

Mischief and Magic

Paul Durcan, *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil*. Harvill, £9.99
 Fergus Allen, *Mrs Power Looks Over the Bay*. Faber and Faber, £8.99

Paul Durcan is a poet who seriously wants to be liked. Nothing wrong with a little ambition, I suppose, as long as it doesn't become a theme in itself. Durcan begins modestly enough, citing Elizabeth Bishop's famous dictum that "what one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration." Several poets must have nailed that particular statement to their noticeboards over the last decade, most in agreement, a few in frustration. In using it as his epigraph, Durcan appears to side with the pro-Bishop camp though he immediately moves away from her example as soon as he speaks in his own voice. He thus seems to invoke her ideas only to mock them later, much as a schoolbully might scrawl the name of a more popular kid on the wall just before covering it with graffiti.

Bishop's reputation can obviously survive the odd tin of paint thrown at it. More toxic are the impersonations passed off by Durcan here, particularly those that pretend to speak for Bishop in her own voice. He consistently reduces her to a child imitating adult behaviour. In "Samambaia", for example, her love for the Brazilian aristocrat and artistic patron, Lota de Macedo Soares, is compared to a game of Cowboys and Indians, pursuing each other through the clouds. The personal details deleted and elided in Bishop's "Song for the Rainy Season", are crudely redrawn by Durcan, a botched and misguided piece of plastic surgery totally at odds with the indrawn sound of the original poem. While Durcan employs the triplets Bishop often uses, he freezes her conversational voice, making public her very "private cloud" ("Song for the Rainy Season"). The body she keeps hidden is exposed without compunction, its "face paint" rubbed away to show the marks and moles underneath. In addition to these maulings comes the final verse where Durcan stages a mock marriage ceremony, performed by Bishop:

I, Elizabeth,
Do take you, Lota,
For my lawful, wedded, cloud

Besides being clumsily written, this is also dubious biography, appropriating another author's life for fun, the literary equivalent of the hoax guest ghosting into a stranger's party. Durcan obviously craves an audience, but it is doubtful whether he will gatecrash the canon simply by reading up on one of its members.

The information he has on Bishop is at best sketchy, at worse defamatory. Bishop herself had an answer for such practises when she censored Robert Lowell over his use of Elizabeth Hardwick's letters by quoting to him Thomas Hardy:

What should certainly be protested against... is the mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions. Infinite mischief would lie in that. If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact, for obvious reasons. The power of getting lies believed about people through that channel after they are dead, by stirring in a few truths, is a horror to contemplate.

Durcan's poems about Bishop lie in a similar category of mischiefousness, being not just a horror to contemplate, but also to get through. What he finally wants in art is actually the opposite to what Bishop advises. While she rejects the confessionals' sensationalising of experience, he revels in it. As he says to "A Visitor from Rio de Janeiro", come to talk to Derek Mahon but unfortunately collared by Durcan:

Fame
Is having all Ireland
Talking about you
In front of your back.

Durcan is fond of such aphoristic nonsense, believing himself the heir to Wilde. What he leaves out is Wilde's sense of the artist's ridiculousness, though in placing fame before Ireland as his main poetic subject, he is at least upfront about his motives for writing. In "Notes Towards a Necessary Suicide", Durcan continues to detail the drab minutiae of the artist's life. After climbing up the same stairs for what seems like the whole poem ("I climb up the stair—climb and climb and climb/ And climb and climb/ And climb and climb and climb"), the poet eventually collapses in bed, pulling the pillow

over his head to listen to “the booming of my own sobbing.” This is a portrait of the artist as a middle-aged man, boring himself with loneliness and his reader with self-indulgence. Treating suicide flip-pantly, Durcan disappears further into his self-regarding mirror:

Ad infinitum I think of Virginia Woolf and know
That sooner or later I will have to go down to the river:
The Dodder at night where it flows past Lansdowne Rugby
Ground
And join my father and his brothers down among the
umbrellas and fridges,
The hoops and horseshoes.

Thinking of Virginia Woolf “ad infinitum” is not the most obvious route to fame. Suicide may make the front page for a day, but it does not build a poetic reputation, which is in a sense Durcan’s dilemma. The mock obituary penned to finish the poem is meant to draw attention to the poet’s plight, yet it succeeds only in exhausting the reader’s patience and sympathy:

In Ringsend park this morning the body was discovered
Of the middle-aged, minor-major poet Paul Durcan
In black suit, white shirt, bow tie
Under a tree in the rain with piles
Of empty champagne bottles all around him,
Greeting cards, faxes, bouquets.
His amused colleagues did not express astonishment;
All were agreed that he was,
In the words of Brian Ryan, the playwright,
“A serious man for the weddings.”

Does Durcan want us to take such thoughts seriously? The dead poet, surrounded by champagne bottles and faxes, is obviously a fool to kill himself. What lies underneath this ironic confession of despair is perhaps Durcan’s real ambition: the dream not of committing suicide, but of being thought about “ad infinitum”, just like Woolf. “Notes Towards a Necessary Suicide” does not advance this dream very far, concerned as it is with memorialising the artist rather than the words on the page. Durcan commits suicide not on himself but on the life of the poem.

Sifting through the collection to get past its author, there are several poems that somehow survive the Durcan ego. “Elvira Tulip, Annaghmakerrig”, is worth celebrating just for its title. The poem sets up a surreal encounter between the young Elvira Tulip, “explaining to me what it means/ To be experimental”, and a peculiar stew-

ard humming in Catalan, “*Where would I be without my wheelbarrow?*” The poem’s mention of Beckett gives a good indication as to its bewildering effect. Placing us outside his usual bachelor pad, Durcan drops the reader dizzily inside the turning world. His ability to ground the poem in the new, the now and the strange, makes us wonder why he keeps going back to his Ringsend tower so often. As a recluse, staring at himself, he produces tired-looking poems, furrowed and heavy-eyed. As a flaneur patrolling the alleyways and byways of Dublin, he loses us inside a frantic, spinning mob of people, cast on an imaginary tide to further peculiar meetings. Throughout Durcan’s poetry, the obsessiveness of the loner competes with the gregariousness of the cityslicker. They are the twin frequencies between which he moves, propelled inside and outside of the self like a pinball. He is arguably at his best when he listens to some of the crowd in the street rather than to himself in his Ringsend hermitage.

While Durcan gives Elvira Tulip the best name in the book, other characters have better lines to say. The brother-in-law in “O God! O Dublin!” is in many ways my favourite. After lunching on gazpacho and tuna in a café in Ottawa, Durcan receives a love letter from the waitress. After learning she is Ethiopian but has married an Irishman, he begins to wonder why many of us stay at home, rarely marrying people from outside the small towns of our birthplace. Durcan’s characteristic self-absorption is surprisingly punctured when he returns home, in a hilarious rebuke to the serious tone he has previously tried to strike:

I turned up at my brother-in-law’s bagless.
I asked my brother-in-law who was digging
Holes in the front garden:
“Why do Irish marry Irish?
Wouldn’t you think that Irish
Would have more bottle in their water?”
My brother-in-law brandished his spade
In his two hands and grinned
A big, five-faced, close-up grin:
“Durcan, if you say another word,
I’ll top you.”

Durcan packs this collection with several such cynical soothsayers, most wielding implements with which to hit him. In “The Chicago Waterstones”, an old girlfriend undermines the poet’s legendary assurance by enquiring about Ciaran Carson’s new book before his. She treats him like “a neurotic travelling salesman”, “brandishing her eyelashes” to upset him as the brother-in-law previously “brandished his spade”. Such humility on Durcan’s part is quite rare, but at least

there are flickers of it, even if the spade never really crashes down on his head.

This self-referentiality is at its most fun when Durcan actually leaves the poem to be voiced by somebody else. In “Karamazov in Ringsend”, Dostoyevsky’s brothers spy on the poet, comparing his activities to the politician, Mary Banotti, who lives three houses down. While one of the brothers presses his ear to Banotti’s and Durcan’s door, the other waits in a getaway carriage nearby. The idea of reusing two literary characters to laugh at one’s own lifestyle is a bizarre experiment. Durcan parodies his finicky habits and contradictory nature through the appearance of his front door and the length of time it takes him to park:

Watch him
As he drives up and slides backwards
Into his space in front of his front door
Which hasn’t seen a lick of paint in thirteen years,
All cracks, blisters, stains, smears.
Sometimes he spends up to ten minutes
Parking—getting tight to the kerb,
Slotting into his sacred parenthesis of five-and-a-half metres.

The front door is perhaps an analogy for the domestic life left to crack and fade while Durcan goes on writing. The trouble spent fitting his car to the kerb seems an apt if rather unusual metaphor for the difficulties of the poet “slotting” emotion into the tight space of metrical form (though he rarely does this himself). The poet is clearly troubled by a feeling of being watched, particularly by his literary predecessors, whose threatening presence literally pursues him. Most writers imagine an older poet following them, but few own up to the nightmare quite as explicitly as Durcan. This preoccupation with how the literary world sees him approaches paranoia at times. Like Prince Hal ghosting around his troops prior to battle; Durcan spends much of the book in disguise, reporting on neighbours, listening in to conversations, pressing the empty glass to the wall. For all the bombast and confidence, these can only be the activities of a fragile ego at work. As one of the Karamazovs listens at Durcan’s door, he hears “the groans of the drowned”. The sufferings of the famous, poet Durcan lie behind nearly all of the pranks and stunts here. Although he makes light of these sufferings, Karamazov is perhaps not alone in wanting to flee from his door.

Durcan’s voice is above all an interrupting one, heckling from the sidelines, keen to tell all and tell now. He is a one man show, celebrating the writing of a middle-aged, Irish man, known through

various clever aliases as “the Irish Subversive”, the “poet Durcan” (“Karamazov in Ringsend”), “Durcaninho” (“A Visitor from Rio de Janeiro”), and “Paul ‘Marry the Sinner’ Durcan” (“Letter to the Archbishop of Cashel and Emily”). *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* invokes associations with Bishop’s *Questions of Travel* mainly to take popshots at her. Durcan reveals himself to be a self-aware poet rather than a “self-forgetful” one, an ironic admirer of Bishop rather than a friend or fan. His affectionate “greetings” to friends abroad might better be labelled as junk mail, addressed to annoy all those who prefer “perfectly useless” poems to perfectly self-obsessed poets. Brilliant at times, Durcan is too often reliant on exploiting friends, lovers and surreal games for poetic material. He is Ireland’s closest thing to Woody Allen, constantly upsetting the divisions between “the egotist who is overweight and vain/ And the magic connections, dreams, constructions of his brain.” In his sixteenth book, the egotist has won. Perhaps his dreams can tip the balance next time.

Fergus Allen seems a more wary poet than Durcan, more cautious about the persona a writer adopts, the figure he cuts on the page. There are less poems here, forty-nine to Durcan’s smug one hundred. And yet that half is more than enough, as Bishop’s Gentleman of Shalott might say. Whereas Durcan seems to compose al fresco, throwing off poems like tangerine peel; Allen’s work appears more careful and somehow less clumsy, as if he has returned to check up on the poem several times. Durcan’s lyric canvasses resemble a series of hurried water-colours. They catch an impression of the scene without staying with us. Allen’s, on the other hand, might be compared to a Giacometti figure. Elegant, almost rust-eaten shadows, they testify to an emotional charge and intellectual value missing from nearly all of Durcan’s effusive ‘greetings’.

In the book’s opening poem, “To Be Read Before Being Born”, Allen contrasts the slow formation of poetry with the sudden arrival of new life. While the poet has time “for practise or rehearsal”, the mother is allowed “no retakes”, no “clambering out on to the bank/ To think things over”. Allen captures the extent to which poetry is perhaps always catching up with life, sprinting to follow its movements but continually two or three steps behind. The poem is a five line, tiny masterclass on how to successfully navigate awkward biographical waters. The poet’s main advice is to sit it out and wait. At times, memory flies past and the writer is left looking stupid on the bank. But occasionally something bites and the lifting of life into art becomes a little easier. His use of the river’s motion to stand in for the flowing currents of memory reminds us of Bishop’s use of the Atlantic in “At the Fishhouses”. Historical knowledge is also figured here as a body of “moving water, dimpled by turbulence”. What lies

underneath both poets' view of life is the same emotional riptide, dimpling the surface of things but never quite pulling the poet or poem down. Waving rather than drowning, unlike Stevie Smith's tragicomic hero, Allen is always extracting words out of disaster. "To Be Read Before Being Born" could also have been titled "To be Read Before Being Written".

Allen manages to express delicate and intimate detail without imposing his personality on the scene. He listens well, noticing the peculiar refrains, similes and favourite stories that differentiate people. The collection is full of lessons exchanged, objects passed on and secrets protected. It sometimes feels as though we are in the middle of a family reunion or wake, embarrassed by confessions and stories that do not concern us but at the same time thankful to have stepped through the wrong door. The title poem, "Mrs Power Looks Over the bay", is a strange mix of the homely with the otherworldly. Behind the cliché of a parent lecturing a younger, luckier generation, lies a veneration for language and for memory. The mother's nostalgia is balanced by a poignant awareness of the here and now. The "dishevelled clouds" and "halcyon" scene are off set by various battered industrial objects round Mrs Power: a "broken-winded" Volvo that struggles up the hill, a Metal Man that seems to have stepped straight out of a Ted Hughes fable, tankers on the horizon "too grand/ to give you the time of day". Further chaotic debris litters the mind of the poem's main character too. Mrs Power is, as her name suggests, something of an unusual woman. Her superstitiousness pervades the poem. She believes the almanac will help to bring her cattle home and later compares the sea to a "breathing zombie". While she bustles her son or daughter "down to the shop/ where yesterday's order is mouldering in the carton", she busies herself complaining about the neighbour's dogs, regretting the fact her voodoo dolls have failed to kill them:

O'Reilly's yard-dogs come from a brood of heathens,
snarling and slaving, like all black-and-tans.
I and your father modelled them in candlegrease
and stuck poisoned bodkins into their bellies,
but of course they're immune to that kind of stunt.
Some kind of trap would do better.

The image of two parents desperately pushing poisoned bodkins into candlegrease models, is grotesque but also rather touching. Allen demystifies the Irish childhood idyll, placing it within the context of a nervy small community, petrified by cultural, political and religious invasion. Black-and-tans, U boats, Spanish trawlers and last Satur-

day's television, all create an atmosphere of paranoia with Mrs Power as the sole defendant of a dying 'local' culture. Allen respects Mrs Power's attempts to keep the local alive, perhaps because it gives room for "like-minded" eccentrics to dwell, for those who still possess almanacs, for others who also practise amateur sorcery on the pets next door, for mothers who remember first kisses as accurately as here:

If you've done your homework give your daddy a hand
with the tractor that seems to be giving birth
and before the rain comes driving through the wall
to spoil the fodder. Oh I've come a long way
with your father since our skins first touched
like fruit in a bowl.

Allen listens in to the stories most of us tend to ignore. He pays attention to the cadences of others, capturing a tone of voice that is perhaps being poisoned with the advent of electricity, television and Volvos. Mrs Power stands in for the grandmother or great-uncle we still recall, the inheritance that is given through speech rather than by written words.

Allen's regard for conversation is perhaps what makes him such a distinctive poet. His work has a sense of the contemporaneity of the past, of the ghosts that dwell amongst us. Such meetings occur on almost every page. In "Latent Heat", Morgan le Fay steps out of the pages of "Gawain and the Green Knight" to supervise a young boy's brush with a schoolgirl from 2A, "her skin milky cool and easily dimpled". Erudition and sexual awakening happen at the same time, as though poetry and puberty were discovered together. "The Autobiography of a Leman" also draws on an Anglo-Saxon past, translating the battlefields and seapaths of Maldon and Wessex into the sexual pleasures and affairs of everyday life:

The Great Northern Hotel set the tone
For pleasures that trickled down like linctus,
Soothing the itches of eschatology,
The ceiling was so high, cirro-stratus,
Concealing our actions from the sun,
And breakfast came on a tray, the maid
Discreet, and we topped the eggs and dipped
Our soldiers into the runny yellow.
But plain sailing all the way it wasn't.

Allen wittily exchanges the props of an Old English epic for the clutter of a provincial hotel, switching "the itches of eschatology" then for the itches of bedclothes now. The only copses here are bread soldiers

dipped in gooey egg, the only danegeld a room service charge. Yet in a curious way, Allen is picking up the project, first taken up by Auden, Harrison, Heaney and others, of updating fading myths and legends. Jettisoning the sound of Old English—the clunky alliteration and thudding weight of words—he still remains faithful to old themes and preoccupations: rearranging the debate between decadence and duty to suit modern dress.

Allen is often dropping in on the historical past, somewhat like a parachutist behind enemy lines. At times, he does a fine impersonation of Banquo's ghost, creeping up on family ancestors to talk in their ear. At others, he appears as a kind of visionary archaeologist, tracing the remains of "Indian temple[s]" and dinosaurs in a Devon cliff face ("East Cliff, West Bay"). In "The Visitant" for example, the narrator glides back to 1860, complimenting a cousin "on her gathered dress". Though she seems to see through him—a "half smile" steals across her "knobbly features"—we cannot be certain if the game is up:

'Can't you see it James?'
She cried out loudly in a country accent
To a pompous-looking beard, who was wool-gathering
In a frock coat (it must have been a Sunday).

The poem follows the strange trajectory of a fantasy most of us recognise, the one that allows us to step into a painting, a photograph, or story we enjoy, in order to see an old friend or to hear a much-missed voice. Aside from bothering his cousin on her appearance, the narrator also spots his grandmother as a child, wondering at the bustle around him and her total indifference to his presence: "To who I was or where I might come from". This self-deference in the company of others is what most differentiates Allen's poetic persona from those of his contemporaries. He sees himself not as a great impresario of Irish poetry, a title poets like Boland and Durcan seem proud to accept, but as a guest among like-minded, amateur players. Characters in his poetry are "not marionettes acting on my dictates" but "real/Quite unstagey people", bickering in a hall and trailing muddy bootprints across the floor, continuing their lives independent of the poet's spying activities. Allen hovers over his family "like a kestrel", aware of the potential advantage he holds over them but determined to keep a safe distance. In comparing his position to a bird of prey, he seems very much conscious of the mischief a poet can cause. The poem considers the problems not just of visiting the past but also of using that experience in writing. Allen's poem reads like a memoir that has been stored in a vault. He protects the story along with the dignity of those who lived through it.

These poems of childhood sit alongside poems that investigate elsewhere too. As with Bishop, there is often a strangeness about Allen's view of 'home' that finds its echo in the domestication and familiarity of foreign places. "To the South and Back" deals with the disappointments of travel and the fraught ignorance of tourists. Communication between traveller and native occurs, not through speech, "sign language" or "tick-tack", but through the accidental discovery of an aluminium spoon. Its "half-obliterated trademark", which may mean " 'Union', 'Torino' or 'Inox' ", eloquently embodies the tourist's 'half' understanding of culture, language and place. At rest "in our kitchen/ Among rolling-pins and carvers", it bears witness to the discovery of connection and difference. In "Puerto Montt", there is a similar realisation about the meaning of travel. The speaker watches the fisherman crack open the shells of sea-urchins, infested with spiders which he believes poisonous:

No doubt they feature in jokes among the locals,
but the Chilean patois is beyond me—
and behind the laughter behind my back.

While the locals' jokes cannot be translated, the visual sight can. When the speaker's companion emerges, he quickly links her appearance to the infested creatures, copying the fishermen's ability to make fun of life even if he cannot follow the exact words they use:

Nose pink, eyes complaining about the wind,
I see you advance from the cleaning shed
between pine-trees with snow tangled in their needles.
You look so crotchety I wonder if a spider
will have to be freed from that designing head.

Allen cherishes the Chilean patois and the local tongues that lie outside the poem. He is aware of the gains and risks of travel, the rewards of new sights and sounds and the dangers of making them seem exotic. As he says in "To the South and Back": "Though ebullience has its charms,/There is much to be said for phlegm". Allen responds to foreign lands by taking home all that can be translated accurately and leaving behind all that cannot. His suitcase often returns home with nothing save bemusement and silence though in a way this is a more honest souvenir than the illusion of comprehension and full understanding.

Mrs Power Looks Over the Bay is a beguiling collection of poems that perfectly balances the local and the peculiar, the hum of Saturday's television with the teasing of Morgan le Fay and the thud of

Alfred and Beowulf. Allen has the patience and refinement of a restorer, stripping down the familiar layers of hackneyed surface to show a world characterised by breathtaking colours and textures underneath. Through his eyes, we find “the sea in curlers”, dreaming “of time off in lieu”; herring gulls “standing around like students/ At an anatomy lesson”; and cigarettes lodged between lips “like pegs stuck any old how in a cribbage board” (“The Beachcombing”). These are poems which salute reminiscences and travel, the secrets of the past and the jokes and journeyings of the present. Dip into this collection and its undertow soon drags you underwater, “the glow/ From its radioactive innards/ Still light[ing] up today’s dark matter” (“Eve’s Lament”). Allen, rather than Durcan, is the poet who follows Bishop most, suggesting that a “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration”, might yet be the best way of writing poetry.