



HAL
open science

Paul Durcan's Self-Portraits As Dialogues

Cathy Roche-Liger

► **To cite this version:**

Cathy Roche-Liger. Paul Durcan's Self-Portraits As Dialogues. *Études irlandaises*, 2018, Irish Self-Portrait: the Artist in Curved Mirrors, 43 (1), 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5489 . hal-02523682

HAL Id: hal-02523682

<https://hal.science/hal-02523682>

Submitted on 20 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Paul Durcan's Self-Portraits as Dialogues

Cathy Roche-Liger



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5489>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5489

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 May 2018

ISBN: 978-2-7535-7578-3

ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Cathy Roche-Liger, « Paul Durcan's Self-Portraits as Dialogues », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 43-1 | 2018, Online since 30 May 2018, connection on 25 September 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5489> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5489

This text was automatically generated on 25 September 2019.

© Presses universitaires de Rennes

Paul Durcan's Self-Portraits as Dialogues

Cathy Roche-Liger

- 1 One of the hallmarks of Paul Durcan's aesthetics is hybridity. This contemporary Irish poet refuses categories between the different forms of art and writes an intermedial poetry in which the pictorial dimension is prominent. His love for painting is visible in his very first poem (unpublished), a poem about Vincent Van Gogh, triggered by a revelation during a stay in France when he was a teenager, in 1960. Referring to his discovery of la Pointe du Raz, and indicating a pictorial way of looking at the world, he later declared: "I felt that all I was looking at had been created by Vincent Van Gogh"¹. In the preface to his 1991 ekphrastic book inspired by the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland, *Crazy About Women* (below-mentioned *CAW*), he wrote:

An artist such as myself with the two spouses of poetry and picture-making is not looked upon favourably by the chaperones of art. [...] Art is not a prison with poetry in one cell, picture-making in another cell and so on. [...] The challenge of art is to be inclusive and *Crazy About Women*, born out of a lifetime's romance with the National Gallery of Ireland, is my attempt to be so inclusive as to make the intercourse between what is painted and what is written as reciprocal as it is inevitable².

- 2 Such words indicate both his passion and an intimate conception of *ekphrasis* as a dialogue, a real exchange and interaction between the verbal and the visual. The majority of the many *ekphraseis* present throughout his work have been inspired by portraits and self-portraits, thus revealing a special interest in this genre traditionally centred on the "(re)presentation" of a human person, and in particular of his face³. The poet has also transformed the still-life and landscapes into portraits and/or self-portraits⁴. He has created a large and varied gallery of portraits – of strangers, friends and loved ones – and has depicted himself repeatedly. What kind of mirrors does he use to look at himself and create self-portraits? How does he both magnify himself and expose his imperfections and frailty in his self-portraits while playing with the genre itself? How does he create a dialogue between word and image, between portraits and self-portraits, between his representations and those of others or other paintings, and

how does he generate new visions through self-portrayal? To answer these questions, this essay will first analyze the double paradoxical movement of magnification and self-exposure. It will then examine how self-portrayal is conceived as a dialogue, further blurring the line between portrait and self-portrait.

Paul Durcan's self-portraits between whimsical magnification and exposure

- 3 Throughout his work, Durcan has represented himself many times. His self-portraits are either presented as such as in “Self-Portrait, Nude with Steering Wheel”, or as part of poems as in “The Lamb in the Oven”, or superimposed upon portraits of others and upon pictorial works of art as in *ekphraseis* such as “The Vision of Saint Hubert (*after Brueghel*)”⁵. Though not all his self-depictions may be considered as pictorial, it is often the case. Most are both textual and pictorial, even if the degree of their pictorial saturation can vary, ranging from mere pictorial references or fleeting “painterly effects”—via his framing by the structure of a door or to his reflection in a mirror for instance as in “A Day in the Cave” or “October Early Morning Haircut”⁶—to minimal and full *ekphraseis* of invented or transformed works of art or of photographs⁷. In “Self-Portrait '95”⁸ for example, the only pictorial element is the title itself, through the reference to the painting genre. Here, the poet expresses his sense of alienation:

Paul Durcan would try the patience of the Queen of Tonga
 When he was in Copacabana he was homesick for Annaghmakerrig;
 When he got back to Annaghmakerrig
 He was homesick for Copacabana.

- 4 He plays with the reference both to the song by Edmundo Ros and to the historical event it relates, through which the Queen of Tonga (1900–1965) brought her country to international attention when she attended the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in London. The poet gives voice to his own paradoxical feelings towards Ireland, while indirectly describing himself as the Irish version of this queen. Moreover, Tonga's Queen Sālote wrote poetry and songs, contributing to the preservation and creative use of the Tongan language. By playing with the multiple pictorial, musical or historical references suggested through this four-line condensed poem, the apparently self-deprecating self-portrait turns out to be a way to put into relief his own creative whimsical abilities. Finally, while underlining his complex feelings towards his native land, he reasserts his Irishness⁹. This deceptively simple and straightforward poem turns out to be a multilayered self-portrait exemplifying the complexity both of the poet and of the genre along with the games on visions implied and at stake when the artist represents himself. Perceiving this complexity requires close scrutiny, reminiscent of such that is necessary to the task of self-portrayal itself. It reminds us that it is not a truth in which one may place blind trust, but the way the poet wishes to stage himself; it reminds us too that (self-)portrayal is an intimate process and act which may work as a (public) statement as well as a shared intimacy.
- 5 For Jean-Luc Nancy, each portrait is a self-portrait inasmuch as it involves and fulfils a relation to a self, to oneself¹⁰. But for him, the adage attributed to Cosimo de Medici “*ogni pittore dipinge sè*” (“every painter paints himself”) cannot be separated from its opposite: “*every self-portrait is first of all a portrait*”. It “is not the representation of a self: each time it is the enactment of the subjectivity or of the being-oneself in itself [...] It is

the implementation of exposure, that is to say of *our* exposure”¹¹. Moreover, to him, showing the outside aspect of someone and diving inside someone are both opposite and complementary sides in portraits¹². He goes further and indicates that “in his portrait [...] the other retreats. He retreats while showing himself”¹³. Though this paradox cannot be resolved, and a part of irrepresentability will always remain, to some extent, a painted portrait shows the inner self in a way that cannot be shown in another way. The aim of the portrait or of the self-portrait is an “unveiling” that would “bring the self out of the painting” on the condition that it would “bring to light” the core, “the structure of the subject”; “painting or representing is therefore no longer reproducing, not even revealing, but producing the *exposed-subject*”¹⁴. Durcan plays with this idea of portrayal in particular, or pictorial representation in general as an “unveiling” enabling the viewer to discover the true self of the persons represented. He whimsically expresses this idea in his *ekphraseis* of both “Sleeping Nude, after Sarah Longley” and “A Portrait of the Artist’s Wife / A Self-Portrait”, after William Leech, where the viewer could, but does not, discover this reality: “If you were to glance up now / [...] You would see me as I am”¹⁵. Though Durcan plays with that notion, he is also aware of how powerful the act of (self-)portrayal can be. Nonetheless, he does not choose mimesis to show himself as he is but transforms himself to better disclose an inner truth that would or could otherwise stay hidden. The movement implied by these transformations is also a way of exemplifying this unveiling through self-representation as a process and enabling the reader to witness it.

- 6 To do so, he can metamorphose himself, for example turning himself into an animal to expose his shortcomings¹⁶. In “The Lamb in the Oven” for instance, he describes Cita nursing a lamb and his resulting feelings of “jealousy” by depicting himself as an insect through a painterly effect created by his framing by a window:

At the kitchen window my charcoal jowls Peeping in, grinding their molars; [...] At the windowpane of jealousy I woo you [...] ¹⁷

- 7 The mirror he uses – here a window – is not mimetic, reflecting external features resembling his outer appearance, but one displaying an image corresponding to an inner feeling or truth – here jealousy – and bringing it to light. He does not look at himself in it, but the metamorphosed self through which he unveils himself appears when he is looking through it, “Peeping in”, looking inside the room and into himself. As a consequence, the mirror itself is transformed; it is no longer a mere “kitchen window” but becomes “the windowpane of jealousy” as if it had been contaminated by the poet’s feeling.
- 8 The mirror he uses for self-examinatory purposes and to bring out an inner truth can also be that of painting. His *ekphrasis* “The Holy Family With St John”¹⁸ opens with the poet admiring the painting attributed to Granacci, and “[reveling]” in it¹⁹. This vision of the quintessential family reveals, by way of contrast, his own loneliness. It triggers the depiction of himself as a man “without a family”, and leads to his transformation into a leaf to highlight this loneliness. He becomes “– a leaf in driftwood –”²⁰. This condensed self-portrait of the lonely poet as a leaf appears as a painterly effect framed by the dashes which separate it from the rest of the stanza.
- 9 Furthermore, the images of others (re)presented in paintings can work as mirrors in which he can recognize (a part of) himself. In consequence, he can superimpose himself onto the representations of other people. This appropriation of the painting can lead to a reversal or a change of the meaning of the painting. In his *ekphrasis* entitled “The

Vision of Saint Hubert”, he becomes the stag of the painting by Brueghel and Rubens to represent his physical and mental urge to possess his former wife again. Moreover, the hunting hounds of the painting become the symbol of the poet’s self-pity: “I gathered round me all my Dogs of Self-Pity, / Long, lean, Bloodhounds of Self-Pity”²¹. He plays with the process of identification with the painting, abolishes the distance separating him from the work of art, projects himself onto it, and transforms the sense of the vision conveyed by the painting. The “intercourse”²², the dialogue with the work of art, and the ekphrastic process of interaction bring forth his own revelation: that he must leave Nessa alone and love her forever but yet from a distance.

10 In addition, the mirror he uses to look at and into himself can be the eyes of other people, the way they look at him, how they describe and consider him. In confronting his own self-portrayal with the perceptions of others, both positive and negative points of view can coexist, and create a double paradoxical movement in poems such as “Self-Portrait, Nude with Steering Wheel” and “Exterior with Plant, Reflection Listening, after Lucian Freud”, an *ekphrasis* of *Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening (Self-Portrait)*²³.

11 In “Self-Portrait, Nude with Steering Wheel”, the general movement is one of self-exposure and self-deprivation. This movement is built through the contrast between the mirror offered by the reported words of the poet’s lover, and the mirror in which he looks at himself to depict himself. Here, Durcan plays with the idea according to which we become the reflection sent back to us by others. With self-derision, he systematically takes the counterpart of his lover’s positive point of view:

I am forty-five and do not Know how to drive a car – And you tell me I am cultured.

[...]

Forty-five years sitting in the passenger seat With my hands folded primly in my lap – And you think I am liberated.

Forty-five years getting in and out of cars And I do not know where the dipstick is – And you tell me that I am a superb lover²⁴.

12 He eroticizes the car, playing with sexual innuendo, to further imply he is a clumsy inhibited lover. The process of self-deprivation leads him to depict himself naked through the minimal *ekphrasis* that concludes the poem and echoes its title: “Nude, with a steering wheel in my hands²⁵”. Durcan symbolically and literally discloses himself through the poetical dialogue with his lover, as if this dialogue were sexual foreplay leading to his undressing. His nudity echoes and mimics the process of disclosure which self-portrayal implies, or can be perceived as the “the implementation of exposure”, to put it in Nancy’s words²⁶. Though he be naked, he is nonetheless holding a wheel, which symbolizes what remains of his manliness, as well as of his ability to direct and control his life. Moreover, although he takes the counterpart of his lover’s positive view, such a representation still appears on the page.

13 In “Exterior with Plant, Reflection Listening, after Lucian Freud”²⁷, the poet plays with expressions of admiration. His choice of setting his poem “Across the street from Oisín Kelly sculpture of Larkin” is a way of introducing a sculptural element of homage and elegy that foreshows his *ekphrasis* of “the most elegiac photograph ever taken of my mother”. This also helps him turn his poem into a monument to her memory²⁸. In contrast with these artistic forms of appraisal, the poet introduces a meeting in the street with a man ironically described as “self-righteous”. The latter’s direct speech enables the poet to present himself in both a positive and a negative way that makes him different from the figures deserving only admiration: “My wife and daughters are admirers of yours / But I have to tell you that I am not / An admirer of yours.” In that

sense, it makes him a mixture of people comprising people like his mother but also people considered or portrayed in a negative, critical way, like his father who is satirically associated with Mussolini and Fascism through his mother's supposedly reported speech: "Telling me how Daddy played in 1938 / A game of golf with Mussolini in Milan / In the Garden of Fascism Golf Club." Nevertheless, the double perspective offered by the passer-by is replaced with the final vision of the poet's image reflected in the "passenger window" of a car, even if the self-portrait is not the central element which is the *ekphrasis* of the photographic portrait glorifying his mother:

I take out my pocket camera and snap her
 And when I get back the print from the camera shop
 It is the most elegiac photograph ever taken of my mother,
 A face on the wind, all epic and ephemera,
 And over her shoulder you can see a man with a pocket camera,
 His reflection,
 In the passenger window of a passing Nissan Bluebird²⁹.

- 14 This self-portrayal is presented as the unintentional result of chance since the mirror in which his image appears is not an intended device but the "passenger window", not even the windscreen, of a "passing" car (my italics). Through this reflection echoing that of Lucian Freud in his self-portrait, Durcan associates himself with the painter, but also with his "glamorous"³⁰ mother since he includes himself in her photographic portrait. The fact that he does not state that it is his reflection but that of "a man with a pocket camera" contributes to further the merging in L. Freud's image. What could first appear as a reflection in a sort of concave mirror, giving more importance to everything but him, transpires to be a way of magnifying himself. Isolated on a line, the element "His reflection" is put into relief, which indicates how important this "reflection" really is. But whimsically, the poet chooses to delay the discovery of this other version of himself by belatedly noticing his own presence in the photograph.
- 15 Therefore, in "Exterior with Plant, Reflection Listening, *after Lucian Freud*³¹", the poet turns the *ekphrasis* of L. Freud's self-portrait into a succession of portraits like that of his mother or of people in the street, before finally including his own self-portrait in the description of his mother's photographic portrait. L. Freud's self-portrait is deconstructed and reconstructed in an indirect manner in this non-mimetic *ekphrasis* through "a bunch of flowers" echoing the ubiquitous plant in the painting at the beginning of the poem, through the man heard in the street by the poet, and through the poet's reflection in the window of the car at the end. This intertwining of portraits and self-portraits corresponds to a tendency in Durcan's work where he frequently blurs the already unclear line separating portraits and self-portraits. In consequence, he plays with the notion of vision and with the (re)presentation of a self. He establishes a dialogue between himself and others: between his own perception and that of others, between his own representation, characteristics and features, and those painted by others. To better highlight the importance of such a tendency, this article will now analyze further this blurring of the distinction between portraits and self-portraits. It will mainly focus on the intertwining of *ekphrasis* and self-portrayal to note how Durcan creates a playful, fruitful dialogue through words and between words and image. It will argue that such a process can be considered as a form of connection sought by the poet.

Self-portrayal as a dialogue further blurring the line between portrait and self-portrait

- 16 In line with his rejection of the separation between the different forms of art³², Durcan generates generic indeterminacy and voluntarily blurs the already thin and permeable frontier between portraits and self-portraits. He entitles poems which are portraits “self-portraits” as “Self-Portrait as an Irish Jew”³³ which is the poet’s portrait of Thomas Joyce, the father of the painter Mark Joyce, Durcan’s son-in-law. Conversely, he transforms portraits or self-portraits of other people into a self-portrait by superimposing his image onto the portraits or self-portraits of others. In “The Repentant Peter, *after Francisco de Goya*”³⁴, Durcan transposes the representation of the saint into a self-portrait through which he depicts himself in a slightly grotesque manner, underlining his vulnerability:

Last thing I do before getting into bed
Is kneel down beside bed
In my Marks & Spencer’s women’s pyjamas,
Which I purchased thinking they were men’s pyjamas,
A womanless man on a shopping spree³⁵.

- 17 This foreshadows the final vision in which his frailty is emphasized by the repetitions:

You taught me that like you I am destitute animal,
Frailer Than plump lamb under candlelit chestnut,
Frailer Than mother cat wheezing in cartwheel,
Frailer Than galaxies of geese,
And that behind all my sanctimonious lechery,
Behind all my petty pleading,
Behind all my hysterical beseeching,
It is all night, with only daylight above it³⁶.

- 18 The dialogue he creates with the work of art through the ekphrastic poem is complexified by other forms of exchange: an argument with Nessa, his former wife, but most of all former relationships and a new dialogue through poetry with his dead father³⁷. This dialogue also has a decidedly accusatory ring to it³⁸ and can be considered as the way Durcan recognizes past trauma, present consequences, and tries to come to terms with it through writing. Durcan intertwines here different visions and perspectives: Nessa and his Dad’s points of view, the way he perceives himself, his father, and the representation of Saint Peter by Goya. He blurs the frontiers between the pictorial representation of another self, self-portrayal, and the perception of himself by other people.
- 19 In some cases, it is even impossible to draw a distinction between portrait and self-portrait, the representation of another being or of himself. In “Aristotle with a Bust of Homer, *after Rembrandt*”³⁹ for instance, in the first stanza, it is impossible to determine whether the poet makes Rembrandt’s representation of Aristotle talk or if he talks to Homer in identifying with the Aristotle of the painting. Afterwards, nonetheless, the identification appears more clearly, when he touches the bust of Homer and seems to become Aristotle. This identification and dialogue with the work of art lead to an introspection that causes him to flee and fall. Because Durcan offers the reader his personal view of the works of art, this can lead to such an interaction that the line between *ekphrasis* of the work of art and self-portrayal is blurred. The painting has a strong impact on the poet that he makes the reader witness through his poem, but his words consequently also modifies the reader’s perception of the work of art. This is an exemplification of the dialogue wished by the poet and expressed in the preface of *CAW*, that is to say of his “attempt to be so inclusive as to make the

intercourse between what is painted and what is written as reciprocal as it is inevitable”⁴⁰.

- 20 Likewise, in “The Orientalist, after Kitaj”⁴¹, the *ekphrasis* of R. B. Kitaj’s self-portrait as an expatriate⁴², the line between *ekphrasis* of a self-portrait and self-portrayal is totally blurred. Here, Durcan’s conception of both self-portrayal and *ekphrasis* as dialogues is expressed by the form of the poem itself. In it, two voices echoing, questioning and answering one another can be heard. The second voice, transcribed in italics in each distich, appears as a thought or a deformed echo of the first. This mimics the act of self-portrayal as a process of self-contemplation through which one questions and explores oneself. This process also enables the poet to symbolize his dialogue with R. B. Kitaj, a painter he admires and whose exhibition “The Artist’s Eye” was the inspiration behind his three ekphrastic collections *CAW*, *GMYPH*, and *WWE*⁴³.

The Ringsend Hermit⁴⁴. *The Ringsend Hermit? And Orientalist. And what? The Orientalist.*

*The Orientalist*⁴⁵.

- 21 Here, the poet includes his self-portrait through the minimal *ekphrasis* composed by the title-effect “The Ringsend Hermit”. Through these words, the reader can picture the poet in front of “The Orientalist” by Kitaj, progressively merging through words in this painting to become “The Orientalist”, just as Kitaj did through his painting. But he can also imagine Durcan recognizing Kitaj as himself, “The Ringsend Hermit”, as another self-portrait he could have painted of himself, before depicting him again as “The Orientalist”. With the echo effects, Durcan creates a questioning that generates multiple visions but in every case, he magnifies himself by associating himself with R.B. Kitaj.

- 22 This conception of self-portrayal as a dialogue both with oneself and with others also appears in the *ekphrasis* of a painting by Moyra Barry entitled “Self-Portrait in the Artist Studio”⁴⁶ where the artist mentally connects with an old Master, namely Vincent Van Gogh, while painting her self-portrait. It is presented as a “ritual” leading both to self-knowledge and exposure, but also as an offering when she invites the figure of the Father, that of the Creator, and the viewer along with Him, to share her essence.

[...] I [...] Sat to myself To perform the ritual of the self-portrait Calling to mind Vincent in Provence, I performed it as a chanson to my studio [...] But also as a chanson to my head, Not evading my cowlike eyes, my rosebud mouth, Plucking the fragility of my skull. Father, what you must do Is to cup my skull in your hands, In your three hands, And drink from it, Drink from my skull Until you have drunk me To the dregs Of my cerebral juices. You will know, Consumed by my grief, By my humour, The angostura bitters of daughterdom⁴⁷.

- 23 Self-portraits in general can often be a way for artists to state something about what creation is and to show the process of creation, as the painter painting himself. Durcan chooses to do so here but through the *ekphrasis* of the self-portrait of another person. He underlines the violence of such an act too by the sacrificial dimension he confers on this ritual. Similarly, in “Casa Mariana Trauma”, Durcan voices how traumatic the process of creation can be through the portrayal of a woman who symbolises the Artist. As a fusion between a painter and a poet, this artist could be seen as an indirect way for Durcan to represent himself:

She is wringing locutions, wringing shrunken, Faded, threadbare words To squeeze oil paint out of tubes of language: The trauma of the painter as the poet.⁴⁸

- 24 The poet also expresses the mythopoeic vision of art as a source of isolation for artists in “Portrait of the Artist⁴⁹” or in *ekphraseis* of works of art representing other artists such as “Supper Time” or “Thomas Moore In His Study At Sloperton Cottage”⁵⁰. This aspect is seen too in “St Galganus” when he describes the lack of connection between himself and the teenager, the distance separating them being the result of the former’s status as artist:

the space between you and I -
The space of a table - the work of a lifetime:
The work of an artist⁵¹

- 25 Throughout his work, Durcan has repeatedly depicted himself as lonely and alienated, while giving voice to his need for connection or his nostalgia towards lost forms of connection and a lost sense of belonging. In “A Day in the Cave” for instance, he writes: “I suffer from an affliction / Labelled inconsolable loneliness”⁵². In “Windfall”, 8 Parnell Hill, Cork”, he depicts his alienation, anguish and utter loneliness while contrasting it with former representations of himself as a family man, a “Daddy” first in a description flooded with pictorial elements and then in the minimal *ekphraseis* of the series of photographs in albums:

At home I used sit in a winged chair by the window Overlooking the river and the factory chimneys, [...] The river a reflection of itself in its own waters, Goya sketching Goya among the smoky mirrors. The industrial vista was my Mont Saint-Victoire; While my children sat on my knees watching TV Their mother, my wife, reclined on the couch Knitting a bright-coloured scarf, drinking a cup of black coffee, Smoking a cigarette – one of her own roll-ups. [...] Pastels and etchings on the four walls, and over the mantelpiece *Van Gogh's Grave* and *Lovers in Water*;⁵³
A room wallpapered in books and family photograph albums Chronicling the adventures and metamorphoses of family life [...] Mammy and Daddy holding hands on the Normandy Beaches; Mammy and Daddy at the wedding of Jeremiah and Margot; Mammy and Daddy queueing up for *Last Tango in Paris*; Boating on the Shannon, climbing mountains in Kerry; Building sandcastles in Killala, camping in Barley Cove; Picnicking in Moone, hide-and-go-seek in Clonmacnoise; Riding horses, cantering, jumping fences; Pushing out toy yachts in the pond in the Tuileries; The Irish College revisited in the Rue des Irlandais; Sipping an *orange pressée* through a straw on the roof of the Beaubourg; Dancing in Père Lachaise, weeping at Auvers⁵⁴.

- 26 Durcan does not choose to depict himself as a single uniquely self-examining entity. He prefers to stage himself in a wider context, surrounded by loved ones and art – books, pastels, etchings. He highlights his links and relations with others, connecting himself both with his (lost) family and with other artists. Art and writing are here the only way to reach back and enjoy anew a form of lost felicity. One might speak of substitution. Furthermore, by indirectly associating himself with Goya, Cézanne or Van Gogh, he magnifies himself⁵⁵.
- 27 In his 2015 collection, *The Days of Surprise*, which has a strong autobiographical dimension and in which he represents himself repeatedly while recollecting memories, self-portrayal is also a moment of meditation upon life and death, love and estrangement. In “*Il Bambino Dormiente*” for instance⁵⁶, an *ekphrasis* of Giovanni Bellini’s tempera *Madonna in trono che adora il Bambino dormiente*⁵⁷, he first describes himself as alienated and alone in front of the painting in an empty room. He then merges with it, superimposing himself and his mother on the Christ and the Virgin in this “sacred family portrait” to make peace with his life and death, to reconnect with memories and

the original, primordial form of connection he experienced – the shared bond with his mother – and, as a result, with humanity. Writing appears again as a dialogue, namely here between his present and his past, himself and a work of art. Art is where he seeks and finds “HUMAN RESOURCES”⁵⁸.

- 28 In “The Hammock”⁵⁹, the last poem of the 2016 collection *WWE*, a volume through which he expresses his love for and faith in art, *ekphrasis* and self-portrayal are intertwined once again. Durcan depicts himself alone in a museum space: reclining on a sculpture, enjoying art, remembering and re-experiencing his delightful visits to the Toledo Museum of Art. This moment is presented as out of time, as a peaceful, enchanted rest he wishes to prolong and succeeds in prolonging through writing:

Like any self-respecting, horizontal hobo
 Or upright, vertical citizen of the Union
 I am a connoisseur of public seating [...]
 Here I am reposing like a stag tilting in full flight,
 Swaying in the breeze under oak tree and maple,
 My carefree dangled fingers wine-tasting uncut grass
 In urban parkland, watching the auto-traffic [...]
 And across Monroe Street the façade of the Toledo Museum of Art –
 That scintillating flight of steps, the Ionic Columns,
 Alexander Calder’s scarlet *Stegosaurus* stalking the red brick terrace.
 I closed my eyes and smiled! O Memory!
 O Robert Henri, O Kitaj, O Sherwood Anderson, O Hart Crane, O Ohio!
 This hammock is a thing of perfect balance and, therefore beauty.
 “I balance all, bring all to mind.”
 “O commemorate me where there is water”.
 I opened my eyes and smiled.
 I crossed my feet and played with my prayer beads
 With my hands in my pockets. Once I was a minor Football star...
 O yes! And later... well... later... later...
 I had appointments for this morning but I’m going nowhere.
 LIBRA OK.
 I’m gonna snooze in my hammock all morning – in my glass Hammock on Monroe.
 For an hour or two, know, live and inhale, exhale Peace⁶⁰.

- 29 Here it is not his loneliness but a moment of blissful solitude that is presented. This humorous self-depiction is again a way of magnifying himself by associating himself with all the great artists whose works he enjoyed and wrote about. These include not only those exhibited in the museum, but two great Irish poets as well: W. B. Yeats and his mentor, Patrick Kavanagh, with the two quotations respectively from “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” and “Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin”⁶¹. By quoting these lines, he plays with the way he wants to be remembered after his death. He also presents himself as a sort of new Romantic, electing to bear the Wordsworthian mantle⁶². He finally underlines how, through words and imagination, he can be whoever he wants, and how he can reinvent himself endlessly.
- 30 Thus, the poet constantly depicts himself through his work, “[c]hronicling [his] adventures and metamorphoses”, to put it in his words⁶³. Through self-portrayal, to paraphrase Nancy’s thought, Durcan both retreats within his portraits while unveiling himself and producing himself⁶⁴. In so doing, he questions himself, explores himself, exposes his weaknesses, but also reinvents himself and enters into dialogue with people who made him what he is, i.e. loved ones and admired artists. He glorifies himself and art by associating himself with them but he also brings to light and makes light of his

shortcomings and of his frailty. Self-portrayal does not only appear as a self-centered process but as a whimsical, playful process too. It is a way to show interactions through art, and to find the forms of connection the poet is seeking, a sort of dialogue not only between the verbal and the visual, a dialogue which corresponds to his conception of art as a form of “intercourse”⁶⁵.

NOTES

1. Private interview with Paul Durcan, Dublin, August 2010.
2. Paul Durcan, *Crazy About Women* (below-mentioned CAW), Dublin, The National Gallery of Ireland, 1991, p. xi.
3. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'autre portrait*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2014, p. 14, 16.
4. Cf. for instance “Dawn, Connemara” in Durcan, CAW, p. 107; “The Mantelpiece” in Durcan, *Give Me Your Hand* (below-mentioned GMYH), London, Macmillan, National Gallery Publications, 1994, p. 148; or “Still Life with Grapes, Chestnuts, Melons, and a Marble Cube” in Durcan, *Wild, Wild Erie, Poems Inspired by Works of Art in the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio* (below-mentioned WWE), Toledo, Ohio, Toledo Museum of Art, 2016, pp. 41-42, which ends with the line: “For only a Still Life is never still!”. These three collections can be described as a trilogy or a tryptic, and are composed of *ekphraseis* respectively inspired by works from The National Gallery of Ireland, The National Gallery in London and the TMA in Ohio.
5. Respectively in Durcan, *Daddy, Daddy*, (below-mentioned DD), Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 1990, pp. 17-18; Durcan, *Cries of an Irish Caveman* (below-mentioned CIC), London, The Harvill Press, 2001, p. 101; and Durcan, *The Berlin Wall Café*, Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 1985, p. 69.
6. Durcan, CIC, *op. cit.*, p. 160: “Paul – in the door of his cave pawing air”, here he humorously presents himself after his expectations have been disappointed; Durcan, *Praise in which I live and Move and Have my Being*, London, Harvill Secker, 2012, p. 17: “I stared into the long looking glass at his dark face / Wide-eyed over my white head” – here he briefly presents a double portrait and vision, that of the barber cutting his hair and of himself. Through this poem, which plays on the notions of vision, (mis)representation and perception, Durcan seems to advocate playfulness and unexpected behaviour, while portraying himself via his hair, that is to say as “white-haired”, yet deceptively “hoary” and truly “overgrown”.
7. In using this gradation, we refer here to Liliane Louvel according to whom *ekphrasis* is the higher level of pictorial saturation in a text, whereas the “painterly effect [*effet-tableau*]” (my translation), is the lower level. Cf. Liliane Louvel, *Texte/Image, Images à lire, textes à voir*, Rennes, PUR, 2002, pp. 34-42.
8. Durcan, *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil, One Hundred Poems* (below-mentioned Greetings), London, The Harvill Press, 1999, p. 119.

9. Likewise he expresses his Irishness when he describes himself as an “Irish poet” (Cf. Durcan, *Greetings*, “Waiting for a Toothbrush to Fall out of the Sky”, p. 221), but also similar feelings of dislocation in “Beatrice Monti della Corte von Rezzori” (Durcan, *The Art of Life*, London, The Harvill Press, 2004, pp. 82-83) or in “Ireland 1977”, a portrait of Ireland through which he conveys his feelings of perpetual exile and alienation: “I’ve become so lonely, I could die’, he writes, / The native who is in exile is his native land” (Durcan, *Sam’s Cross*, Dublin, Profile poetry, 1978, p. 42).

10. All the translations of Jean-Luc Nancy’s words in this article are mine.

11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2000, 2006, pp. 33-35: “tout autoportrait est d’abord un portrait”; “Celui-ci [le portrait] n’est pas la représentation d’un sujet: il est chaque fois l’exécution de la subjectivité ou de l’être-soi en tant que tel. [...] Il est la mise en œuvre de l’exposition, c’est-à-dire de notre exposition [...]”.

12. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’autre portrait*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18: “Manifester au dehors et plonger au-dedans sont dans le portrait à la fois contraires et complémentaires”.

13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’autre portrait*, *op. cit.*, p. 18: “dans son portrait [...] l’autre se retire. Il se retire en se montrant [...]”.

14. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, *op. cit.*, p. 16: “un dévoilement, qui ferait sortir le moi du tableau [...] peindre ou figurer n’est plus alors reproduire, même pas révéler, mais produire l’exposé-sujet”.

15. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. 121, l. 11-13. Cf. also Durcan, *The Art of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 48, l. 1: “If you could see me as I am”.

16. For further information about the use of animal metamorphosis in P. Durcan’s work, as a way both of exposing his shortcomings and frailty and of glorifying himself in self-portraits and portraits of other artists, cf. Cathy Roche-Liger, “The Animal Metamorphoses of the Artist in Paul Durcan’s Intermedial Poetry” in Daragh O’Connell, Michael G. Kelly, *Comparative Becomings, Studies in Transition*, Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 157-175.

17. Durcan, *CIC*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

18. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Durcan, *The Berlin Wall Café*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

22. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

23. Lucian Freud, *Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening (self-portrait)*, 1967-1968, oil on canvas, 121.8 x 121.8 cm, private collection.

24. Durcan, *DD*, *op. cit.*, p. 17, l. 1-3 and 10-15. Let us note that Durcan added a word in line 11 (“With my *gloved* hands folded primly in my lap”, my italics) and withdrew the eighth stanza in Durcan, *Life is a Dream, 40 Years Reading Poems, 1967-2007*, London, Harvill Secker, 2009, pp. 218-219: “45 years of hovering on street kerbs and clinging to lamp posts / Terrified to cross the street / – And you whisper into my ear in the middle of the night that I am a Divine Creature.”

25. Durcan, *DD*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

26. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, *op. cit.*, p. 34: “la mise en œuvre de l’exposition”.

27. Durcan, *DD*, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-78.

28. As it is often the case in Durcan's homage and elegies: cf. for instance his eight elegies to P. Kavanagh in *Greetings, op.cit.*, pp. 127-142.
29. Durcan, *DD, op. cit.*, p. 178.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.
32. To Durcan a perfect poem would include as many forms of art as possible, as he declared in a letter to Kathleen McCracken: "I see no ultimate distinction between the different 'arts' and I feel most at home in those moments, times, experiences when several or all of them come together or work together". Cf. Kathleen McCracken, "Canvas and Camera Translated: Paul Durcan and the Visual Arts", *The Irish Review*, n° 7, Cork, Cork University Press, autumn 1989, p. 18.
33. Durcan, *At the Edge of the Edge of Mark Joyce*, Dublin, The Green On Red Gallery, 1998, pp. 33-35.
34. Durcan, *DD, op. cit.*, pp. 179-180. Francisco de Goya, *Saint Peter Repentant*, 1823-1825, oil on canvas, 29 x 25.5 cm, *The Philips Collection*, Washington.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.
37. His father to whom he refers as "You" and who can be identified via the phrase "You are two years dead".
38. As opposed to other poems through which Durcan tries to reach again dead people in appeased, loved memory.
39. Durcan, *Praise in which I live and Move and Have my Being, op. cit.*, pp. 141-42.
40. Durcan, *CAW, op. cit.*, p. xi.
41. Durcan, *Going Home to Russia*, Belfast and Wolfeboro, The Blackstaff Press, 1987, "The Orientalist, after Kitaj", *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.
42. R. B. Kitaj, *The Orientalist*, 1976-1977, oil on canvas, 243.8 x 76.8 cm, Tate, London. Cf. the painting and its description on the Tate website <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=8134>: "The Orientalist' belongs to Kitaj's portraits, including 'The Jew' and 'The Greek' that relate to the theme of the expatriate. Kitaj is himself an expatriate. He was born in Ohio and has spent most of his life living between America and Britain, caught between two cultures. His stepfather, a Viennese research chemist, was a refugee from Nazi Europe. 'The Orientalist' was an invention, but for Kitaj he represents a real character, evoking the expatriate's sense of displacement." Though Durcan is not an expatriate, he repeatedly expresses a feeling similar to this "sense of displacement" by underlining his sense of alienation and his paradoxical relation towards Ireland as we have seen with "Self-Portrait '95" or "Ireland 1977" for instance (cf. *supra* footnote 9).
43. *The Orientalist* by Kitaj was in this exhibition and is reproduced in the catalogue, *The Artist's Eye, An Exhibition Selected by R B Kitaj at the National Gallery, London, 21 May-21 July 1980*, London, *The National Gallery Publications Department*, 1980. Concerning the importance of this exhibition, cf. Brian Kennedy, "Crazy About Women: Poems About Paintings", in Colm Tóibín, *The Kilfenora Teaboy, A Study of Paul Durcan*, Dublin, New Island Books, 1996, p. 161: "I knew this passionate poet was interested in the project [writing CAW] when he told me that, daily for three weeks in 1980, he had visited R B Kitaj's Artist's Eye exhibition at the National Gallery, London." Cf. also Durcan, *CAW*, p.

x: "In 1980 I visited [...] R. B. Kitaj's "The Artist's Eye" exhibition in the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. I visited it daily for three weeks. The Kitaj show changed my attitude to art –expanded it and revolutionized it and gave me back the authority of my own eyes." In *WWE*, Durcan once again pays tribute to Kitaj in his *ekphraseis* "Notes Toward a Definition of Nobody – a Reverie" and "The Hammock" (pp. 159-162, 196). He also confirmed Kitaj was "much of [his] mind – he [Kitaj] being from Ohio" when the poet wrote his 2016 collection (Private email communication, 27 October 2016).

44. Durcan describes himself as a hermit and he partly lives in Ringsend, Dublin.
45. Durcan, *Going Home to Russia*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
46. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. 113. Moyra Barry, *Self-Portrait In The Artist's Studio*, 1920, oil on canvas, 30.4 x 25.5 cm, *The National Gallery of Ireland*, Dublin.
47. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
48. Durcan, *Greetings*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
49. Durcan, *CIC*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
50. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111, 84-85.
51. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
52. Durcan, *CIC*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
53. These are two pastels by Brian Lalor that Durcan bought at *The Lavitt's Quay Gallery*, Cork, at the end of the 1970s, and that Nessa kept after their separation (Durcan, Private email communication, 2 September 2011).
54. Durcan, *The Berlin Wall Café*, *op. cit.*, pp 45-47.
55. Associating himself with other artists, or people he admires with other admired people to create magnifying effects is a process which is present in many poems by Durcan. In "Hommage à Cézanne" for instance (Durcan, *DD*, pp. 28-29), which is an *ekphrasis* of the 1873 version of *Une moderne Olympia*, he turns the man on the sofa, who has been seen as a representation of the painter wearing horse-riding clothes, into a horse, and himself into a horse to associate himself with Cézanne and glorify himself in the process. In "Self-Portrait in the Artist Studio" (Durcan, *CAW*, p. 113) Moyra Barry is associated with Van Gogh, and therefore glorified. The poet immediately mentally made this connection between M. Barry in this painting and Van Gogh, describing her as "Marie Foley as Van Gogh" in one of his notebooks for the preparation of *CAW*. Cf. notebooks in *The National Library of Ireland*, Dublin; references: MS 45, 771/2).
56. Durcan, *The Days of Surprise*. London, Harvill Secker, 2015, pp. 26-28.
57. 1473, tempera on canvas, 120 x 63 cm, Gallerie dell'Academia, Venice.
58. Durcan, *The Days of Surprise*, *op. cit.*, p. 28. About this poem and the first of the collection as self-portraits enabling the poet to reach back to a lost form of connection, cf. Cathy Roche-Liger, "À la recherche du lien et du moment perdus : '57 Dartmouth Square' et 'Il Bambino Dormiente' de Paul Durcan", in Gadoin, Isabelle, Tollance, Pascale (dir.), *Polysèmes n° 18, L'immobilité Vive*, autumn 2017 (accessible on line at <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/2289> – Accessed February 2018).
59. Durcan, *WWE*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.
60. Durcan, *WWE*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

61. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Ed. Richard J. Finneran, Rev 2nd ed., New York, Scribner, 1996, p. 135; Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, Ed. Antoinette Quinn, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2005, p. 227.
62. Durcan declared that he would like to be able to achieve what was for Wordsworth at the source of poetry itself: “emotion recollected in tranquility”, Private interview, Dublin, 11 August 2011. Cf. William Wordsworth, *Selections from William Wordsworth. Poetry and Prose*, London, Methuen & co Ltd, 1966, p. 12.
63. Durcan, *The Berlin Wall Café*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
64. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, *op. cit.*, p. 16 and *L'autre portrait*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
65. Durcan, *CAW*, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

ABSTRACTS

Paul Durcan has written many intermedial self-portraits, mainly both textual and visual, which blur the already permeable frontier separating portraits and self-portraits. Though he focuses on himself to describe specific details, he generally chooses to represent himself in a wider context, using both concave and convex mirrors to do so. Through self-portrayal conceived as a dialogue, he creates a double paradoxical movement, first by exposing himself and his frailty while magnifying himself, then by highlighting his utter loneliness and alienation while creating multiple artistic forms of connections.

Paul Durcan a peint de nombreux autoportraits intermédiaires, majoritairement à la fois textuels et picturaux, qui brouillent la frontière déjà perméable entre portraits et autoportraits. S'il peut faire des gros plans sur lui-même pour se décrire, il choisit de ne pas se focaliser uniquement sur lui-même et de se représenter dans un contexte plus large, en utilisant à la fois des miroirs concaves et convexes. À travers l'art de l'autoportrait conçu comme un dialogue, il crée un double mouvement paradoxal, se mettant à nu et exposant ses fragilités tout en se glorifiant, mais aussi soulignant sa solitude et son aliénation tout en créant de multiples formes de connections.

INDEX

Mots-clés: autoportrait, portrait, miroir, intermédialité, dialogue

Keywords: self-portrait, portrait, mirror, intermediality, dialogue

AUTHOR

CATHY ROCHE-LIGER

FoReLL B1, Université de Poitiers. Cathy Roche-Liger wrote the first French doctoral dissertation on the Irish poet Paul Durcan. It studies his pictorial poetics. She has written several articles about Paul Durcan, and other contemporary Irish poets such as Michael Longley, John Montague, Harry Clifton, Trevor Joyce or Geoffrey Squires. She is particularly interested both in poetry and in the interactions between the visual and the verbal. She is a member of FoReLL, University of Poitiers (France).