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## Proper Accounting

Terence Brown

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At the recent celebration of Seamus Heaney's seventieth birthday, in the Pavilian Theatre, Dun Laoghaire (held on 28 March, 2009) the poet himself adverted to our current economic distresses here in Ireland and in the world in general. He remarked how he had over the years used the term 'crediting poetry' to refer to the way in which his own art-form was a human necessity. He also noted that the phrase can also be taken to imply that poetry is a form of wealth that rarely finds a place on the kinds of balance sheets that are employed to determine state and commercial policy. *Crediting Poetry* was of course the title of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1995. This set me thinking on the way, in an era in which dodgy accounting practices have been exposed at the heart of the marketplace here and abroad, whether proper accounts might be presented to show how the cultural wealth a society accrues from its writers, artists and thinkers affect the national balance sheet. The task would certainly be a daunting one for the auditors and would involve complex systems of record whereby the outcomes of state and private investment in the arts and culture sphere would be carefully tracked so that assessments of profit and loss in terms of attendances, job-creation, tourism figures, spin-off products, social capital, and so on could all be figured into a final holistic statement. One thinks that this would be an even more difficult task than, for example, assessing the full economic and social capital value that a university accrues for a town, a city, a region and a country, another area of human activity that in my view is never properly accounted for when annual educational budgets are discussed and accounts presented (and that these forms of wealth are perceived as very real is evidenced by the current concern of the good citizens of a city like Waterford that they should have their own university).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is, I think, well worth noting that among the various Irish institutions that have been shown to possess feet of clay in recent years (local government, the Catholic Church, the banks and their regulatory authorities), the universities have retained a reputation for integrity and have suffered no scandals of the order that have destroyed reputations in other areas of Irish life. They remain among the most successful of Irish institutions.



I am conscious of course that John O'Hagan, as long ago as 1987, was co-author with Christopher Duffy of a Report Commissioned by the Arts Council of Ireland, entitled *The Performing Arts and the Public Purse: an Economic Analysis*, which made a case on economic grounds for public investment in arts activity in Ireland. So, naturally, I turned back to it, when thinking on this issue. There I noted, first, that the focus was strictly on the performing arts (and even then they themselves acknowledged that within their remit their focus was somewhat narrow, skimping as they did the contributions of dance, music and opera) and, second, that they stated: 'the economics of the visual arts, literature, film, and other art forms raises very different issues and questions'.<sup>2</sup> It would have been interesting to know in what way these other arts activities raised questions different to those that they themselves in fact posed in their book in relation to the performing arts, which were, why 'in any market-orientated economy . . . taxpayers who do not partake of the performing arts should be required to provide funds for them', and what are 'the ways in which the performing arts can be, and are, funded from the public purse'.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, within the limits of their brief and focus, their book did make a convincing argument to the first of their questions as to why tax payer's money should go to support the performing arts. Now, in a period when tax is required to make good the failed wagers of privately owned financial institutions, this question ought to be easier of answer, but I suspect it won't be. However one is heartened to note the Arts Council Director, Mary Cloake, as reported in the *Irish Times* (22 April 2009), stating, 'Such is Ireland's international standing in the arts that the sector is akin to a natural resource', something to be proud of 'in contrast to our reputation perhaps with banking'.

Working as they do within the model of the 'market-orientated economy', O'Hagan and Duffy addressed how support for the performing arts can be justified while sustaining the principle of 'sovereignty of the consumer'<sup>4</sup> (itself a concept we may want to challenge, but let that be for the purposes of this argument). Their answer involves careful distinctions between 'private benefits which accrue from an activity' and certain 'goods and services' which if they 'also produce significant social or collective benefits' will be 'unaccounted for by the market mechanism'.<sup>5</sup> It is in the area of 'collective benefits' that the

<sup>2</sup> John W. O'Hagan and Christopher T. Duffy, *The Performing Arts and the Public Purse* (Dublin, 1987), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

authors find good reasons for tax-payer support of performing arts activities. However they caution: 'While the nature of the collective benefits resulting from the performing arts will be outlined, the magnitude of such benefits both in absolute terms and in relation to private benefits must remain a matter of conjecture'.<sup>6</sup> All of which is to reinforce my observation that a proper accounting of the contribution of the arts and culture to the wealth of a nation is, to use a formulation deployed by the poet W.B. Yeats, 'of all things not impossible the most difficult'. And that is before one takes on board O'Hagan and Duffy's admission that the economic approach, which in their understanding of the matter means a 'market-orientated' approach, can only 'provide a systematic framework within which the debate can take place, but it cannot decide on matters that are ultimately issues of value and political judgement'.<sup>7</sup>

Among the broad categories of 'collective benefits resulting from the performing arts', the authors list two which will concern me here: 'national feeling' and 'identity and self-criticism'.<sup>8</sup> Considering how drama and literature can be credited in a proper accounting of the wealth of the nation, a good deal of 'conjecture' (a term which recurs in their book) will be involved. And it must also be noted that O'Hagan and Duffy do not rest their case for public support of the performing arts solely on the possibility of 'collective benefit'; that only has force in combination with other demonstrable *economic* goods.

Conjecture is often easier at a distance, so it may be wise to attempt to assess the collective benefits which can be said to accrue to the Irish nation from literature and drama by reflecting, in what must be broad terms, on the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century enterprise known in the literary histories as the Irish Literary Revival, which combined the performing art of drama with literature and in the Abbey Theatre company was in 1925 the first recipient in the English-speaking world of state support for dramatic activity. In seeking to assess its impact in terms of collective benefit, we can, at our vantage point about a century later, think of how it affected its contemporaries and the legacy it left. And in pondering those matters we may be well-placed to consider how more recent literary and dramatic production has augmented the wealth of the nation as a 'collective benefit'.

From the outset the writers and intellectuals who in the 1890s set themselves the task of reviving literature and drama were clear that their

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

endeavour bore on the issue of national identity and national reputation. The famous prospectus drawn up by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn for establishment of an Irish Literary Theatre is both a foundational and representative moment in the history of the Revival. They wrote, in its interesting draft form given in Roy Foster's biography of Yeats, that their joint enterprise aspired 'to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts & [passions] emotions of Ireland' and in so doing would 'show that Ireland is not the [locus naturalis] home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism, and we are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation'.<sup>9</sup> As is well known, that universal support was not forthcoming, since from their opening session in 1899 when Yeats's own play *The Countess Cathleen* was attacked on religious grounds that disguised nationalist objections to its portrayal of the Irish peasantry, to the riotous reception afforded John Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907, the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre company that succeeded it, met with opprobrium from a significant section of Irish national opinion. What, however, cannot be gainsaid is that Yeats and his confederates did manage to put the issue of representation firmly on the agenda of contemporary debate in a period when the identity of the Irish people was a hotly contested issue. Who indeed were the Irish, what was their national identity, were questions to which the Irish Literary Revival and the Abbey theatre gave distinctive challenging answers in a period when the modern Irish separatist movement was in process of formation. And some of the answers that were implied in what was essentially a Yeatsian project, with its vision of what we would now term creative hybridity and post-colonial writing back against empire, provoked in some contemporaries an altogether more narrowly nativist version of Irish identity that found its most vigorous expression in what became known as the Irish Ireland movement. In all of this what is indisputable is that artistic production was a mode of cultural politics in the early twentieth century in this country, in which politics were inscribed matters of contemporary moment. The arts mattered, as they partook in formative national debate. They were crucial to the nation's intellectual and imaginative wealth, part of its knowledge economy (of course, in current usage that term is often used to narrow the meanings of 'knowledge').

In some ways Yeats and his closest colleagues could be said to have lost the national debate. When the poet received his Nobel prize for literature at the

<sup>9</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life: 1: The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914* (Oxford, 1997), 184.

end of 1923, with the shots of the recently ended civil war still ringing in his ears, his acceptance speech seemed to acknowledge that defeat. Claiming that his own work as poet and dramatist and that of the theatre movement he had helped to found, were part of the general quickening of cultural life that filled the vacuum left in the political sphere after the death of Parnell in 1891, Yeats nonetheless felt driven to admit: 'It seemed that the ancient world lay all about us with its freedom of imagination, its delight in good stories, in man's force and woman's beauty, and that all we had to do was to make the town think as the country felt; yet we soon discovered that the town would only think town thoughts'.<sup>10</sup>

In the early decades of Irish independence the country continued to think town thoughts, inasmuch as an essentially petit-bourgeois society, with its values rooted in the country town rather than the capital or the imaginary pristine countryside, based its sense of national identity on the Irish Ireland vision of a Catholic and Gaelic nation coming into its rightful inheritance. Yet its nativist ideology could not ignore the way in which the Literary Revival had bequeathed to the new state a set of symbols of the heroic past which could help affirm the collective grandeur of the project of nation building. In 1935 Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cuchulain (a hero of Yeatsian revivalism) could be placed in the General Post Office in Dublin to general acceptance that this was an appropriate expression of Irish self-sacrifice. And a sculpture in the Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square as late as the 1970s could draw on the imagery of the legend of the Children of Lir to suggest national escape from an ancient curse. Furthermore the major imaginative investment made by the Revival in the idea of Irish civilization as essentially rural, at its most compelling in the poetry of Yeats, was part of the invention of an Ireland of the mind that retains imaginative purchase at home and abroad even to this day. To state the matter crudely, the enterprise helped in the marketable branding of the country for the purposes of tourism and inward investment. Where Thomas Moore in the nineteenth century had made Erin the land of song with a tear in the eye, Yeats in the twentieth had made it a spiritual home of poetry. One heard an echo of this last week when *The Los Angeles Times* editorialised on the Heaney birthday celebrations: 'The Irish, of course, take their poets more seriously than most'.

More significantly in Ireland Yeats's legacy to his country has been verbal, with phrases and formulations going into the language: 'the greasy till' offers a

<sup>10</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London, 1955), 562.

metonym of commercial corruption that betrays the ‘terrible beauty’ of self-immolating patriotism. At the early stages of the peace process that led to the Good Friday Agreement, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds could elevate a glacial negotiating pace to a spiritual progression by advising ‘peace comes dropping slow’ (quoting, somewhat out of context, it must be said, Yeats’s most famous lyric, ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’). ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’ (‘The Second Coming’) in Ireland as elsewhere is all too depressingly quotable as the current crisis unfolds. And this sense that the poet and writer can put words on national sentiment, and is somehow the conscience of the tribe, is probably the most significant legacy in present-day Ireland of a period in Irish history when it was not absurd for Yeats to ask (in his poem ‘The Man and the Echo’), ‘Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?’

All of this can properly be credited to Yeats and his movement in the national accounts. And this before we ponder how great writers like Yeats, Joyce, Beckett take their bearings on what it means to be human through their soundings of Irish reality.

In his Nobel Lecture in Stockholm in 1995 Seamus Heaney expressed himself conscious that Yeats in 1923 had chosen to speak not of himself but of the Irish Dramatic Movement as a collective venture that affected the course of Irish political and cultural history. He came, Heaney reminded his listeners, ‘to tell the world that the local work of poets and dramatists had been as important to the transformation of his native place as the ambushes of guerilla armies’.<sup>11</sup> With reference to that act of solidarity with his artistic confederates Heaney invited his audience, and by extension his readers, ‘to do what Yeats asked his audience to do and think of the achievement of Irish poets and dramatists and novelists over the past forty years’.<sup>12</sup> In speaking thus he seemed to be indicating that the period from 1955 until 1995 constituted a distinctive phase in Irish history, in the way the period 1890 until the foundation of the Free State had done. He was challenging us to consider how poets, dramatists and novelists had contributed to that period as Yeats and his fellow artists had done so munificently to theirs.

That comprehensive critical task remains to be done. However Heaney’s lecture offers a hint as to how it might be started. In suggesting that the Irish Dramatic Movement was a contributing factor in the ‘transformation’ of Ireland, Heaney implicitly poses the question whether that term is appropriate to the period he identifies (1955–95). It certainly has seen changes that might

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* (New York, 1998), 426.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.



seem to warrant the word, but perhaps not in the near revolutionary sense it seems to bear in the years 1912–22. The fact that key works in the period, at least since the 1960s, have had transition as a major preoccupation (with Brian Friel providing some of the defining texts from *Philadelphia Here I Come* to *Dancing at Lughnasa*) leads one to suspect that a role in identifying the nature of transition and in negotiating it may be salient to how the arts have contributed to national life since at least the 1960s – works like Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985), John McGherhern's *Amongst Women* (1990), spring instantly to mind. And when one allows the term purchase in one's mind one realizes how it provides a way of engaging with Heaney's own *oeuvre*, which has so signally contributed to the literature of the period. For Heaney's work registers, explores and affirms a transition in national life whereby a people who understand the historical justifications for political violence, nonetheless, and without repudiating past sacrifices, proceeds to a new national self-understanding in which peace-making has its own dignity. To have been a force for that public good is an immeasurable contribution to the wealth of the nation. A collective benefit indeed.

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