

## *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

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 rhododendrons  
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.

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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.

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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.