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Biography versus Fiction: The Value of Testimony

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Dáil Éireann, Dublin, Ireland. 15th May 2001

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Interview with Michael D. Higgins, Minister of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht between 1993 and 1997

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Alexandra Dilys-Slaby is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Caen. After graduating from the École Normale Supérieure in Cachan in 2000, she undertook a PhD on the relationship between state and culture in Ireland which she completed in 2003. She carried out these interviews with two key figures of cultural policy in Ireland during the two years she spent in Ireland doing research for her thesis.

Michael D. Higgins was the first minister of Culture in Ireland. A socialist cum criminologist cum poet, he is an outstanding figure on the Irish political scene. This interview aims at revealing the rationale of the creation of this Government department in Ireland and the role of intellectual and political justifications in the negotiations accompanying this initiative.

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Dáil Éireann, Dublin, Ireland
15th May 2001

Alexandra Dilys-Slaby : To what extent were your notions of culture and cultural policy accepted by the rest of the government on an ideological and philosophical level?

Michael D. Higgins : At the time of my appointment in January 1993 we had just come out of the 1980s when matters ideological and philosophical were not central to political speculation. I think, to put it in context, that before the election, and before the formation of government, in discussing the future for the arts and the future for the cultural policy, the Labour party had committed itself to making issues of culture central. Then after the election and in the negotiations for the formation of government, the leader of the Labour party briefly discussed with me, without asking me to be the Minister, how did I see these issues being turned into an effective Ministry, being made central in the life of the people. I offered him some views and that which was very definitely my view that you could not have a residual version of artistic activity that would be given an administrative reflection and arts being part of a subsection of a part of the Department of the Prime Minister for example, and that you needed, beyond the issues of arts provision, to engage with the wider debate that was taking place in relation to inclusiveness and access. I was very conscious as well, in having that conversation with him, of reports like the Benson Report which had been available in 1979, and *Deaf Ears?*, which had been about music. The place was coming down with reports on different aspects of exclusion in a citizenship sense. So I also, consciously, was aware of this from the very beginning, and Colm Ó Briain, whom I took in as my advisor, was as well, and I began to see things in terms of citizenship, rather than as an aspect of entertainment, and that the arts were part of a cultural expression that had to be defined in terms of creativity. Maybe the central concept that I borrowed from Ciarán Benson's work was the definition of creativity as a mediated experience, rather than some kind of instinctual, personal inclination which I rejected anyway. A separate argument is where excellence and artistic brilliance comes from. That is of course very personal, but at the same time the general platform, aesthetic consciousness, awareness available to a society is a policy matter that is a mediated experience. Did I discuss these with cabinet members? Not really. For once, the concept of the strong Ministry was there. It was my function, then, to establish it. I realized as well that it had to have a significant size, otherwise it would be regarded as just a lame duck Ministry. And for six weeks when I was appointed in January, I was Minister for the Gaeltacht with about 27 employees in the outer regions and about 56 here in Dublin, in one of the most appalling buildings in Dublin – it was like a bunker. So when I left, and the different pieces had been added to the Ministry, it had about 1,600 employees. It included broadcasting, it included the built heritage, the natural heritage, it included the arts, it included different areas in relation to the role of arts in education. It was very important to establish it as a significant Department. To your question, I think, you know, to what extent were my notions of culture and cultural policy accepted by the rest of government on an

ideological and philosophical level, curiously, I think, the fact that I had been a writer myself, and that I was a poet, and also that I had been involved in making documentaries and whatever, was seen as enough of a validation. People actually accepted that I might be doing new and exciting things, and they more or less left me off. Certainly, in that first government I was in, from 1993 to 1994, I needed a very small amount of money to kick-start the refounding of the film industry. I didn't have too much difficulty with that. They were supportive.

AD-S : In an interview with Anne Kelly in 1994, you said that your colleagues in the government should go and read Habermas and Adorno. How did they respond to that theoretical background of yours?

MDH : Well, you see, I think it is very important to draw a distinction between the ministers and the people who are the permanent civil servants. I had no real difficulties really with colleagues in explaining what I was trying to do. I haven't the interview in front me, but I imagine that it was in relation to section 31 in relation to broadcasting, and the nature of the critical intelligence and whatever. I spent a year thinking out and preparing how to end the proscriptions that were there under the provisions of the broadcasting industry and I did it. Certainly many of the different other senior figures in government Departments would have been the people who would have operated with a very narrow bureaucratic version of the State, not even in a Weberian one, but they would have seen it as the fact that the State has to be defended of course. I was very much committed to the idea of critical consciousness. As to whether they ever discussed with me, I gave a few interviews. I gave a rather biggish speech—I spoke with Jack Lang in Temple Bar later in 1994—in which I expressed the ideas that were driving the aesthetic theories that were defining what I was going to do. What I was very conscious of is that I was at something, and I did it. None of it bothered me. Maybe I didn't pay any attention to it. Why should I? I wasn't doing anything on the basis of a committee or anything, you know. I had a vision, I had a space, I had an opportunity of three or four years, and I was going to do it and that was it.

AD-S : Is the word "Culture" a Labour word in Ireland?

MDH : It is a word full of political resonances, not necessarily left. It was very clear that I was the first Minister for Culture in Ireland, and it was also interesting that I was a person influenced by socialist thinking. This is not to say for one second that I saw it as an opportunity to achieve other political aims. I didn't. I had actually been thinking myself a lot and before that, for example, I gave the Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture in 1996 or 1997, and in that I had been a person interested in Williams for a very long time, and in the course of that, I certainly objected very strongly to the idea that you would use a Ministry of Culture to just achieve a narrow programme. I wouldn't accept that at all. I was far more interested by people writing like Martin Hoyles and others, by his book *The Politics of Literacy* on the question of creating critical consciousness. So therefore anything I did, any of the institutions, were all at arm's length from there. Autonomy with responsibility was the motto that Colm Ó Briain and I practised. I never for example rang the broadcasting authorities ever about a programme I wasn't

interested in, or anything that they did editorially. The problem only was that there is a big difference between ministers in Cabinet, and the people who are in the senior positions in the different government Departments. The Department of Finance would have been fairly hostile to most things that I would do, but that is because they are hostile to any innovation. They would particularly, probably, have thought that keeping the arts and cultural issues in the Department of the Prime Minister in a very small way, was a kind of way of taming that particular source of intelligence and dissent and creativity in the society. I was in favour of loosening it up and letting it go. A clue to my own thinking is very much in the attitude I brought to the Council of Ministers in Europe where I introduced a new concept and began explaining it, and it went into wide currency at the end of my period, and that is the concept of the *cultural space*. They had all begun using it near the end, but that was, when all the governments on the Council of Ministers in the European Union were right or right of centre, except myself. And they had a view that when economic growth comes you may be able to start funding the arts again. I explained to them that it was the wrong way to go about it, that you should in fact be investing in the arts at a time of non-growth if you were to prevent racism, if you were to prevent marginalisation, and also, if you were to avoid the double dividend of losing on citizenship twice over: you lost because you hadn't a job, and then you lost participation and so on... So I argued that the cultural space was wider than the economic space, and also, a point I made in my speech in Temple Bar with Jack Lang in 1994 was that the cultural space and its creativity could revivify the economic space rather than the other way round. That was a continual theme of mine all through the Ministry.

AD-S : *You mentioned meetings with European Ministers for Culture. How often would you meet?*

MDH : I attended all the conferences. I attended all the meetings of the meetings of the Council of Europe Culture Ministers. We met once every six months at least.

AD-S : *What issues were discussed at those meetings?*

MDH : There were different formal agendas, but a great deal of the discussions would also take place at the lunches, and afterwards, and I was one of the people who had remained constant, because there was quite a turnover. There were a number of elections, for example... I dealt with four or five Greek Ministers. I dealt with three French Ministers. There were very few who were constant figures, including the Dutch Minister. When we began, the GATT dispute was on in Geneva in relation to the definition of culture as what was produced : a statement in culture that had resonances that were wide, or was it a commodity that was part of the entertainment industry? This in turn led to *l'exception culturelle*, the position of the French which I supported, and then I noticed that when Mr Toubon was replaced, that his successor wasn't as enthusiastic about it as I was, but I continued my opposition to the commodification of culture. And other issues arose. There were practical issues then that went down through the years, for example, Media II was ended and we were going on to the next Media programme. Some ministers wanted to use the Media programme which was to assist in the production of

material that would be European in a kind of big budget way to rival Hollywood. I argued in favour of it being a tiered one, that is that it wasn't our function to simply replicate a new Hollywood in Europe, but rather to have a portion of the expenditure for the small producers, a middle level for lower budget films, and some others for the larger budget films. That view prevailed in the end. Among the issues that were discussed while I was there then was *Télévision sans frontières* which I negotiated on a mediation process between the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. There was in addition the new Media programme, there was a new document on the heritage, and so on. I attached a lot of importance to it. I worked with three commissioners at different times during this period. But I was struck, I'm afraid, by, within the college of Commissioners, the weakness of the Cultural Commissioner vis-à-vis the other Commissioners. I could give practical examples of that, in relation to what was happening in audiovisual, European Parliament, European Commission, before my time, and I asked Commissioner Monti to prepare a directive curbing the concentration of ownership in the media, which of course now is brought to a perilous state of development with the election of Mr Berlusconi in Italy, and Mr Monti turned his heels on that and never did it, and Jacques Santerre just before he left office said that he supported Monti and allowing the market to despise this matter. And that's an outrage. I continually battled these issues. I had a very very good meeting with the European Parliament. I remember meeting Member of Parliament Castellini from Italy, this wonderful woman who was twice chair of the Cultural Affairs Committee. She suggested that I should be a Minister for Culture for life at the end of it. I developed these ideas quite widely around Europe. I regularly spoke on the question of the importance of the autonomy of culture. I used the phrase that it was not a matter of seeking something that was bland and acceptable to the mass society of Europe, but rather a mosaic that would represent different threads and colours, and I very much would have been influenced by Paul Ricœur to some extent in this. He uses the phrase « the as yet unremembered past », the idea of many memories going into the formation of what would be a tolerance that would create Europe and European culture, and also the freedom of the imagination. I would have liked that that would have gone much farther. And then by the time I left, the countries had gone left of centre again, governments and ministers had changed, but they were not able to undo what had happened, particularly in relation to the destruction of public service broadcasting. And all of these issues, the tyranny by the market of a neo-liberal kind, their actions had really a devastating effect by the time the complexion of Europe had changed.

AD-S : *Is Ireland taking an original path in the general international trends of State intervention into culture? There was a government Department created in 1993 and the relevance of the Arts Council is being put into question, and this seems to contrast with an increasing criticism of direct State intervention, represented by the dirigisme model in France for example.*

MDH : Well, it depends. I know exactly what is meant by *dirigisme*. But the point is the matter of defining the relationship between the arts and culture. Culture is a wider issue. Even if you take the widest definition which would be an anthropological one, it has been defined twice in recent international documents—the Unesco document *Our Creative Diversity*, and the Council of Europe document, which is much better, *In From the Margins*. If you look at it

there, you can see that culture is about the way of life of the people, and therefore it is about the balance, for example, of work and recreation. It is about the balance of work and sensibility. It is about work and life values. Not just the arts are a component, a set of paths within the general definition of culture. You could never, ever, assume that the Arts Council should in fact handle all the cultural issues. The cultural issues are a matter for example of democratic access. Well, governments' cultural policy will either go for what they would call elitist excellence, or they would go for access and community and so forth, and that's policy decision, that's a politically cultural decision. That's handed. The Arts Council gets on with it, with its budget in relation to how it works within its policy frameworks. I was replaced eventually by someone who does not share my vision at all. My successor's view is much more corporatist. There are people that she has put on board representing the corporate sector that I wouldn't dream of putting on. My view is that I believe that the corporations need to be saved by the artists rather than the artists saved by the corporations. I could give an example of this, because when I started, film production in this country was 11.4 million. In 1996, in the middle of my period it was under 86 million. It fell back from that, but one of the things I learned from that, very much, was that film makers could learn everything that they needed to know about budgeting, but the people in charge of finance wanted to know nothing about film. I wouldn't have dreamed of putting many of the people my successor has on to different boards, but she has a greater faith in what I would call the vulgar version the market place than I have. I really pushed on people who had been excluded from the arts for twenty or thirty years. Look at the people I appointed. I appointed in the Arts Council Ciarán Benson, who had produced the definitive work on arts in Ireland twenty years earlier, Lelia Doolan who had been a film maker and they are not party members... They were all people who you could say were involved in the community of the arts, but who had been excluded. My predecessor and my successor had a pinch on for retired judges, retired civil servants, and the only change was that they replaced some of these with people from the corporate sector. I beg to differ. Theirs is an ideological statement. They are much closer to the market than I was.

AD-S : How do you interpret the withdrawal by your successor of the word « culture » from the heading of the Department?

MDH : It was stupid and vindictive. It was to make it different from the time I was there... And of course it was deadly, it was very much a terrible mistake, because it did the very thing that I had been warning against, it reduces it back to arts, heritage, Gaeltacht and the islands. The argument was that heritage included culture. Of course you could argue the other way round. Heritage is a component of culture. Well, what about contemporary culture? It was a dreadfully silly change of the title.

AD-S : So that clearly indicates a radical change of emphasis?

MDH : It resumes older directions. It is a very narrow version of the economic. I should tell you that I find it very difficult, to be honest with you, to take seriously people who subscribe to neo-liberal economics when they talk about culture. They don't. In fairness to them most of them do not subscribe to it. They subscribe to the entertainment industry. Neo-liberal economics is about

for example selling tickets, it is as Jean-Luc Godard would say in the hundred years of cinema : is it a hundred years of cinema or is it a hundred years of charging for images on a wall? He's right. The neo-liberal savagery has no cultural theory. What I said, really, about it, is that many people interested in culture have not seen that the narrow materialist basis of it represents the greatest threat to cultural diversity in our times. What is fascinating is, in a scholarly way which I find quite appalling, is that they were well able to see the flaws, and correctly so, in the materialist version of neo-Marxism. Why are they not able to analyse the market? The answer is that we are living in times of an extraordinary intolerance. There is no debate on this issue. This is being presented as natural, to-be-taken-for-granted version of the world, when it is in fact an appalling, thick savagery. It doesn't represent anything. I mean I actually looked at France briefly and I gave a paper in Leipzig about the people's street and it was about the fact that in urban renewal in Europe right across, including in France after Jack Lang, there was a destruction of the public space. Many places that were previously open streets were becoming cobble-stoned and places for boutiques. So in other words what was happening was that Europe was being changed from being a mosaic of citizens into being a pool of consumers. This is clear, my successor hasn't as much trouble with that as I have.

AD-S : If you were to look back on your term and make an assessment, what were you pleased about and what left you disappointed?

MDH : I am glad that cultural issues became mainstream issues. It was no longer a peripheral issue. It was regarded as something important. The access issues were very important. I remember huge arguments at the time when inflation was in double figures, interest rates were in double figures, there was limited amount of money, much of which from the European Union. I think we built 17 theatres and renovated about three or four other buildings. These were suddenly venues that were available for people where venues didn't exist before. They've been used for communities. They are all round the country – Dublin, Blanchardstown, Tallaght, Coolock, Galway, Longford, Letterkenny, Portlaoise, Ballygowan... The next stage was to move on to the professional, the structural aspect of running these. I am worried myself that unfortunately, the concept of artistic management, of managing an entity, be it the opera, the ballet, the theatres, has been defined as a new point in the Weberian model of management. It can't be autocratic. Yet many of the people who are in that have in fact taken management models. People imagine that anything that is loose, creative and free, and even spiritual, will benefit in one way or other from the management model from commerce, when in fact the management models from commerce are in crisis, and the real thinking people at the top of the biggest corporations in the world know that the same intelligence for an advanced innovation in computer technology is not the same as that of a composer in music, but you needed a new management mind. And in addition to that, I would have liked to have seen people who gave their life and work to the public space receive a pension from the public space, so that if you did so many public performances you were automatically credited so that you could live later in life with dignity. That's a flaw all over Europe. I was happy with the buildings. I was happy with my establishment of Telefís na Gaeilge, upon which I got the most criticism. Here, everyone was selling off television services all over Europe, everything was being privatised and I was

bringing a new state service into being for a minority language, the Irish language. I'm glad of that. I'm glad I've brought in the independent production unit in television, because this was to give editorial choice to people. I think I'm very glad particularly, perhaps most of all, that I ended the censorship that was there under Section 31. And there were other things. I allocated 25 million pounds for canals in Ireland, so that they wouldn't be just places into which people threw rubbish, I bought five barges, had them lifted, gave them to communities for people to work and restore them, and I gave them as a gift to the community, so people suddenly were on the water, and things like that. We put in fishing bays on the canals for people who were disabled. There were lots of things like that, but then there was of course, which I suppose I am associated with, the fact that we created 4,000 jobs in the film industry. Things were started. There was an excitement. But that was also where part of the problem was. When people wanted to criticise many of the French innovations, they would criticise Lang. I drew a lot of criticism down on top of myself in relation to some of this, which is pity, because the ideas themselves were very important, and are important. And Colm was very rigid. He was a valuable resource. We operated at different levels in a way, because he was a very good advisor. All these things were fine. I have spoken about this new experience, for example, I've been to New Zealand since I ceased to be a minister to talk about the decline and fall of public service broadcasting. I created a huge amount of interest just before the last election when Helen Clark [New Zealand Minister for Culture] was re-elected. I spoke about public service broadcasting. Interestingly, the Maoris had been studying our Irish language television station, and using it as a model for their station, which they are going ahead with now. I've been to Canada to talk about cultural diversity in an international sense, and I've been to Sweden to talk about the Swedish preparations for *In From The Margins*, then I went to the UN Conference on Cultural Development for which we had no minister, and I was in on the workshop run by Egypt, on Mediation and Culture. This is the biggest issue. I can see it is going to be the biggest issues and everything is boiling down on it and it is as to whether cultural policy and cultural rights moved on to the Human Rights agenda. I think it's going to be very, very difficult, for a number of reasons, which I call monism and dualism, in a way which is the argument that rights are mediated by culture. In the social sciences, interesting cultural policy seems to me to be heavily administrative. I could be forever going around all of the different places, but I don't do it, because I'm not interested in it, because I want to stay still and think of the question. The issue isn't which city you choose to be a cultural capital. The issue is an old classical one in philosophy and sociology which interested me. I remember disagreeing with that French sociologist philosopher, the one who is writing on the sociology of work, because I think his view is far too narrow. I'd much prefer the classical Greek questions—how do we live our lives? I'll give you an example of one of the tragedies that I would face in Ireland. Ireland in conditions of affluence, has totally changed since I ceased to be a minister. It is in GDP now becoming the second biggest market for luxury cars in Europe. It's about third in relation to income and so on. What is happening in relation to this, is that young people involved in the dot com economy are getting up at half six to go to work, and they're returning at half seven or eight. They are parking not just their cars but they are parking their children. They're commuting for longer distances, losing an enormous amount of time. This isn't about choice anymore. It is a matter of having to do this, to appear to

be useful, to earn money, to be able to consume more, to have more than one holiday a year, to possibly purchase a holiday home abroad. This is devastation as far as I'm concerned. I'm not a backward-looking person, and I would have thought it to be a very advanced position to be eliminating tedious work. In the fifties and sixties, the debate about the delivery of technology into the world was about how technology would eliminate drudgery. Now we are actually creating, in conditions of affluence, prisoners of the economy, who have little capacity for living reflectively, for being free. Most people want to be free. I actually support, and this might shock you, Jospin's version. Among the left in Europe he's singular. I believe myself in seeing this meant you should shorten the working day. I very much agree with compulsory paternity leave. I very much agree with shortening the working life. I very much agree with public parks and spaces, and I also agree with such high levels of taxation as are necessary to have a universal provision of health service, to have a universal provision of parks, theatres, monuments, and so forth. That is the mark of a civilising movement. My successor is the one who was associated with the phrase "we are closer to Boston than to Barcelona", which immediately set in contrast the unmediated market model of savage capitalism as I call it in the United States, versus the social model in Europe. Now, if you like, Jospin is at the strong end of the social model. I strongly support him. *Strongly* support him.

AD-S : *So cultural policy in Ireland needs that central involvement to acquire a social definition?*

MDH : Lang wrote something about that. He strongly supported what I was doing. You can ask him about that yourself if you want to. Tell him you've been to see me. I like Jack Lang... I think all those issues will move centre-stage now with the accession into the European Union of the East European countries. The place of cultural policy in the alternative models of transitions is huge. The biggest casualties of what you might call the rapid transitions of the former Soviet Union and Russia were the ballet, the opera, and of all these kinds of things there has been massive destruction. There has been massive destruction. In the different applicant countries and the Czech Republic, etc., there are very interesting issues now being thrown up. For example, some of the countries have a better musical literacy than any country in the existing Union. Now are they to sacrifice a general universal access to learning music in favour of market transitions? It's going to be a huge issue. I have already been talking to different people about this. You see, what has happened is the very good quipping in your own question here, "the withdrawal of the State" from a general provision in relation to pensions for example, for members of the ballet, of the opera, of dance companies, all these kinds of things. That has left a huge gap. What has happened is that many of these people have actually been abused by agents who are selling their services as individual artists. They have organised tours to Britain where they have fifteen people in attendance at the ballet. *Fifteen*. Because of hucksters running this, so you are having the destruction as it were of a universal general access that raises the whole level of musical appreciation. For example, you cannot compare the general level of appreciation of opera in Austria to another country, because it is very high in Austria, and they change the opera every day, and *they* were debating in my time, Could they afford to keep Vienna supported in terms of something like that renovation of the opera. That raises questions, where the

art form becomes symbolic of a country, such as is the case of Russia, such as is the case of all the applicant countries. The most sad, devastating destruction has been in the cultural field. Everyone tells me this, right across the board. Now you might say as well, What has happened, is this curious? As for the written arts—I am a member of PEN myself and I am the member of the Writers Union—many of the writers who were writing as dissenting voices within the abuse of the statism were writing more creatively than they are now in relation to what has happened to the publishing industry. Then, what does the European Union say to the applicant countries? Does it offer them the market or does it offer them an opportunity to build on a cultural space? There is no doubt that they would have an enormous amount to teach us, here in our country, where training in music was appalling poor. You know, the concept of the *conservatoire* is one thing, but equally the concept of having access to musical education as a very young child is very important. So this is the whole thing—where it will all go from here. So that is actually just the applicant countries in Europe, but at a wider level, in relation to the UN, when you look at the international institutions, and you look at Unesco, which has so much capacity to do things, you find it is the weakest institution in the United Nations. There you have it all. And therefore there has to be a breakthrough in the business of bringing culture through into the centre of things, and that will require challenging the hegemony of the economic in areas that are properly cultural.