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Introduction
For the Poet Durcan, in his Seventy-sixth Year

Alan Gilsenan

On My Sixty-First Birthday

Late in the afternoon
The sun is going down
It is getting colder and colder
Darkness is spreading.

In my striped pyjamas
I stand at the window
Shouting into the street below
'Help! Help!'

Nobody takes any notice,
All seems hopeless,
But then a surprise occurs:
The street lights come on.

This poem, from the 2007 collection *The Laughter of Mothers*, is how Paul Durcan marked his sixty-first birthday. In the charged moment of this piece, we see many of Durcan's hallmark motifs – the pathos, the mundane, the surreal and then, when one least expects it, an unannounced moment of luminosity. This collection of essays, translations and poems, curated to celebrate Paul Durcan's seventy-sixth year, seem to offer up some similar surprising sparks of illumination, birthday gifts for the Poet Durcan, bestowed into the gloaming of a dark and fearful year.

It is interesting that this tribute comes from Brazil as the birthday celebrations in Paul Durcan's native land were a little muted. This is possibly because the man himself is a little reticent, even reclusive at times, despite his electric performance energy and potency of his famed readings. Yet, despite widespread affection for him, I sense a certain reluctance in official cultural circles to acknowledge his place in the canon – whatever that might be. Perhaps it is his edginess, his awkwardness, his unrelenting and unerring gaze that provokes suspicion.

It is often observed that Durcan is both a chronicler of the private and the public realms. I suspect the truth is closer to the fact that Durcan doesn't really differentiate between these two worlds. His sensibility lies at the painful confluence of these two states. There are few poets who could respond to a tragic public event with a poem appearing in the front page of a Sunday newspaper whilst also engaging in the most intimate minutiae of his family life.

Durcan writes lovingly about his daughters, Sarah and Siabhra, and his former wife Nessa O'Neill:

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> Dear Nessa – Now that our marriage is over
> I would like you to know that, if I could put back the clock
> Fifteen years to the cold March day of our wedding,
> I would wed you again and, if that marriage also broke,
> I would wed you yet again. (*The Berlin Wall Cafe*)

But he also engages with the complex ghosts of his parents – his stern and disapproving father, John Durcan, and his beloved mother Sheila MacBride Durcan. In his many poems about her, she is a kindly figure, seemingly always basking in a golden light:

> Thank you, O golden mother,
> For giving me life,
> A spear of rain.
> After a long life searching for a little boy who lives down the lane
> You never found him, but you never gave up;
> In your afterlife nightie
> You are pirouetting expectantly for the last time. (*The Laughter of Mothers*)

In his poems about his troubled relationship with his father, Durcan never stops, somehow, in seeking his approval. But nor is he miserly in his love nor understanding, as he writes in "Hymn to My Father":

> We had no life together – or almost none.
> Yet you made me what I am –
> A man in search of his Russia. (*Going Home to Russia*)

Durcan has spoken of his father's distaste of his young black-shirted self and how – while drinking in O'Donoghue's pub on Dublin's Merrion Row – the young man was bundled into a car and taken to a psychiatric hospital, an event that led to a certain unravelling in his life. It is tempting to see his conservative father's rejection of his son's idiosyncratic vision, his vulnerable presence and gentle soul, as reflecting something of the attitude of official Ireland towards him, while his mother's more tolerant understanding echoes something of the love that Paul Durcan engenders in his many readers and listeners.

For there is something in the life and work of Paul Durcan that stops the Irish nation – along with his father – heralding him as a national treasure or as our unofficial Poet Laureate. His friend Seamus Heaney certainly inspired many of these notions and somewhat meaningless honours although he certainly did not seek them out. In Durcan's poem about hearing of Heaney's death – *Breaking News* – he imagines a sympathetic Heaney consoling him in his shock:

> 'Are you all right down there, Poet Durcan?'
> (That's how he always addressed me down thirty-seven years –
> 'Poet Durcan')
> 'Calm down, I'm only dead, I'm only beginning
> The new life, only hours and minutes into it;' (*The Days of Surprise*)

In this poem, Heaney – the accepted "official" national poet of Ireland – reaches out from the vast beyond to offer a kindly and respectful hand to Durcan, recognising him as the fragile and vulnerable man that he is, the poet as outsider. For Paul Durcan is a puckish figure on the imaginative landscape of Ireland, a maverick in a conformist world, a dissident in a repressive and hypocritical society. But this paints an overly simplistic portrait of the poet as a punk-ish spirit, an irreverent and raucous rebel, for it ignores Durcan's innate dignity. His personal grace.

Crying in the wilderness, Paul Durcan seems closer in spirit to his beloved Patrick Kavanagh. If one was to substitute Ringsend for Baggot Street, the opening verse of one of Kavanagh's most famous poems might be Durcan's:

> If ever you go to Dublin town
> In a hundred years or so
> Inquire for me in Baggot Street
> And what I was like to know,
> O he was a queer one
> Fol dol the di do,
> He was a queer one
> I tell you. (*Collected Poems*)

Another kindred spirit, his good friend Michael Hartnett ("the Poet King", Durcan calls him), wrote of him as *The Poet as Black Sheep*, in the third section of *Notes on My Contemporaries*:

> I have seen him dine
> in middle-class surroundings,
> his manner refined,
> as his family around him
> talk about nothing,
> one of their favourite theses.
>
> I have seen him lying
> between the street and the pavement,
> atoning, dying
> for their sins, the fittest payment
> he can make for them,
> to get drunk and go to pieces. (*Collected Poems*)

Speaking publicly about Kavanagh in 2004, Paul Durcan sounds a stern warning about the dangers of mythologising or romanticising writers like Patrick Kavanagh and his "life of degradation". It is a warning that we should heed when thinking about Durcan too. For all this casual mythologising of the poet as outsider belittles him and somehow reflects an inherent lack of respect for the role of poet in our society. It is a lack of respect that Paul Durcan feels acutely. Respect is really all the Poet Durcan demands.

Kindliness is also a trait that Paul Durcan values hugely. For it is the flip side of respect. And this collection of writings about the man and his work is a real manifestation of respect and kindliness. It has been lovingly initiated and led by Professor Munira Hamud Mutran (ably assisted by Professor Mariana Bolfarine with some modest input from myself). An inspiring and generous presence, Professor Mutran was honoured by President Michael D.

Higgins in 2018 with the Presidential Distinguished Service Award for her almost forty years of commitment to Irish Studies at the University of Sao Paulo. Paul Durcan himself visited Brazil in 1995 and dedicated one of his poems in his collection *Greetings to our Friends in Brazil* to Munira ("The Daring Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze").

The pieces carefully gathered here between these covers – passionate, engaged and humane – draw us inevitably and joyfully back to a remarkable body of work from this unique and rare individual. The poems now seem both born of their time but utterly timeless, lights coming on in our darkness, still urgent and utterly necessary. Long may the Poet Durcan run. As he concludes "How I Envy the Homeless Man" from his collection *Praise in Which I Live and Move and Have my Being*:

> Even in these last years of my life
> I might make a go of it – sing
>
> As I have always yearned to sing
> The song of my silence, the song
> Of the men and women I love
> Of the places that make me feel at home.

County Wicklow.
September 3rd, 2020

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