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Reimagining the Fourth Age: The Ageing Mother in the Poetry of Mary Dorcey and Paul Durcan

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Abstract: In my analysis of selected poems by Mary Dorcey and Paul Durcan, literary representations of the ageing mother are explored in conjunction with research in cultural and social gerontology relating to the demographic group of ‘deep’ old age. Presented with pervasive stereotypes such as old age as a second childhood or the cultural ‘decline narrative’, these poets seek to find a language and perspective that does not diminish the ageing mother’s dignity, agency, and personhood while still attending to the physical and sociocultural realities of old age. In light of the iconic, timeless image of the mother in Irish culture, such explorations gain special pertinence. They also reveal how the mother’s ageing process impacts the mother-child relationship and informs the adult child’s own ageing. By thus moving the ageing mother to the centre of their poems, these poets not only reimagine what has been termed the ‘social imaginary of the fourth age’ but remind us of our shared vulnerability and the need for intergenerational connection and care.

Keywords: Irish poetry, ageing mother, second childhood, Mary Dorcey, Paul Durcan

This essay explores some of the ways in which contemporary Irish poets address their mothers’ old age and impending death. Given the iconic status and timeless image of the mother in Irish culture, such depictions of physical and mental decline gain special pertinence; if the mother has traditionally been silenced and objectified in Irish literature, how can the poet convey the condition of the ageing mother retreating into silence and death? How can such poetic representations find a language and perspective that does not diminish the diseased or dying mother’s dignity, agency, and personhood? And finally, how does the mother’s ageing process impact the mother-child relationship and inform the adult child’s own ageing? These questions will be explored in conjunction with recent research in cultural and social gerontology relating to the demographic age group of ‘deep’ old age. In my analysis of selected poems by Mary Dorcey and Paul Durcan, I will show that these poets’ attempts to give expression to their ageing mothers’

physical and mental disintegration can contribute to reimagining both the iconic image of the mother and what has been termed the ‘social imaginary of the fourth age’.¹

Decline, death, and loss are an inevitable part of our experience as we traverse the life-course into older age. Nevertheless, one driving force behind the recently emerged field of cultural gerontology has been to counterbalance the pervasive ‘decline narrative’² which conflates older age with the loss of physical and cognitive abilities, infirmity, and death. Especially in the early years of literary gerontology and age studies, the notion of ‘successful ageing’ was central to many researchers’ work. However, such positive representations of older age have been typically linked to the demographic age group of the ‘third age’, referring to ‘young-old’ people ranging from 65 to 80 years of age.³ This third age is juxtaposed with the ‘fourth age’, the demographic group comprising those in ‘deep’ old age, also referred to as the ‘old-old’. Perceptions of fourth agers as frail and dependent are not only typically ‘constructed from the perspective of younger people’ but tend to be ‘determined by biology and discussed almost entirely in terms of physiological processes requiring expert surveillance’.⁴ Accordingly, researchers have argued that the notion of successful ageing may further harm, stigmatize, and marginalize older people in need of care.⁵ It is therefore important to note that, rather than representing ‘a particular cohort or stage of life’, the fourth age signifies ‘a kind of terminal destination – a location stripped of the social and cultural capital that is most valued and which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure in later life’.⁶ As Julia Twigg notes, ‘These old remain eternally Other. And that sense of them as a wholly separate and fundamentally different category of being lies at the heart of how ageism operates’.⁷

As life expectancy in Ireland keeps increasing thanks to better living conditions and scientific advancement, cultural representations of old age in all its facets are urgently needed. In an Irish context, where the population of the very old is the fastest growing demographic, such an approach is particularly vital and encompasses questions of intergenerational care, autonomy, and adequate representation of the elderly.⁸ While feminist research has long established that bodies are socially and culturally constructed, in ‘deep’ old age the body tends to be perceived as succumbing to the inevitable forces of nature so that, in turn, “‘old age’ proper becomes tautologically synonymous with decline’.⁹ Significantly, as Kathleen Woodward notes, ‘An 85 year old [. . .] will be perceived first as old and only second as a woman or man’.¹⁰ This perception ties in with pervasive representations of old age as a second childhood, devoid of implications of gender and sexuality and characterized by physical and cognitive inferiority as well as dependency, thereby ensuring ‘the hegemony of adulthood’.¹¹ Such assumptions can have problematic consequences, as often the metaphorical connection between childhood and old age leads to infantilizing practices through which ‘the

adult status, or personhood, of elderly people becomes obscured' and older people are 'transformed into metaphoric children'.¹²

Such negative, reductive, and ultimately ageist perceptions need to be counterbalanced by means of personal accounts suited to the creation of 'new cultural narratives of deep old age'.¹³ In Irish poetry, Eavan Boland has arguably been foremost in inscribing subjective experiences of ageing in a tradition centered on images of eternal youth or rejuvenation. As Boland emphatically states in 'A Woman Painted on a Leaf': 'I want a poem / I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Boland's important project of revising the timeless image of Mother Ireland by writing about the losses and bodily changes of growing older, tends to focus on women's midlife and avoids depictions of 'deep' old age other than sketching the occasional bleak outlook. Boland's poem 'Instructions' from her collection *Domestic Violence* (2007) is a case in point as it outlines the speaker's fear of impending old age as well as the perceived cruelty of writing poetry 'about age': 'What is left is for you / and you only: // A dead tree. The future. What does not bear fruit. Or / thinking of'.¹⁵ Even though in the poem 'In Coming Days', from the same collection, the speaker notes, 'Soon / I will be as old as the Shan Van Vocht –',¹⁶ deep old age remains a *terra incognita* in Boland's poetry. Searching for depictions of a mother's fourth age in contemporary Irish poetry thus leads us to poems written not from the perspective of the ageing mother but from that of her middle-aged children.

In what follows I will analyse selected poems by Dorcey and Durcan about the ageing mother in conjunction with research from cultural and social gerontology. While Dorcey's poems from her collection *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (1991) explore the mother's ageing process through the lens of the changing mother-daughter relationship, Durcan's poems in *The Laughter of Mothers* (2007), narrating the mother's dementia and death from the son's perspective, shift the focus to concerns about the sociocultural conditions of old age in the context of institutional care. Both poets explore, critique and reimagine pervasive cultural narratives, tropes and practices to create more nuanced and subjective perspectives on older age.

That the trope of old age as a second childhood should figure prominently in recent Irish poets' accounts of their mothers' ageing is hardly surprising, considering that this pervasive image 'dominates the representation of deep old age'.¹⁷ In Mary Dorcey's poem 'Trying on for Size', the speaker, at first glance, seems to cast the relationship to her physically frail mother in terms of such a familiar role reversal:

Capsized on the bed
you roll
cane white legs
tapping the air.
You are pulling on your stockings –
easier now this way

than to stand upright and bend.
You are laughing
because I've caught you at it
one of your secret stratagems.¹⁸

The initial image of the mother 'Capsized on the bed', legs in the air, is reminiscent of an infant being dressed. This impression is reinforced by the description of the mother's legs as 'cane white' like those of a baby, blindly 'tapping the air'. Yet the mother does not voluntarily share this moment with her adult daughter; she is not asking for help in the daily task of getting dressed but has developed a 'secret stratagem', one of many, to maintain her autonomy and independence in managing the challenges of her everyday life. As such, the fact that her daughter 'caught [her] at it' suggests an intrusion of the mother's private space, her bedroom, which the daughter must have entered without knocking. The mother is 'laughing' to hide her embarrassment at having been 'caught' in this awkward, undignified position, her 'senile grotesquery publicly displayed'.¹⁹ Yet, far from being a child caught in the act of inappropriate or disobedient behaviour, she is an adult older woman accomplishing her daily tasks to the best of her physical abilities.

The daughter's awareness of her mother's embarrassment in turn prompts a childhood memory of her physically strong mother 'shamed' by 'a birth mark on [her] calf'.²⁰ While this memory of her young and beautiful mother, whom the child admired for swimming 'with mighty strokes / out so far',²¹ draws attention to the mother's diminished physical strength as depicted in the first stanza, it simultaneously serves to highlight independence as one of her defining character traits; the mother is depicted as swimming out so far that, to her daughter, she appears like 'a bird or buoy / dancing between the waves'.²² The speaker's memory, however, constructs a more complex image of her mother than the all too easy juxtaposition of ageing infirmity and youthful strength might suggest. Despite the 'awe'²³ felt by the young daughter watching her mother out at sea, the fourth stanza evokes the mother as a fallible human being, who, despite her outward strength, was occasionally unable to cope with her parenting role, threatening her daughter 'with a wooden spoon' and 'At sea in [her] kitchen / [. . .] did not counsel or console'.²⁴ With hindsight, and from her adult perspective, the speaker is equipped to reconcile herself to such chastening memories and empathize with her mother's situation: 'you turned your eyes from trouble / having known too much of it / uncomforted yourself'.²⁵

The role reversal theme recurs in the following two stanzas only to be repudiated for good. Thus, the mother's steps on the stairs are described as 'anxious, baby steps' in view of which the daughter longs to

[...] pick you up and carry you
or launch you down the banister
as you did me

in this house
when we were children together.²⁶

This stanza attests to the playful, carefree side of the mother-daughter relationship, which temporarily rendered both mother and daughter equal, ‘children together’. It is precisely this acknowledgement of equality which prevents the adult daughter from infantilizing her ageing mother. She does not give in to the urge to ‘mother’ her own mother, and, while neither woman is a child, the mother-daughter relationship is acknowledged and reconfirmed. In rejecting the notion of her mother’s stage of life as a second childhood, the speaker implicitly rejects the familiar consolation of ‘grant[ing] a cyclical nature to the linear passage of the time of a life’.²⁷ Instead, she is aware that her mother

[. . .] must take every step first
along this passage
we daughters follow after
each one of us
moving into the space
cleared by our mothers.²⁸

The mother’s advancement towards death, though inevitable, is depicted as an act of bravery and strength, in line with the daughter’s earlier description of her mother at sea. It is not only that the mother is depicted as a pioneer, clearing the path for her daughter to ‘confront this last world / you will discover before me’ but it is the mother’s ‘fine nerve’ and ‘unthanked grace’²⁹ in doing so that turns her into an admired and awe-inspiring role model for her daughter.

The intimate, loving and caring connection between daughter and mother, conveyed throughout the poem by the speaker’s use of the second-person ‘you’, culminates in the final stanza of the poem:

I see your shy, jaunty smile
at the mirror –
see you say
what do you think?
As if death
were a foolish, extravagant hat
you were trying on for size.³⁰

The wordless communication between them – ‘see you say’ – suggests that while the subject of death may not be openly discussed between mother and daughter, there is, as Antoinette Quinn puts it, a shared understanding of ‘the tragic fact that generational replacement is integral to the maternal relation’.³¹ And yet this sense of tragedy is allayed by the playful reference to a ‘foolish, extravagant hat’, a symbol of what Quinn reads as the mother’s ‘understated bravery’³² but surely also of her quiet resistance in the face of death. As Julia Twigg notes, ‘clothing,

particularly for older women, is often embedded in moral prescriptions that act to police their bodies'.³³ By metaphorically trying on a hat that defies age-appropriate conventions, the mother is presented as exerting agency within the constraints of her bodily impairments. The reference to her 'jaunty smile' in connection to dress also links the poem's closing lines to the mother's initial laughter at being caught by her daughter in the act of pulling on her stockings. Here, however, it suggests a sense of playful conspiracy between mother and daughter, underlining their closeness. Connectedly, the image of the mirror reflects their close personal, intergenerational bond; it is almost as though the daughter, glancing at the mirror, catches her mother's reflection instead of her own, a reflection perhaps of her ageing future self as she is moving into 'the space cleared by [her] mother [...]'.³⁴

The image of the mirror recurs more prominently in Dorsey's poem 'Repossession', included in the same collection. The poem starts out with a reference to the mother's recent hysterectomy, which makes the daughter marvel at the fact that her mother's aged body, described with raw honesty – 'You are stooped and frail / and thin / your fingers swollen / your knees don't work'³⁵ – is the same body that nursed her, her young mother's 'flesh / [...] fat and full enough / to feed me'.³⁶ The mother's physical infirmities are matched by her declining cognitive abilities. As the daughter complains, 'your mind mislays everything / but the past'.³⁷ One of the mother's main unresolved preoccupations is her guilt at not having cared for her 'own mother / who died in a Home'.³⁸ The daughter-speaker feels annoyed by her mother's endless ruminations of the past and by the manner in which her mother, in old age, increasingly turns into her own mother, who seems to have 'grown into your lapses - / into your hands / into your walk'.³⁹ In a skilful turning point at the end of the poem, the speaker, aloof and 'impatient of all this blather',⁴⁰ experiences a sudden epiphany as she catches sight of her own reflection in the mirror, the heirloom passed down from her grandmother, and sees her own mother staring back at her:

the gilt-framed glass
that she left you
and oh –
there you are
reflected
already –
fitting new quarters
looking out from
my eyes.⁴¹

Quinn sees in the poem an enactment of 'the shocking recognition that daughters, too, age and die' as '[t]he daughter's face and fate reduplicate her mother's'.⁴² While not spelled out explicitly in the poem, there is a hint that, 'like mother – like daughter', the speaker, too, will 'sort old treasures; / guilt and lost chances'⁴³

once her mother is gone. Yet the mirror connecting three generations of women also gestures towards what Kathleen Woodward terms a daughter's 'generational identity', an identity which 'has to do with feeling oneself linked, unconsciously if not consciously, to the generations ahead and behind through the relation of caring'.⁴³ As Ruth E. Ray notes, following Woodward, 'A daughter goes through a period of rejecting and identifying herself in opposition to her mother. In time she comes to re-identify, but this often does not occur until the end of her mother's life'.⁴⁴ Dorsey's poem encapsulates this complex process in the daughter's final recognition of her mother 'looking out from my eyes'.

The daughter's late identification with her ageing mother is re-enacted in the poem 'When You're Asleep' where initially the reluctant daughter finds herself in the maternal role, 'worn out' with her mother's incessant talk about the past. The poem once more draws on the trope of a role reversal between mother and daughter; as Quinn rightly observes, 'The opening stanzas are designed to trick the reader into assuming that she's listening to the querulous tones of a harassed mother scolding a toddler'.⁴⁵ Only in the third stanza is the addressee revealed to be the speaker's ageing mother eager to share her reminiscences with her daughter:

How old were you the year that we went...?
Do you remember the time
somebody said...?
Wasn't it grand the first
summer we saw...?
Were you born yet
the last winter your father and I...?
Just let me tell you once more -
I know I've told you already...⁴⁶

The importance of vivid memories in older people's lives has long been established by gerontologists. Far from meaningless 'blathering', for older people modes of remembering fulfil vital functions crucial to meaning-making, identity formation, psychological integration, and emotional well-being. The mother's internal dialogue with her own late mother in 'Repossession' hints at her need to reconcile herself with past choices in order to complete her life review. In contrast, in this poem her attempts to involve her daughter in shared recollections of the past are suggestive of the mental process of reminiscence. As Woodward explains, unlike the life review, which is an analytical process aimed at facilitating reconciliation, acceptance, and closure, reminiscence is more 'fragmentary and partial' and 'necessarily carries within it the figure of companionship, of the social'.⁴⁷ Reminiscing with family members or friends about familiar events from the past generates 'an atmosphere of a certain companionableness, [. . .] marked by the hope if not the promise of trust and security'.⁴⁸ Dorsey's poem poignantly depicts the ageing mother's desire for such companionable reminiscence.

Conversely, while the daughter is ‘worn out’ with her mother, her caring attitude enables her to understand this need and to acknowledge that, to her mother, the occasion of her daughter’s visit provides emotional sustenance:

But for you these are festival
days;
days you can talk
all day long
out loud for a change
morning to night,
banqueting
because I’m here
to listen.⁴⁹

The epiphanic insight is again reached at the end of the poem when the daughter realizes that her mother’s emotional dependence mirrors her own childhood dependence on the mother. As such, the not unproblematic role reversal depicted in the poem – the daughter, for instance, continually admonishes her mother: ‘Eat up now / stop talking / your food will get cold’⁵⁰ – is redeemed by the maternal love and care that the daughter bestows on, or rather returns to her parent. This nurturance is poignantly conveyed when the speaker looks in once more on her sleeping mother, wondering when her head grew ‘so small’⁵¹ and drawing close to feel her mother’s breath. However, the role reversal between mother and daughter, which brings the poem precariously close to erasing the older woman’s adult state and personhood, is subtly undermined at the end of the poem when the speaker is suddenly reminded of her own childhood ritual of keeping her mother at her bedside ‘one moment longer’ by asking, ‘Do you love me still?’. Her mother’s habitual answer to this question, ‘When you’re asleep!’,⁵² takes on a darker meaning by tapping into the familiar sleep/death analogy and reminding the daughter of her mother’s mortality. Hockey and James point out that elderly people frequently use references to their impending death as a strategy to resist infantilizing practices. As they note, ‘in subverting their metaphoric status as children and in asserting their closeness to death, and its attendant frailties and dependencies, elderly people are actively regenerating their personhood as individuals who are not only vulnerable but also adult’.⁵³ In Dorsey’s poem, the daughter’s sudden awareness of her mother’s impending death may serve a similar function. Yet the role reversal suggested in this and other poems about the mother-daughter relationship chiefly helps to underline the importance of intergenerational care driven by a loving and mutually nurturing mother-daughter relationship.⁵⁴

While in Dorsey’s poems the context of intergenerational care is situated within the mother’s familiar surroundings of her own home, Durcan’s poems about his ageing mother shift the focus towards institutional care. His collection *The Laughter of Mothers* pays tribute to his own mother, Sheila McBride Durcan

(1915-2004), by recounting and reimagining her long and eventful life. The closing group of poems considers his mother's old age, dementia, and death. One of these, 'Little Old Lady', draws on the trope of old age as a second childhood, yet it does so in a way strikingly different to Dorsey's poems. Rather than focusing on the close mother-child relationship in terms of a role reversal, the poem addresses the ageist cultural stereotype of the 'little old lady', a cliché that renders older women at once 'comical' and 'powerless'.⁵⁵ The poem focuses on the mother's life after the death of her husband, John Durcan, and challenges societal expectations about a widow's appropriate conduct. The poems immediately preceding 'Little Old Lady' convey the parents' close bond throughout the father's final years, marked by his dependence on his wife due to his Parkinson's disease. Accordingly, readers may well expect to learn of the mother's inability to cope with her bereavement and widow status as suggested by the poem's initial lines: 'After Daddy died, she became so small / She began to look like a little girl'.⁵⁶ However, the reference to the mother's shrinking and her apparent outward transformation into 'a little girl', suggestive of dependency and helplessness, is followed by a description of her increasing independence and apparent *joie de vivre*. Thus, 'after a period of grief' she begins to 'disport like a little girl', carefree like her twelve-year-old self 'Making hay in Mayo'.⁵⁷ We learn that

At seventy-three she beat herself out of the lethargy
Of old age and she began to hop about
Not only the apartment but the city streets,
Beginning conversations with strangers at bus stops
And hanging out in the new space-age shopping centres.⁵⁸

Accordingly, the trope of old age as a second childhood is associated with a child's supposed carefree pleasure and prepubescent freedom rather than with dependence and lack of agency. The mother's version of 'successful ageing' is epitomized by her purchase of a 'steel-and-rope trapeze', which she installs in her kitchen and in which, on her eightieth birthday, she shows greater interest than in her piqued son's more conventional gift, a 'bucket of begonia' which he 'had gone to some trouble to purchase'.⁵⁹ In fact she is described as '[m]ocking' her middle-aged son and his clichéd notions about old age as she is swinging 'to and fro' on her trapeze: "'Now what do you think of your little old lady? / Do you think she is surplus to requirements? / Well, don't think I'm fishing for compliments'".⁶⁰

The uplifting, if likely embellished sense of agency and independence conveyed by 'Little Old Lady' and its concomitant insistence that old people are precisely not 'surplus to requirements' is short-lived in the context of Durcan's collection where the mother is deprived of her agency and autonomy after having been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and admitted to a nursing home. This desolate chapter in both the mother's and son's life is addressed in 'September 11, 2001'. While the poem's title deliberately evokes the 9/11 terrorist attacks, this world

event provides only the backdrop to the personal drama unfolding within the poem. Its first half centres on the son's recollection of visiting his mother shortly after her admission to the nursing home. The speaker is haunted by memories of this visit as he roams the countryside and comes across two sheep, one seemingly asleep but really dead, the other 'en route to the next world', both of which remind him of his mother: 'Just like Mummy that afternoon / Two weeks before her eighty-sixth birthday'.⁶¹ The image of sheep serves as a leitmotif in the poem that comes to exemplify the mother's dehumanised and infantilized condition in institutional care.

The mother's admission to the nursing home is described in terms reminiscent of an enforced deportation – 'What is your name / What is your date of birth? / Get a move on and take off your clothes'⁶² – and his mother's room in terms of a 'state-of-the-art prison cell'.⁶³ This 'pristine, gleaming, death-row cell'⁶⁴ is an anonymous 'No 318'⁶⁵ and almost totally devoid of personal belongings that would give the room a semblance of home. For the speaker it is difficult to know whether his mother, 'prone body face to the wall / Strewn on the narrow stainless-steel bed',⁶⁶ is 'alive or dead'⁶⁷ and seeing her in this dejected, possibly sedated condition arouses feelings of guilt in her son; in line with the previous sheep analogy he stands 'in the doorway like a sheep killer'.⁶⁸ He laments the fact that his mother, after 'surrounding / Every possibility under the sun and the rain / For the sake of [her] husband and [her] children!',⁶⁹ is left with no worldly possessions but 'a small suitcase and three John Hinde postcards / Of her native town, Westport in County Mayo'.⁷⁰ This description decries the destitute situation many women face in old age after devoting their lives to their families as wives, mothers, homemakers, and carers. In this context, Grenier et al. propose to view 'frailty and dementia [. . .] in the context of new forms of insecurity that affect the life course, as expressed by ideas associated with the concept of precariousness and risk'.⁷¹ This perspective would stir the discourse away from ideas of a 'failed old age' to reconsider the value and personhood of people with physical and cognitive impairments and to shift the focus to person-centred care in view of our 'shared vulnerability'.⁷² What is at stake in disregarding the selfhood of an Alzheimer's patient is poignantly illustrated in Durcan's poem, which suggests that depriving the elderly mother of her familiar surroundings and her personal belongings contributes to erasing her identity.

This impression is reinforced in the second half of the poem, which narrates the son's second visit two weeks later. His mother has now seemingly settled into her new surroundings and the nursing home routine:

A week to the day after her eighty-sixth birthday,
Tuesday, September 11, 2001,
Just after lunch in the Winston Nursing Home.
Squatting in the day room in front of the 42" TV,
Mummy along with her fellow inmates keeps
One eye on a plane crashing into a skyscraper.

Smiling, she whispers: ‘The same old story.’⁷³

While the mother’s inability to grasp the enormity of the event she is witnessing on television might be attributed to her advanced state of dementia, the poem suggests that the monotonous nursing home environment serves to further marginalise and detach her, ‘along with her fellow inmates’, from the outside world. The fact that ‘the TV flows on, with the sound turned down’,⁷⁴ only serves to reinforce this impression. Grenier et al. comment on the dominant view that ‘people with dementia have “less” or are without agency, with the implication that their lives are both marginal to society and less valued’.⁷⁵ They note, however, ‘that communication and agency may look different in later life, and be as much socio-cultural as biological’.⁷⁶ In the context of the poem, the mother’s perception is shaped by her own predicament, which she quite clearly communicates to her son against the backdrop of the crashing twin towers: ‘Mummy hisses: “I hate this place. / I will never ever come to a place like this again”’.⁷⁷

One central focus of the poem is the speaker’s helplessness in view of his mother’s suffering and confusion. Contrary to John Mc Donagh’s claim that the mother is ‘retreating into a child-like stage of fading memories where [her] son becomes the parent’,⁷⁸ I would argue that the mother-son relationship is not reversed in this poem. Crucially, the mother maintains her maternal authority towards her son – admonishing him for his stammer and affectionately examining his looks – while the son remains affectionate but helpless and inadequate in view of her sense of abandonment and despair: ‘She cries: “What will I do? / What am I going to do?” / Except to hold her hand and stammer / There is nothing I can say to her, nothing true’.⁷⁹ During this moment of crisis the speaker is reminded of what his mother was like in her younger years:

Who was a young mother on her back,
Sick with laughter, on the sunny shore,
Is strewn on her bed
Like a model in a fashion shoot.
Her sheep’s eyes staring at me,
Imploring all that sheep’s eyes can implore:
*Why hast thou forsaken me?*⁸⁰

The young, happy, and strong mother may have been reduced to a sheep-like condition, yet the syntax – ‘Who was [. . .] / Is strewn’ – emphasises continuity between the person she was then and the person she is now. This realisation heightens the poignancy of her imploring question, which is a reproach of society’s inadequate care system, whose ethos should be ‘to value the lives, experiences and convictions of persons with dementia, even in circumstances where what is expressed seems foreign or “unknowable”’.⁸¹ This empathetic approach is exemplified by the son at the end of the poem as, drawing on the

religious connotations of the sheep motif, he calms his mother with ‘Rhymes and Psalms – the only words / That mean anything to Mummy’.⁸²

In contrast to the dreariness pervading Durcan’s account of his mother’s fourth age in a nursing home, ‘Golden Mothers Driving West’ appears like a wish-fulfilling fantasy, the son’s antidote to the unbearably bleak death his mother suffered in the ‘Alzheimer’s nursing home’ after ‘sitting [...] in an arm-chair for two years / In a top-storey room with two other aged ladies, / [...] / Three Irish orang-utans, silent, stationary’.⁸³ The poem narrates the unlikely escape of these three elderly ladies in a stolen car driven by the speaker’s mother. We follow their journey west through the reports of several eye witnesses, including a Polish youth in a car wash who was ‘struck by the fact that all three ladies were laughing / For the ten minutes it took him to wash the car’⁸⁴ and a young German girl on a cruise with her family who saw ‘three small, thin, aged ladies with white hair’ jump from the bridge, ‘their dressing gowns flying behind them in a breeze’⁸⁵ – a death described as clearly preferable to the mother’s years of silent languishing in the nursing home. By placing his mother in the driver’s seat of the car, the speaker grants her the agency she was denied in her final years as an Alzheimer’s patient in institutional care; by imagining her on her last journey en route to her native County Mayo, he restores her to a place of personal meaning, underlining the importance of home, connection, and belonging that the nursing home has failed to provide.

To conclude, Dorcey’s and Durcan’s poems about the ageing mother are written from the point of view of the middle-aged child seeking to come to terms with their parent’s physical and mental decline, and impending death. The speakers witness the process of ageing and dying from the outside, struggling to come to terms with grief and loss and conjuring memories of the mother’s younger days so as to do justice to the richness of her life and to preserve her dignity and personhood. In doing so, they explore and subvert pervasive cultural perceptions such as the trope of old age as a second childhood and resist cultural narratives of eternal youth and rejuvenation that tend to obscure the realities of ageing, not unlike the iconic image of Mother Ireland. By moving the ageing mother to the centre of their poems, they thus help to create more nuanced cultural narratives than provided by the Irish poetic tradition as well as by the social imaginary of the fourth age. While older people in institutionalised care might easily be marginalised and infantilized, it is precisely the lens of the intimate mother-child connection that can provide for richer, more diverse and empathetic representations of older age. Without obscuring realities of physical and cognitive decline, these poems still emphasise the sociocultural conditions of ageing and insist on the ageing parent’s personhood and agency. As Mary Dorcey notes in an interview, ‘One of the functions of writing and writers [. . .] is to look where most of us are afraid to look, to look and report, because all of us, in our ordinary life, are afraid to speak directly about pain, about the dark and difficult things’.⁸⁶ More poems and different perspectives are needed to fill the void of poetic

representations by and about people in ‘deep’ old age, to remind us of our shared vulnerability and the need for intergenerational connection. The relative lacuna of such representations may testify to the courage it takes to write these poems, as well as to read them. These poems bring us face to face with uncomfortable, painful truths about the frailty and mortality of those dear to us, as well as our own; the future that, in Boland’s words, ‘does not bear thinking of’. Ultimately, however, they also provide us with the gift of poems to ‘grow old [and] die in’.

Notes and References

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- ⁵ Grenier et al. 324.
- ⁶ Gilleard and Higgs 123.
- ⁷ Julia Twigg, ‘The Body, Gender, and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology’, *Journal of Aging Studies* 18 (2004): 64.
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- ¹¹ Jenny Hockey and Allison James, ‘Back to Our Futures: Imagining Second Childhood’, *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1995) 136.
- ¹² Hockey and James 135.
- ¹³ Grenier et al. 327.
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- ¹⁶ Boland, ‘In Coming Days’, *Domestic Violence* 56.
- ¹⁷ Hockey and James 135.
- ¹⁸ Mary Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’, *Moving Into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (Galway: Salmon Publishing, 1995) 25.
- ¹⁹ Antoinette Quinn, ‘Speaking the Unspoken: The Poetry of Mary Dorcey’, *Colby Quarterly* 28.4 (1992): 235.
- ²⁰ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 25.
- ²¹ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 25.
- ²² Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 25.
- ²³ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 25.
- ²⁴ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 26.
- ²⁵ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 25.
- ²⁶ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 26.
- ²⁷ Hockey and James 133.
- ²⁸ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 26.
- ²⁹ Dorcey, ‘Trying on for Size’ 26.
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- ⁴³ Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 101.
- ⁴⁴ Ruth E. Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 4.
- ⁴⁵ Quinn 236.
- ⁴⁶ Mary Dorcey, 'When You're Asleep', *Moving Into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* 79.
- ⁴⁷ Katherine Woodward, 'Telling Stories: Aging, Reminiscence, and the Life Review', *Telling Stories* (Occasional Papers for the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, no. 9, 1997) 2. For the importance of life review in older people see Robert N. Butler, 'The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged', in *Psychiatry* 26.1 (1963): 65-76.
- ⁴⁸ Woodward, 'Telling Stories' 3.
- ⁴⁹ Dorcey, 'When You're Asleep' 79-80.
- ⁵⁰ Dorcey, 'When You're Asleep' 80.
- ⁵¹ Dorcey, 'When You're Asleep' 81.
- ⁵² Dorcey, 'When You're Asleep' 82.
- ⁵³ Hockey and James 144.
- ⁵⁴ In an interview, Dorcey comments on the importance of writing about a positive mother-daughter relationship like the one she enjoyed with her own mother 'because it is so little described in world literature. Good mothers have been written out of literature and history. And loving daughters equally. [...] So I felt that some writer needed to put on record a strong and communicative relationship because if we have no model of mothers and daughters who actually talk to each other and change with each other, how can the world change?' (Maria Micaela Coppola and Carla de Petris, 'A Conversation with Mary Dorcey', *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 5 (2015): 235)
- ⁵⁵ Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Ageing* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013) 139.
- ⁵⁶ Paul Durcan, 'Little Old Lady', *The Laughter of Mothers* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007) 118.
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- ⁶⁰ Durcan, 'Little Old Lady' 119.
- ⁶¹ Paul Durcan, 'September 11, 2001', *The Laughter of Mothers* 122.
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- ⁶⁴ Durcan, 'September 11, 2001' 125.
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- ⁶⁷ Durcan, 'September 11, 2011' 123.
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- ⁷¹ Grenier et al. 321.
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⁸¹ Grenier et al. 320.

⁸² Durcan, 'September 11, 2001' 125.

⁸³ Paul Durcan, 'Golden Mothers Driving West', *The Laughter of Mothers* 126.

⁸⁴ Durcan, 'Golden Mothers Driving West' 126.

⁸⁵ Durcan, 'Golden Mothers Driving West' 127.

⁸⁶ Coppola and de Petris 236.