

Dennis O'Driscoll

**THE
OUTNUMBERED
POET**

Critical and Autobiographical Essays



Gallery Books

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Working Bard

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a young man without a fortune must be in want of a job. It was certainly true of my own experience. And another truism — the one about the universality of death and taxes — soon acquired a special, indeed literal, significance for me. Death, after all, was what would earn me my living; death in the form of taxes, actually: death duties and inheritance taxes. In 1970, aged sixteen and having just completed my secondary schooling, I was relieved to be offered a job by Ireland's Revenue Commissioners, our internal revenue and customs service: a 'permanent, pensionable position', no less, 'subject to satisfactory probation'. I have toiled in Revenue — as the organization is generally termed — ever since; for more than thirty years as a full-time employee (specializing successively in death duties, stamp duties and customs) and, subsequently, on a part-time basis (as editor of *Tax Briefing*, a journal which provides accountants, lawyers and tax advisers with technical information and interpretative guidelines on complex tax legislation).

'If you ever leave your job, you will stop writing': an office colleague, turned soothsayer, relayed this stark prediction to me once. Most poets, however, seem convinced that they would never *begin* writing if they were to spend a lifetime working in one of the busiest (not to mention least loved) institutions, one attracting more critics than *The Waste Land*. Our creative habits are as mysterious to each other as our domestic habits. So, as someone who has neither taken nor given a single poetry workshop or writing class, it is natural for me to ask — 'not in sorrow, but in wonder' — how I would survive if my pay, prospects, pension and tenure were to depend, irrespective of the vagaries of a fickle muse, on my being able not only to prove my poethood through regular publications, but also to act as a kind of creative satnav, plotting my students' routes toward expressive fulfilment.

Yet, a creative writing professorship is the career choice of so many admirable American poets that any fears I might harbour

about extraneous pressures on their creative spontaneity may well be misguided, impertinent or naive. In the end, all poets — within the academy and without — face the same task: to 'follow the prompts', as the corporate voicemails urge, and nudge into shape the amorphous sounds, rhythms, images or phrases by which the first stirrings of a potential poem are recognized, and which arrive unbidden like internal voicemails or text messages. In rare cases, the finished poem — having survived an initial probation period — may even prove 'permanent and pensionable'.



I had spent thirty-eight years in Revenue before my poetry and my official duties drew unexpectedly together for the first time. Early in 2008, I was asked — invited, not instructed; commissioned, not commanded — to write a poem to mark the opening of the Revenue Museum in Dublin Castle, site of the Revenue Commissioners' HQ (where my standard-issue Office of Public Works desk hunkers in a draughty, high-ceilinged, red-bricked Georgian wing). Even the tight-fisted Revenue is better loved by the twenty-first-century Irish natives than were the iron-fisted English colonists who ruled from Dublin Castle in earlier centuries; yet I cannot imagine a visit to a revenue museum acquiring must-see status for many locals, who probably fear a menacing rather than relaxing experience, a reminder of life's adversities rather than a diversion from them.

The museum's clientele is far likelier to be drawn from tourists — *Ireland for Dummies* grasped in hand, Nikon strapped on shoulder — who are attracted to Dublin Castle by the guided tours of the state apartments. In the pre-digital days, when the doctoring of photographs was not much essayed outside of the Kremlin, I must have played walk-on parts in hundreds of photograph albums, from Anchorage to KwaZulu-Natal, having been accidentally snapped in various guises by visitors seeking a Dublin Castle panorama: as an unwitting photo-wrecker, lugging files to a Department of Finance briefing; as a cropped suit-sleeve, whisking photocopied documents to a Eurocustoms board meeting; or as a mere anaemic blur, an ectoplasmic mist, hastening to catch my commuter bus at the end of a working day.

Had I been asked to write a poem on Dublin Castle and its long history — about which my knowledge is not so much elementary as fragmentary, accumulated in piecemeal fashion from over-

hearing tour guides — I might have found the challenge manageable. But a poem for a revenue museum, a place which was little more than an architect's sketch at the time of writing (or drafting, doodling, daydreaming, despairing — which was how my deliberations began), seemed a mission which defied accomplishment. Besides, I have never felt at ease with commissions for poems. I am far too superstitiously wedded to the notion that inspiration is the *sine qua non*, the non-negotiable prelude to writing a poem — as essential as cider to applejack or whiskey to Irish coffee. Conscripted poems are the first to die.

Despite my regular poetry profit warnings to the museum committee, my mumblings about the extreme unlikelihood of my hammering out stanzas for the grand opening and plaque-unveiling, I did eventually deliver 'At the Revenue Museum'. This poem was smuggled into existence (though 'smuggled' may not be the *mot juste* for lines celebrating the customs service) in the hold of an office sequence, on which I was already at work. As a stowaway, it eluded my inspiration police whose 24/7 patrols would normally have repulsed it abruptly at the borders of consciousness for lacking the proper credentials. The poem, initially printed in the programme for the opening ceremony, now hangs among the exhibits (ledger and hydrometer, tax-calculating machine and drugs lavatory) at the beautifully laid-out museum in an elegantly austere limewash-and-limestone crypt of Dublin Castle.



Roland Barthes observed that writers do not take holidays. Even if ostensibly on vacation, they continue in one way or another to work: taking note, making notes, checking proofs, dabbling in research, reading towards an essay or lecture; always 'on', they are permanently on duty, on call, on high alert, refusing to desert their posts. If writers never really take a vacation, neither are they always willing to relinquish their day jobs (T S Eliot in publishing, Wallace Stevens in insurance), long after economic necessity can have been the deciding factor. The rhythms of poetry and the routines of work are interdependent for some poets; the discipline and the distraction of the workplace allow the unsupervised unconscious to remain home alone, free to range and roam at its own pace, select its own society, intensity and pitch.

In the end, however, it is as impossible to fully comprehend the

poetry policies of the insurance office writer as it is to draw definitive lessons from the career of the teaching poet. At any rate, Wallace Stevens (who, in his own words, 'never believed that it took a great deal to be both a poet and something else') refused to surrender his job for a Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company pension. In a letter — written from his office — to Archibald MacLeish, declining the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard for 1955-56, the seventy-five-year-old poet stated, 'The Hartford has a rule that fixes mandatory retirement at seventy. Although I am well beyond that age, I believe that I can keep on here as long as I want. To take the greater part of a year, however, for something else would be only too likely to precipitate the retirement that I want so much to put off.' Perhaps the lonely prospect of isolated and unstructured Hartford days, staring out the green-shuttered windows of his clapboard mansion on Westerly Terrace, unnerved him. Or maybe, as he said of Alfred A Knopf's plans for a *Collected Poems*, 'I have held off . . . for a number of years because, in a way, it puts an end to things.'

Of T S Eliot, his biographer Peter Ackroyd notes: 'Even in the years of his greatest fame, he continued with the routine business of publishing. For a man who found it difficult to write for more than three hours a day it was one way of passing time but, more importantly, as he explained in an address in 1951, it was necessary for him to hold a job which other people considered useful; he had so little confidence in his own work that he did not want to risk wasting all of his time upon it.' Randall Jarrell, who died before retirement age, was job satisfaction personified: 'I'm crazy about teaching. If I were a rich man, I'd pay to teach.' Mary Karr is similarly motivated: 'Teaching is very important to me — something I would do if I were a zillionaire.' For all his legendary grumpiness toward God, the distinguished Welsh poet R S Thomas thrived on the life of a rural priest ('It was a blessing for me that I entered the Church'), anchoring his aesthetic in the ascetic, and earning a living — in the sense that the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* would best understand that word — by means utterly different from those of his reckless, feckless, brilliant namesake and near-contemporary, Dylan Thomas. Philip Larkin's mutterings about work, as a 'toad' squatting on his life, did not blind him to the jewel in this amphibian's head; waxing lyrical, he conceded that his choice of librarianship as a career was, in retrospect, an 'inspired' one.



When selecting snappy pronouncements for my books of contemporary quotations about poetry, I was bemused by the number of poets who managed to subtly imply that the tax official is a bottom feeder, the second lowest form of life — and that the lowest ranking would be inevitable if an even worse stigma did not attach to the poet. In the words of Douglas Dunn, 'If someone on a train asked me what I did for a living, I'd say I was a tax inspector, rather than a poet.' His fellow Scotsman, Don Paterson, concurs: 'I'm still embarrassed to say I'm a poet. I say I'm a writer and sometimes I say I work for the Inland Revenue, which kills the conversation. To say you're a poet is even worse.' Charles Simic claims that 'Parents still prefer their children to be taxidermists and tax collectors rather than poets.'

I have always regarded myself as a civil servant, not a 'poet' or 'artist' — words I would find embarrassing and presumptuous to ascribe to myself. But, unlike Douglas Dunn and Don Paterson, I would not exactly rush to announce myself in polite company as a Revenue official, lest I clear the room at a cocktail party, sour the crème brûlée or depress the value of neighbourhood real estate. The Welsh poet, Sheenagh Pugh, displayed unique mettle in naming a collection, however ironic her intent, *Sing for the Taxman*: 'Sing because you're the best; because you can, / and sing — why not? — for the taxman.'

Poetry (Chicago), May 2009

PART TWO

Poets and Poetry

