the arts council
an chomhairle ealaíon

The Siren Alps

John McAuliffe


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Introduction

The Public and the Arts (2006) study was commissioned by the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon to provide information on the current behaviour and attitudes of Irish people to the arts.

The study finds that public attitudes to the arts are very positive and that attendance levels are above international norms. Current patterns of attendance, participation and purchase are revealed, as well as private 'consumption' of arts and culture via an increasing range of media. However the study also showed some apparently contradictory findings – the public (as reflected in samples taken by the study) consider the arts to be important, even if they do not personally attend at formal arts events. This has prompted consideration of the many ways in which the arts influence day to day life, albeit sometimes invisibly.

Arising from the study the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon has asked a range of commentators to give their opinions and perspectives on *The Value of the Arts.* These pamphlets are intended to provoke discussion and to focus attention on the crucial role the arts can and do play in our lives as individuals, as members of diverse communities and as part of our wider society.

THE SIREN ALPS

VERITIES 1

The individual and the community are central to the arts, but the reverse is also true: the arts change lives and have the power to change a community's idea about itself. People of all ages see them as part of their daily or weekly life, and for many others they act as a resource or an escape at particular moments in their lives. To read the new Arts Council report, *The Public and The Arts*, is to get some sense of this, but the report's statistical basis cannot really consider how the arts and the public are wrapped up in one another. However, the report's division of The Public and The Arts into separate entities, into consumer and producer, does usefully suggest the importance of creating and maintaining networks that plug the arts into the public, social and also private life of Irish towns and cities. These promotional networks do help to open up the world of the arts, and poetry in particular, and they are fundamental in breaking down many people's uncomfortable response to poetry and introducing a wider appreciation of poetry's value.

THE VALLEY

it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

W.H. Auden's (great) lines about poetry hold good too for the other arts: his geography with its valley and ranches, is modest, familiar, even as it stakes its absolute claim for survival as 'a way of happening, a mouth'.

ADMIRERS

The same poem, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', imagines the poet's death:

> An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
> The provinces of his body revolted,
> The squares of his mind were empty,
> Silence invaded the suburbs,
> The current of his feeling failed; he became
> his admirers.

For Auden, and for most readers of poetry, poems find ways of speaking which suit or read or identify their readers: this is why poems (and a poet) can assume a kind of second life among these readers and sometimes, luckily, a more general currency. In these cases, as Auden says about Yeats, 'The death of the poet [is] kept from his poems.'

The relationship between poem and reader, where the Arts become the admiring Public, is the one which makes us think of a 'rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem', of a place where 'hope and history rhyme', or that 'There, but for the clutch of luck, go we all'. But it is a relationship that still remains difficult to describe or quantify.

AND

Frank O'Connor says somewhere that 'and' is the most romantic word in the English language, but it is difficult to see the romance in the story of *The Public and the Arts.* According to this report, *The Public* has heard about *The Arts,* but the two do not encounter one another often enough for the latter's liking. This inattentiveness on *The Public's* part may be, of course, because there are problems with the definition of *The Arts* or the ways (for instance, at regular events, in theatrical spaces or online) in which the *Public* engages with *The Arts.* Perhaps expectations are too high for both parties, perhaps their relationship has been exaggerated in the past.

In my case, and for many others too, the two communities suggested by *The Public* and *The Arts* overlap. As a writer I identify with *The Arts;* as a reader or audience member with *The Public.* And as festival director of Poetry Now (2003-2007), I see myself as that crucial and privileged matchmaking *and* whose function is to bring the two together.

PATIENCE AT MIDNIGHT

When I started work at the Poetry Now festival I suddenly saw how the public reception and promotion of poetry differs from the culture of more high-profile arts. Poetry has a review-based culture, which suits the patient world of books and readers; it has little in common with the 24-7 advertisement to the Public of 'event' arts, like film or music, those arts that we talk about most regularly with friends. For film and rock music in particular, the *and* of marketing

and promotion, what fills the omniplexes and arenas, is fully and sophisticatedly exploited and developed. In the light of this valuable Arts Council report, I'll look now at poetry in the context of that 'event' world, before discussing the importance of developing this relationship between poetry and the public.

SHOP TALK 1

A festival like Poetry Now requires, as a priority, promotional and event management skills. While it relies on a core of interested readers, it will not fill the theatre without attracting a larger, more casual audience. Each year Poetry Now's systematic advertising and PR (supported by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, The Arts Council and *The Irish Times*) successfully informs, courts or retains this floating Saturday night crowd, packing the Pavilion Theatre with people who live in suburbs and commuter towns miles away from Dun Laoghaire. Last year, in the run-up to the festival, I was glad to hear people complain about feeling 'saturated' by the festival's ads and fliers. It's something I say myself about the inescapable and clearly effective promotion of events as different as *Shrek 3* and The Electric Picnic.

SHOP TALK 2

As part of the festival promotion, we also discovered that live events, for poetry as much as for film, rock or theatre, need a social frame to draw and retain a crowd. If we couldn't organise a Heineken sponsorship or an onsite restaurant for this one-off weekend, a successful event must provide a forum, a festival club, for people to enthuse, complain and

debate. It has worked well, and the festival's readings and prizes and talking points have made it a fixture in the annual calendar: writers, teachers, readers have a chance to hear and buy inspiring new work, to argue about the poets' authority (artistic and moral), to debate the pleasures of the art and, also, to contribute to the ups and downs of reputations.

MIRROR

It's taken me some time to understand why the Arts Council report read so strangely at first. It is like walking through a mirror. *They* are writing about *us* (the arts), rather than the other way around: that is, poetry is not examining or representing the state or the public so much as the state (and the public) are measuring and representing the arts.

NUMBERS

Poetry Now is not the only popular literary festival and, like Cuirt in Galway, Writers' Week in Listowel and other short, annual, non-touring events, its success depends on state funding as well as sponsorship and gate receipts. Without a promotional budget, the festival would lose its new audience entirely. It makes no sense to promote a one-weekend-only poetry reading as if it will be a 'block-buster' (out for four weeks only at 5,000 European screens, although this is a nice thought…), but it is appropriate that there should be protective Irish support in the crowded Irish promotional marketplace for poetry events. One-off events can be expensive to promote, but the public is there for festivals that attract the best international readers to perform alongside

Irish writers: the quality of these events is not an issue (as is clear from the size of the crowds as well as the Irish and international reviews of the festival). And it is clear, although John Burns in another pamphlet in this series suggests otherwise, that Arts Council support of promotional activities and outlets does work.

This success is reflected in the report: although *The Public and the Arts* flags up repeatedly the decline in public interest in the performing arts, it does report an increased audience for the main public event associated with poetry, the reading, which has not fallen but risen (by 25%). This is good news and a marker of how Arts Council support has consolidated this form's public visibility through its funding of the literary festivals that dot the Irish calendar. However, poetry events still register a small number of regular participants overall, something which is pointed out to me repeatedly, usually live on radio, during the Poetry Now PR campaigns:

RADIO 1

'if people are so interested in poetry', say these devil's advocates on the radio, 'why do you need to work so hard to promote it?' It is hard to imagine the audience for a film or concert that receives zero promotion, but that argument never seems to satisfy them: 'Hasn't poetry,' they ask, 'lost its relevance? Let's face it, many, most people,' they go on, 'are just not interested in poetry'.

INTEREST

Maybe they are right about this low level of interest: it is true that many people, including writers, novelists particularly (although there are exceptions), never or rarely read or feel comfortable with poems. But it's easy to recommend, for holiday reading, breezing through Peter Fallon's *Georgics,* Maurice Riordan's *The Holy Land* and Robert Hass's *Sun Under Wood,* and I would rather spend a week at the dentist's than re-read best-selling fiction like *A— B—'s S—,* or *C—D—'s C—A—,* or *E—F—'s M— N—…*' And yet I will continue to read new novels, particularly if they are recommended by friends or a strong set of newspaper notices.

RADIO 2

Why poetry? Why not poetry? If I ask these devil's advocates on the radio (or novelists) about poets they've tried reading lately, they bring up the Leaving Cert (although I don't hold George Eliot's *Silas Marner* against the novel as a genre any more than I do Ian McEwan). After a little prompting, they usually profess a liking for Kavanagh, they remember nursery rhymes, a poem they saw in *The Irish Times* a while back; Paul Durcan on the radio divides opinion. They write the odd poem themselves though not seriously.

EASY

Maybe poems are not taken seriously because people see how easy it looks. After buying a book, you don't even need to go anywhere to read the poems. It's also easy to start writing a poem: no money, no technology, not even,

compared to a novel, much hard writing graft. Just a biro and a sheet of paper. Maybe poets should start to credit Formal Advisers, Image Consultants, Light Managers, Best Boys, a Sound Editor, some executive producers.

NOT DEFINING POETRY

Why is it that so many people maintain a very woolly idea about what POETRY is? In fact, an uninvestigated wooliness becomes, for many, the defining quality of poetry. It is, they say, a soft, semi-spiritual, irrational retreat from the world in which they live, a world whose pressing concerns bear down with such urgency on daily life that they have no time for such a vague, irrelevant art.

WOOL

Maybe there are poems and poets who deserve this write-off, but good poems are not woolly at all, and not 'irrelevant' either. Poems are usually clear, grounded in how people speak (and live and think and experience the day-to-day world): most definitions of a good poem involve its surprising use of (or attitude to) this material, its invention of fresh images, its creation of 'memorable speech'. This is a poetry that is not removed from but absorbed by and omnivorous for the world. It takes pleasure in knocking down the barriers or abstractions that habitually bracket and shut off our identities; it challenges our expectations; it tries to speak the truth about how we live, in time.

NARRATIVE

Some people's complaints about poetry, about the so-called 'high arts', are really complaints about how different it is to other kinds of text. It does not focus on consequences: it does not ask you to buy something as an advertisement does. It does not ask you to tune in next week to find out what happened to the desperate housewife or the gangster or the wizard. Or to check later to see if your team had made a signing, or whether the lost girl has been found, or whether the peacekeepers are being sent in yet.

POEMS

Poems omit the narrative tension of film and fiction and news: they're not much interested in exploring character either. They *are* interested, obsessed by time, and in the sound and the look of things, and they strike attitudes wholesale: they insist on declaring a value system, on asking questions about how we live now. I love this about poems. Any good poem does it. But if I went to Derek Mahon's classic, 'Everything is going to be all right', looking for a plot or a narrative, I would not know where to look for disappointment.

> How should I not be glad to contemplate
> the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
> and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
> There will be dying, there will be dying,
> but there is no need to go into that.
> The lines flow from the heart unbidden
> and the hidden source is the watchful heart.

The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.

WHERE TO LOOK: AN INTRODUCTION

The poem has a very positive-seeming title (I hear Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds' there somewhere (which google tells me was a hit the year it was written).
The crescendo of rhyme likewise seems to indicate that this poem is celebratory and triumphant (bright / sunlight / right; everything/flying).

But Mahon has thrown a spanner in the works: each of the lines has some way of undercutting our initial response to the rhymes, so that we can see that the poet is "not glad" (and does the opening lines' question sound a bit like 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' Maybe), the high tide is "on the ceiling" (the poet underwater, overboard?), the **far** cities are beautiful (but not his one), the sunlight is a **riot**, the day has not yet **broken,** the clouds are still present (even if they are flying) and we begin to see that 'Everything *might well* be going to be alright' sometime in the future but at present things are fairly terrible for the poem's speaker. And yet…
In his recent version of *Oedipus,* Derek Mahon has Oedipus confidently declare at the start of the play: 'Everything is going to be all right'.

This poem is easy to memorise and its lines will come to you one day as you drive home in the rain, or as you look up from the paper some Saturday daydreaming about war in Iran.

There's an Emily Dickinson poem, number 80 in her *Collected Poems,* that has a similar effect.

EMILY DICKINSON

Our lives are Swiss –
So still – so Cool –
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their curtains
And we look farther on!

Italy stands the other side!
While like a guard between –
The solemn Alps –
The Siren Alps
Forever intervene!

PUBLICS

To make this romance between the Public and the Arts more complicated, my art, poetry, has two kinds of public, a readership as well as an audience, both of whom it needs to satisfy.

Some people argue that these two publics require different aesthetics. But then it is easy to be prescriptive about what poetry should or should not be doing, other than doing its own thing and not conforming to expectations, as must a newspaper or a horoscope.

THE DARK

If its audience is to grow, poetry needs public advocates, and discussion and argument. This doesn't mean that poetry should be trying to grab the news agenda, but that it needs more outlets and more venues so that people become more familiar with its strategies and strengths.

In fact, news-chasing poems often lose the art's power and force and find themselves collapsing into the predictable pro or con rhetoric of a public debate. A poem's strength means instead that it can defend against our believing what we want, even as it forces our individual agency on us so that we respond to its prompting, with no one looking over our shoulder to say 'Wrong' as the poem coaxes us to read it on its own terms, leading us away from ourselves, with any luck, into the dark, into its recognisable and shadowy light.

MATCHMAKING

Literary festivals are a good place to start looking at, and listening to poetry, something which is recognised in *The Public and The Arts.* But since 2000 there has been a spate of books which most readers recognise as good and enjoyable. If anyone is puzzled by Patrick Kavanagh's enthusiasm for Allen Ginsberg (two poets that almost everyone agrees on), Tom French's *Touching the Bones* should be the first port of call. If anyone liked Conor O'Callaghan's book about Roy Keane, *Red Mist,* they'll probably like his poems too and should start with *Seatown,* his great book about borders and shorelines (and Dundalk).

REAL PLACES

Speaking of Dundalk, if you read books to discover imaginary worlds and real places, or just to know your own territory, I cannot imagine anyone curious about Ireland (or about Ireland today) not enjoying Paul Durcan's *Greetings to our Friends in Brazil* and *The Art of Life* or Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel* even if their longest poems are set in Brazil and Italy and New Jersey. And if you look for more specific places, poets write books which are more than rough guides, and not just to remote hills and unfrequented rivers: for Belfast Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti* and Alan Gillis's *Somebody, Somewhere;* for Dublin Peter Sirr's *Bring Everything* and Gerard Fanning's *Water & Power*, for Galway Rita Ann Higgins' *Throw in the Vowels* and Eva Bourke's *Spring on Henry Street*; for Cork Tom McCarthy's *Mr Dineen's Careful Parade* and Eilean Ni Chuilleanain's forthcoming *Selected Poems.* These are absorbing, stirring books. They make readers appreciate and look for solitude, short stretches of time alone (away from mobile and the internet, itself an excellent resource for poetry readers but a terrible, shoulder-tapping reading companion). They remind me I can 'look farther on' even as I must also see those sky-blockers, 'the siren alps'.

VERITIES 2

Poetry is not an art that will create revenue for the state or its practitioners, but it does offer unique and rare pleasures and rewards to its readers and audiences. It is how we think about ourselves; it is one of the places where, as Derek Mahon has put it, 'a thought might grow'. Its promotion has become

increasingly difficult and important, but it is also true that the state's continued role in the public sponsorship of a liberating and necessarily private experience, as much as its support for individual artists, is a basic force for good.

John McAuliffe, August 2007

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