrote a famous poem about Mandelstam, which he entitled "M" The initial S in Durcan's poem is a clear reference to Stalin. Mandelstam was born in 1891 and died in 1938 at the age of 47 in the Gulag. He was deported for a satirical poem he had written on Stalin. Until today the exact time and manner of his death are unknown (Brown 7). Throughout his life, Mandelstam refused to write in line with the requirements of Socialist realism.

In the second stanza of his poem, Durcan engages with state control and censorship:

> The Czar S became so afeard of M
> That he issued a ukase
> That every telephone in Russia was to be shot dead (90).

The lines hint at Mandelstam's persecution by the secret police and allude to the fact that in the 1930s, the poet's writing was entirely banned by the state (Gary Haris ix).

In the following lines, Durcan refers to Mandelstam's deportation:

> So that in 1937 the Czar S had M interned
> And committed to an empty psychiatric hospital
> In a derelict cul-de-sac on the docks,
> Sentencing him to total and solitary confinement forever
> To this day nobody has ever set foot in that house. (90)

The house that nobody "sets foot" implies an inaccessible place in which Mandelstam's poetry was kept. It alludes to the fact that for years, Mandelstam's work had disappeared as it had been confiscated by the state. The authorities made a great effort to delete Mandelstam's name systematically in order to pretend that the poet had never existed (Service 365). Consequently, over two thirds of his poetry remained officially unavailable to Russian readers for decades (Brown 3).

A further Russian poet having suffered under Stalin mentioned by Durcan is Boris Pasternak. Similarly to Mandelstam, Pasternak was exposed to the repressions of the totalitarian system. While he did not have to fear for his life, he was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and was urged to turn down the Nobel Prize in 1958 (Service 365). Erik Martiny sees Pasternak as Durcan's "poetic father" and "mentor" (98-99). In "Peredelkino: at the Grave of Pasternak", the poet venerates the Russian writer, while at the same time establishing parallels between Ireland and Russia. Contemplating Pasternak's grave, the speaker is mentally transposed to Ireland:

> I am borne back to another railing'd grave
> In Kilcrea in West Cork:
> Lo Arthur Leary, generous, handsome brave.
> Slain in his bloom lies in this humble grave. (78)

Art O'Leary was the husband of the poet Eibhlín Ní Chonaill, who died at a young age due to a feud with the Protestant landowner Abraham Morris. O'Leary refused to sell Morris the horse he had brought back from his service in the Austro-Hungarian army for £5. At the time, the Penal Laws stated that a Catholic was not allowed to own a horse which was worth more than £5. If despite the law he did, he could be forced by a Protestant to sell his more valuable horse at this price. Declining the deal, O'Leary was shot after having been proclaimed an outlaw (Brennan 128-129). The two last lines of the above quotes stanza of "Peredelkino – at the grave of Pasternak" is the epitaph on O'Leary's gravestone, which had been composed by his wife (Cater Hall 101). Creating a parallel between Irish and Russian history, Durcan associates the epitaph with Pasternak:

> Slain in his bloom like you
> Lo Boris Leonidovich,
> Who died for the right to ride a white horse;
> You – generous, handsome, brave. (78)

Through his connection between Pasternak's and O'Leary's grave, Durcan links historic social inequality in Ireland with social injustice under Stalin. While in reality O'Leary, and not Pasternak, "died for the right to ride a white horse", the Russian poet was discriminated by the state for his poetry.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a further soviet poet occurring in *Going Home to Russia*. Durcan refers to Solzhenitsyn in "The Return of Solzhenitsyn" and "The Kindergarten Archipelago". In "The Return of Solzhenitsyn", the speaker of the poem implores the writer to come back: "Alexander Isayevich, for how much longer/ Will we have to wait for you to come home?" (76). Thus, he refers to Solzhenitsyn's exile in the United States due to his outspoken criticism of the Soviet Union and the penal system. The title of the second poem is an allusion to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1971) in which the Russian writer documents the horrors of the concentration camps. Referring Mandelstam, Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn in his collection, Duncan venerates the writers' integrity and their refusal to put their work at the service of the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that in *Going Home to Russia*, Durcan establishes a connection between Ireland and the Soviet Union in order to obtain a fresh view on his home country. According to Shklovsky's theory of "ostranenie", the Irish poet generates an outside perspective with the intention of working against a habitual or "automatic" perception of Ireland (12). In Durcan's poetry, the Soviet Union is either illustrated as an alternative, more advanced form of society, or depicted as an exotic place of evasion full of mystery. In his poetry, Durcan shows a thorough knowledge of the Soviet Union, a country which at times he seems to be glorifying. However, his engagement with the fate of persecuted Russian poets shows his consciousness of the repressive system of the Stalinist era. The parallels which

Durcan establishes between Ireland and Russia throughout his poetry collection are nevertheless not to be seen as a naïve way of perceiving Soviet life. His poems are rather to be read as subversive overstatements, relying on a play with the paradoxical and contradictory. Through the use of humour and irony, he achieves an alienating view on Ireland in order to communicate to the reader the shortcomings of his own society.

Notes

1 http://myth-of-russia.lunn.ru/en/the-british-myth-of-russia

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Poems for a Poet

One Giant Step on Behalf of the Elderly

Celia de Fréine

At last you step over the threshold
crossing from the safety of home
into the great outdoors

You head for the park
during the designated time
and are surprised to see
that everyone has become younger –
their skin is smooth, their limbs supple

You imagine that you too
have returned to your childhood
watch as your Oxford brogues
change to stilleto heels
platform shoes, Greek sandals
gutties, all the way back

to the days of those whitewashed boots
your mother would leave
on the windowsill to dry
before she would allow you out to play

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Paul Durcan

Damian Grant

Poetry (said Auden) makes nothing happen.
Well, that's not quite true – though Auden died
before happenings really started to happen.
This Paul Durcan now. He has been happening
all over the place for years; though how a man
from Mayo found his way to Moscow (and
everywhere afterwards) if not a mystery
is something to be wondered at. Montaigne
may have said it first: "there is nothing human
escapes me". But Durcan sure can follow suit.
Casting his net on always troubled waters,
flying the Irish flag on an English vessel,
he trawls for everything – whatever strange fish –
drawing the line (or cutting it) at mermaids.

So he sailed up the Liffey from Timbuktu
To spin his yarn for me, and you.

What Tiresias (also transgender) sees
is what gives us – gave Eliot –*The Waste Land*.
What Durcan sees is no less comprehensive,
no less that ruin we are the fragments of.
In all those portraits, self and other, coaxed
from words squeezed out like pigment to create
his inexhaustible palette of people,
we most perceive their instability:
the which said which? and who was who?
that Sally made him question. Ekphrasis
explodes here; the kaleidoscope shakes down
a mirror world of moving images.
What shakes us most is love: love driving headlong,
or love uncoupled, a hunger endured for years.

And he knew then that the dearest thing one owns
Is the little bit of furze between two towns.

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Hands

Moya Cannon

For Eamon and Kathleen

It was somewhere over the north-eastern coast of Brazil,
over Fortaleza, a city of which I knew nothing,
except that it is full of people –
the life of each one a mystery
greater than the Amazon –
it was there, as the toy plane on the flight monitor
nudged over the equator
and veered east towards Marrakech,
that I started to think again of hands,
of how strange it is that our lives –
the life of the red-haired French girl to my left,
the life of the Argentinian boy to my right,
my life, and the lives of the dozing passengers,
who are being carried fast in the dark
over the darkened Atlantic –
all of these lives are now being held
in the hands of the pilot,
in the consciousness of the pilot,
and I think of other hands which can now hold our lives,
the hands of the surgeon
whom I will meet again when I return home,
the hands of the intelligent, black-haired nurse
who unwound the birth-cord from my neck,
the soft hands of my mother,
the hands of those others who have loved me,
until it seems almost
as though this is what a human life is:
to be passed from hand to hand,
to be borne up, improbably over an ocean.

Hands, 2011
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Recollections of Paul Durcan

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Orpheus Ascending
The Berlin Wall Café by Paul Durcan

Derek Mahon

Durcan's is the poetry of a new kind of man, whence his evident appeal to women: "Women and poets," said Graves, "are natural allies." If he reads strangely to us, it's because we haven't got there yet – or perhaps, because we never can. He doesn't write out of a future where we have yet to arrive, for that would be merely to anticipate. He writes from lateral imaginative zones which contain, as it were incidentally, glimpses of Yeats's "dim coming times": I read *Ark of the North* in this light, for example. But it's the laterality, the sideways look (not, despite his degree in archaeology and mediaeval history, the "backward look"), the simultaneous presence of alternative modes of perception, that characterise his vision.

Let us dispel once and for all the widespread belief that he is a surrealist, a belief based on misconceptions about both Durcan and surrealism. The notion derives, I think, from his professed admiration for David Gascoyne, and from a two-line poem, "La Terre des Hommes", in his first collection, *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor* (1975):

> Fancy meeting you out here in the desert:
> Hallo Clockface.

"La Terre des Hommes", though striking and memorable, is untypical of Durcan, being entirely visual and free of editorialising. The word surrealism is used too loosely in any case. Duchamp's classic definition, "the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table", proposes something less amenable to paraphrase then Durcan's epigram – besides, Durcan is on the record as disliking surrealism, in which he detects a streak of sadism.

As for Gascoyne, I think Durcan has been misunderstood. It was only the very young Gascoyne who was a surrealist: with *Hölderlin's Madness* (1938) he abandoned the doctrine; and if we are looking for his influence, I think it's to be found where most of Gascoyne's best work is to be found, in *Poems 1938-42*, first published by Tambimuttu's Poetry London Editions, with illustrations by Graham Sutherland, and included in *Collected Poems* under the heading "Time and Place" – poems of mystical attention like "A Wartime Dawn" and "The Gravel-Pit Field", neither in the least surrealistic, both in the English Romantic-existential tradition which goes back to Keats and Coleridge. No, Durcan is not a surrealist but a cubist, one transfixed by the simultaneity of disparate experience, all sides of the question, the newspaper headline, the lemon and the guitar – a man with eyes in the back of his head. The poems are often obscure, but need only be held up to this light.

Francis Stuart, in *The High Consistory*, suggests that "the artist at his most ambitious does not seek to change maps but, minutely and over generations, the expression on some of the faces of men and women". Edna Longley, in her introduction to *The Selected Paul Durcan*, reads a poem like "Irish Hierarchy Bans Colour Photography" as an attack on 'black-and-white attitudes". Julien Benda, in *La Trahison des Clercs*, a book which needs to be re-read in every

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generation, remarks that the "clerk" who is praised by the laymen is a traitor to his office. It's in the light of such observations that Durcan's political position maybe estimated: in *Jumping the Train Tracks with Angela* (1983), "Bogside Girl Becomes Taoiseach", the implication being that it's only a matter of time. This isn't surrealism but real sexual politics, a natural consequence of "Ireland 1972", which says it all:

> Next to the fresh grave of my beloved grandmother
> The grave of my firstlove murdered by my brother.

The cover of *The Berlin Wall Café* shows a dead blackbird by Edward McGuire, and I'm reminded of the early "Memoirs of a Fallen Blackbird" with which I once heard Durcan mesmerise a late-night audience at a poetry festival in Amsterdam. The role of "exemplary sufferer" (Susan Sontag's phrase) is one which he has courted, consciously or otherwise, throughout his career, as if obscurely aware that he is temperamentally suited to the role of sacrificial victim – Adonis, Actaeon and Orpheus in one. Durcan was married for many years to Nessa O'Neill and is the father of two daughters; and Nessa has been celebrated by Durcan *passim* since *Westport*: "She Transforms the Ruins into a Winter Palace", "She Mends an Ancient Wireless", and so on. Some of these poems are very fine. Now the Durcans have separated, and *The Berlin Wall Café* is in large measure a "Hymn to a Broken Marriage". To speculate about the reasons for the break-up would be impertinent, except in so far as Durcan has himself commented publicly on the background to this new collection. Speaking to Charles Hunter in *The Irish Times* (1986) he said "I will rue for the rest of my life the fact that I put my work before my family… Poetry is an incredibly isolated activity… Heaven is other people; a house where there are no women and children is a very empty house."

Durcan appears, if anything, more of a feminist than ever. (Perhaps "womanist" would be better.) Jesus, he tells us, was "a lovely man, entirely sensitive to a woman's world"; he meets "a KGB lassie" in the Moscow subway; there is some gender-bending reminiscent of that camp triumph "Mícheál Mac Liammóir"; and even the nuns in "High-Speed Car-Wash" twirl gleaming parasols in the sunlight while they discuss the new Peugeot. One critic has remarked that this new collection "elevates self-pity to a condition of heroic intensity". I would go further and say that the heroism *transcends* self-pity. This is a heroic book, by a hero of the imagination – not only because, from despair, he achieves poems like "The Jewish Bride" and "The Pietà's Over", but because of his womanism, which casts Nessa also in a heroic role (as he has always done), suggests mythical precedents. When he promises "to woo her only and always in the eternity of my loss" and asks us to join him in praising "famous women", it is as if mankind itself were on its knees in apology and supplication; and I think, for example, of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Durcan, with a microphone for a lute, can, like Orpheus, charm the birds from the trees; he is that kind of poet. Eurydice, you remember, died of a snake-bite and Orpheus followed her to the underworld, where he persuaded Pluto to let him have her back. Permission was granted on condition that, before reaching the light, Orpheus should not look back. He did, of course, and Eurydice was lost for ever; after which he turned gay and was killed by Maenads. Durcan has not, to my knowledge, turned gay, and he is in no danger from the Maenads. It's that backward look that interests me, as figuring – what? Despair? Doubt? Disbelief? The wife from "The Pietà's Over" tells her husband,

> It is time for you to get down off my knees
> And learn to walk on your own two feet,

and later compares the cold light of day with the Resurrection:

> I did not take the easy way out and yield to you –
> Instead I took down the door off its hinges
> So that the sunlight shone all the more squarely
> Upon the pure, original brokenness of our marriage.

But where Durcan sees an empty tomb I see Orpheus offending into the light, an exemplary sufferer, a hero of art, to resolve his despair in song, inspired by a lost Muse. He himself, and through him our perception of the world, are changed by the experience in just such a direction as Stuart indicates in my quotation from *The High Consistory.* "Man lives *poetically* on this earth," said Hölderlin, a poet favoured by Durcan; and it follows that our poetry is a kind of politics, a politics of the soul. René Char called poetry "l*a vie future a l'intérieur de l'homme requalifié*", "the future interior life of requalified man"; and it's as "requalified man" that Durcan has something new and important to tell us. This new collection is of a piece, in that respect, with his previous work, differing from it only in the intensity of its heroism, the renunciation of a sometimes too facile fluency for the taut strings of perfected artistry. Emerging into the light, he has given us his best book yet.

The Irish Review, 1986

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"Being Sensible": Paul Durcan's Anarchic Vision

Katie Donovan

Having not heard Paul Durcan read in some time, I was delighted to be able to listen to him at last year's inaugural Shaking Bog Nature Writing Festival in the Glencree Valley (as I write, in the summer of 2020, such lively local festivals assume a nostalgic glow – this year we have had none). Paul was paired with the dynamic Bloodaxe poet, Pascale Petit, so it was a very special event indeed. Both achieve a richly surreal vision in their work, which manages to be both personal and global in its reach.

As a poet it is hard not to be envious of Paul's spontaneous charm and emotion when he stands before an audience. His daring and eloquence have not dimmed over the years, and, true to form, he kept us spellbound.

When I was a young poet in the late 1980s and early 1990s, seeking to write about emotion myself, I was drawn to the searing, self-deprecating tone of the poems in *The Berlin Wall Café* (1985) and *Daddy, Daddy* (1990). In the poem "Kierkegaard's Morning Walk in Copenhagen", Paul writes of his father's funeral: "Outside the crematorium, listening to men/Being sensible and not talking about their feelings/About Daddy having been a moment ago incinerated/And exchanging informations about the afternoon's rugby fixtures…" By resisting this sort of patriarchal sensibility, Durcan played his own part in overthrowing the weight of tradition – where poetry had to be "manly", i.e. about war, or history, or farming rituals.

He presents us, instead, with his flawed self, trying to navigate the swirling seas of everyday life. In the poem "The Pietà's Over", his fearless exploration of his own less than heroic emotions at being forced to live without the comfort of a spouse is unsparing in its satiric bite. Particularly effective is the voice in the poem: that of the wife who is leaving him: "you must make your home in yourself, and not in a woman".

One poem I particularly admire is "Around the Corner from Francis Bacon"; a memory of romance in its fresh, heady days:

> Where we first lived in sin
> …
> I slept on an ironing board in the kitchen
> And you slept in the attic: Late at night
> When all the other flat-dwellers
> Were abed
> …
> You crept down the attic ladder
> …
> You placed your hand on my little folly, murmuring:
> "I've come to iron you, Sir Board". (*The Berlin Wall Café*)

Paul is never shy about naming the body's intimate parts, which, in those days, were taboo in Irish writing: "My father was a man with five penises..." That he wrote with humour and compassion about this vulnerable, physical aspect of the human experience, was

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liberating for us younger poets, seeking to write openly about all parts of our lives, in a society where nobody mentioned penises, much less vaginas or menstrual blood. Where, the year before *The Berlin Wall Café* was published, a young girl called Ann Lovett died alone after giving birth to her baby under a statue of the Virgin Mary, in a town where everyone feigned ignorance of her pregnancy.

Paul can create legendary titles. Think "The Haulier's Wife Meets Jesus on the Road"; the unforgettable "Diarrhoea at Party Headquarters in Leningrad"; or, one of his best known poems, "Making Love Outside Aras an Uachtarain". Who could resist?

I have also often admired his capacity to weave the heat of current affairs into his work, as in "The Feast of St Bridget, Friday the First of February, 1985" (from *The Berlin Wall Café* also published in 1985). This poem features the horrific killing of a school bus driver during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and seeks, with its addition of context, newsreader-style shorthand, and ironic downplay ("so what?") to place this suffering within a world history of atrocity: "Don't suppose Derrylin will ever be as prestigious as Auschwitz…..Children had to step over pool of blood and broken glass".

As Colm Tóibín has observed, "Of all of our poets, Paul Durcan writes the most public, and the most private, poems."

From rural boreens to city bedsits; from Mayo to Palermo, his naming of the furniture of our lives is closely observed: "We are all aliens in the cupboard,/All coat hangers in the universe." That sense of being alone yet together is something striven for in many of his poems – leaving a poignant impression of many crossings but only a few, treasured connections.

A poet of home and a poet of many flights, Paul has written extensively about his travels. He has lost – and found – himself in the narratives of many paintings. Above all, he has distilled the essence of our flawed, faintly ridiculous, but somehow lovable humanity, to offer us moments of tender, anarchic insight. Long may his gift last.

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Fiercely to Myself

Niall MacMonagle

For Paul Durcan, "Poetry is born of speech and silence" [In Dublin, 8 November 1990] and Durcan's unique poetry is born of the inner life, the solitary self, that thinking, feeling, imagining life that, in turn, becomes a word world, heard and read. And that inner life, in its intense engagement with the outer world, makes for the powerful Durcan dynamic. For fifty years, Durcan, in his poetry, has celebrated, condemned, explored and questioned a world real and imagined and in doing so has delighted, enriched, entertained and unsettled a large and enthusiastic following.

A question once asked by a Primary school pupil, "How many poems have you written?" surprised Durcan. His answer, "Two thousand", surprised him even more but no Irish poet, in the past fifty years, has been so steeped in the goings-on of Ireland, no Irish poet has been so preoccupied with its concerns, so forthright in condemnation of injustice, inequality, hypocrisy, and so strikingly memorable in highlighting Ireland's oddities.

Durcan's disturbing honesty, his humour, his memorable scenarios, his unforgettable images take up a permanent place in the reader's mind. His prodigious output – there are over twenty books – includes beguiling love poems, surreal, liberating narratives, quirky utterances. Many of his titles are, in themselves, mini-poems.

Sometimes prompted by newspaper headlines – the Northern Troubles, the Divorce Referendum, Mary Robinson's election, the death of six nuns in a Dublin convent fire – sometimes by private concerns and complex personal relationships, Durcan is always courageous and passionately spiritual. Like Patrick Kavanagh, Durcan knows "that posterity has no use/ For anything but the soul,/ The lines that speak the passionate heart,/The spirit that lives alone."

"The great enemy of art is the ego" says Durcan. "It keeps getting in the way. One needs the ego to disappear so that I become you; I become the people walking up and down the street." (Oxford Poetry, Spring 1988). The many voices in Durcan's work, the many personae, including that of a playful "Paul Durcan", add up to a body of work that contains multitudes. He is the most companionable of poets, in his poetry, in his eye-sharp, ear-sharp pieces for radio, which are really prose poems [published as *Paul Durcan's Diary* (2003)], and in his conversation.

In the self-deprecating, four-line "Self-Portrait 95", he tells us that

> 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.

But it's that shifting of perspectives, that open-ended way of seeing things, the vivid descriptions of the situations in which he finds himself that make Durcan the brilliant poet he is.

And then there's the music, the imagery, the cadences. It's there in "Father's Day, 21 June 1992", when the speaker tells us that "we sat alone,/ The axe and I,/All the green fields

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running away from us,/ All our daughters grown up and gone away." It's there in "Rosie Joyce" when Durcan captures the landscape, the feeling of newness, the excitement felt on his first granddaughter's arrival on earth:

> That Sunday in May before daybreak
> Night had pushed up through the slopes of Achill
> Yellow forefingers of Arum Lily – the first of the year.
>
> Down at the Sound the first rhododenrons
> Purpling the golden camps of whins;
> The first hawthorns powdering white the mainland;
>
> The first yellow Irises flagging roadside streams;
> Quills of bog-cotton skimming the bogs;
> Burrishoole cemetery shin-deep in forget-me-nots;
>
> The first sea pinks speckling the seashore;
> Cliffs of London Pride, groves of bluebell.
> First fuchsia, Queen Anne Lace, primrose.

All those firsts. All that energy. And that little tender detail – the forget-me-nots in Burrishoole cemetery.

Through his painterly eye, we see "The plush, emerald, furry rollers of the car wash/ Plied, wheeled, shuddered, backwards – forwards"; we see a parcel opened "as delicately as a surgeon executing a tracheotomy," an umbrella becoming "a carousel of arousal" and we see "Young, bow-tied Death . . . /Sitting upright at his black piano, taking his time,/ Sitting upright all day at his black piano,/ Sitting upright all night at his black piano" Durcan, in Richard Dorment's words, is forever Making us see things DIFFERENTLY.

And in "Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno", that Durcan tour-de-force, those lulling cadences, with Keatsian negative capability, inhabit otherness. We become, with Durcan, that nun in crisis remembering another time, a place altogether elsewhere.

> That was one of the gayest days of my life.
> The day the sisters went swimming.
> Often in the silent darkness of the chapel after Benediction,
> During the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament,
> I glimpsed the sea again as it was that day.
> Praying – daydreaming really –
> I became aware that Christ is the ocean
> Forever rising and falling on the world's shore.

*

Durcan's poetry contains many moments, many moods. One of my many favourite Paul Durcan moments is the Kilfenora Teaboy's question, "Oh don't we do an awful lot of dying on the side?" Yes, life brings knocks and disappointments, regrets and heartbreak, but because, like all artists, Durcan is on the side of life, the bleak note segues into a gloriously sharp, frequently humorous, enhancing and freeing way of viewing the world. His way of looking, his

way of seeing is all his own.

Yes, there is "all that ice and all that eyebrow" but when his voice sounds in our inner ear it can be startling, congenial, discombobulating, nourishing and sometimes all of the above.

Durcan's presence in Irish poetry is assured. Yeats stands on the roadway or on the pavement grey and dreams of Innisfree; Patrick Kavanagh, on Inniskeen Road of a July evening, watches the bicycles go by in twos and threes; Boland hears a horse clip-clop its way down her suburban road; Kinsella rigorously interrogates himself in the mirror while shaving; Meehan triumphantly bears the newspaper twists bulging fat with winkles proudly home like torches; Heaney peers down wells, loves the dark drop, the trapped sky; Ní Chuilleanáin sees a lone tractor at the level crossing, one light glowing although it's not quite dark; Mahon hears a trickle of masonry, a shout from the blue or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane; Kennelly meets a child who had never heard of marmalade . . .

And Paul Durcan? "When I was a boy, myself and my girl/ Used bicycle up to the Phoenix Park." "Making Love Outside Áras an Uachtaráin" is, for me, Durcan's signature poem. Here, Durcan celebrates the young in one another's arms. Durcan's lovers, in the green, green grass of the Phoenix Park, usher in a new Ireland. It reminds us of Ireland's glorious past, an Ireland when Diarmuid and Grainne were young and in love, but De Valera, in 1960s Ireland, with his ancient rifle and his negative strictures prowls and stalks.

De Valera says "Stop making love outside Áras an Uachtaráin" but Durcan in twenty lines liberates a generation. The poem hoists and flies a green, green flag and it flutters freely, exuberantly over a different kind of Ireland, an Ireland that Paul Durcan signalled, charted and emboldened.

I bought *Sam's Cross*, Durcan's 1978 collection, which includes that poem, in Cork the year it was published and Cork was where I first met Paul Durcan over forty years ago. Since then, his writing and his company have given great pleasure. I've seen and heard Paul give readings in many different places. His vivid memory, his vast experience of places he has been to, the people he has met, the books he has read, the films he has seen, the paintings he has absorbed, his interest in everyone and everything - as often noted in those Durcan Notebooks - meant magnificent company, a marvellous lunch and dinner guest.

And then there's the Durcan correspondence. There are postcards from Achill, Ringsend, New Zealand, London, Annaghmakerrig, Belfast, Canberra, Poznan, Brazil, Barcelona, New York.

On a Laurel and Hardy postcard – "I saw these two in PERSON on the stage of the Olympia!!! But, to be honest, preferred them on celluloid. They were too SUB-TILE on stage for me!" On a postcard dated 16 May 1990, showing Piet Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie, tells us he's "Reading tonight at the Poetry Centre at the 92nd Y with Derek Mahon & Paul Muldoon." It's raining and thunderstorms are forecast. On TV it's "Good Morning America from Kilkenny, Ireland."

There's a card from County Mayo. "This view [The Mall, Westport] is from my Grandmother MacBride's door after she moved into Westport from Clew Bay in the 1950s'. There's a Rembrandt card dated 21 June 2007 in which he rejoices in his first grandchild: "Rosie Joyce is the Last Sunset on the Last Rock of Inishiar."

And his letters reveal the energy, generosity and insight of Paul Durcan, man and poet: On Sunday 8 November 1987, Paul and some other friends were in our house for lunch. That same day, while we were at ease, the Enniskillen bombing killed eleven people and sixty-three were injured, including thirteen children.

The following Wednesday, 11 November, Paul Durcan wrote:

> Last Sunday was for me a most holy and lovely day; I felt physically & spiritually that I was inside the rain, partaking of the rare fruits of affection in a hostile world.
> Now that I know what was happening in Enniskillen while we were breaking bread together in your home, it is an even more precious memory, to be held onto in spite of all the forces seeking to destroy what is left of human affection & grace & civilised living on this island.
> For myself, I do not wish to think of myself as being Irish anymore – but a creature of this island, this riverbank, this seashore, for whom only the Vision of a Woman on the Stairs, or a Friend on the Streetcorners, is of any interest – nothing else.

In a letter dated, exactly a year later, 11 November 1988, Durcan writes "I was never really a poet in the generally accepted term; on the other hand! I was and am fiercely to myself" and writing about Thom Gunn [on 6 May 1996] Durcan writes "Most of the poets who are fashionable today will be never read again – but Gunn will always be read. Right from the start he made a Hopkins-like commitment and he stayed faithful." In that same letter, "Francis Stuart was 94 last Monday (April 29). We sat alone in a room in silence. (isn't Dublin really the strangest place!)."

Sometimes, he strikes a lonely note, sometimes a happy one. On 8 September 1999 he wrote about Donal McCann: "Miss Donal terribly. He'll be eight weeks gone next Saturday. He was terribly brave – stayed with the ship almost to the very end – went to sleep about 48 hours before he crossed the bar." And in a letter dated 16 August 2007, Durcan wrote about a dinner at our house where he met up again with Seamus Heaney:

> In my life such an oasis of friendship & wit & grace & civility is a rare, rare phenomenon . . . And I felt honoured as well as delighted being in the company of the Tracys [Bob and Becky] and the Heaneys. It is about 22 years since I last found myself in a normal, domestic ordinary occasion with Seamus. How pacifying & revivifying it was to sit beside him & relish his silence almost as much as his conversation. Stopping by his woods . . .

And then the Christmas cards. Among the many is one from 2002, featuring a black and white photograph of three young boys on wasteland. It's a card sponsored by the Ringsend Action Project and by Paul Durcan, Poet, who wrote the enclosed poem ["The Three Wise Men of Pigeon House Road"] specially for the occasion. It begins: "The faces, Mister,/ In the picture://They're our faces/ In the gutter . . ."

A printed note on the back reads

> The Three Wise Men of Pigeon House Road are three Traveller boys who, together with their families, live on the side of the road in Ringsend. The conditions that they have to endure are to say the least very poor. The best Christmas gift that you can give them is to use whatever influence you have to encourage policy makers, your friends and families, that, next year these three young boys will get the respect and recognition they deserve.

*

On 23 January 1987, 29 January 1988 and 7 March 1991 Paul Durcan gave three riveting Readings in Wesley College where I taught for thirty years. In the Visitors Book that January Durcan wrote

> . . . a snail leaves his career behind him, glistening . . .
> Donal McCann

On his return visit, a year later, he wrote

> Bring me back to the dark school, to the dark school of childhood;
> To where tiny is tiny, and massive is massive.
> Thank you all very, very much.
> Thank you, thank you.
> 'the poem is the cry of its occasion' Wallace Stevens
> 'All art aspires to the condition of music' Walter Pater

And in Wesley College, 7 March 1991, Paul Durcan's entry read:

> 'Down on my knees . . . .'
> Thank you Thank you Thank you
> 'In reality fiction is all that matters.'

And to coincide with one of those visits I asked Paul Durcan to judge a little sonnet-writing competition. The sonnets were written by a class of seventeen-year-olds and Paul's chosen winner was a lad who set his sonnet in Pinochet's Chile. The poem captures the memorable image of a political prisoner dancing in captivity with his absent wife. That powerful image of a brave, outspoken individual, alone in his prison cell, defying injustice, embracing love, embodying hope – it's pure Durcan.

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The Assembly of Paul Durcan

Paul Muldoon

1

My first sense of Paul Durcan came in 1966, when I was 15 years old and a student in St. Patrick's College, Armagh. One of my English teachers, John McCarter, spent his weekends in Dublin and returned to our classroom of a Monday morning with hair-raising and jaw-dropping tales of the literary scene. Patrick Kavanagh still held court in McDaid's and handed down critiques and professional discourtesies. Paul Durcan was one of Kavanagh's youngest disciples, already being praised for the poems that would be included in Endsville, the 1967 debut he shared with Brian Lynch.

The irreverence wit on display in even the titling of that first book would so impress John McCarter that he encouraged us to read Paul Durcan in the same breath as Donne and Dryden. A more unlikely poet to whom Kavanagh had commended Durcan was the future Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan, whom Kavanagh considered "the finest living poet."

2

My first extended interaction with Paul Durcan's work came in 1975. By that stage I was a radio producer for the BBC in Belfast but had been charged, as one of the Corporation's few Catholic member of staff, with a summer-long goodwill mission to RTE, the Republic's state broadcaster. The term used in that era was that my attachment to RTE was a "hands across the border" exercise. And "exercise" was what it seemed most likely to remain. On day one I was brought into a small room and given a copy of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act which forbade "any matter that could be calculated to promote the aims or activities of any organization which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attaining of any particular objectives by violent means." I was then assigned a cubicle with a rotary phone that had a locking device. Anytime I needed to make a phone call I had to ask for the phone to be unlocked. Hardly conducive to a great deal of radio production.

I did have a couple of tasks to which I must have been thought equal. One was to oversee the letters program, *Dear Sir or Madam*, which was presented by the veteran broadcaster John O'Donovan. The member of the RTE Repertory Company who read the letters was a Mr. Barry McGovern, who would go on to become such a magnificent interpreter of Beckett. Another of my tasks was to help with *Sunday Miscellany*, a medley of words and music that has proved to be enduringly satisfying to Sunday morning radio listeners. My main job, though, was to compile a series of three or four 15 minute programmes in which Paul Durcan waxed lyrical on the work of "the finest living poet."

All Paul Durcan's linking material had been recorded on cassettes, which had to be transferred to reel-to-reel tapes. The person who had been working on the programme had gone off on holiday and left me to edit this linking material and splice it together with the appropriate tracks, or snatches of tracks, from Dylan's LPs. The whole kit and caboodle had been stuffed into a large manilla envelope and handed to me. The script was incomplete, as I

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recall, and Paul Durcan was himself out of the country. I had no way of contacting him, even if my phone had been unlocked to that end.

3

Though the putting together of these programmes was a nightmarish undertaking, it was nonetheless instructive in the way nightmares sometimes are. Because of the nature of the work, I was forced to inhabit Paul Durcan's head and recognize that his musings on "Desolation Row," a poem Kavanagh had him transcribe in longhand like a schoolboy, were coincidentally musings on his own role not only as an artist but a socially committed artist. This same year, 1975, saw the publication of Paul Durcan's first solo collection, *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor*, as well as the event that would inspire one of his most harrowing and heartfelt poems:

"In Memory: The Miami Showband — Massacred 31 July 1975"

In a public house, darkly lit, a patriotic (sic)
Versifier whines into my face: "You must take one side
Or the other, or you're but a fucking romantic."
His eyes glitter hate and vanity, porter and whiskey,
And I realise that he is blind to the braille connection
Between a music and a music-maker.

The connection "between a music and a music-maker," as I understand it, is that the music is given to, rather than taken by, the music-maker. The "braille" emphasizes the sense of touch, that the music plays upon the music-maker. The music-maker does not choose, but is chosen.

I always find it useful to think of Paul Durcan as a trained archeologist—mostly because he is, in fact, a trained archaeologist! He is chosen by, rather than chooses, the large manilla envelope of the world. As he assembles it as a writer, we assemble ourselves as readers.

Voices from Brazil

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Paul Durcan Dances Down to Brazil

Heleno Godoy

The distance between any point and another
one in Dublin, Ireland – take the River Liffey
as a possible running track – is not measured
from West to East or in miles or metres.
That would be too easy!

We have to do it as difficultly as Paul Durcan
does it (has been doing it his whole life),
pirouetting over streets, river, bridges, all the city.

If life does not include all possible margins,
what kind of river the Liffey would be?

The long practice has made of Paul Durcan
a great *ballet* dancer: his *pirouettes* over waters
and bridges and clouds and lakes have taken him
to Armenia (and no, he is not from there), to Greece
and Italy (neither from these places), to Argentine
and Australia, not staying long in any of these countries.
(He is indeed just an Irishman, and that's too much!)
But he stayed longer in France, to study the technique
of flying on a trapeze with Jules Léotard.

If a poet does not fly around his real and imaginary
worlds, what kind of poetry would he write?

One day, after *un grand jeté*, Paul Durcan left
Dublin Airport and landed in Guarulhos, São Paulo,
Brazil, a moment for a *rond de jambe* done
with precision and extreme grace.

Then, not as fast as he came, he returned to Ireland
without ever being or becoming a Brazilian.
But it's a fact that he has many friends down here!

If a man can not adapt facts or create little lies about his own
and other people's lives, what kind of poet Paul Durcan would be?

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