



Between filiation and affiliation: the space of art

Kevin Whelan



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.

BETWEEN FILIATION AND AFFILIATION: THE SPACE OF ART

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
that day.¹

Emily Dickinson

THE LEVELS OF MEMORY

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has emphasised different levels of memory in an ethical context.² The first level is the pathological or therapeutic, as initially explored by Sigmund Freud in his *Metapsychology* of 1915, with its pivotal question—what constitutes an acceptable past? Both an excess or a lack of memory can be equally damaging; abuse lodges in the psyche as wounds, scars of memory, which never fully heal. The work of memory is to establish a proper balance between mourning and melancholia. While mourning involves the reconciliation of self with the lost objects of love, melancholia internalises the loss as a despairing longing for reunification, and is therefore condemned to repetition (a damaged form of resistance to the reality principle). Freud advocates the process of moving from melancholia to mourning by ‘working through’ from repetition, through remembering, to reconciliation. At the individual as well as every other level, it is necessary to move

¹ Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems* (Philadelphia, Running Press Books, 1991), p. 218.

² Paul Ricoeur, ‘Memory and forgetting’ in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary debates in philosophy* (London, Routledge, 1999), pp. 5-18.

beyond an excess or a repressed memory, which leads only to repetition or melancholia.

The second level of memory is the ethical or political. Memory is not static or inviolate; it is possible to educate or heal memory, through the suasion of art, which adjudicates between memory and forgetting. Memory does not have to be coercive or intransigent; the availability of art with its varied narrative strategies enables choice in the creating of personal and collective identity. Art ensures that it is always possible to tell it another way; that possibility opens a space for the other, a space for dialogue, a negotiation of narratives.

At this discursive level, the possibility of an ethical memory becomes available. Its ethical force derives from its desire to open the past to the future, to help construct that future through recourse to the exemplarity of the past. Ethical memory is directed towards the future rather than the past. It is regulated by the horizon of justice, seeking a memory that is just to the victims as well as the victors, while it seeks to inaugurate new institutions at the political level, which guard against recurrence. Robert Frost reminded us that 'Memories are the least material of possessions' and survive even the bleakest of human circumstances.³

The existence of these levels argues for the necessity of memory, not merely as a form of knowledge, but as an action ('exercising our memories'). There is a responsibility to remember, because of the inescapable linkage between

³ Robert Frost, *The notebooks of Robert Frost* (ed.) Robert Faggen (Boston, Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 208.

past and future. Memory captured in art offers a necessary stay against the annihilating force of time and its erosion of traces. It is also the fundamentally human capacity, which, as Hannah Arendt has reminded us in *The Human Condition*, enables a continuation of action in the face of death. Art encourages us to escape from the ligatures of the past through its capacity for forgiveness; it can establish a link to the future through its capacity for promising.

The fusion of memory and art makes us heirs of the past and its utopian possibilities. The promise of a historical event is always more than what actually happened. There is more in the past than what happened; at any given point in time, multiple trajectories toward the future were open. Art can restore this openness to the past, and thereby nourish the utopian instinct, by restoring lost opportunities, and redeeming betrayed possibilities. This creates the space for a counterpoint history, of loss, of victimisation, of humiliation, so brilliantly evoked by Walter Benjamin.⁴

FILIATION AND AFFILIATION

A crucial feature of all forms of representation is the space from which we speak or, to put it another way, the appropriate distance between filiation (that to which we are born) and affiliation (that to which we aspire). If we are too filiated, the pressure of proximity crushes us, as we become 'mired in attachments'.⁵ If we veer too far away, the excess of distance can make us light headed. Yet the transition from filiation to affiliation is the standard Enlightenment ploy:

⁴Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history' in H. Zohn (ed.), *Illuminations* (London, Fontana, 1992), pp 245-55.

⁵Seamus Heaney, 'The first flight' in *Station Island* (London, Faber & Faber, 1984), p.102.

the distance travelled is the necessary elevation for liberal rationality. An appropriate distance creates the possibility, in Edward Said's famous formulation, for ethical witness, the necessary distance from the thing addressed while remaining implicated in one's own culture. If the distance is too far, the artist becomes excessively detached to a point of pure indifference. It is the in-between position that Seamus Heaney prefers - as in his favoured trope of stepping stones:

[I]n the 1940s there was a ford at Lower Broagh and a trail of big stepping stones led across from one bank to the other, linking the townland of Broagh to the townland of Bellshill. We used to paddle around the gravel bed on the Broagh side and I always loved venturing out from one stepping stone to the next, right into the middle of the stream – for even though the river was narrow enough and shallow enough, there was a feeling of daring once you got out into the main flow of the current. Suddenly you were on your own. You were giddy and rooted to the spot at one and the same time. Your body stood stock still, like a milestone or a boundary mark, but your head would be light and swimming from the rush of the river at your feet and the big stately movement of the clouds in the sky above your head.⁶

Heaney has recalled his hero Czeslaw Milosz in his Nobel

⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Something to write home about' in *Finders Keepers* (London, Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 48.

Prize lecture:

He talked about a story he had read when he was a child about someone travelling all over Europe on a bird's back, looking down at the earth from a great height. And he said this represents one of the big poetic impulses and desires - this airy whole, a vision in the sense that you see the whole thing and you feel it buoyantly and with delight and you're above it. On the other hand, he says, we also feel that if we fly too far, we've betrayed Earth and the cries of the earth. And so the difficulty always is that if you fly, you break solidarity with the people on Earth. Auden puts it in a different way. He says there is a mixture of Prospero and Ariel in every poet - Prospero representing poetry's impulse to wisdom and Ariel representing the impulse to pure song.⁷

Poems of sudden reversals are a favourite category of Heaney. The most accomplished of these, in part because of the startling quality of the subject matter, in part because of the relaxed but consummate mastery of style, is the poem on Clonmacnoise from the 'Squarings' sequence in *Seeing Things* (1991):

The Annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

⁷Interview with Seamus Heaney 'The words worth saying' in Steven Ratiner (ed.), *Giving their word: conversations with contemporary poets* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p. 106. The story that Milosz had read was Selma Lagerlof's *Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906).

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it, but in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown',
The abbot said, 'unless we help him'. So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.⁸

Heaney has said:

I was devoted to this poem because the crewman who appears is situated where every poet should be situated: between the ground of everyday experience and the airier realm of an imagined world. And the essential thing – whether you're the poet or the crewman – is to be able to move resourcefully between these two realms, not to get yourself bogged down in the quotidian, yet not to lose your head in the fantastic.⁹

ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

What is the appropriate link between ethics and aesthetics?
The artist is ultimately an ethical witness, who provides

⁸Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London, Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 62.

⁹Esther De Groot, 'Seamus Heaney' in Sheila Clarke (ed.), *Ashford: Writers in residence* (Ashford, Ashford Books, 2007), p. 115.

testimony. This trust in testimony, in the expressive function of language, in the moral power of narrative, enables 'an ethics of discourse'. Paul Ricoeur argued that 'we must have trust in language as a weapon against violence, indeed the best weapon there is against violence'.¹⁰ We should stress the autonomy of art, its necessary indifference to the conditions from which it arose, and the fact that it is not directly deducible from them, while not being entirely free of them either. We can never reduce the work of art to the conditions out of which it emerged. But neither can it occupy some pure or autonomous realm immune from its contexts.

The work of art is simultaneously disengaged and incriminated. Immersion in the archive of actuality will never produce a sufficient account of the otherness of art. Art realises its emancipatory function in the creation of alternative futures. The very disengagement of art is therefore the analogue of human freedom, the instantiation of that which is not yet available. The task of art can not be just a critique of forms of coercion: it must also be a repertoire of alternative possibilities.

True art in that sense never repeats itself: Beckett wanted an art 'weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road'.¹¹ Art instantiates the movement between memory and inspiration, between filiation and affiliation. As Freud showed, it 'constitutes a

¹⁰ Ricoeur, 'Memory and forgetting', p. 18.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London, John Calder, 1965), p. 103.

region half way between a reality which frustrates wishes and the wish-fulfilling world of the imagination'.¹²

We can finally revert to Ricoeur and his discussion of the truth claim of history as a record of what really happened. Literary and ethical discourse of this type still leaves a hole – a negative space of absolute loss, a limit that art cannot surpass, that ethics cannot redeem, a disconsolate future that has lost its past. This is also the realm of contingency and necessity – of Marx's piercing aphorism that men make their own history but not in conditions of their own choosing. If imagination properly is unleashed, history remains chained to the pastness of the past, and has always to return to the body count.

The fundamental task of the artist is the retrieval of traces, the rescuing of voices, the expansion of the human archive. The artist is ultimately a witness, who provides testimony and whose ethical position depends on trust, trust in the word of another. This trust in testimony, in the expressive function of language, in the moral power of narrative, enables 'an ethics of discourse'. Ricoeur argues that 'we must have trust in language as a weapon against violence, indeed the best weapon there is against violence'.¹³ Testimony - of the artist, the activist, the intellectual - is the power point between inspiration and memory, between mourning and melancholia, between filiation and affiliation.

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¹² Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and taboo and other works' in J. Strachey (ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume X111 (1913-1914) (London, Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 188.

¹³ Ricoeur, 'Memory and forgetting', p. 18.

