The Art of the Caveman

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The Poetry of Paul Durcan

By

John Mc Donagh

Cambridge
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Publishing

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9688-8
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9688-7

To my father, Kevin Mc Donagh.

“The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.”
—*King Lear*, William Shakespeare.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Eugene O'Brien and Dr Brian Clancy, my colleagues in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, for their generous help in preparing the text. I am very grateful to Dr Kathleen McCracken who gave so generously of her time and knowledge, as well as access to invaluable resources. Victoria Carruthers at Cambridge Scholars was always helpful and prompt in her advice. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Patricia, for her unceasing support and encouragement, and John, Brigid, Patrick, Michael and Meabh, for their constant grounding.

ABBREVIATIONS

Note: For reasons of accessibility, quotations are taken wherever possible from *Life is a Dream: 40 Years Reading Poems 1967-2007*, abbreviated as (LD). Where poems are referenced that do not appear in that selection, they are abbreviated and referenced by first publication. *The Kilfenora Teaboy*, Colm Tóibín's edited essay collection, is also included as (KT) due to its recurrence throughout the book. Abbreviations for the titles of works by Paul Durcan in this book are as follows:

WLAM	*O, Westport in the Light of Asia Minor*
TB	*Teresa's Bar*
JBF	*Jesus, Break his Fall*
SMP	*A Snail in my Prime*
BWC	*The Berlin Wall Café*
GHR	*Going Home to Russia*
ITLOP	*In the Land of Punt*
SPD	*The Selected Paul Durcan*
DD	*Daddy, Daddy*
CAW	*Crazy about Women*
GMYH	*Give Me Your Hand*
GTOFB	*Greetings to our Friends in Brazil*
KT	*The Kilfenora Teaboy*
Diary	*Paul Durcan's Diary*
TAOL	*The Art of Life*
LOM	*The Laughter of Mothers*
LD	*Life Is A Dream: 40 Years Reading Poems 1967-2007*
Praise	*Praise in which I Live and Move and Have my Being*
DOS	*The Days of Surprise*

INTRODUCTION

In the nick of time Wee-Wee showed up
But such was the trembling of his hands
At the moment of delivery he let slip the forceps
With the result that the face of the new-born infant
Was red as a squashed tomato. The young mother
Expressed her dismay, but Wee-Wee brushed aside her fears,
Informing her that it was par for the course, that
He would put the babies face in ice for a day or two
And all would be right as rain. Mother and son
Left the Stella Maris with the boy sporting
A permanent red eye - a botched delivery –
And this red eye he carried with him for the rest of his life.
"It's only a birthmark", Wee-Wee assured his mother.
The bewildered mother had no choice but to take up that refrain
Which she repeated to all comers for the next fifty-eight years:
"it's only a birthmark." (LD, 554-5).

"Par for the Course", published in *The Laughter of Mothers* in 2007, is a recollection by Paul Durcan of his own birth, which occurred at the Stella Maris Nursing Home in Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, on the 16th of October, 1944. The poem recounts his 'botched' delivery, at the hands of noted Dublin gynaecologist Dr Burke-Wykeham, colloquially known as Wee-Wee, and it comes as no surprise that the moment of his birth should feature in a collection of poetry. He is one the most autobiographical of all contemporary Irish poets and "Par for the Course" takes up the story from the very beginning. His birth is complicated and he carries a scar with him for the rest of his life, while his ominous entry into the world presages the many difficult events in Durcan's early life that have been confronted throughout his life and work. His friend, the writer Francis Stuart, appositely noted in 1981, when writing about *Sam's Cross*:

> Here is, I think, this island before the Fall, something of which survives underneath the top layers, and that Durcan celebrates and recalls to that part of us that can still respond. The poet himself, far from wearing his heart on his sleeve, shares it with others, vulnerable not just to personal experience but to all kind of pain around him (Stuart, p.27).

Twenty-three collections of poetry in forty-five years is testament to both his longevity and commitment and, as he passes his seventieth birthday, his career can be divided clearly into recognisable periods, while recurring themes and stylistic consistencies mark him out as one of the most important of contemporary Irish poets. This book is consequently divided into seven chapters which seek to explore the dominant themes that Durcan has wrestled with for decades, from his problematic early parental relationships, through the decline and fall of his marriage, and into his public attacks on the Catholic Hierarchy, the IRA leadership and the cultural stasis he has often perceived as lying at the heart of the Irish state. His achievements have been considerable in that he has, since his first published work, attempted to explore not only his personal experiences of family, relationships and life, but he has also been at the forefront of a poetic attempt to critique a stuttering emergent Irish identity. In an attempt to tentatively capture the *zeitgeis*t, he has provided a consistent critique of the various manifestations of a burgeoning Irish modernity, however idiosyncratic and chimerical that process might be. However, the fundamental poetic instinct has always been towards, as Christina Hunt Mahony has noted, a form of poetic authenticity:

> '…the quest in all of Durcan's work is for authenticity – an ongoing attempt to define a modern Irish reality as it slides forward belatedly at first, and then careens recklessly into the present' (Hunt Mahony, 274).

Whilst Durcan has been arguably the most politicised poet in the south of Ireland, he is also amongst the most travelled, and his collections invariably feature his journeys, not only within Ireland, but also in Europe and further afield. He is the most engaged of wanderers, revelling in the different cultural experiences he encounters and finding solace in the company of strangers. It is a cathartic experience for him, allowing a brief respite from the perceived gloom of home, but also providing a crucial cultural correlative through which home is reviewed, realigned and reinterpreted. Ireland is his touchstone but his work is a further example of the engagement of contemporary Irish poetry with the wider world. Indeed, travel is an essential aspect in every Durcan collection and it often provides a crucial narrative thrust, as well as a comparative psychological healing, and this will feature heavily in this book. His need for movement is palpable, and it often manifests itself in the most ordinary and least glamorous of locations, around his home in Ringsend, Dublin, or in his familial home county of Mayo. His poetry provides a unique geo-literary history of Ireland, as well as bringing the freshness of new horizons into view and Patrick Kavanagh's oxymoron of an outward-looking insularity

finds regular expression in Durcan's poetry. In 'Bogland', Seamus Heaney refers to the 'encroaching horizon' of the Irish landscape, a country where 'the wet centre is bottomless', (Heaney, 1980, 53) and it is towards this chimerical nexus that Durcan's natural poetic sympathies stray. Heaney's 'bottomless' Ireland is one that resonates throughout Durcan's work, with concepts of national identity proving as elusive in the contemporary environment as they were in the past. As he has toured and read around the country, he has recorded a society and landscape changing beneath his feet and he has always been attuned to the complex social and cultural developments that have marked Ireland's changing urban and rural landscapes. In his anthology of seven poets since W.B Yeats, Maurice Harmon has noted two significant manifestations of modern Irish poetry, namely 'the extensions outward into European and other cultures and the extensions backward into the Irish past' (Harmon, 30), two poetic imperatives that can be found in even a cursory glance at Durcan's body of work. It is perhaps somewhere between these two vectors that Durcan's true achievement lies, critically demarcating the liminal lines of an emergent Ireland whilst remaining sensitive and attuned to older traditions that tectonically grate with the contemporary.

The critical neglect of Durcan's work, despite the commercial popularity of his books and his high public profile, is difficult to comprehend. As the third Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2004-7, succeeding John Montague (1998-2001) and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill (2001-4), his status amongst his peers was nationally and internationally recognised. Indeed, as recently as 2014, he was presented with the prestigious Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award at the Bord Gáis Energy Irish Book Awards, putting him in the company of previous recipients including Seamus Heaney, John Banville, John McGahern, Edna O' Brien, William Trevor, Maeve Binchy and Jennifer Johnston. Fellow poet and critic Peter Sirr has neatly summarised the vibrant poetic scene out of which Durcan has emerged:

> 'Pearse Hutchinson comes out of a Fifties-Dublin poetry culture which is adventurous, loose-limbed, interested in social, political and sensual alternatives to Ireland. He belongs to the same generation as John Montague, Thomas Kinsella, Richard Murphy and Anthony Cronin. There is an elective affinity between his work and that of Macdara Woods, Eilean Ni Chuilleanain and Leland Bardwell. Michael Hartnett and Paul Durcan would figure in the same company, as would John Jordan. The context, therefore, is of a rich poetry culture with a strong modernist/experimental streak, though one which is also allied to the notion of poetry as a direct channel of communication.' (Sirr, 145)

His politicisation of the genre, and his fascination with the many manifestations of popular culture he has encountered at both home and abroad, are perhaps factors in this critical neglect. Others could include his often unconventional use of form and predilection for the long poem, as well as the usual academic disdain for and distrust of humour, a Durcan trademark. Equally, it has to be acknowledged, that throughout his career Durcan has received mixed critical reviews, and it can be argued that his fondness for parody and satire sits uncomfortably with a more traditionally aesthetic perception of poetry. His experimental style and direct political engagement often engender responses that accuse him of that most heinous of literary crimes, namely populism. Fellow poet Michael Longley has mischievously suggested that perhaps the force of his public personality might also be a factor, occasionally overshadowing the work:

> 'But I do disapprove of all this cult of personality business, I stay away from it. Perhaps poets like Durcan and Kennelly are in danger of courting it, but then that's Durcan and Kennelly'. (Logue, 46)

However, this book seeks to place Durcan at the forefront of an Irish poetics that has sought to critique and re-evaluate the Irish state, in all its various manifestations, over the past fifty years and it will argue that he is one of the most important, distinctive and challenging voices to emerge in the time of a particularly fertile generation. In his 1995 book, *Modern Irish Poetry – An Anthology*, Patrick Crotty notes of Durcan that 'his assiduous populism denied him serious critical attention' (Crotty, 286) and it can certainly be argued that Durcan's conscious attention to the contemporary manifestations of Irish culture have placed him at odds with many of his contemporaries. However, Crotty's assertion is revealing in that the assumption that 'populism' is somehow anathema to a serious critical review seems to be a common reaction to Durcan's work.

Published in 1996, *The Kilfenora Teaboy* remains the only book-length study of Durcan's work currently available. Edited by novelist Colm Tóibín, the book contains ten insightful essays, comprising contributions from fellow poets, including Brian Lynch, Eamon Grennan and Derek Mahon, as well as critical analysis from, amongst others, Edna Longley, Peggy O'Brien and Bruce Woodcock. A testament to the quality of the contributions gathered by Tóibín in this book is the freshness of perspective that stills rings true and it remains an essential introduction to Durcan's work to that date. However, in a 1996 review of *The Kilfenora Teaboy*, David Wheatley notes that 'Durcan continues to resist a conventionally dispassionate critical treatment' because of his position

'akin to national shaman in the life of the Irish Republic' (Wheatley, 311), another correlation of critical neglect and popular acclaim. Indeed, critical reactions to his 2015 collection *The Days of Surprise* typically refer to Durcan's popularity and interest in popular culture while ignoring the serious social, cultural and political critique offered in his poems. Because of this it can certainly be argued that a critical overview of his corpus of work is long overdue.

In his poem "Alitalia Flight 295 Dublin-Milan", published in *The Art of Life* in 2004, Durcan clearly lays down a wary marker for any attempted analysis of his work. His life is contained within the lines of his poems and his poetry is, in many ways, the story of his life. Arguably more than any other poet of his generation, his work is a chronologically extended self-portrait and he has charted his often complex progression from a childhood split between Mayo and Dublin to his current residence in Ringsend, Dublin, what he constantly refers to as his self-styled cave. About to board the flight for Italy, he warns:

> Do not buy the biography of Primo Levi.
>
> Let there be an end to biography:
> Biography is lechery.
>
> If you want to know Primo Levi,
> Read the poetry of Primo Levi.
>
> The poetry is the story,
> The story is the life. (TAOL, 90)

In his essay 'Who Are the Irish?', published in the journal *Studies* in 1988, John Wilson Foster noted the significance of Durcan's contribution to what he refers to as 'the necessary redefinition of Irishness'. He writes that Durcan 'had expanded the definition of Irishness, not in an act of renegation, but in an act of enlargement and freedom' (Foster, 414). This expansion of the poetic imperative firmly into the contemporary is also noted by Lucy Collins who comments that Durcan 'is more concerned with capturing the difficult negotiations of the moment than with mapping the labyrinths of history' (Collins, 217). This contribution to an 'enlarged' concept of Irishness, in all its hubris and inconsistencies, has been one of his greatest poetic achievements and it marks him out as one of the most significant Irish poets of record for the past fifty years.

CHAPTER ONE

"ON THE FLOOR AT THE FOOT OF THE BED": FATHERS AND MOTHERS

> There is no one in my life
> Whom I disliked so submissively,
> Yet whom I loved so mercilessly,
> As you, Daddy. To me
> You were at once saint and murderer.
> When you raised your right hand
> To smash in my face,
> I saw the face of a murderer.
> When you spoke the name
> Of a beloved townland or parish,
> Keelogues or Parke,
> I saw the face of a saint.
> (LD, 270).

The publication of *Daddy, Daddy* in 1990 marked a considerable critical acceptance for Durcan's poetry: it won the prestigious Whitbread Poetry Prize and was shortlisted for the Irish Times / Aer Lingus Poetry prize in the same year. It also marked a specific thematic concern that had been a feature of Durcan's work from the outset, namely a complex, devoted and difficult relationship with his father, a towering figure not only in Durcan's life but also in his poetry. Coupled with his 2007 collection, *The Laughter of Mothers*, dedicated to his mother, these two books provide Durcan with an opportunity to tease out the intensely formative nature of two very powerful relationships, and much of his poetry resonates with the real and imagined presence of his parents. However, these are two very different relationships. *Daddy, Daddy* recounts a very troubled interaction between father and son, the latter a constant source of apparent disappointment to the former. In many senses, it is a typically Irish father/son relationship of its time, characterised by an intense and largely unarticulated love, and undermined by a social system in which a man's value was determined by what he did for a living. These are poems of yearning, missed opportunities and regret, and they continue Durcan's remarkable exploration of where he has come from and the profound

psychological consequences of his childhood and adolescence. It is in his poems concerning his complex personal relationships, as son, lover and father, that Durcan offers arguably his most sustained and valuable analysis of the simultaneous joy and suffering of the human condition. *The Laughter of Mothers*, published in 2007, recounts a very different relationship between mother and son, yet no less significant in Durcan's development as a human being or as a poet. These two collections together chart the two most formative relationships in Durcan's life and, in many senses, his body of work is series of concentric circles radiating from this parental nexus.

The dedication to *Daddy, Daddy* reads: "To the memory of John James Durcan of Turlough, Co. Mayo, 1907–1988". Turlough is a village on the outskirts of Castlebar, the county town of Mayo, and it is dominated by a round tower in the Abbey of St. Patrick. Born on May 12, 1907, John Durcan was one of three children born to John and Julia Durcan, who ran a shop, bar and general store in the village, as well as owning land. There is a clear progression in the Durcan family in the twentieth century from general business and farming to the professions, paralleling a general trend in Irish society, with law dominating as the chosen path. Starting out as a solicitor in Castlebar, Co. Mayo, in 1930, Durcan's father John was sworn in as a Circuit Court judge at the Four Courts in Dublin on December 8, 1950, assigned to the west of Ireland jurisdiction and, by all accounts, he was a man who took his profession very seriously. Coincidentally, his life could have taken a radically different course just two years prior to that appointment when, in the general election of 1948, he failed by a matter of a few votes to win a Dáil seat in Mayo for *Clann na Poblachta*. Sean MacBride, Paul Durcan's maternal cousin and Godfather, and a lasting influence on the poet, had founded this new party. His father's appointment to the judiciary was endorsed by the Fine Gael party, an allegiance that was to last his entire life. He served as a judge for 27 years, retiring in 1977 at the age of 70. His mother, Sheila MacBride, was also a practising solicitor, but had to retire upon marriage, and both of Durcan's siblings, Rosemary, born in 1946, and Ivan, born in 1952, are solicitors. These professions certainly contrast with the less predictable career path of their older brother, and therein perhaps lies the seed of the difficult paternal relationship that was to ensue. The appointment as a judge had a fundamentally detrimental effect on the relationship between John Durcan and his eldest son Paul. Recalling his father's appointment, Durcan writes in his Diary in 2001 that "From that day on, prison became a twenty-four hour reality in my home" (Diary, 11). This is a characteristic play on words by Durcan, implying that from around the age of six, the family

home became something of a penitentiary for the young poet, as his father increasingly devoted both his time and emotional energy to his new, influential position. The imprisoning of individuals, now the remit of the newly appointed judge, began to take its toll on his father:

> Week in, week out, year in, year out, my father committed people to the terrible prisons of Ireland, and he himself grew sadder and sadder—and sadder and sadder still. The toll darkened his soul. So, all my life I have never passed Mountjoy jail or Portlaoise or Limerick or Cork prisons without always feeling sad, so sad, sometimes suicidal (*Diary*, 12).

This dominant figure in Durcan's childhood, at once distant, condemnatory and harshly judgemental, was also constantly sought out for snippets of affection and approval. His childhood was relatively uneventful, and he began his primary schooling in Muckross Domican Convent primary school in Donnybrook, Dublin, in September 1946, punctuated by spells spent living with his Aunt Sarah and Grandmother Eileen in Turlough, Co. Mayo, where he attended the local school. A keen swimmer and athlete, he excelled at sports, completing his first sub-four-minute mile at the age of ten, and a wide variety of sports, from cricket to snooker to hurling and Gaelic football, has remained a feature of his poetry throughout his career. In 1952, he enrolled in Gonzaga College in Ranelagh, Dublin, a leading Jesuit day school beloved of upwardly-mobile Catholic parents, and it was here that Durcan came under the influence of Fr. Joseph Veale, a Jesuit priest who introduced his class to the tenets of a liberal education. However, the father/son relationship was clearly a central one for Durcan, and the regretted absence of paternal love permeates his work. This relationship determined and shaped Durcan's complex relationship with his own masculinity, and it is a struggle that has characterised his work from the outset, whilst his father is a real—and at times imaginary—spectre who haunts every collection. In his latest collection, *The Days of Surprise*, published in 2015, his father once again looms large in what is by now a familiar and recognisable poetic apparition, namely that of a stern, emotionally retentive patriarch, remonstrating with his teenage son over the company he keeps. He personifes an Ireland obsessed with appearance, conformity and the often brutal suppression of those perceived to be different. In "First Mixed Party", even the choice of shirt worn by the fifteen-year-old poet to a party causes his father to lose his temper, but instead of "an unmerciful thrashing / Which would have been his normal course of action", his father recoils in exasperation and bellows what would prove to a prophetic question at his son: "Will I always have to be ashamed of you for the rest of my days?" (DOS, 13)

He is the touchstone for Durcan's formative view of the world and often what emerges is a perspective based on very oppositional terms. For example, in "What is a Protestant, Daddy?", published in *Teresa's Bar* in 1976, his description of what appears to be an almost alien religious culture is clearly based, given the title of the poem and its historical setting, on perceptions gleaned from his father. What emerges from their interaction is a picture of the quiet bigotry that characterised Irish society in the middle of the twentieth century, even from a member of a judiciary whose very existence is predicated on the concept of a moral neutrality:

> Protestants were Martians
> Light years more weird
> Than zoological creatures;
> But soon they would all go away
> For as a species they were dying out,
> Soon there would be no more Protestants…
> Oh Yea, Oh Lord,
> I was a proper little Irish Catholic boy
> Way back in the 1950s (LD, 37).

The blurring of chronology with memory is further exacerbated when Durcan recalls a very similar event in his piece "Letter to Gerry Adams", published in his *Diary* in 2003. He recounts watching a television news report, with his then six-year-old daughter Sarah, in 1976, where a Protestant man was murdered by the IRA: "My six-year-old daughter Sarah playing on the floor with her crayons looked up at me and asked; 'What is a Protestant, Daddy?'" (Diary, 132). This recollection would seem to suggest that little has changed in Catholic Ireland between the 1950s and the 1970s, with the perception of the "other" as ignorant and unfamiliar as ever. It is also another example of Durcan's haunted psyche, the present constantly informed by the past in a vortex that continually brings them into collision. Although Durcan is often regarded as a practitioner of the surreal, there are recurring strategies he deploys in order to question his society and his values, and one of the most common is this chronological juxtaposition. This technique, which can be seen within individual poems as well as over entire collections, could be referred to as Durcan's hauntological perspective, the very absence of his father proving to be a crucial psychological hurdle that he has to constantly clear. The blurring of the lines between the poet and his father is a key consequence of this, exemplified in the poem "The Two little Boys at the Back of the Bus", where Durcan typically mixes reality with fantasy to the extent that it becomes difficult if not impossible to separate them. He describes "two little boys" sitting in the back of a bus, narrated as "you and I" (DD, 134),

returning to their mother's house after a game of schools' rugby. The "you" is a clear reference to his father, at once a little boy and "safe in the back of the bus / At seventy-two you share your biscuits with me" (DD, 135), thereby conflating time to the absolute present but concurrently travelling back in time to be with his father:

> We were always, you and I,
> The two little boys at the back of the bus,
> Returning to mother (DD, 135).

The softening of the image of his father, presenting his as a childlike figure, seeking only what his son sought, namely the security and comfort of "mother", conflates the two men into one, two boys innocently seeking the comfort of home. Clearly, Durcan sees the child in his father and in many ways this is a poem of forgiveness, one of many in *Daddy, Daddy*, but lest Durcan be accused of trying to erase his painful memories of previous paternal conflicts, the very next poem in the collection, "Susannah and the Elders", recalls his father's refusal to attend his son's wedding and his insistence on having his name removed from the wedding notice placed in *The Irish Times* by his son's future mother-in-law. This section of the poem is narrated in very matter-of-fact terms, Durcan once again writing an official record of exactly what happened at this point in his life. However, as the poem develops, a more sinister and bizarre metamorphosis occurs, as his father, who eventually relents and recognises his son's marriage and visits his grandchildren, literally becomes the "old badger that he was" (DD,137), and takes a shine to his son's previously shunned spouse. Durcan is eventually forced to step in:

> But when he asked for her hand through the bathroom door
> I had to wave the mat at him. "Daddy", I remonstrated,
> "I love you but you cannot have my wife" (DD, 137) .

Eventually, his father metamorphoses into a badger, scraping around until he is picked up and she strokes him "on the nape of the neck", because:

> She admired him
> For what he was—apart from me, the loneliest creature she knew,
> A man alone.

Once again, Durcan cleverly disconcerts the reader in that the poem moves seamlessly from a straightforward biographical account of yet another dispute with, and rejection by, his father to a highly idiosyncratic and fantastical image of the man as a sexually aroused badger, the

transmutation perhaps deflating the painful memory for Durcan of the original rejection. This juxtapositioning of the real and the imagined, therefore, is a key psychological device utilised by Durcan to at least contextualise the trauma caused by the deep divisions between him and his father, however bizarre the outcome. It is a technique that also suits the often-conflicting emotions he has towards his father. James Simmons has noted this autobiographical complexity:

> One of the interesting paradoxes in Durcan's work is that he achieves his range and universality by being extraordinarily personal. Or so it seems. When a poet is so vivid people presume he is being autobiographical; but it really is none of our business, as long as we experience the significance of his details (Simmons, 30).

This careful narrative construction within poems, and indeed collections, is typified by the seventh section of *Daddy, Daddy,* as Durcan engages in a somewhat fractured, yet recognisably chronological, journey through his relationship with his father. Interestingly, the preceding section contains one long poem, entitled "Amnesty", in which the narrator recalls the fear engendered by driving past a prison with "Daddy", and the use of his particular patriarchal moniker again associates this man with Durcan's own father. In response to his son's falling in love with "a black girl / A medical student from Cape Town", the father figure throws his son out of the family home:

> He loved me as no man ever loved his son
> But he said to me—crisply, glassily, over the breakfast table,
> Over the cornflakes and the marmalade—"Don't ever come home again".
> Pardon? Pardon (DD, 91).

The "pardon?" expressed by the son, suggests an incredulity on his part at this rejection, but it is immediately followed by "pardon", a clever play on words where the son appears to forgive the father. This is repeated five times in the poem, suggesting perhaps, that although he has not forgotten the regular disagreements and fights with his father, Durcan has forgiven. In the poem, the couple's fifth child is named Amnesty, and the son cannot help but repeat her name over and over again. Her name is highly significant in that this is what the poet intends in this collection: an amnesty for past grievances and a tentative ceasefire with the present. Given that this poem precedes the "Daddy, Daddy" section, it would appear that he is ready to forgive, if not quite forget.

The clear love and affection between father and son, however retentive and inarticulate, is poignantly recalled in poems such as "The Repentant Peter" and "Mickey Donnelly's Hat", and his father emerges, as indeed he does from the long poem "Amnesty", as a man whose emotional constipation is more a product of his social position and contemporary upbringing than any deep-rooted dislike of his son. The strong impression created by Durcan is that inside his father was a father waiting to be born, subdued and tied down by social convention, but somehow released upon the birth of Durcan's own children. This is typified in the poem "Birthday Present", when father and son meet in Dublin, on the occasion "of my twenty-third birthday" (DD, 128) and they take a familiar stroll along the Grand Canal into the city. At the top of Grafton Street, his father pops into the "Radio Review Record Shop" to make a purchase and, whilst waiting outside, "a noted Fine Gael politician" passes by without acknowledgement. When he tells his father of the passing politician, the former's face melts "with pride and admiration", the latter acting a shining example of a well-lived life. When the father and son return home, the present is eagerly opened:

> It was The Beatles' new LP,
> Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,
> When I ran back downstairs to you, you said,
> Your voice streaky with awe,
> "Did you ever think of politics as a career?"
> "Dad"—I said—"Thanks for the birthday present" (DD, 130).

However, it has to be emphasised that the poetic depiction of Durcan's father is, like so many other aspects of Durcan's life, subject to the hermeneutical lens that distorts and refracts the past to the extent that the apparently autobiographical is open to question. It is precisely in this liminal space that his poetry achieves its most effective exposition and critique. In an interview in 1967, the Nobel Prize-winning Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez noted that "my most important problem was destroying the line of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic" (Márquez, 52), and this accurately describes so many of the poems Durcan has written about his father. The clear autobiographical details that tally with Durcan's life with his father are juxtaposed with poems that explore far more bizarre manifestations of that formative relationship. By transposing the real onto the imagined, Durcan succeeds in bringing both into sharper relief, and the outcome of this conflation is many poems of extreme dissonance, humour, affection and conflict. Indeed, one of the recurring features of so many of Durcan's

poems is their resistance to neat categorisation, any recognisable theme or subject often shifting into what might appear to be a tangential curve, either returning to its original subject or moving, apparently randomly, towards its goal. This dislocation is, however, precisely one of Durcan's great strengths, and it allows him particular freedom in exploring his relationship with his father, unencumbered as he is by either time or space. Although *Daddy, Daddy* could be viewed as a retrospective collection, his father appears very much in real time, a figure far more alive in the poet's imagination than he ever was in life.

In "Crinkle, near Birr", for example, Durcan is in full psychosexual flow, using the first person narrative voice to announce that "Daddy and I were lovers" (LD, 235), describing their wedding in the church of the small village of Crinkle, Co. Offaly, where he is given away by his mother. He describes his father as "a TV personality in Yorkshire", clearly distancing this "father" from his real father. However, a few lines later, he writes that this "was in the days before he became a judge" (LD, 235), thereby reintroducing the autobiographical. This freewheeling in time and space, the juxtaposition of the clearly fictive with the real, is what gives these poems their sense of the unexpected. Charles Baudelaire, an acknowledged stylistic influence on Durcan, noted that "the beautiful is what is bizarre" (Walberg, 25) and this poem certainly fits into that category. On honeymoon with his father in Galway city, the inevitable happens:

> In the afternoons we spawned our own selves in our hotel bedroom
> Listening to cricket.
> The West Indies were playing the MCC at Lord's.
> We lay in bed listening to Rohan Kanhai batting for a double
> Century
> And Garfield Sobers taking six wickets for forty-five runs (LD, 235).

In this poem, Durcan cleverly portrays the almost hermaphrodite entity that is the father/child, one inseparable from the other. Malcolm Bowie, in his analysis of the theories of Jacques Lacan, provides a useful starting point for looking at what Durcan is portraying in this part of the poem. In a chapter coincidentally titled "Inventing the 'I'", Bowie outlines the Freudian concept of childhood identification, the intricate process by which our nascent sense of self begins to emerge. Throughout *Daddy, Daddy*, Durcan is exploring this process of the birth of the ego and this image of self-spawning reinforces the absolute centrality of his father not only in childhood, but also in the formation of the self that Durcan is so willing to deconstruct. Bowie writes:

> The identification of oneself with another being is the very process by which a continuing sense of selfhood becomes possible, and it is from successive assimilations of other people's attributes that what is familiarly called the ego or the personality is constructed (Bowie, 30–1).

No stronger image of this "assimilation" could be provided than that of the poet and his father "spawning" themselves, their mutual moment of conception inextricably tied to burgeoning concepts of tightly interrelated selves. Durcan is unable to extricate himself from his father, despite his obtaining "a silent divorce" at the age of twelve. Whatever transpired between father and son in the interim, and Durcan does not shirk from the emotional and physical violence that marked periods of his childhood, appears to be less important than this initial union. For Durcan, the bond with his father has been forged so deeply in his subconscious that only in poems of surreal imagery can the profundity of that seminal, formative relationship be explored. Indeed, "Crinkle, near Birr" comes as close to any Durcan poem to describing the true nature of his relationship with his father, unable, as he is, to distinguish between self and other. The love that he feels for his father is utterly tangible, as is the regret over the gradual souring of their personal relationship, something for which Durcan noticeably refuses to blame his father. The poem ends in the beautiful image of the cradling hands of his father, a symbol of the love that is the bedrock of this key relationship:

> When I look back at the years of my marriage to Daddy
> What I remember most
> Are not the beatings-up and the temper tantrums
> But the quality of his silence when he was happy.
> Walking at evening with him down at the river,
> I lay on my back in the waters of his silence,
> The silence of a diffident, chivalrous bridegroom,
> And he carried me in his two hands home to bed (LD, 237).

John Durcan died on January 8, 1988 at the age of 81, having suffered from Parkinson's disease for the last years of his life. The same year saw the publication of *In the Land of Punt*, a collaboration between Durcan and the artist Gene Lambert, where each produced seven works, poems and paintings respectively, and it is an early example of one of Durcan's many ekphractic works. The poem "Crucifixion" depicts his "father" being crucified for "the matinee performance" (ITLOP, V1) after his death at the hands of "hospital consultants", who had performed several operations on him because he had offered his body "To the Welfare Transport Company for Invalids". On the cross, his father's masculinity evaporates as he began

"to liquidise into a woman", and his humiliation is completed as his physical body is "sluiced" away. The consultants "who murdered my father" dance around the body, robbing whatever personal items they can get their hands on. However, in the mortuary, in the silence and peace of death, a sense of calm descends once the professionals have departed and he is left alone with his "Dada":

> In the hospital mortuary I stared at his beautiful face.
> It was all lit up with a smile from the far side of death,
> And his breasts became him, and his broken hips
> Were flowing in death as they had not flowed in life
> And outside on the seafront, under the palm trees,
> In the half-moon breeze, native girls were waiting for him (ITLOP, vi).

Daddy, Daddy was published in 1990, and the title of the collection and its dedication are clear signposts that this will be an appraisal of the profoundly difficult and complex relationship that existed between the two men. However, the poems that really begin to delve into their complex life together do not appear until the seventh and final section of the book. Regarding the title of the collection, Peggy O'Brien traces a very convincing line from Durcan to Sylvia Plath's well-known poem "Daddy", first published in *Ariel* in 1965, regarding the title as a "tuning fork of intertextuality" (KT, 77). In a close reading of the poems from both collections she argues that Plath is a profound, if sometimes unconscious, influence on Durcan, particularly in reference to what she refers to as the "ground-breaking" (KT, 76) final line of Plath's poem "Daddy":

> There's a stake in your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always knew it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through (Plath, 222).

O'Brien's essay, published in *The Kilfenora Teaboy* in 1996, explores and parallels the complex paternal relationship experienced by both Durcan and Plath and she posits the view that Durcan's poems about his father should be seen in the wider socio-cultural climate that framed their relationship. She perceptively notes that Durcan's portrayal of his relationship with his father is "deliciously ambivalent" (KT, 101), images varying from that of a fascist tyrant to a benevolent patriarch. However, she explores the idea that John Durcan was very much a man of his time, a man bound to social convention by virtue of his position as a judge and the seriousness with which he treated this role. She argues that *Daddy, Daddy*

should be viewed more broadly as a political work of reappraisal of the traditional perceptions of the father/son dynamic:

> In "Daddy, Daddy ", for example, the politics of the family is Durcan's ambit, a territory traditionally regarded as a female preserve. Durcan is identifying with Plath both as a fellow suffering human being and as a poet strategist. I take his unexploitative, brotherly embrace of Plath, a poet sibling from a similar family drama, as his way of expanding the margins of Irishness at the end of the century, softening and humanising the harsh profile of the archetypal founding father (KT, 100).

In parallel with the obvious strong critique of his father, there is a feeling in Durcan's poems about him that it is love that is the over-riding emotional bond between them, however difficult its expression. What appears to somewhat overshadow this bond is the fact that Durcan has been willing to publically explore the darker sides of their relationship, notably in Alan Gilsenen's documentary, first aired in 2007 on RTÉ, Ireland's national television station. Entitled "Paul Durcan—The Dark School", the film explores Durcan's early adult experiences and his father emerges in a poor light, largely responsible for committing his nineteen-year-old son into the St. John of God psychiatric hospital in Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, in 1964, where his diagnosis is clinical depression. The first six months of 1965 was a difficult period for Durcan, when he underwent electro-convulsive therapy in a psychiatric hospital near Epsom, Surrey, and the long-term consequences of these experiences have been features of his work for decades. In an entry in his *Diary*, entitled "The First Child Psychiatrist of the Western World", he laments the paucity of mental health services for children in Ireland, remembering the brutality to which he was subjected. Attending, in 2002, the retirement of Dr. Anthony Carroll, the first Clinical Director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in the Western Health Board, Durcan notes the key to childhood therapy, something he has learned through his own bitter experience, and perhaps provides a clue to his own sense of creativity:

> The good child psychiatrist is the one who, first of all, unlocks his or her own individual creativity and playfulness and, secondly, the creativity and playfulness of the child and/or adolescent. The kernel of childhood and adolescence—and especially of all childhood and adolescent therapy – is creativity and playfulness (*Diary*, 128).

"Ulysses", the first poem of the section entitled "Daddy, Daddy", provides a crucial cultural context in which Durcan seeks to contextualise the father/son dynamic. Indeed, the position of the poem is a further example

of Durcan's framing technique, collections beginning and ending with poems that effectively bookend his ideas. In fact, it can be seen in all of Durcan's collections that the positioning of poems is carefully orchestrated, either to complement each other or provide a startling contrast. Given his often-stated, life-long passion for art it should not come as any surprise that he should be so concerned with the order of his collections and how they appear as a collection, down to the selection of the art work for the covers. Indeed, the cover of *Daddy, Daddy* features a painting by Finnish artist Hugo Simberg entitled *The Wounded Angel*, and Anne Karhio has commented upon its significance for Durcan:

> In the case of Durcan the symbolist painter's depiction of indefinable grief seems to offer a means of addressing pain too complex or devastating for verbal explanation. In other words, specific personal and historical crises in specific contexts can be dealt with by engaging with a work of art which takes sorrow as its subject in more abstract or even universal terms (Karhio, 29).

Durcan frequently refers to his collections as "books", suggesting that they are not simply collections of free-standing poems, but interrelated and interdependent works that should be in seen in their totality. In "Ulysses", Durcan recalls how his father, at first resistant, eventually succumbs to buying a copy of James Joyce's eponymous book, despite decrying it as a "work of blasphemy" and swearing that it would never be allowed into the family home. However, largely prompted by Durcan's mother who simply wanted to see her house "at peace", he purchases a copy, ironically, from Michael Hartnett, Durcan's friend, fellow poet and one time curator of the Joyce museum at the Martello Tower in Sandycove, Dublin. Hiding in the ramparts of the tower, Durcan sees his stern father march down the pathway with a copy of the book in a brown paper bag tucked under his arm. His mother later tells him that the book was on his father's bedside table, a fruit-gum wrapper acting as a bookmark. Recalling the event Durcan writes:

> It was not until four years later
> When a musical friend
> Gave me my first lessons
> That Ulysses began to sing for me
> And I began to sing for my father:
> Daddy, Daddy,
> My little man, I adore you (LD, 240).