

‘Being Sensible’: Paul Durcan’s Anarchic Vision

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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

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.