

Orpheus Ascending *The Berlin Wall Café by Paul Durcan*

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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 than 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

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 “*la 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.

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