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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “and sing—why not?—for the taxman.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

SING FOR THE TAXMAN

The unlikely intersection of poetry and internal revenue.

By Dennis O’Driscoll

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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 16 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.

“If you ever leave your job, you will stop writing.” An office colleague—turned—soothsayer relayed this stark prediction to me last year. Most poets, however, seem convinced that they would never begin writing if they were to spend a lifetime in one of the busiest (not to mention least loved) branches of public administration, one attracting more critics than *The Waste Land*. Our creative habits are as mysterious to each other as our domestic habits. In the end, all poets face the same task: to “follow the prompts,” as the corporate voice mails urge, and satisfactorily 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 voice mails or text messages. In rare cases, the finished poem—having survived an initial probation period—may even prove “permanent and pensionable.”

When selecting snappy pronouncements for my recent book of contemporary quotations about poetry, *Quote Poet Unquote*, I was bemused by the number of non-Irish 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.”

In Ireland, not only are poets accorded appreciable status and respect—enough at least to elevate them safely above rock bottom—but tax collectors have been their unacknowledged allies, especially between 2003 and 2008 when government funding for the Arts Council in the Irish Republic (population: 4.3 million) doubled. The 2008 peak of €85 million (roughly \$110 million at the early 2009 exchange rate) is unlikely to be scaled again until the economic climate improves and tax revenues recover their former buoyancy. Meantime, the council’s allocation for 2009 has been reduced to €76 million.

In a cunning linguistic shift, the Arts Council, appealing for increased subvention from government, has learned to couch its case in business idiom, rather than resort to the language of ethics, aesthetics, or pedagogy, let alone transcendence. The director of the council, Mary Cloake, has described the arts as a “high-quality, good-value product” and arts funding as “an investment, a really smart investment, by the Government, of the taxpayers’ money,” asserting that “the presence of [music and theatre] organizations in our cities is . . . considered a key indicator of a mature and attractive knowledge-based economy. It plays a crucial role in attracting inward investment by global corporations.”

Thanks to subsidies from the Arts Council (and occasionally also from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland), the Irish Republic’s poetry publishers—a vital, dedicated, idealistic community—have been able to survive without struggling to attract financial donors as well as book buyers. Poets in Ireland may apply for travel grants, and the success rate is high; they are also eligible to compete for the semiannual “bursaries” awarded to writers who intend to set aside time for particular projects. Above all, though, whatever goodwill should flow—or trickle, at least—from artist to tax official ought to emanate most fervently from members of Aosdána, the Irish academy of artists established in 1983.

Formerly composed of writers, visual artists, and composers, Aosdána now admits architects and choreographers to its ranks. A maximum membership of 250 is permitted; approximately 50—from founder-members born in the 1920s (John Montague, Richard Murphy, Leland Bardwell, Anthony Cronin) to newcomers, born in the ’60s (Peter Sirr, Pat Boran)—are principally known for their poetry. What is unusual about this academy is that, subject to certain eligibility requirements, it provides members with a not-inconsiderable income that widens their options, allowing them the basis for escape from the garret, the conference call, and the seminar room.

I have always regarded myself as a civil servant rather than 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 spoil the cocktail party, depress the value of neighborhood real estate, or clear the room at an art gallery reception. The Welsh poet Sheenagh Pugh displayed unique mettle in naming a collection, however ironic her intention, *Sing for the Taxman*: “Sing because you’re the best; because you can, / and sing—why not?—for the taxman.”

Dennis O’Driscoll is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Reality Check*, and a member of Aosdána, the Irish academy of artists. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Learn more about Dennis O’Driscoll, and his poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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