There is a poem in Paul Durcan’s first book entitled ‘Self-Portrait’ which begins:
‘In the image of the moon and its likeness / Is he made, — the pale and restless one’ (Endsville 19). The piece is not remarkable in itself, but points toward a tendency which Durcan has cultivated into a distinctive style: the cross-pollination of the visual arts with poetry. Many of Durcan’s poems are made ‘in the image’ of a painting or film, responding to and playing against impressions received from canvas or screen. There is a sense in which Durcan works within that artistic tradition which flourished during the Italian high Middle Ages. His poetry is a record of ‘collaborations’ between verbal, visual and musical media.

With perhaps the exception of Derek Mahon, few contemporary Irish poets have paid such close attention to the visual arts as Paul Durcan. His interest in film and painting has led him to experiment with methods of translating not only the content, but also the form of visual works into poetry. The ideal poem would, for Durcan, incorporate as many of the arts as possible:

I think I regard it as axiomatic that poetry has to be fundamentally cinematic and photographic and painterly as well as musical. 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. (Letter to the author)

The poems from Endsville through to Going Home to Russia are marked by an increasing range of allusions to, and imitations of visual works and techniques. Durcan has always been more ‘obsessed’ by cinema and music than by literature, and his preoccupation with painting is part of an early preoccupation with cinema (Letter to the author). So it is not surprising that the poems are often built around filmic images and structures. Allusions to directors and films contribute to tone and mood, while the essentially dramatic quality of Durcan’s narrative monologues lends itself to a format not unlike cinematic montage. Poems as diverse as ‘The Archbishop Dreams of the Harlot of Rathkeale’, ‘The
Death by Heroin of Sid Vicious’, or the recent *tour de force* ‘Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno’ are composed by ‘cutting’ and ‘piecing together’ select ‘shots’. They are an amalgam of varying positions in space and time, contrasting perspectives, psychological and physical impressions. In others, such as ‘The Haulier’s Wife’ or ‘The Beckett at the Gate’, the action gains point when backgrounded by a shifting *mise en scène*.

This is not to say that Durcan’s poetry is non-realistic or, as it has been wrongly labelled, surrealist. Rather, it means that it is realistic in the fullest sense: it portrays and explores reality. In this respect it resembles the films of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, who has been described as:

> . . . a *realist poet in images*: that is, he digs deep beneath the surface structure of his narrative to load his treatment with overtones and undertones, hints, symbols suggestive of and reflecting on the theme. Stylistically he intermixes in his presentation the straight story — events in sequence — with events that happened in the past or may happen in the future, or can never happen, all represented on the same plane of actuality . . . (Montagu, 92)

This is what we are given in Durcan’s poems: images and events which are sensual, particularly visual, and which are arranged as sequential or associative ‘scenes’. The poem, like the film, is not a substitute for, but an examination of, reality.

That Durcan’s poems are predominantly narrative in form would seem to contradict what often appears to be an arbitrary juxtaposing of incidents and impressions. The incongruity is partly explained if the poems are understood as formally imitating filmic techniques. I am thinking here of passages like the opaque sequence of questions posed in ‘The Fairy Tale of 1937’, a piece appropriately dedicated to the memory of Tarkovsky:

> On his back wandering in the rain?
> Sitting in the chair by the window?
> With his feet in a milkpail of rainwater?
> Stretched out on the iron bed in the corner?
> With his head on a bolster of rainwater?

(*Russia*, 91)

We encounter scenes like this in Cocteau’s *Orphée* or Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, films which, like Durcan’s poems, ‘hover on the edge of parable’ (LeFanu, 105). But it is also at this point that Durcan, and Tarkovsky, part company with the patent avant-gardism of Cocteau. Even the most esoteric of Durcan’s poems maintain the sincerity characteristic of Tarkovsky’s films.

‘The Fairy Tale of 1937’ is a playful but deadly serious allegory of post-revolutionary Russia. Its religio-political overtones (the nonconformist named
M, the concluding ‘communion’) and its fabular format adumbrate biographical and structural parallels with Tarkovsky. ‘An idea, in the cinema’, writes Mark Le Fanu, ‘is a camera movement, not a speech’ (121). Comparably, in painting an idea is expressed by a form fixed in paint. Tarkovsky is a preeminently painterly director who has been likened to the Cubists and Cézanne (Le Fanu, 103), so it is appropriate that Durcan, in his attention to the integration of different art forms, emulates and imitates him. ‘The Fairy Tale of 1937’ combines painterly and filmic techniques in what, given its complex use of allegory, is a decidedly literary medium. It is a difficult poem, and its success or failure must be judged in accordance with its existence as a visual as well as a verbal parallel.

In poems like ‘The Fairy Tale of 1937’ the images have validity because they exist as linguistic constructs, just as pictures on the screen are accepted because we recognise that they are enclosed by an artificial reality. We take pleasure in their strangeness for the same reason that we are receptive to the implausibility of the cinema: we know that images such as ‘big-eared, wide-eyed feet’ (Russia, 91) are limited to the imaginary. But at the same time we are acutely aware of their bearing on the real, of their exposure of latent truths, a quality which brings Durcan much closer to Tarkovsky’s realism than Cocteau’s surrealism. The difference is exemplified by the formidable but productive compression of ‘The death by Heroin of Sid Vicious’. The dense succession of stark images in this poem brings to mind the work of the Italian director Michaelangelo Antonioni, which Durcan in another poem refers to as ‘A black-and-white map of the agony / Of human love, where night / Is day, and day is night’ (Jesus, 16). Similar symbolic inversions give many of the poems their dream-like, filmic texture.

Not all of Durcan’s ‘cinematic’ pieces are so severe as ‘The Death by Heroin of Sid Vicious’. Poems which incorporate filmic references either formally or contentually often do so to make a comic-ironic indictment of social, political or religious hypocrisy. The intent is explicit in ‘Archbishop of Dublin to Film Romeo and Juliet’, in which production the lovers are to be isolated in separate refrigerators and ‘At the climax — of the film — / Intercourse will take place by television link, / Courtesy of Eurovision’ (Berlin, 26). In a light-hearted take-off of the Hollywood western (and the aising), the harlot of Rathkeale appears in the Archbishop’s dream:

. . . walking down the road at evening
Wearing a red scarf and black high-heel shoes;
She is wearing nothing else and the sun
In the western sky is a-dying slowly
(Teresa’s Bar, 50)

while the cutting theatrics of ‘At the Altar-Rails, Watching a Marriage Go Die’
plangently subvert an all-too-familiar slice-of-life scenario. Durcan’s delight in the cinema enters into Eden Quay’s address to the Dublin architects:

Many is the he-and-she
Or she-and-she, or he, or she,
Queued-up for the new movie
Being projected in 3-D:

Vincent Price — so ugly
And suave, and smugly
Sawing-up women:
Grimacing, grinning.
Or next-door at the Astor
Motoring faster and faster
In France, a screw in the roadster
Getting looser and looser . . . (Jesus, 16)

Given Durcan’s conviction that television and radio are viable media for artistic expression, and his belief that the invention of the camera by Fox-Talbot ‘changed the rules of art — all art’ (Letter to the author), it seems paradoxical that his harshest ridicule is reserved for these methods of communication. But a close reading of ‘Bishop of Cork Murders His Wife’, ‘Wife Who Smashed Television Set Gets Jail’ or ‘The Marriage Contract’ reveals that it is not the medium but its abuse that Durcan calls into question. Television threatens to replace father and mother as ‘the basic unit of the family’, its violence and absurdities competing with the less glamorous facts of real life. It represents an escape from the encroachments of an intolerable reality; interference with the illusions it projects is ample justification for ‘murder’ or ‘imprisonment without appeal’. Durcan’s carnivalesque humour is laced with undertones which convert the image of a rejected husband observed, ‘By the light of a TV programme he was not watching — A black-and-white film of King Lear with the sound turned down — ’ (Berlin 63), into grim self-parody. Here, the film comments on the action (or non-action), one tragedy resonating in its proximity to, yet distance from, the other.

Of Durcan’s many cinema-like narratives, the long poem Ark of the North lends itself most readily to translation into a visual medium. Ten segments constitute a veritable ‘montage of attractions’ (to borrow a somewhat dated term from Eisenstein), juxtaposing seemingly disparate shots to produce not just a ‘shock’ but an integrated circle of events. Ark of the North is much concerned with methods and limits of perception: a correlative visual and psychological atmosphere is evoked by reference to two ‘classic’ cinema pieces, Carne’s Les Enfants du Paradis and Camus’ Black Orpheus. It takes the shape of a flashback
triggered by a ‘black-and-white photograph of an Egyptian woman / At Drogheda Railway Station on All Soul’s Day’ (Ark, 7) whom the speaker, having preached against the atrocities of the camera, ‘captured’ with a Kodac Instamatic. ‘Captured’ is the operative word here. At the climax the speaker recognises that his crime consists of trying to fix the perfect proportion of life in the flawed imperfection of art. Life escapes in the rhyme ‘invisible on the written page’ (Ark, 17), is destroyed the moment ‘I stood up and clicked the Kodak Instamatic’ (Ark, 20).

If Ark of the North challenges the ability of art to give adequate expression to such epiphantic perception, it confidently appropriates filmic and photographic techniques to concretise such experience. ‘Crossfades’ from Portlaoise Prison to Belfast Central, Dundalk and Drogheda mesh with a close-up ‘tilt’ from toe to head and an animated trial scene. Durcan brackets the crucial sequence by introducing a spatial/temporal dislocation (‘Space remains space, but time is no longer time’ (Ark, 12) and reintegration (‘Time began its slow re-entry into space’ (Ark, 18)), analogous with the disturbed space-time continuum of such twentieth-century films as Hiroshima mon amour, Carlos Saura’s Dulces horas or Tarkovsky’s The Mirror (Le Fanu, 71).

If the ‘coded message’ which Ark of the North leaves ‘Chagalled on the memo pad’ in the ear and the heart is ‘this world is a haunt’ (Ark 12), then much of Durcan’s later poetry may be read as an answer to certain visual messages which have haunted and stimulated his imagination.

That so many of the poems in The Berlin Wall Café and Going Home to Russia are in dialogue with paintings may have something to do with the fact that during 1979-1980, Durcan experienced two ‘turning-points’ in his career: viewing the Paris-Moscow exhibition at the Beaubourg in Paris and discovering the work of the American-born painter R.B. Kitaj, who was invited to choose the 1980 installment of the ‘Artist’s Eye’ series of exhibitions at the National Gallery in London. Durcan was impressed both by Kitaj’s selection and by his essay in the catalogue, and Kitaj has remained for him an exemplar in his work and person (Letter to the author). Kitaj is admittedly a ‘text-centred’ artist (among his sources are Middlemarch and The Waste Land), consciously seeking to co-relate visual and verbal images. His ideas about literature and painting have exerted a formative impact on Durcan’s collaborations:

. . . some books have pictures and some pictures have books. As often as not, books (and pictures in books) happen to uncover many of the terms of my painting addiction, as landscape does for some painters . . . my experience of painting and painters tells me that the written and oral word opens a hell of a lot of doors into the painter’s world of ideas . . . (Kitaj, ‘Prefaces’, 145)

With a minor rearrangement of terms, the same could be said of Durcan’s work.
Mary Farl Powers: ‘Folded Form’ (1989); Woodblock with cast paper, 14" × 17"

Michael Cullen: ‘Strawberry nude with friend’ (1981); Oil on paper, 36 × 48cm
Whereas one of Kitaj’s objectives is ‘to do visually what modern poetry has done verbally — to make works as difficult, as multileveled, as tough, and as full of human purport as a work by T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound’ (Shannon, 18), one of Durcan’s aims is to do verbally what painting does visually. Affinities in material and manner are numerous: an eclectic range of sources, an insistence upon useful social criticism and a constant interrogation of the role of the artist. But perhaps the closest parallel is between Durcan’s dramatic monologues and Kitaj’s figure studies. If Kitaj’s fictional characters redefine the painter’s role as that of a novelist whose raw material is the image rather than the word’ (Livingstone, 34), then Durcan’s role as poet is to take the painting as his raw material, translating it into a language which mediates between image and word. Paintings such as The Arabist, Smyrna Greek and The Hispanist correspond to verbal portraits like ‘Polycarp’, ‘The Kilfenora Teaboy’ or ‘The Brother’. All zero in on a single character, allowing him or her to articulate his or her story. Kitaj’s The Orientalist, which he describes as a picture about what painters do with their ‘painting lives’, ‘un-at-homeness’ (152), was shown at the ‘Artist’s Eye’ exhibition. Durcan’s poem of the same name is both a meditation on and a departure from it. Cast as a duologue between two gossips, this autobiographical poem defines and intensifies the mystery surrounding its subject:

The Ringsend Hermit.

The Ringsend Hermit?

And Orientalist.

And what?

. . . he’s an Orientalist without a home.

(Russia, 50)

Durcan’s iconographic ‘story’ preserves the same tension between surface and subtext that informs Kitaj’s canvas.

Durcan’s engagement with painting is not limited to a single painter, period or school, but the works he has ‘imitated’ all connect in one way or another with his own ideas. In part, identification with the subject or life of the artist seems to determine what or who is absorbed into his work. But if we consider that these poems are often written as spontaneous reactions to seeing an original painting, then Durcan’s eclecticism can be seen as a more or less fortuitous harmonising of disparate parts. Renaissance, modern Russian, contemporary Irish painting and sculpture: all are points of departure which give the poem access to regions rich with formal and contentual possibilities.

Some of Durcan’s earliest poems were ‘inspired’ by the life and work of van Gogh, and his first extensive exposure to major painters came in 1966 when, living ‘around the corner from Francis Bacon’, he could regularly visit the Tate
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Gallery. Later, as a student of archaeology, he drew maps and plans of sites and artefacts, and when he attended painting or sculpture exhibitions began to respond by drawing rather than writing comments. Out of these initial experiments developed the full-blown collaborations between painting and poetry.

In 1969 Durcan was invited to write a poem for the catalogue of the Dublin exhibition of the Spanish painter Manual Salamanca. The result was a prose-poem, the first in a series of fruitful collaborations with contemporary artists. After meeting the painter Michael Cullen and looking at his silkscreen print, Strawberry Nude With Friend, Durcan wrote ‘Strawberry Nude’, and in the autumn of 1987 produced ‘The Michael Cullen Show at the Federksy’ for the catalogue of Cullen’s Belfast exhibition. In the same year he composed seven poems based on his impressions of Gene Lambert’s exhibition of seven new paintings. Durcan arranged the pictures in a sequence, gave them titles and created an overall title for the show: In the Land of Punt. A book of the same title containing colour reproductions of the paintings and the poems has been published. His most recent collaboration is ‘Mary Farl Powers Works In Cast Paper’, written after her exhibition in Dublin.

Francis Bacon, however, is a significant starting-point in terms of Durcan’s involvement with the visual arts. His paintings generally focus on two or three isolated figures, he frequently uses an already-existing image (a painting or photograph) as a point of departure, and his triptychs evoke the sequential, syncopated feeling of film (Larousse, 10-11). These features are characteristic of Durcan’s poetry, converging in the piece written under Bacon’s ‘influence’:

You crept down the attic ladder
To make love with me on the ironing board,
As if we had known each other in a previous life
So waterily did our two body-phones attune,
Underwater swimming face to face in the dark,
Francis Bacon-Cimabue style. (Berlin, 42)

This curious collation of modern and medieval techniques is peculiarly appropriate to Durcan’s verbal ‘canvases’. Supplemeting the cinematic aspect of his poetry is a painterly element which is best described as ‘visionary’. It surfaces in the psychological vistas and apocalyptic imagery of two early poems, ‘O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor’ and ‘Hymn to Nessa’, and is collapsed into a single phrase in the recent ‘El Flight 106: New York-Dublin (after J. M. W. Turner). ‘All sunset and chains’ is an oblique allusion to Turner’s The Slave Ship. In terms of the narrative sequence this slight reference functions as a ‘cut’ which injects an absurd, comic encounter with the potential for tragedy.

Poems like ‘El Flight 106’, ‘Nessa’, ‘The Rape of Europa (after Titian)’ or
‘The Hay-Carrier after Veronica Bolay’ partake of Cimabue’s ‘moving imprecision’ (Larousse, 65); they seem, like Turner’s late paintings, to be arranged around ‘vortexes’ (Larousse, 417), a central image or refrain which accrues meaning as the poem works its way through in a series of sweeps and passes. This cumulative pattern is illustrated by ‘The Hay-Carrier’. Bolay’s painting is executed in sombre greys, browns and blacks broken by an exclamation of red in the upper right corner. It depicts a stick-like figure with a pitch-fork storing hay in a red barn. Durcan’s response is both personal and archetypal:

We were always all hay-carriers.
We will always be hay-carriers.
For the great gate of night stands painted red —

And all of heaven lies waiting to be fed.

(Russia, 38)

Other poems radiate from or gravitate towards explicit and indirect references to paintings. ‘Le Poète Allongé (after Chagall)’ fosters the same intentional blurring of the fictive and the real as Chagall’s painting. But whereas Chagall’s poet stretches out under the mauve sky of his rural idyll, the speaker here, reclining in the Moscow Metro, imagines himself contributing to the Red cause by stripping ‘green’ foreigners of their shoes and sending them, red-socked, into Red Square. In some measure Durcan’s poem is, like Chagall’s painting, an escape into the visionary optimism of fable. Yet it also offers an acute assessment of east-west relations, broaching through quirky, pointed humour, the question of the poet’s role under either ‘regime’. ‘Le Poète Allongé’ is one of several poems written after Durcan’s recent visits to Russia. Chagall’s love/hate relationship with his native country bears certain similarities to Durcan’s feelings about Ireland and Russia. Like Blake or Kitaj, Chagall is a poet’s painter, his writings adding a further luminosity to his canvases. One might read his flying figures and dreamscapes as visual equivalents to Durcan’s ‘visionary’ poems.

‘Tbilisi Cabaret (Ortachala Belle with a Fan)’ offers a different response to a different kind of art. It is dedicated to the Russian painter, Niko Pirosmani, whose Ortachala Belle with a Fan appears on the cover of Going Home to Russia. The poem is another figure study presumably spoken by Pirosmani and evoking, in praver-like cadences, the Ortachala Belle. The poem may be read in light of the Russian film-maker Georgy Shengelaya’s Pirosmani, which in 1980, informed western audiences about the life and work of Pirosmani. The film depicts the city of Tiflis at the turn of the century as it is perceived by its native painter. Something of Durcan’s reverence for the pagan culture preserved in liminal locations like Tiflis in Georgia is brought to life in Shengelaya’s reconstruction of Pirosmani’s people and places (Le Fanu, 7-9). The repeated opening line, ‘I’m a sophisticated
primitive’, differentiates the speaker from his ‘prima donna’ and describes Pirosmani’s style. Bright colours and strong outlines endow his subjects with iconographic permanence. The poem invokes and praises the ‘sophisticated primitivism’ of the feminine, making it a pervasive, corrective first principle of which the ample yet girlish shape of the Ortachala Belle stands as a befitting emblem.

Durcan often translates the ‘story’ depicted on the canvas into a contemporary social or personal context. In the same way that Turner uses his art to vindicate causes like the abolition of slavery, Durcan uses his poetry to point out the ironic incongruities between the world as it is and the world as it should be. In a poem written for the Dublin painter Ronan Walsh’s exhibition held last year at the Project Arts Centre, the artist is figured as a physician whose ‘psychological’ portraits give the only accurate picture of a couple of ‘old wans’:

But if you really want to know us — maybe you don’t —
I suggest you go down and see Dr Ronan W
(And he may or may not pass you on to Surgeon Degas)
And he’ll show you X-rays of our lives —
The interior lives of a pair of old bats.
(Russia, 40)

In ‘Hymn to my Father’, the Knight’s dilemma is based on V.M. Vasnetsov’s painting ‘Knight of the Crossroads’. The poem is personal, but avoids the sentimental, both by its ironic tone and the closing identification of the poet and his figurative counterpart:

If you were me — which you are —
Knight at the Crossroads,
You would go home to Russia this very night.
(Russia, 95)

As in ‘Le Poète Allongé’, the method is usually to construct a parable informed by, yet independent of, the picture alluded to in the title. The complex network of recognitions contained in ‘The Prodigal Son’ is a radical departure from Rembrandt’s interpretation of Christ’s parable. Yet the poem’s grotesquerie (hands transformed to spikes, the father become a Bogey Man) probes the psychological ground concealed in the dark recesses between Rembrandt’s cloaked and kneeling figures.

Similar use is made of ‘The Jewish Bride’, also after Rembrandt, ‘The Pieta’s Over’ and ‘The Vision of St. Hubert (after Breughel)’. Part of a cycle of poems confronting the difficulty of a broken marriage, all three begin ‘at the black
canvas of estrangement’ (*Berlin*, 40). The ‘Jewish Bride who has survived the
death-camp’ (*Berlin*, 41), the wife who makes plain ‘It is time for you to get
down off my knees / And learn to walk on your own two feet’ (*Berlin*, 54) and
who cries out ‘Go away from me, Hubert, go away from me!’ (*Berlin*, 69): each is part
of a composite picture of a sensitive, purposeful woman. The original materials
— Michaelangelo’s sculpture, a Victorian English painting entitled ‘Don’t put
me out into the cold world’, Breugel’s ‘picture-with-a-moral’ — are diverse,
and when drawn together, activate a collage-like interplay between text and
subtext, verbal and visual images. Durcan is in this respect very much like the
photographer, whose selection and arrangement of elements determines the
shape and significance of his art.

There is a sense in Durcan’s poetry that the paintings are there not as ‘object-
ive correlatives’ but as ‘corroborators’ in an instinctive appreciation of human
concerns outside cultural and chronological boundaries. Certainly this is true of
‘The Hay-Carrier’ and ‘Hymn to my Father’. A comparable relationship exists
in ‘The Rape of Europa’. Something of Titian’s ‘magic impressionism’, the
distinctive splashes of colour and soft outlines, is reproduced in the concrete,
polyvalent images of a child’s dream. The dialogue between father and daughter
pivots on a question-answer construction: ‘Life is a dream, Papa, isn’t it? Life is a
dream?’ / / ‘Life is a dream, Phoenix, life is a dream’ (*Russia*, 12). Myth and art
conflate dream with reality, so that one can be interpreted in terms of the other:
‘If the bull has loosed the paddock of his flesh it means / That boys might once
more again be boys and girls girls’ (*Russia*, 2). A metaphor for art, dreaming is
figured as a restorative process, giving back identity and triggering the recogni-
tion of the real in the as yet only imaginary. The same fusion of unique yet cor-
respondent perspectives underlies the ‘translation’ of painting into poetry.

In speaking of the relationship between Durcan’s poetry and the visual arts,
one cannot ignore the cover designs of his books. He would like the jacket to
make a general statement about the contents, and so far the interface has been
provocative. Edward McGuire’s *Paul Durcan, poet* presides over the selected
volume, the *Orachala Belle with a Fan* summarises the preoccupations of *Going
Home to Russia*, while a black-and-white photograph of Durcan overlooking
Cork City appropriately prefaces *Jesus, Break His Fall*. But perhaps the most mov-
ing, and the most disturbing association is McGuire’s *Blackbird on Plate with The
Berlin Wall Cafe*. Not only does the painting comment on the complex of in-
justices tackled in the book, but it also throws an uncanny light on ‘Memoirs of
a Fallen Blackbird’, a poem composed before Durcan saw McGuire’s work.

I have suggested that much of the richness of Durcan’s poetry resides in just
this kind of mystery: a transference, both in form and content, of impressions
received from a visual into a verbal medium. At the time of writing, Durcan is
working with the composer Michéal Ó Súilleabháin. ‘He has set my words to
music and we have a choir, two voices, a flute and a flamenco guitar' (Letter to the author). We can, I think, anticipate many more “collaborations”.

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