

## **Worlds Apart – Paul Durcan’s Father- (Re)constructions**

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As Michael Parker claims, “[i]n the Irish psyche, ancestry is a potent force, steadying the individual, and shaping his or her sense of identity” (Parker 4). Beyond the general or perhaps even commonplace nature of the second part of the sentence, the choice of the word “ancestry” is remarkable: it manages to compress almost infinitely broad contexts into the essentially personal aspect of the historical dimension expressed by the word. Twentieth-century Irish history, by virtue of its complicated nature, presses down heavily on the life of the individual, often turning private lives into the matrix of historical events, the “ancestry” of a single person thus easily widens into the context of communal historical affairs, leading to the conclusion of the inseparability of personal and communal dimensions in the life of the individual.

Father figures feature significantly in the work of several contemporary Irish poets. This general phenomenon suggests the importance of the historical dimension in the project of handling experience and it also indicates the necessary anchoring of the poetic persona in the comfortably narrow ground of familial relations. Fathers appear as exemplary characters for some poets and as tyrants for others, and in each case there are profound emotions involved in the relationship between fathers and sons. The imperfection of such relations is acknowledged in certain cases yet filial respect is maintained even in strained situations, though such situations are usually seen from a retrospective point of view, through the filter of memory, when the father is no longer alive and can thus be fully possessed for interpretation by the surviving son.

In Paul Durcan’s case the father offers a complex and rather complicated figure to examine – the father was a High Court judge and thus a public person with allegiances to the Fine Gael party. This explicitly provides moments of intersection between personal and communal history as the father’s association with the founding ideologies of the independent Irish state offers the possibility of collapsing the two histories into each other and reading one in terms of the other. Durcan reconstructs his father’s figure in a number of poems in the volume *Daddy Daddy*, which is a collection dedicated to the memory of the man. The fact that the poems date from a time when the father is no longer alive hints at certain solid codes governing the relation of the two people (or perhaps a more general father-son relation, the relation between two different generations). The poems work towards an honesty difficult to achieve as the memory of the

father combats the fact of his death – yet it is perhaps this unalterable fact that helps Durcan to assess properly his relationship with his father.

The relationship, complicated by the public sphere of life, is one in which the father's figure appears a tyrant yet there is also affection present in the son's approach. The "bone-grinding monster" (Elliott in Kenneally 321) who is "threatening, peremptory, gloomy, parsimonious violent, moralistic, beastly, murderous, fascistic" (ibid) has another face, too, yet that is hidden for most of the time. The son's account, however, does not fail to include those instances when the father demonstrates that other face, and despite all the tyranny and oppressiveness the choice of the title for the sequence, as well as for the full collection, *Daddy, Daddy* indicates an ultimately affectionate relationship. The complex and complicated nature of this relation turns the collection partly into an exercise of disentangling the strains binding father and son, thus the speaker's memorial pieces are at once self-scrutinising attempts at interpretation.

The first poem of the section dealing with the father is entitled "Ulysses." The title evokes various literary resonances, yet the ultimate one is the inescapable connection with Joyce – and as the poem progresses, it turns out to revolve around Joyce's seminal novel and the question of the purchase of it by a decent Irish citizen. The father, a respected High Court judge, one of the pillars of Irish society is outraged at the prospect of acquiring a copy of the book condemned by "Even the most liberal-minded Jesuits" "As being blasphemous as well as pornographic" (Durcan 99). His decision to buy the book is certainly a great event in the light of this strict verdict on the book by the definitive authority on moral issues.

The conflict with the father is told in retrospect – the 18-year-old figure of the poet is hiding in the Tower of Joyce from his father, who, after a set of rows with the son and the wife, gives in to his wife's pressure and resolves to get a copy of the book. Earlier he stated his stance on the issue: "In the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and sixty-three / I will not be an accessory to blasphemy" (Durcan 100). Still, the resolution comes, though the decisive push towards action contrary to all expectations from such an immaculate person is not made clear. The victory of the son on the issue is almost complete but the book has to be wrapped in brown paper in order to hide its 'satanic' nature – ironically the wrapping paper "the night before had ferried bottles of vodka" (Durcan 101). The book lands on the father's bedside table and the bookmarker, "a fruitgum wrapper" (ibid), to make the profane meet the demonic, shows the progress of the reader of the book. A few weeks later the son gets to reading the novel but it remains a mystery until years later understanding dawns on him, changing his relation to his father too.

The 'courage' to face the immoral act of buying the novel and then reading it is comparable to Odysseus's bravery on his doomed homeward journey. The Odyssey of the father, driven very likely by curiosity, is thus one possible reading of the title. The experience opens a new chapter in the relation of father and son and this once again recalls the literary ancestry of Ulysses: the sense of arrival is suggested by the understanding of the book by the son – though the

father’s reaction to it is left somewhat ambivalent by the cunning employment of an ambiguous grammatical structure: when reading the book, the son “found it as strange as my father / And as discordant” (ibid). The question arises naturally whether a book should be seen as ‘satanic’ if it brings about understanding between two people who have never found a proper way of communication before reading it. If this is what ‘satanic’ or ‘immoral’ or “blasphemous” mean, then perhaps it would be expedient to reconsider the ‘moral’ or even ‘sacred’ ideology on which Irish life is based which ideology fails when it comes to confront reality as it is, “strange” and “discordant” as it may be. The poem on this level contributes tacitly to the cultic stance of the novel and of its writer too – the magic of a literary text of fiction is sufficient to alter actual relationships between flesh and blood people and it also manages to reveal aspects of reality hidden behind the mask of respectability and hypocrisy.

The deceptively neutral title of the poem “Fjord” does not reveal the tension that erupts only in the closing stanza. The stanzas leading up to the climactic moment simply explain the passion of the father for teaching. The example cited is a seemingly innocent word but the end of the train of thought is an image of Irish fjords hiding German U-boats during the war, in spite of the proclaimed political neutrality of the country. The reproach of the son to the father comes from this comment:

Look into your Irish heart, you will find a German U-boat,  
A periscope in the rain and a swastika in the sky.  
You were no more neutral, Daddy, than Ireland was,  
Proud and defiant to boast of the safe fjord. (Durcan 106)

The truth is emblematic of a wider circle of referents and points to one of those hypocritically muted elements of Irish history which do not lie neatly with the ideological basis of the state. Yet historical facts are difficult to erase or deny and any attempt to do so will discredit the ideology itself subjecting it to that kind of scrutiny which it seeks to evade by its very nature.

A more explicit instance of difference of opinion is recounted in the poem entitled “Poem Not Beginning with a Line by Pindar” which introduces an instance of outrage provoked by the father’s reaction to a question asked by the son. The complication of the story lies in its political context: the question is prompted by an act of violence, carried out by the IRA, at the expense of ten Protestant workers. The horrors of the case evoke Goya’s nightmare-like vision yet even the painter’s imagination appears poor compared to the ‘ingenuity’ of the terrorists. The son’s question is directed at the father’s judgement – and the father is not simply an elder person with corresponding authority but “The President of the Circuit Court / Of the Republic of Ireland, / Appointed by the party of the Fine Gael” (Durcan 140), a representative of the law and of the official ideology of the state. The answer, then, is at once surprising and conventional: “Teach the Protestants a lesson” and “The law is the law and the law must take its course.” (ibid) This is provided without the slightest sense of

embarrassment on the part of the father when he “[d]oes not prevaricate as he gazes through me” (ibid).

The reply shocks the questioner to such an extent that only a deeply ironic reaction is possible: the nation-building ideology is termed fascism explicitly at first but the speaker checks himself and juxtaposes the official line with hard-grained reality. The party’s idealising image of itself simply contrasts with the vulgarity it embodies and the tight-lipped repetition of the judge-father’s words conclude the poem in a fitting fashion, offering these words as a no-comment attitude to a situation never wholly contemplated by those who formulate assessment over it.

The tension between father and son may occasionally be reduced to near non-existence, as it happens in the poem “Birthday Present”, yet it does not disappear fully. The moment is that of the memory of the 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the speaker, when the son, no longer a boy, is asked by the father to walk into town with him, without being told why exactly this should happen. The account of the walk is given in short and quick lines until the surprise of the father comes – they stop in front of a record shop and he is told to wait outside. Here the lines begin to lengthen lazily, and another character is introduced: a young Fine Gael politician, an “Irish-speaking economist” (Durcan 129), with details of his physical appearance and his label in party circles – the young man is known as Brian Boru. The speaker adds another element to this neutral picture which undermines the expected respectability of serious politicians as well as demythologises the canonical historical figure:

I had seen him the night before  
At a party in Fitzwilliam Square.  
He had had another man lasso him to a chair  
And beat him up with a silk cravat,  
Chanting ‘Long Live Brian Boru’. (ibid)

This detail is as much out of concord with the serious image of a party politician as possible, especially that the scene suggests an element of perversity too, which is difficult to reconcile with the respectable Catholic code of behaviour expected from a person of this social standing.

The father returns from the shop with an LP record and hands it over to the speaker, “mumbling Happy Birthday” (ibid). When he learns about the son having seen the politician, his whole personality undergoes a spectacular change and an effusion of cordial phrases follows – about the young politician, sending the poem towards an anticlimactic conclusion. When later the son expresses his joy over the present, the father asks him the question “Did you ever think of politics as a career?” (Durcan 130) The answer is a somewhat low-key “thank you for the birthday present,” (ibid) echoing the son’s disillusionment about the perhaps not so honest act of giving a present. The question of the father, growing out of the context of the episode of the meeting with the young politician, reveals his secret hope of having his son follow him and perhaps fulfil his

wishes in finding a real heir in his son. The original occasion of the birthday is thus forgotten, and the conclusion is motivated by a chance – the father’s attention is quickly deterred from the personal aspect of his son to the public one, and the title of the poem acquires a profound ironic dimension.

As if to deny the hope of the father in the previous poem, the son’s rebellion is depicted in “Stellar Manipulator”, providing a proper answer to the deflated mood at the end of the birthday. Despite fatherly pressure to become a lawyer the speaker becomes “at the age of twenty-five / Stellar Manipulator / At the London Planetarium” (Durcan 131). The physical distance is complemented by the mental one between a lawyer and a stellar manipulator to turn the speaker into the perfect black sheep of the family. That rebellions are never easy is proved by the various incarnations of the father’s power, the Director of the Planetarium, the father himself and the duty officer taking down the personal data of the speaker, as the speaker has been asked “to act as bailsman” (Durcan 132), naturally at the wish of the father. Yet the son defeats the father by going his own way and there is not much left for the older person but to mumble laconically, when asked about it, the name of his son’s awkward profession of Stellar Manipulator.

“Antwerp, 1984” is a poem in retrospect, it vividly captures a moment of rare intimacy between father and son, a relationship most often described by the poet as strained and anachronistic. The recollection of a train journey in Belgium five years before the death of the father brings together two people in a strange way – mutual understanding is based on shared and intimated thoughts rather than on actual spoken words. The father’s laid back composure reveals some sort of vulnerability and it is the son who ‘does’ the confession – in the poem as well as in the actual action as recollected in the writing. Certainly the perspective colours, if not distorts, the memory of the actual journey (the paradox of elegies, cf. Johnston 196) – the impression is created that the absence of the father at the time of composing the poem allows the son to take liberties with the events and their interpretation, actions and the feelings motivating them.

The occasion is provided by the memory of a train journey at one point of which the two mutually catch each other’s glance reflected in the window as the son is gazing at a poplar tree outside. The two people are caught in the same wish simultaneously: “each of us / Yearning for what the other yearns: / To be a tree – that tree” (Durcan 144). The rare moment of understanding is further illustrated by their way of exchanging of favourite poems. This is followed by the son’s glimpse of the father’s figure – the reflected image of a moment ago is replaced by the actual body in front of the observing eyes, and the perspective comes to be broadened by the knowledge of the years to come in that moment – the years which have passed since that train journey, with the father already dead. The tree metaphor is elaborated on as the son promises to turn a part of the tree into a memorial for the father, a log with the intention of preserving the memory in a fitting manner. The old family name is recollected as the ‘proper name’ to be given to the memorial: “Mac Dhurcáin, / Son of the Melancholy One” (Durcan 145). The name comes alive in reflection:

As we approach the crossing of the Rhine  
 No man could look more melancholy  
 Than you – Melancholy Daddy.  
 God took out a Stanley Knife,  
 Slashed the canvas of life,  
 Called it a carving of your face,  
 Called it you. (Durcan 145-6)

The scene is closed with the picture of the son putting his hand on the quivering knee of the father as they are both engaged in the act of “gazing down into the wide river far below” (Durcan 146). This closing image of father and son gazing into the river below them is symbolic on several levels: the rare moment of sharing the same activity is complemented by the association of river with change, the constant flow of time – with his knowledge of the last five years of the father, the son is contemplating in that moment the past and the future at the same time.

The poem “The Dream in a Peasant’s Bent Shoulders” captures a moment in the decline of the father’s life in which the speaker’s feelings approach pity towards the situation. The father is in the “seventy-bed ward” (Durcan 153), complaining about the disappearance of his pyjama bottoms. The ironic perspective is made clear when the speaker explains that the 28 years of unconditional service for the state are followed by an unexplained removal of the mentioned items of clothing. The wife is outside, crying for the husband, yet the fact that she is not with him indicates that theirs is perhaps not a fully perfect relationship. The ironic juxtaposition of the father’s fidelity to the State with whatever he could offer her makes this point:

You took Mother on one holiday only in twenty-eight years –  
 A pilgrimage by coach to the home of Mussolini  
 And Clara Petachi near Lago di Como,  
 A villa in the hills above Lago di Como. (ibid)

That it was a journey, referred to as a “pilgrimage,” to Mussolini’s home is indicative of the dubious nature of the ideologies governing post-Second World War Irish public life.

The ‘reward’ of the State, the taking away of the pyjama bottoms renders the whole issue of communal fidelity an absurd affair. What is left of the dignity of the retired judge is quickly evaporating under the circumstances. The situation produces a portrait of a human being who is at best a weak and broken man, characterised by features which look awkward considering the earlier life of the same person. Deterioration is almost complete as the father no longer hears the son, he only repeats his own desperate cry of “Hold my hand” (Durcan 154).

In the poem “Cot” the hospital bed, in a short and foreseeable time the would-be deathbed of the father, undergoes a transformation into a cot, and

subsequently the father becomes the son for the brief duration of a vision. The prophet-figure of the matron initiates the vision as she announces that the time of the death of the father is to be expected within half an hour. Her indifference contrasts with the busy telephoning of relatives of the persona. On entering the ward the persona finds the place altered by the transformation of the deathbed into a cot, as if the progress of life could be reversed or turned into a cycle – the father seen as a newborn son also suggests this, if not more than a momentary, dislocation of experience.

The motif that offers the basis for reducing the distance between dying man and newborn son is the helplessness of both characters: though for different reasons, both rely on the assistance of other humans for staying alive. Innocence is restored to the aged parent in the tenderness of the vision yet the next image undermines this idyllic moment: the old man is a “baby dinosaur / With an expiry date” (Durcan 157-8). As the old man’s sleep is interrupted for a brief spell of consciousness, there is time enough for him to wave goodbye to his wife, the persona’s mother, and the light goes out again as he goes back to sleep. The closing lines of the poem create an ambiguous termination as the identity of the speaker in these lines is not clarified: “Don’t fret son, / Don’t ever again fret yourself” (Durcan 158) can be a taking leave of the persona of his father as well as the reverse of this situation.

The first section is built of progressively shorter lines, which creates the shape of a downwardly narrowing passage, so the typographical layout of the poem, one narrowing paragraph and one paragraph consisting of short lines also imitates the decline depicted in the poem, thus even at first glance the poem suggests the direction it takes and it provides a foreseeable conclusion to the sequence of poems and to what they attempt to present.

Durcan’s representation of his father takes a different course from that of other poets. The public figure is partly viewed from a perspective in which the public dimension is also strongly considered and is found to be a significant force in the shaping of the character of the father, at least on the surface level. Durcan’s speaker never fails to point out the hypocrisies of the father’s stance, presenting a strong Freudian dimension to his treatment, yet there are also moments in which filial love and respect are expressed, hinting at affection operating between the two people. The final manoeuvre of approaching the last moments of the father’s life from a perspective normally associated with beginnings suggests the speaker’s wish for a new relation, a different and perhaps a more intimate one without any oppressive and conditioned public aspect, yet the finiteness of the father’s life serves as a reminder that such a relation has only an imaginary dimension to exist.

## References

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