

Text of the introductory address delivered by **Dr Lucy Collins**, UCD School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin on 16 June 2011, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* on **Paul Durcan**

Paul Durcan is renowned for his outspoken, comic, and often deeply moving poems, the fruit of many years' attentive observation of life in Ireland. By turns savage and tender, his poems satirise political duplicity and bourgeois complacency in surreal ways, exemplifying a Yeatsian view of art as 'a vision of reality'. Born in Dublin on October 16th 1944, Durcan was educated at Gonzaga College and at UCD. His earliest poems, which appeared in the collaborative volume *Endsville*, reveal him as an iconoclast and an aesthetic risk-taker. After a brief period in London, he moved to Cork and graduated from UCC with first class honours in Archaeology and Medieval History. In 1974 he won the Patrick Kavanagh Award for poetry.



While Durcan's capacity to challenge poetic expectations was clear from this early stage, it was in his second collection, *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor*, that the characteristic aspects of his poetry were established: his forensic scrutiny of hypocrisy, his relentless self-questioning, his unique blend of the real and the fantastic. *The Selected Paul Durcan*, published in 1982, gathers some of his most powerful poems from this early period, emphasising his outrage at political misconduct and paramilitary violence. Durcan is the only poet born in the Republic of Ireland to address sectarian issues throughout his writing career. His poem "In Memory of Those Murdered in the Dublin Massacre, May 1974" powerfully articulates the effects of violence, concluding

The aproned old woman, who's been sweeping the floor  
Has mop stuck in bucket, leaning on it;  
And she's trembling all over, like a flower in the breeze.  
She'd make a mighty fine explosion now, if you were to blow her  
up;  
An explosion of petals, of aeons, and the waitresses too, flying  
breasts and limbs,  
For a free Ireland.

Durcan is aware of the difficulties inherent in the representation of such unspeakable acts, in a country 'where words also have died an unnatural death'. It is his own refusal to allow words to die that makes him an important witness to the need for critical self-reflection in Ireland today.

Self-reflection is a process that Durcan himself engages in relentlessly. Allied to his anatomisation of Irish society is his unflinching exposure of personal suffering. The title of his 1985 volume, *The Berlin Wall Cafe*, suggests a location of great political significance, yet it is the failure of intimate human relationships that preoccupies the poet here. In his next collection, *Going Home to Russia*, he again depicts the complex relationship between the speaker and a strange yet familiar country in intimate, sexual terms. The Whitbread Award-winning *Daddy Daddy*, from 1990, turns to the troubled relationship between the poet and his father and, by extension, explores the ways in which close familial bonds and their difficult dynamics of power have shaped Irish society.

Durcan is a prolific poet, with more than twenty volumes of poetry to his name. This indicates both the breadth of his cultural engagement, and the immediacy needed to render personal and political conditions accurately. It shows too his endless capacity to renew himself as a poet, from the visual inspiration of *Crazy About Women* to the political directness of *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil*. For Durcan, risk-taking is an essential part of creativity, and his willingness to face up to the most difficult of subjects extends our understanding of poetry's potential. A variety of voices, male and female, can be heard throughout his work, challenging authority and allowing human vulnerability to achieve fullest expression. The multiplicity of voices also gives special meaning to Durcan's mesmeric performances of his work.

Within these performed narratives, extraordinary rhythms unfold. Dramatic monologues merge with ballad forms, with songs and prayers, a variety evident even in the titles of the poems: "The Drimoleague Blues", "My Belovèd Compares Herself to a Pint of Stout", "Dancing with Brian Friel". Mixed forms allow the voice flexibility and avoid distorting the complex rhythms of speech. Yet in spite of their relaxed idiom, these are crafted poems, observant of the idiosyncracies of individual experience and of the subversive possibilities of language. The attentiveness that characterises Durcan's poetry is also evident in his critical method. In each of the memorable lectures that he gave as Ireland Professor of Poetry, he focused on the work of a single poet, reading it with the utmost care and insight. Such sensitivity is a testament to the important role that Durcan played during the period of his professorship, exemplifying integrity of vision combined with responsiveness as a mentor and teacher. A similar equilibrium lies at the heart of his poetic achievement. His acute eye for political hypocrisy and social distortion is balanced by an ability to picture the world transformed; by a belief in the possibility of goodness even amid the shortfalls of self and society. He prompts us to see poetry as a vital element in our moral formation, and the writing of it as a redemptive act.

*Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,*

*Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.*