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‘The Given Note’ – Traditional Music, Crisis and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney

Seán Crosson

The Storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others (Benjamin, 1968, p. 87).

These remarks from Walter Benjamin provide a useful starting point from which to examine the presence of traditional music in the poetry of Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Much as Benjamin noted the changed relationship between the traditional storyteller and his audience, and that between the novelist and his reader, I want to suggest a parallel differentiation between the creation and communication of traditional music and its emergence and role in the work of Heaney. Furthermore, this chapter proposes that at a time when Northern Ireland increasingly descended into civil strife and crisis, Heaney looked to landscape and, to a lesser but comparable extent, traditional music, to articulate a distinctive voice, beyond the claims of tradition and community, ‘to use the first person singular’ as he has remarked, ‘to mean *me* and my lifetime’ (Randall, 1979, p. 20). Indeed, Heaney has faced a crisis of identity that has preoccupied Irish poets since at least the time of Yeats, a crisis brought on by the discontinuity in the Irish literary tradition, by an unresolved postcolonial condition and a struggle between the pull of community and tradition and that of the individual artiste.

Heaney's poetry has been challenged by the tensions that underlie relations between each of these elements. Within his work, one finds a quest for motifs, including that provided by traditional music, adequate to his own predicament. In this context, while traditional music and song would appear to have provided Heaney with what he interpreted as an appropriate metaphor for artistic inspiration, his portrayal often avoided the political and social complexities associated with this music.

Heaney's engagement with traditional music reflects a recurring engagement with music generally in the poet's work. The titles of poems are themselves suggestive: 'A New Song', 'Serenades', 'Strange Fruit' and 'Singing School' as well as those discussed below. Heaney has also emphasized in his essay 'The Makings of a Music' the music of poetry itself, which he describes as consisting of two features: a poem's 'structure and beat, its play of metre and rhythms, its diction and allusiveness' and the music which is derived not 'from the literate parts of [the poet's] mind but from its illiterate parts [...] what kinds of noise assuage him, what kinds of music pleasure or repel him' (Heaney, 1980b, p. 61). This second aspect might be described as a poem's 'word music'.ⁱ This music is most apparent in readings of a writer's poetry aloud, or when one listens to a poet performing his/her own work, a feature that has become increasingly important for the public's engagement with Heaney's poetry as indicated below. Indeed, Heaney has himself noted the importance of the poet's speaking voice in his consideration of William Hazlitt's account of a reading by William Wordsworth. For Heaney, it was 'the quality and sway of the poet's speaking voice' that impressed on Hazlitt the importance of recording the event (Heaney, 1980b, p. 64).

Heaney's poetry has itself been described by Harry White as 'so apparently musical that to comment upon it entails the risk of redundancy' (White, 1998, p. 158). White has recognized a significant musical inheritance in Heaney's poetry, sensing a 'bardic impulse' in his work that places him in 'a line of descent from the music and verse of [Thomas] Moore

through the reanimated lyric conventions of the Celtic revival' (ibid.).ⁱⁱ Indeed, Heaney wrote an introduction in 1979 to *A Centenary Selection from Moore's Melodies* in which he conceded the important influence of music on him as a poet, describing song as 'the inspiring medium through which I became initiated into verse' (Heaney, 1979b, pp. 8-9). Moore's engagement with Irish music was also a response to considerable crisis in Irish society in his own time – including a rebellion against colonial rule in 1798 – as it underwent dramatic change culturally and linguistically in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this context, Irish music seemed to offer Moore an authenticity and continuity that allowed him to connect his work to a perceived ancient indigenous tradition while also building a contemporary audience for his poetry, and Irish poetry in English in general, through song.ⁱⁱⁱ As I argue below, similar inclinations are also apparent in Heaney's engagement with traditional music.

Heaney's approach also shares some significant similarities with that found among Romantic poets in general and their engagement with oral traditions, including traditional music and song, in the late 18th and 19th centuries. This engagement was itself a response to crisis, brought on by Romantic poets' disillusionment both with the Enlightenment exaltation of human rationalism and the increasing mechanization of society with the arrival of the industrial revolution, a sense of crisis made all the more urgent by the events of the French Revolution in 1789. In this context, Romantics sought to reassert the importance of creativity, imagination and community, while still affirming individual expression, features they associated with the past and primarily oral, and rural, societies and traditions.^{iv} As Maureen N. McLane has noted:

It is not an overstatement to say that, in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries, almost every major British literary poet found

him or herself engaging with oral tradition, as well as with the figure of the oral poet, his work, his cultural position, and his method of composition. Oral tradition acquired new status not only as a legitimate fund of cultural authority but also a resource for the making and annotating of ‘original,’ literary poetry. The image of the oral poet, moreover, fired the Romantic imagination—whether this poet was imagined as Ossian, ‘the last of his race,’ purported bard of third-century Scottish warriors, or as a seventeenth-century ‘last minstrel’ singing his dying strains to defeated Scots nobles, or as a contemporary Highland lass singing as she reaped (McLane, 2002, pp. 135-136).

However, this ‘romance of orality’ has been criticized, particularly for its association of orality with concepts of the primitive, an over-essentialization of folk and organic culture and this culture’s frequent infantilization (ibid., p. 136).

Several commentators have also criticized Heaney for rehashing the Romantic tropes of 19th century nationalism (tropes apparent in Moore’s work) while failing to engage sufficiently critically with the contemporary realities of Northern Ireland.^v David Lloyd, for example, has criticized Heaney’s ‘rhetoric of compensation [...] uncritically [replaying] the Romantic schema of a return to origins which restores continuity through fuller self-possession, and accordingly rehearses the compensations conducted by Irish Romantic nationalism’ (Lloyd, 1993, p. 20). A central trope within Irish Romantic nationalism was that of the land, a land that was often feminized and represented in the form of a woman, sometimes called Cathleen Ní Houlihan, at others the Shan Van Vocht and often immortalized in song. Land, and above all the bog, is also a prominent trope in Heaney’s work, particularly the first four collections written as the Troubles in the North of Ireland rapidly escalated, including *North*. This focus reflects Heaney’s own concerns with the

discontinuities of the Irish tradition, discontinuities he has sought to comprehend, and to some degree resolve, through a focus on landscape.

Indeed, a recurrent concern in Heaney's work is the discontinuities he recognizes in himself, both linguistically and culturally. This concern has resulted in many poems in Heaney's *oeuvre* focused on the names of places, often tracing their etymology to connect with an older civilization.^{vi} The most famous example is the poem 'Broagh', which reflects on the distinct pronunciation of placenames in the North, sometimes difficult for 'outsiders' to articulate:

[...] *Broagh*,

its low tattoo

among the windy boortrees

and rhubarb-blades

ended almost

suddenly, like that last

gh the strangers found

difficult to manage (Heaney, 1972, p. 27).

The landscape would seem to offer Heaney a means to access his country's past, to overcome the divisions in the present through the continuity he believes it provides. As he wrote in his essay 'Sense of Place'

[W]hen I look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced, as Professor J.C.

Beckett was convinced about the history of Ireland generally, that it is to what he

called the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity (Heaney, 1980c, p. 149).

The Irish landscape provides that point of continuity for Heaney, to which he has repeatedly returned for inspiration. In the poem 'Belderg' he finds the patterns of settlement in Mayo replicated in the contemporary patterns of stone walls indicating 'persistence, / A congruence of lives' (Heaney, 1975, p. 14). Elsewhere, in the poem 'Kinship', he finds the artefacts of generations, preserved in a bog from the ravages of time and invasion that have influenced the linguistic and cultural changes in Ireland:

Earth-pantry, bone vault,
sun-bank, embalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives (ibid., pp. 40-41).

However, much as the landscape has provided for Heaney a point of tradition, continuity and stability, traditional music has served a similar purpose in his poetry. In 2003, Heaney recorded an album of readings and traditional tunes with acclaimed uilleann-piper Liam O'Flynn. What began as occasional concerts from the mid 1990s onwards in the UK, the US and Ireland,^{vii} eventually resulted in the recording of the album *The Poet & the Piper*. The album takes the listener through from Heaney's earliest collections to work from the 1996 volume *The Spirit Level*. The selection of poems included in this album indicate much about Heaney's work but are also revealing with regard to Heaney's relationship with traditional music.

The opening track on *The Poet & the Piper*, 'The Given Note', provided the title for one of O'Flynn's albums, for which Heaney contributed some words among the sleevenotes. Heaney describes O'Flynn as 'unshakably part of a tradition' (Heaney, 1995), indicating a major reason why this collaboration was attractive to the Derry poet. For a poet who has remarked in poetry and prose on the discontinuities apparent in the Irish past and present, traditional music provides a means for Heaney, similar to that outlined above regarding Thomas Moore, of connecting with tradition while also connecting with a contemporary audience increasingly engaged with traditional music.

The relationship of music to tradition is apparent elsewhere in Heaney's work. He has had a long collaboration with the Belfast folk-singer David Hammond, which includes their involvement in the Field Day group in the early 1980s. Heaney's poem 'The Singer's House' is an appeal to Hammond to 'Raise it again' man, following his friend's reluctance to sing for a recording session after a bombing incident in Belfast. They were both to make some recordings for a mutual friend in Michigan. '[T]he whole point of the tape', Heaney has noted, 'was to promote that happiness and expansiveness which song, meaning both poetry and music, exists to promote in the first place' (Heaney, 1989, p. xi). However, following the bomb attacks, Hammond was unable to sing as 'the very notion of beginning to sing at that moment when others were beginning to suffer seemed like an offence against their suffering. He could not raise his voice at that cast-down moment' (ibid.). But beyond Heaney's call on his friend to continue to sing, to continue to offer hope, there is also a concern in the poem for the loss of tradition. There is a suggestion in the final two verses of 'The Singer's House' that music and song might offer a means through which to connect again with past tradition, to revive and renew a culture that is losing touch with its history while descending into crisis. While the singer's song is 'a rowboat far out in evening', there is the possibility that such a boat may return, a return suggested in the final verse. While the line 'a hint of the clip of the

pick’ connects this final verse to the ‘saltminers picks’ of the opening (a reference to a time in the North’s history when the saltmines near Carrickfergus were still active), it also suggests the pick used by a guitarist such as Hammond to play his instrument. Heaney also recalls in verse five and six the fading traditional belief in the Selkie – ‘People here used to believe / that drowned souls lived in the seals’ – legendary creatures in Irish and Scottish mythology that were believed to be capable of transforming themselves from seals to humans. If the singer can ‘raise it again’, Heaney suggests there may be a possibility of connecting once more with such traditions since ‘we still believe what we hear’ (Heaney, 1979a, p. 27).

The theme of tradition and music is explored elsewhere in *Field Work*. Indeed, song, and singing, is a recurring feature of this volume which marked a movement from the ‘deeply visceral engagement with the earth and the historical bodies buried in it’ apparent in collections up to *North*, ‘to a preoccupation with more transcendental matters’ (Hart, 1994, p. 33). As Elmer Andrews notes, ‘Seeking a renewed lyricism [...] attuned to the natural world, he thinks of his poems as everlasting flowers: in the words of the poem called ‘Song’, they are “the immortelles of perfect pitch”’ (Andrews, 1998, p. 144).

‘The Singer’s House’ is followed in *Field Work* by Heaney’s most direct poem to a traditional musician, ‘In Memoriam Seán Ó Riada’, a work that combines personal memory with reflection on the public role of the artist. However, there is also a clear implication here that Ó Riada offered a means to connect to the past through his work, while also providing a sense of community in the present, particularly in the final two verses where Heaney connects the musician to the Jacobite, or *aisling* poets, of the eighteenth century, including Aogán Ó Rathaille and Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin:

As he stepped and stooped to the keyboard

He was our jacobite,
He was our young pretender
Who marched along the deep [...] (Heaney, 1979a, p. 30)

Heaney has described poetry as also providing ‘continuity’ and involving a ‘restoration of the culture to itself [...] an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past’, an effort, he argued as the Troubles intensified in the mid-1970s, which had to be ‘urgently renewed’ (Heaney, 1980a, p. 60). Yet it is not unusual to find this role associated with music and song in Heaney’s work. The process is apparent in the poem ‘Song’, a delicate lyric that recalls Irish mythology in its final line, a line attributed in Irish folklore to Fionn Mac Cumhail the legendary leader of Ireland’s ancient military force, the Fianna (Stephens, 1920). With the inclusion of this line ‘To the music of what happens’ (Heaney, 1990, p. 127), Heaney connects the present to the past through a reference to music.

Heaney’s work reveals a sustained engagement with Gaelic texts. For instance, his translation of *Buile Shuibhne* as *Sweeney Astray* in 1983, introduced a character that would return in the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ section of *Station Island* (1984). Heaney’s adoption of Sweeney as an adopted persona in his work in these years reflected the continuing movement in his poetry from a concern with place and his own community in a time of crisis to a wish to transcend both in a visionary poetic, encapsulated in the poem ‘The First Flight’ from ‘Sweeney Redivivus’:

I was mired in attachment
until they began to pronounce me
a feeder off battlefields

So I mastered new rungs of the air
to survey out of reach
their bonfires on hills [...] (Heaney, 1990, p. 197).

Heaney's use of Gaelic texts as a means of transcending the present, however, necessarily detaches these works from the historical realities with which they are involved. Referring to Heaney's use of the bog motif to explore violence in Northern Ireland, David Lloyd suggests (in an argument also apparent in the work of Ciaran Carson and Patricia Coughlan) that the poet effectively reduces 'history to myth, furnishing an aesthetic resolution to conflicts that are constituted in quite specific historical junctures by rendering disparate events as symbolic moments expressive of an underlying continuity of identity' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 17).^{viii} Such a process is also evident in Heaney's allusions to traditional music. An examination of one of Heaney's best known poems referring to traditional music, 'The Given Note', reveals the mystification that Lloyd criticized, the obscuring of the historical and communal realities that music and song often communicated.

Irish music and song provided a crucial outlet for Gaelic communities at a time of colonial oppression. Both acquired increasingly political undertones as the colonial project developed in Ireland. Fellow Northern poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn has articulated the subversive potential of music and song in his 2004 collection *Rakish Paddy Blues*:

bards, rhymers, balladeers, armed with pistols, broadsheets, bandoliers,
manifestos of brotherhood, palimpsests and performing fleas.
They emerged from grey drizzled streets
to speak in secret tongues of flame,

under wet lashings of archway spliced with whispers of insurrection,
rumours of transubstantiation (Mac Lochlainn and Vallely, 2004, p. 34)

Music and song had an inspiring role in both nationalist and unionist traditions in Ireland, a fact recognized in the past and resulting in the oppression of musicians. Indeed, the suppression of Irish music and musicians historically contributed to its politicization within Ireland and provided a point of resistance to the colonial enterprise. The colonial administration in Ireland had long frowned upon the impact of native traditions on colonial culture and the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny had forbidden contact between native musicians and poets and colonialists (McCarthy, 1999, p. 33). Possibly influenced by the statutes' failure to prevent such interaction, in 1533 a further British statute prohibited the performance of 'the rhymer, the píobaire (piper), the bard, and the aois ealadhn (the artistic class)' because of a fear that by performing to 'gentilmen of the English pale', these poets and musicians might inspire among this gentry 'a talent of Irishe disposicion and conversation' (Ó hAllmhuráin, 1998, pp. 29-30). By 1603, the Lord President of Munster issued a proclamation calling for the execution of 'all manner of bards, harpers, etc' (O'Boyle, 1976, p. 10) due to their perceived role in the Nine Years War that Gaelic Irish chieftains waged against the colonial administration in Ireland between 1594 and 1603. This proclamation was followed shortly after by an order by Queen Elizabeth 'to hang the harpers wherever found' (ibid.). One of the consequences of this persecution was to end the strictly delineated roles of poet and musician under the Gaelic order such that, as Seán O'Boyle notes, 'the harpers and the court poets joined the pipers and the poets of the people in the enforced social uniformity which followed indiscriminating oppression' (ibid.).

Heaney is very aware of this history, apparent in his reference to Seán Ó Riada in the poem, 'In Memoriam Seán Ó Riada', as 'our jacobite' thereby recalling the *aisling* poets such

as Aogán Ó Rathaille who articulated a politically engaged voice of protest against the colonial presence in Ireland in the eighteenth century.^{ix} However, the potential this offers to explore the contemporary political context in which the poem was written, at the height of the Troubles in the late 1970s, is diffused through the final verse in which Ó Riada is transformed into the non-threatening figure of a ‘gannet smacking through scales’ (Heaney, 1979a, p. 30).

Heaney’s references to this tradition itself give only occasional hints of its subversive potential. Indeed, in his poem ‘The Given Note’, traditional music is portrayed as mystical and almost otherworldly, idealized, romanticized and fulfilling a primarily aesthetic function. His comments also suggest the importance of music in engaging an audience. His recent collaboration with O’Flynn is revealing in this regard. ‘I have a strong sense of pleasure and pride in sitting beside a piper of Liam’s mystery’, he has remarked, ‘The pipes call and raise the spirit. They also quieten and open up the daydream part of people’.^x In comments regarding an earlier album by O’Flynn, he also observed: ‘my sense of [O’Flynn] is well summed up in a couple of lines from the poem which provides the title for this disc: He strikes me as one of those fulfilled spirits who have “gone alone into the island / And brought back the whole thing”’ (Heaney, 1995). The title of the album Heaney refers to is *The Given Note*, a title taken from Heaney’s poem of the same name. This poem is the opening track on *The Poet & the Piper* but was originally included in Heaney’s 1969 collection, *Door into the Dark*, a collection written and published at a time of increasing crisis in Northern Ireland with the onset of the Troubles. Yet Heaney chooses within the poem a motif that avoids social or political engagement while aestheticising an important communal practice.

It was Seán Ó Riada who introduced Heaney to the slow air that inspired the poem, ‘Port na bPúcaí’ [variously translated as ‘Music of the Spirits’ or ‘The Tune of the Fairies’]. Heaney has described the poem as

a retelling of a story I heard Seán Ó Riada tell when he was in Belfast a number of years ago as composer at the Belfast festival. He played a piece of music which he called “music of the spirits” and told a story about a fiddler getting it out of the air on the Blasket Islands and it seemed to me an image of inspiration just, a mighty wind blowing the music to you. So I wrote it down just as a figure of craft and inspiration’ (MacMathúna, 2005).

What is notable in the poem, however, is Heaney’s focus on the individual. It is an individual man who gets this ‘air out of the night’ after going ‘alone into the island’ and taking it, he suggests, ‘from nowhere’. However, the actual history of this slow air is considerably more complex and revealing with regard to the the historical dynamic that produced traditional tunes. According to Paul McNevin ‘[Slow airs derive] from old Gaelic songs sung in the *sean-nós* style (old-style)’ (McNevin, 1998, p. 61) and it would appear that ‘Port na bPúcaí’ too may have had such a history. *Sean-nós* [old-style] singing is a distinctive and sophisticated form of singing in Irish found primarily in the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) regions along the west coast of Ireland and believed to offer one of the few surviving examples of the performance style of a much older tradition of poetry and song in Ireland. Irish music scholar Ríonach Uí Ógáin has given a summary of one oral account (associated with the small Blasket island of *Inis Mhic Uibhleáin* [Inishvickillane] off the south west coast of Ireland) of the origin of the song from which ‘Port na bPúcaí’ may possibly be derived:

One day three boats from the Great Blasket went to the small Island. A woman called Neans Ní Dhálaigh was there. When they landed they brought up the boats. After a while two of the boats went to the big Island. One of them stayed and after

a while the woman was sitting on a stone. She heard the song. She heard it twice. The third time she was singing the song herself along with the voice and the voice disappeared. The man heard it again and he was fearful and anxious. The woman met him and asked him if he had heard the song. He said he had. The other three came and they didn't hear any voice. They brought down the boat and they were going home. Neans was singing the song in the boat and the song is called 'The Tune of the Fairies'. The others were afraid when they heard it. It can still be heard on the Great Blasket. (Uí Ógáin, 2003)

Here is one version of the song attributed to the woman:

Is bean ón slua sí mé	I am a woman from the Sí
Do tháinig thar toinn	Who has come over the waves
Is do goideadh san oíche mé	And I was taken at night
Tamall thar lear	For a while abroad
Is go bhfuilim as riocht so	And I am in this state
Fé gheasa mná sí	Under geasa of the fairy women
Is ní bheidh ar an saol so	And I will not be in this world
Go nglaofaidh an coileach	Until the cock crows
Is caitheadsa féin	And I must go
Tabhairt fén lios isteach	Into the lios
Ní taithneamh liom é	It is no pleasure for me
Ach caithfeadh tabhairt fé	But I must do it
Is a bhfuil ar an saol so	And all that is in this life
Caithfidh imeacht as	Must leave it

Ach béadsa ag caoineadh'n	But I will be keening
Fhaid a bheidh uisce sa toinn	As long as water remains in the wave
Is ná deinig aon ní	And have no dealings
Leis an ndream thíos sa leas...	With the crowd that is down in the lios [...] ^{xi}

There are a number of interesting aspects to this song and the folklore surrounding it that I want to draw attention to and contrast with Heaney's poem. Firstly and most obviously it is from the perspective of a woman, not a man, that the song is sung, while according to the folklore it was also a woman who first heard it. Secondly, the song itself is reminiscent of the Gaelic *caoineadh*, or lament, by one who feels compelled to go into seclusion with the fairies. As indicated above, the *caoineadh* is referred to in the song itself and Irish traditional musician Feargal Mac Amhlaoibh in a 2009 documentary on music from the Blasket Islands referred to the song from which the tune emerged as having been originally taken, according to local folklore, from a woman 'a bhí ag canadh nó ag caoineadh' (a woman that was singing or lamenting^{xii})(Seoighe, 2009). Angela Burke has identified the important function that laments played in the Gaelic tradition. They were one of the few crucial outlets for women expressing their own very personal and deeply felt emotions within a strictly circumscribed patriarchal society. She has described this therapeutic role as 'Síceoilfhillíocht' [literally psycho-poetry] whereby women who may have been suffering from depression or other psychological conditions found an important outlet through song and story to express their concerns, often in allegorical or metaphorical ways.^{xiii} The Donegal Irish-language poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh, for example, has spoken of his own, frequent childhood experience of his mother disappearing sometimes for days on end. These disappearances were explained by her as time spent with the fairies, though he now attributes them to bouts of depression.^{xiv}

Therefore, there was a functional, as much as representational or aesthetic purpose in the creation of songs such as these.

Furthermore, a central role of the performance of traditional music and songs such as ‘Port na bpucaí’ was contributing to the creation and consolidation of community. As Tomás Ó Canainn has noted of traditional songs in Irish in his seminal study *Traditional Music in Ireland*: ‘*sean-nós* is only completely at ease [...] where the singer and his listener are in real communication’ (Ó Canainn, 1978, p. 49), while Breandán Ó Madagáin has also observed that such ‘Songs are not an independent entity in themselves: they are a form of human behaviour. And their vital context is the social life and culture of the community’ (Ó Madagáin, 1985, p. 132). John Blacking has described the vital role of the audience in the performance of music and song as ‘Creative listening’ (Blacking, 1978, pp. 9-10). ‘Creative listening’ is most apparent in *sean-nós* singing where audiences actively participate in performances not just through encouraging the singer, but also, on occasion, by holding the singer’s hand as he or she performs, moving it up and down to the rhythm of the song. Belfast poet Derek Mahon has given us a striking description of this moment in his poem ‘Aran’:

He is earthed to his girl, one hand fastened
In hers, and with his free hand listens,
An earphone, to his own rendition
Singing the darkness into the light (Mahon, 1991, p. 31).

However, if we turn to Heaney’s ‘The Given Note’, again one is struck by the description of traditional music as ‘this air out of the night,’ something

out of wind off mid-Atlantic

Still he maintains, from nowhere.

It comes off the bow gravely,

Rephrases itself into the air. (Heaney, 1999, p. 36)

There is little sense here of the communal activity associated historically with the creation and communication of traditional music. If the music comes apparently out of thin air, one need not concern oneself with its relevance to people for whom traditional music was at one time forbidden and suppressed. It is the subversive potential that music and poetry might offer that Heaney suppresses in this poem, a suppression that is all the more apparent in the subsequent poem included on the album *The Poet & the Piper*, 'Digging', 'the first poem' according to Heaney, 'I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words' (Heaney, 1980a, p. 41). In 'Digging', Heaney reflects on his father's and his grandfather's use of the spade in their livelihood and views himself as an inheritor of sorts, but through the use of a different implement:

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests: snug as a gun [...]

[...] I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it. (Heaney, 1990, p. 2)

As Blake Morrison has suggested, Heaney's poem, like his father's spade, is involved in 'passing on tradition, extracting "new" produce (poems not potatoes) out of old furrows, and enjoying an intimacy with the earth' (Morrison, 1982, p. 27). However, whatever subversive potential the opening lines intimate, is deflected in the poem's closing: 'The squat pen rests / I'll dig with it' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 21).^{xv}

To conclude, while landscape has provided Heaney with a recurring point of tradition, continuity and stability, particularly as Northern Ireland rapidly descended into political and communal strife and crisis, traditional customs would seem to have played a comparable role in his work. In common with Romantic poets of the 18th and early 19th centuries who turned to the past and traditional practices in a time of perceived crisis, Heaney's poetry is marked by attempts to connect to figures such as the farmer in 'Digging', and 'Fodder', the Blacksmith in 'The Forge' and 'Poet to Blacksmith'; the 'Thatcher' in the poem of that name; the fisherman in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', and in 'The Given Note' the traditional musician. However, each of those he describes operates as a skilled member of her/his community whose work is formed, acknowledged and validated in that context and performs a primarily functional – and communal – rather than representational role. While Heaney attempts to parallel his own poetry with such traditional craftsmen, his is essentially what Walter Benjamin would call a solitary art. Indeed, Heaney's focus generally has been on establishing and developing his own distinctive and personal lyrical voice, 'If I do write something' we are told in 'The Flight Path', 'Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself' (Heaney, 1998, p. 413). And such is the emphasis of the poem 'The Given Note': the personal act of creativity, separate and distinct from the communal processes that are vital to the composition and communication of traditional music and song. If Heaney's approach does signify a continuity of tradition, it is the tradition of Romantic/Modernist expression of self via lyric subjectivity; the use and influence of traditional music and song in Heaney's

work is mediated through this tradition. It is the crisis faced by the Romantic tradition that is echoed in Heaney's poetry, whereby traditional music provides him with yet a further useful motif (paralleled in his use of landscape) for his lyrical voice as he seeks a way to express his own personal identity beyond the communal calls to protest and confrontation.

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ⁱ For more on this aspect of poetry, see Scher, 1982 and Garlington, 1997.

ⁱⁱ White has updated his arguments regarding Heaney in his later study *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (2000) in which he contends that literature for Irish writers such as Heaney has essentially taken the place of an Irish art music reflected in 'a persistent search for music in language' (White, 2008, p. 34).

ⁱⁱⁱ For further on this, see Crosson, 2008, pp. 65-72.

^{iv} For more on the engagement of Romantics with oral tradition, see Finnegan, 1997, pp. 30-41.

^v Examples of such criticisms are to be found in Lloyd, 1997; Fennel, 1991 and Wills, 1993.

^{vi} In poems such as this, and others including ‘Anahorish’, Heaney is also drawing inspiration from the early Irish literary genre *dinnseanchas*, texts that recounted the origins of Irish placenames.

^{vii} Further information on this collaboration is available from the Tara music website at <http://www.taramusic.com/biogs/liamobg.htm> and <http://www.taramusic.com/archive/lofsh.htm>, (date accessed September 18, 2009).

^{viii} See also Coughlan, 1991 and Ciaran Carson, 1975.

^{ix} For a fuller discussion of the *aisling* see Murphy, 1939-40. Murphy notes that one genre of *aisling*, the ‘love’ or ‘fairy’ *aisling*, dates back to at least the eighth century. See also Ó Tuama, 1960 and Ó Buachalla, 1996. As Breandán Ó Madagáin has noted, the *aisling* is a tradition that was intimately connected with music as most *aisling* poems would have entered the popular consciousness of their time through song (Breandán Ó Madagáin, 2000, p. 89) Heaney has himself translated several of these song poems, including one of the most famous in the tradition, ‘Gile na Gile’ by Aogán Ó Rathaille, which he translated as ‘The Glamoured’ and is included on the CD, *The Poet & the Piper*. Heaney has also translated the eighteenth-century Gaelic parody of the *aisling* form, *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* by Brian Merriman, one of the finest and most famous poems in Gaelic, as *The Midnight Verdict* (2001).

^x These remarks are included on the Tara music website at <http://www.taramusic.com/biogs/liamobg.htm> (date accessed September 18, 2009).

^{xi} This version is featured on Méav Ní Mhaolchatha’s album *Silver Sea* (2002). Lyrics and translation available at <http://www.geocities.com/celticlyricscorner/meav/port.htm> (date accessed October 2, 2008)

^{xii} Translation by the present author.

^{xiii} For a discussion of this and its use in Cathal Ó Searcaigh’s poetry see Ó Laoire, 2003, pp. 17-18.

^{xiv} Ó Searcaigh has referred to this in Neasa Ní Chianáin’s documentary *Fairytale of Kathmandu* (Vinegarhill Productions, 2007).

^{xv} It should be noted that Heaney has used music, and particularly song, to directly engage with one of the most marked moments of crisis in Northern Ireland. As Ruben Moi notes in his contribution to this collection, his ballad ‘The Road to Derry’ was written as a highly critical riposte to the events of

what has become known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ when members of the British parachute regiment killed 13 civilian demonstrators in Derry city. However, and significantly, though initially written to be performed by the folk group The Dubliners in 1972 shortly after the event, it would remain unpublished until some 25 years later in 1997 – when the peace process in Northern Ireland had developed significantly, presumably because of Heaney’s own reticence towards such a direct engagement shortly after the event.