

Greetings to Durcan

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Paul Durcan. *Greetings to our friends in Brazil*. London: The Harvile Press, 1999.

Born in Dublin in 1944, Paul Durcan is one of Ireland's foremost contemporary authors. A prolific writer – with 20 published works – he began his career in 1967 with a collection of poems entitled *Endsville*. In the 1970's he settled in Cork where he got a degree in archaeology and medieval history from the University College. He has won the 'Patrick Kavanagh Award' (1974), the 'Irish American Cultural Institute Poetry Award' (1989) and the 'Whitbread Poetry Prize' for his book *Daddy, Daddy* (1990). Presently, Durcan is a member of Aosdána, an affiliation of distinguished artists, and lives in the Ringsend area of Dublin.

A genuinely inventive poet, Durcan anatomises both public and private ills. A balance between opposites distinguishes his poems: the usual and the bizarre, the joy of the quotidian and the insight on the absurdity of existence, the provincial and the cosmopolitan at the same time. This feature makes his a highly distinctive and fascinating poetry. Another of Durcan's achievements is a vivid idiom, in a conversational mode sometimes resembling the Beat style. Marked by a language of startling directness, rarely his poetry is obscure, rather, it is approachable and consistent with the honest records Durcan makes, be it of weird or of familiar subject matters. Durcan is a great listener, indeed, a writer gifted with a fine ear for the sound of colloquial speech. Besides, what also impresses in Durcan is the humorous dimensions some of his poems acquire. In several instances the poet is an ironist (with the habit of self-ridicule) exploring surrealism as a satirical weapon.

Published in 1999, *Greetings to our friends in Brazil* is a prodigious collection of one hundred playful, open and sometimes irreverent poems, most of them with a considerable poetic quality. The 257-page book is divided into eleven sections, according to different themes developed in each of them. This hefty work presents an impressive amalgam of varied subjects; from his native Ireland, Durcan ventures far beyond the strictly local and his concerns include also international politics, cultural diversity, art, love and religion as well, revealing that many combined interests shape his vision of the world.

As for the title, Durcan commented that he intended to call the book "The Nineties" or "The Mary Robinson Years" and one may argue that these would be too explicit titles, lacking the singularity the chosen title conveys. The name "Greetings to

Our Friends in Brazil” is derived from a real quotation from Mícheál Ó Muirheartaig’s radio commentary on 1997’s All-Ireland football final between Mayo and Kerry, which is reproduced in the long initial poem of the book. As it reads:

(...)

On my watch it says two minutes and fifty – three seconds left but
We haven’t had time to send greetings to our friends in Brazil

(...)

“Mercy is by definition exclusively divine.

Mercy is a divine, not a human term.”

I feel ready to go to bed.

Let me pray:

Greetings to our friends in Brazil. (p. 3-12)

Some poems in the second section deal with social problems in Brazil, a country Durcan travelled to in 1995 for a month’s tour?? (a series of readings under the auspices of the British Council). While in this country Durcan visited Catholic missions working with to?? the poor of Brazil and met several Irish nuns and priests who, due to the nobility of their efforts, he came to consider true contemporary heroes and heroines. The poem “Recife Children’s Project, 10 June 1995” portrays its Father Frank Murphy, Founder of such Project:

(...)

Che? Frank?

No icon he –

Revolutionary hero of the twentieth century. (p. 16)

Yet in this visit, as Durcan mentioned in an interview, the number of Presbyterians he met in Brazil astonished him. In the poem “Brazilian Presbyterian” Evandro, a young man in Fortaleza, is questioned about the nature of heaven:

(...)

The Brazilian Presbyterian

Began to think aloud:

“Heaven... is a place...:

That... would *surprise* you.” (p. 32)

Together with religion, Brazilian soccer teams also became a source of inspiration for Durcan who, in a few poems, explored the theme of soccer playing. As the poet once said, a soccer match is “like a poem”, and added: “It’s beautiful. It’s the body speaking”.

In this same section of *Greetings* there are some poems about the North-American poet Elizabeth Bishop. A notable one is “Samambaia”, in which the persona is Bishop addressing her lover Lota Macedo Soares. One of the most beautiful poems of the whole book is “The Geography of Elizabeth Bishop”, that presents the poet autobiographically, through a first-person speech:

Reared in New England, Nova Scotia,
I was orphaned in childhood.
(...)
There is a life before birth
On earth – oh yes, on earth –
And it is called Brazil.
Call it paradise, if you will. (p. 24)

Eight poems about and for Patrick Kavanagh are to be found in one of the following sections and this tribute reflects (sometimes in hilarious and surrealist ways) Durcan’s admiration for the great Irish poet. The last stanza of “Surely My God is Kavanagh” says:

(...)
Surely my God is Kavanagh!
Who is content with feeding praise to the good.
While other poets my comic light resent
The spirit that is Kavanagh caresses my soul. (p. 129)

Besides Bishop and Kavanagh, a whole society of writers is made alive through references found in the book: Francis Stuart (“The King of Cats”), Brian Friel (“Dancing with Brian Friel”), Seamus Heaney (“Portrait of Winston Churchill as Seamus Heaney, 13 April 1999”), Virginia Woolf (“Notes Towards a Necessary Suicide”), and still others such as William Butler Yeats, Jack Kerouac, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett and William Carlos Williams.

As *Greetings* illustrates, Durcan not only contextualises the heterogeneous *dramatis personae* of his poems in varied worlds (thus reflecting his travels to the U.S., Somalia and to several European countries) but presents an exotic cast of characters, from institutional figures to unknown people he talks to in public places. Princess Diana is in “The Night of the Princess”, as the persona who says she used to listen to the gutter dripping:

I saw each drop coming out of nothing.
I put my hand over my mouth.
I could see the embryo of each drop.
(...)

The drop drops and I switch on the bathroom light.
Switch it off. Switch it on.

Dead. Dodie, dead. Die, Di, die. (p. 167)

Among all these peculiar voices, in several poems one may find Durcan's – the intentional fallacy properly considered – describing episodes in a voice that seems his "own". Also self-portraiture is a recurring descriptive technique explored by Durcan as in "Self-portrait '95":

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. (p. 119)

Probably the most remarkable section of the book is the one which brings poems that chart the Irish situation, especially of the 1990s, revealing Durcan's engagement with Irish social, political and religious issues. Extremely moving is a suite of poems about bombings, their victims, and politicians' "pious chant". With 14 Parts, the long poem "Omagh" describes the misery caused by the Omagh bombing. Quoted below is Part 9, "What Ben says", which resembles a litany to the dead:

Do not talk to me of "death
Giving birth to life".
Do not talk to me
Of "post-trauma management"
Do not talk to me. (p. 205)

Other poems offer vituperation for the IRA, criticising Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Féin, condemning all the savagery with no justification and thus probing the hypocrisy, selfishness and potential destructiveness of human behaviour. "The Bloomsday Murders, 16 June 1997" is particularly meaningful:

Not even you, Gerry Adams, deserve to be murdered:
You whose friend at noon murdered my two young men,
David Johnston and John Graham;
(...)
I am a Jew and my name is Bloom.
You, Gerry Adams, do not sign books in my name.
May God forgive me – lock, stock, and barrel. (p. 177)

But although Durcan's poems bring out frank critiques of establishment follies and Irish life – its pressure, claustrophobia and rigid conformity – there is a sense of survival that pervades several poems, leading to the idea that Irish spiritual heroism can flourish again.

The final section of the book presents a series of poems about former Irish president Mary Robinson and, though a tribute to her is not entirely uncritical.

Greetings to our Friends in Brazil is a comprehensive collection that reveals not only Paul Durcan's literary artistry but also his humanist passion, from the life-affirming qualities of Irish culture to true zest for life in the deepest sense. Transcending their subjects, Durcan's poems aptly illustrate the good quality of the contemporary Irish poetry and of this poet in particular.