

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

### *A Poesia de Paul Durcan – Um Autorretrato na Irlanda Contemporânea*

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**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 autobiográfica; 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

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’s 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 Café* 32), he concludes.

Among the titles as headlines such as “Archbishop of Dublin to Film Romeo and Juliet” (*The Berlin Wall Café* 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 perceived 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 Café*, 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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