

PROCLAIMING ART AND HEALTH MANIFESTOES IN 2016

Pat Cooke

I was asked to say something about manifestoes in general, or to be more precise, given the year that's in it, about proclamations. Conveniently enough, the word 'Manifesto' is more or less a synonym for 'Proclamation'.

The defining characteristic of the manifesto (or proclamation) is declamatory certainty. Its key rhetorical device is to call attention to that which is manifest, or self-evident. You will note an almost complete absence of doubt's shadow. This allows such declarations to be very economical with words; parentheses, qualifications, equivocations of any kind, are redundant. In that regard, there is surely no better example of the type than the sentence that opens the American Declaration of Independence – 'We hold these Truths to be Self-evident...'

The Proclamation of an Irish Republic that Pearse read in front of the GPO a hundred years ago shares this literary economy. Its reverberant phrases fit neatly on a single iconic broadsheet:

'We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible...'

'The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman...'

Though Pearse, a (minor) poet, had a large hand in writing it, we can safely say that the Proclamation is not a great work of literature. But it did provoke one. Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916' is surely the greatest individual work of art to be prompted by a declaration of this kind. In it, Yeats acknowledges how art is trumped by action, but at a cost.

Hearts with one purpose alone

Through summer and winter seem

Enchanted to a stone

To trouble the living stream.

And it also contains one of the resounding paradoxes of Irish literature: 'A terrible beauty is born.'

So there would appear to be a chasm between the nature of artistic voice and declamatory utterance. Art, or at least the kind of art we recognise as great, is rarely marked by declamatory certainty, but rather by ambiguity, irony, detachment, resignation, diffidence, and often a reflective distance from events ('emotion recollected

in tranquillity,' as Wordsworth memorably put it). One of the last things written by the man that proclaimed the proclamation was a poem. Pearse's 'Wayfarer' opens:

The beauty of the world hath made me sad,

This beauty that will pass;

and closes:

And I have gone upon my way. Sorrowful.

The plangent introspection of the poetic Pearse is a planetary distance from the proclaimer.

Proclamations are promissory notes written on the future, documents forwarded for endorsement by a future generation, or generations. And that's probably why for subsequent generations of Irish people reading the 1916 Proclamation can evoke mixed feelings, both exhilarating and dispiriting. Proclamations aren't troubled by detail. They aren't road maps, or practical guides to what must be done. They don't come with performance indicators, allowing their inheritors to measure current performance by the KPI's of historic dreams and aspirations. As Charles Townshend has observed in his history of the troubled years between 1916-24, 'The new separatist leaders did not see it as necessary to analyse the "self" that was to exercise self-determination, or to waste many words in defining the republic that would give it political form.' (p.55)

But they haunt us nonetheless. They do so by their prepossession on the future – the rolling present in which successive generations dwell. Epitaphs must remain unwritten until their promises have been redeemed. The fidgety unsureness of touch and tone with which the government that came to power in 2011 approached the centenary commemoration of 2016 betrayed a generation haunted in very urgent ways by the ghosts of 1916. In the years since 2008 we've had to reckon with the broken promises of the Proclamation in a particularly acute way. There was that shameful loss of national sovereignty that required us to be bailed out by foreign money and saved from our wilful excesses by the coming of an international troika to manage our economic affairs.

What documents like the American Declaration of Independence and the 1916 Proclamation tell us too is that they acquire an enduring capacity to call the future to account when they are endorsed by radical or revolutionary action. As Yeats recognised in his poem, it was not mere words, but words ratified by deeds that change history. That's the terrible beauty.

The Arts and Health Manifesto

Clive Parkinson will soon talk about the feelings that provoked him and others in the UK to produce their Arts and Health Manifesto. For now, I'll just offer a few thoughts placing it in the context of my brief musings on the nature of this literary genre so far.

For a start, the Arts and Health Manifesto developed by Clive and others seems to reflect the age of greater uncertainty in which we live. It veritably declaims that uncertainty by coming in two parts: Manifest Part 1 (2011) and Part 2 (2012). Part 2 has a go at the kind trumpet-blast of earlier specimens. 'We are unreservedly utopian,' it declaims. But I think it's fair to say that it offers no self-evidently all-embracing vision of the utopian kind. In tone, it shifts between assertion, diffidence, uncertainty and paradox. This is crystallised in the very arresting image of the 'love-filled slap' which has, don't you think, a kind of terrible beauty? It oscillates between declaring that 'the arts are central to achieving our fundamental human rights' and admitting that 'there is no formula, no commandments or little red book.'¹ We can be sure, then, that the Arts and Health Manifesto is no Communist Manifesto!

Instead, it strikes me as more a cry, a call and an appeal to our better nature than a manifesto in the conventional declaratory sense. Its most honest quality is that, regardless of whatever utopia it claims to inhabit, it is not one where the arts come with the self-evident power to transform sickness into health.

It does something that is surely fatal in terms of the genre's classic purpose – it provokes an interesting question: does this manifesto have a faith position? Without a rock of faith (those hearts 'enchanted to a stone' in Yeats's poem) neither Thomas More nor Patrick Pearse would have been the martyrs to Utopia that they were.

So: what can we proclaim about the relationship between arts and health? Is it possible to have a manifesto that affirms a simple faith in the transformative power of art? It was T.E. Hulme, a contemporary of Pearse's who died a year later in Flanders, who came up with a brilliant phrase to describe the burden placed on art in a modern, secular age:

The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism....Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion.

The invention of aesthetics in the eighteenth century made possible the idea that works of art improve us morally, emotionally and spiritually. Via Kant primarily, spiritual values leached from the sacred to the secular sphere. Spilt religion, healing art.

But here's a manifesto that says 'Magic Bullets don't exist and we can't cheat death by painting' and that no art class can make us happy! It's a declaration, as far as I can see, that does not offer art as a panacea for life's ills. It declares its admiration for Swift's 'Modest Proposal' a work of caustically ironic literary genius. This suggests that this manifesto is ultimately, well, just a modest proposal. Which probably makes it in the end a lousy manifesto: it fails to proclaim self-evident certainties. And yet, it is a

¹ The Word version of the Manifesto changes this sentence to: 'This is no formula, no commandments, no 12-point-plan.'

manifestly more truthful effort to keep faith with art's contingent consolations. Artists, it declares, in another paradoxical turn, 'have given us solutions, barbed and dripping with stimulants and sedatives.'

That, I take it, is the love-filled slap. Art's natural dwelling place is the now, a testament to the embodied moment, what it keeps faith with is the sheer messiness and confusion of being alive NOW.

For over twenty five years I was director of Kilmainham Gaol, the place where the words of the Proclamation were endorsed, when Pearse and thirteen of his comrades went to their execution by firing squad in the stone-breakers' yard. I found art to be a necessary ally in exploring the meaning of that history-haunted place, a history that throughout those years bled into the present by means of the Northern conflict that we only managed to staunch in 1998. As we staged plays, operas and mounted art works in the space, I found the word that best described what art did in painful places was **offering**. Art is always an offering, an experiment, always taking a chance, or chancing its arm, take it or leave it. And it is always producing in us a variety of responses; love, loathing, acceptance, rejection. So while we can issue manifestos about art, the essence of art work is to defy or contradict declarations made in its name. For me, it was Sam Beckett who put this best in the epigraph to his novel *Watt*: 'No symbols where none intended.' Which, you might notice, comes pithily and paradoxically close to being a declaration in its own right.

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