

Audiences for Periodicals in Postcolonial Ireland

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Abstract

One way of examining the effects of periodicals is to consider their relationships with audiences. Audiences are sometimes already present but, at other times, they need to be created. In the postcolonial period in Ireland, this raises questions about the ideological stance of editors and writers and the ways in which they made their productions attractive to different audiences. The relative uncertainty as to the reception of periodicals requires the creation of subtle rhetorical strategies in the search for and retention of audiences. Following the revolution, such factors as a populist adherence to government-inspired images of a new national identity requires periodicals to position themselves in relation to the dominant cultural formations. Selected Irish periodicals of the period are examined against these considerations, in theoretical and empirical terms, and a number of competing genres are identified in this field, shown to interpellate particular constituencies, and impact differentially on cultural and intellectual life.

Hubert Butler, writing in 1954 about the premature demise of *Envoy*, which he described as “the organ of Ireland’s rebellious writers”, declares that, “an Irish journal is like a sortie from a besieged city. Its effects cannot be measured by its duration” (1986a, 54). It is the case that many Irish periodicals did have limited lives, ran out of energy and were finally deserted by their audiences. How, then, can one measure the effects of a periodical if not by its duration? Analysing the quality of a periodical’s relationship with its audience may constitute another way of examining its effectiveness. Jon Klancher, in his book on English audiences of the early nineteenth century, argues that “‘audience’ is in fact the most unexamined assumption in the armoury of cultural history and criticism” (1987, 1). This paper explores, both in theoretical and in empirical terms, the nature of the relationship between Irish periodicals of the postcolonial period and their readerships.

From the beginnings of periodical writing in Ireland, in the late seventeenth century, it appears that journals entered into an anxious and uncertain set of relations with their audiences and were often regarded as dissident productions, in an oppositional relationship to the cultural politics and active censorships of their time (Madden 1867, 36). They needed, therefore, to develop ways to address these audiences, to call them into being, or, in Althusserian terms, to ‘hail’ or ‘interpellate’ them. Althusser points out that the interpellation of the subject is always uncertain; this is so

whether the message is overt or implicit or whether it is 'always-already' known that the national, or the religious, or the cultural, or the class position finds common ground with the reader. If it is true that "ideology never says 'I am ideological'" (Althusser 1971, 163), that it proceeds by stealth and hides within the infrastructure, then how difficult must it be for any periodical to be confident of the process of directing its message, of the unmediated reception of its communication. Unintended meanings, unexpected interpretations lurk in the gap between the text and its reception.

The readers of periodicals can exercise untrammelled choice over whether to ignore articles altogether, whether to skim them or whether to peruse them with critical attention. There are also hidden readers who are not deliberate purchasers of a periodical but individuals with more casual access to these writings. Thomas Davis proclaimed his belief that each copy of *The Nation* was seen by ten people (Brown 1972, 176). This concept of a hidden readership, ten times greater than the circulation figures, is precisely echoed, perhaps consciously, by Sean O'Faolain in an editorial in *The Bell* (1944, 1). This indeterminacy of audiences for periodicals, the capacity of an audience to embrace unexpected readers, obviously expands the possible area of influence of the magazine, but at the same time exposes the publication to unexpected risks.

Periodical producers exhibit different levels of consciousness of these risks and attempt to cope with them in different ways. O'Faolain, for example, declared originally that *The Bell* had no policy, that it would be the creature of its readers, reflecting their views and their interests; the magazine aimed at inclusiveness, being open to everybody (1940, 5; 1941, 5-6). This statement masks an implicit policy declaration behind the manifesto of a denial of policy. Many political and social concerns are inferred by *The Bell's* choice of subject matter. Its interest in marginal people in jail or in orphanages, its coverage of activities in the regions outside Dublin signal a political position (Dennan 1987, 134). Hubert Butler saw the magazine's interest in writers from the North as a defining factor and recognised its special appeal to "the remnants of the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia" (1986b, 154-55). Other periodicals of the time expressed repeated concerns about the economic risks brought about by a reduced market in Ireland for cultural productions. Daniel Corkery, in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, had pointed out, as early as 1931, the problems Irish writers in English faced because of the perceived need to address English audiences and their endemic fear of appearing provincial by comparison with English models (1956, 62). Robert Graecen, in *Irish Writing* in 1948, is pessimistic about the prospects of finding "an educated audience" in Ireland and argues that Irish writers "must attract a London or New York audience or go unknown" (83). John Ryan, the editor of *Envoy*, in his farewell editorial in 1951, attributed its failure after only two years to the indifference of the *English* public to Irish letters rather than to any deficiency in the taste of the Irish themselves

(7). For these producers, the search for an audience responded to the problem of survival. They looked in different directions for their solutions.

What precisely declares these directions? According to Bakhtin, any consciousness “finds itself facing the necessity of choosing a language”, of negotiating a position within the collective world (1984, 294). He establishes that “who speaks, what is said and for whom the message is uttered represent a triad of crucial consideration” (Danov 1991, 62). The producer, the style and content and the audience need to be taken together. One of the most powerful signs that periodical producers deploy in their interpellation of audiences is the mark of the genre to which the publication belongs. The assignment of a periodical to a particular genre is more than an academic exercise in literary taxonomy. It proclaims or ‘hails’ the audience. As Jonathan Culler remarks, “a genre ... is a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as a norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text” (1975, 136). The so called ‘little magazines’, for example, are easily recognised as the “vanguard grouplets or avant-garde reviews”, which Pierre Bourdieu characterises as “typically short term and precarious”. Opting out of the commercial ambition of the “wide audience product”, they seek to identify themselves instead with a search for “cultural profit”; they practise what Bourdieu calls “elective affinity”, entailing a search for a homology between publisher, editor, writer and reader which aligns their joint interests in a minority position in society (1986, 223, 242).

In the postcolonial period in Ireland, many writers accept the government’s view of a nation “marked, as the nationalists constantly stressed, by distinctive religious, social and linguistic forms” (Brown, 1985, 205). When the first ‘little magazines’, *Ireland Today* and *The Bell*, appear in the 1930s and 1940s their genre announces itself through a number of distinctive characteristics: low production values, popular prices, radical contributors, missionary seriousness, impatience with convention and mediocrity, interest in the realities of Irish life and intellectual curiosity about the world outside Ireland. Other examples of the ‘little magazine’, representing very different facets of this genre, follow in the wake of the relative success of *The Bell*, but produced by a younger generation. These include *Irish Writing* and *Poetry Ireland*, both edited by David Marcus and Terence Smith. Their bright and colourful appearance proclaims them as youthful; it is clear that they are poorly supported by advertising revenue and they are accessible in price. Their preoccupations are almost entirely literary. Despite the sardonic contributions of Patrick Kavanagh, there is no enunciation of the social concern or interest in popular culture that differentiates *The Bell* from the purely literary journal. There is, however, an even stronger interest in representing Irish writers in a European context, and, in the case of *Envoy*, a readiness to deal with the visual arts. *Envoy* proclaims itself in search of an international audience and conveys a

distressed sense of writing for a beleaguered intellectual minority.

However, other literary productions were able to mark out wider audiences by claiming allegiances to very different periodical genres. *The Dublin Magazine* was one of these. Subtitled *A Quarterly Review of Literature, Science and Arts*, the heavy imitation cloth cover and the academic contents page indicate that the reader is entering into what Peter Dennan calls "a haven of literary gentility" (1987, 130). The editor, Seumas O'Sullivan, lived in what Terence Brown characterises as "an insecure and self-regarding coterie" (1985, 130). He is described by Alvin Sullivan as "a gentle, rather fey poet and essayist and an earnest disciple of George Russell" who "sought to avoid any violent partisanship" (1986, 139).

The genre being invoked here, if not precisely imitated, is that of the English Victorian reviews, for example the *Quarterly* or the *Fortnightly*. More contemporary English models are T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* or the *Fortnightly's* successor, the *Contemporary Review*. This genre demands cultural competence of its audience. It plays a role in literary culture analogous to that ascribed by Bourdieu to the art gallery in respect of painting. This entails providing means of displaying works of art, making them available for educational purposes, emphasising the *institutional* nature of the artistic activity, its contribution to the maintenance of the values of the dominant class (Bourdieu 1993, 36). *The Dublin Magazine* behaves exactly in this way, acting as a showplace for the Irish literary and academic establishment of the time. The National Library's index of its authors reads like a compendium of the famous Irish writers of the three decades of the magazine's primacy. Like its remote ancestors, the periodicals of the eighteenth century, *The Dublin Magazine* is clearly "a class publication"; like *Blackwood's* it aims to be "an engine that produces intellectual desire" (Graham 1966, 52). Unlike these predecessors, however, *The Dublin Magazine* does not identify itself with any political power base or position. However, by its implicit claim that Irish writing of the time can be positioned in the same cultural framework as that occupied by recognised English and European artists, it helped to combat the endemic parochialism of the period, though it did little to disengage Ireland from the cultural world of its former colonial dependency (Smyth 1998, 134).

Another distinct and highly successful genre, appealing to a defined audience in Ireland, is the religious journal. These publications range from the religious equivalents of the trade-journal, such as *Furrow*, designed for the parish priest, to middle-class journals like *The Capuchin Annual* and even more prestigious publications with academic contents. The audiences are clearly indicated in their self-presentation, often including a high quality cover, heavy with religious symbolism. *Christus Rex: An Irish Quarterly Journal of Sociology*, published from Maynooth, pays tribute to the art-deco style in its presentation of globe and dove and sword. Similarly, *The Capuchin Annual* has orange Gothic lettering and Celtic script on its cover

together with a portrait of St. Francis, again in the art-deco style. The cover of *Studies*, the journal of the Irish Jesuits, subtitled *An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, is, by contrast, more austere, carrying an impressive list of articles on the front.

These publications have the self-assurance which surely flows from a high degree of certainty about their reception, about the continuity of their audiences, the guaranteed income they can expect, and their relative freedom from cultural, critical or economic attack. They are reassuring in tone and content, fortifying firm beliefs and attitudes. If there are intellectual or political tensions, they are well concealed. Intellectual challenge is managed with skill by the editors. These religious periodicals treat of social and literary themes, usually from a doctrinal viewpoint, but often citing original research. *Studies* publishes original work by invited dissident writers, such as O'Faolain, or Peadar O'Donnell or Patrick Kavanagh, who might not share the editorial view on social matters. If there is a spectrum in confidence about the audience for periodicals, these appear at the far end of it, even feeling able to enclose the rebellious within the confines of their well-regulated discourses.

Homi Bhabha says that "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (1990, 7). In the sometimes desperate search for audiences for periodicals in the post-revolutionary era in Ireland, it seems to me that *The Bell* was the only publication which succeeded in entering new ground, working creatively upon the prevailing culture, rather than merely working within it. In its declaration of the need to "abandon all the old symbolic words", it marks a decisive break with the traditionalists who dominated the prevailing nationalist aesthetic, based around Celtic images and the ancient language (O'Faolain 1940, 5-6). The recruitment of a newly recognised petty bourgeois readership 'interpellated' or 'called up' a group within Irish society with a stake in change and modernity.

Modernisation was a live issue in postcolonial Ireland and the writers around *The Bell* sensed the need to contest the atavism underlying the prevailing nationalist ethos. The editors recognised, in David Lloyd's striking phrase, "the excess of the people over the nation" (1995, 276), and this sharply differentiated *The Bell* from its contemporaries. The editorial policy of seeking to create a new audience outside the metropolitan centre led *The Bell* into what O'Faolain described, in an editorial, as "a curiously subtle form of collaboration between himself and his public" (1944, 95). There is on the other hand little evidence that the readers of *The Dublin Magazine* or the intellectual fringe that bought *Envoy* or *Irish Writing*, or the faithful who subscribed to the religious periodicals of the day, were invited into any creative dialogue with the producers of these journals.

In his critical 1946 article comparing *The Bell* with *Horizon*, Conor

Cruise O'Brien says of the magazine that:

In its caution, its realism, its profound but ambivalent nationalism, its seizures of stodginess and its bad paper, it reflects the class who work and read it—teachers, librarians, senior civil servants, the lettered section of the Irish petty bourgeoisie ... They are earthbound, for good or ill, and *The Bell*, making the best of it, deliberately set out to reflect Irish life, rather than attempt the very different task of pursuing the true, the good and the beautiful. (1946, 1030)

O'Brien's distaste for the "earthbound" aligns him with the ambitions of the readers of the bourgeois reviews, those who saw "the good, the true and the beautiful" as their natural birthright, to be handled, as Bourdieu suggests, with the casual familiarity of the family heirloom (1986, 66). O'Faolain readily conceded in his farewell editorial that a cultural luminary like Yeats would not have cared much for *The Bell's* practicality and realism. He defended himself against some fellow intellectuals who had accused him of a form of *trahison des clercs*, of appealing to populist sentiment:

At times people have made fun of our factual pieces ... but we say, 'it is the beginning; if a man will describe his own field faithfully, and the path to the house, and the house to the hearth, and keep his courage, he will sooner or later come to himself, and then the real fight will begin'. (1946, 4)

This invocation of the plain man was mocked by Flann O'Brien in his depiction of "The Bellman's" appeal to "the Plain People of Ireland" which was satirised in his articles in the *Irish Times* (1993, 79). But O'Faolain's rhetoric in his final editorial is a sign of the magazine's commitment to a particular audience, with expectations and responses that helped to mould a periodical with different ambitions. In its pages O'Faolain and his colleagues mounted what Luke Gibbons has described as "a strategic shift of the blame for the ultimate failure of the revolution from *external* sources—British imperialism—to inherent deficiencies in the native tradition" (1991, 562). This prepared the way for O'Faolain's "real fight" to open Irish culture up to modern European and international influences.

I have argued that the audience (sought or realised) is a determining factor in the style and the ideological impact of periodical production. The examples examined here show that, in the context of Ireland's post-revolutionary state, when the national audience for literary and social writing was imperfectly shaped or perceived, producers had to enter into an active interrogation of their readerships. Some were securely based in religious affiliation; some relied on the traditional formations of bourgeois high

culture; others on an equally traditional constituency on the intellectual fringe. In one particular case, that of *The Bell*, a potentially influential social group, up to that time culturally disenfranchised and excluded, found its voice. All audiences have, in different degrees, a potential for fracturing into instability. Editorial anxiety about this develops a creative tension from which a periodical can derive a source of energy. Over time, unless this dynamic audience relationship generates change, influencing strategic choices by editors and contributors, there comes a point where the publication ossifies into something of a museum piece, or more likely, simply dies.

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