

The Assembly of Paul Durcan

Paul Muldoon

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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."

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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

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.

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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.