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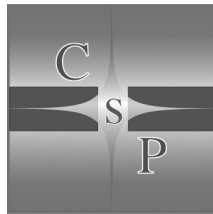


"The Given Note"

"The Given Note":
Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry

By

Seán Crosson



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Do m' Athair agus mo Mháthair

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FOREWORD

“Tír álainn trína chéile...”

“With comfort at the hart” is how John Derricke characterized performances of bardic poetry to the accompaniment of harp music in medieval Gaelic courts. Seán Crosson’s study of the connections between music and poetry in the work of contemporary Irish writers disagrees that comfort is the main element in a literary and musical tradition that has been, at least since Derricke’s time, displaced, fragmented and discontinuous. Yet, a quest for a union with this imagined state of “comfort” seems to inform the work of many of the poets Crosson studies in this ground breaking work.

The close association of music and poetry in the literary tradition of Ireland goes back to early medieval times. The centrality of the poet and his work to the realities of Gaelic politics, society and culture are undoubtedly ultimately responsible for this intimate connection. However, before Seán Crosson’s research, no focused, comprehensive, systematic treatment of the complexities involved in this symbiotic relationship existed.

This book draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives to construct an exploratory inquiry detailing and interrogating previously unarticulated connections between words and music. Despite the breathtaking wealth of referential material, the model that emerges is subtle, nuanced and flexible, handled with the sure and elegant touch of one who is supremely aware of the possibilities of effects at the nexus of these two intertwined media. It provides the reader with a survey of the historical connections between poetry and music in Ireland, drawing on theories of orality and literacy, on the discipline sometimes referred to as melopoetics, but more usually as “word and music studies” to illuminate the issues that concern today’s writers engaging imaginatively with a historical tradition. The concern with community and audience informs the work of a number of the writers considered here as indeed does the desire to find a place to reside in a tradition considered broken and ruptured. Music performance in various guises seems to provide a bridge between the past and the future, creating a moment in which bodies in space cooperated to enact the rituals of traditional music. This process promotes

a connective web through which the alienation of post-colonial modernity may be temporarily canceled. Such a process is attractive to writers daunted by the great cultural losses experienced by the Irish literary tradition in its attempts to come to grips with the reality of linguistic and cultural change in post-Famine Ireland. Crosson, however, shows also how such an attractive prospect is not without its own contradictions that emerge particularly in the work of Thomas Kinsella and his generation. In traditional music performance, and particularly in the performance of traditional song, musicians and audience are in perfect communication. Such ideal conditions for the exchange of meaning appealed to poets such as Kinsella as they strove to communicate their own work to a wider readership. Yet music is also entertainment and Kinsella rejects the idea of his own work as an entertainment. Communication is paramount. Kinsella was also concerned with the future of poetry in the Irish language and was rather tormented by his own decision to write exclusively in English. For him, the break, the change in language was permanent. Other poets, however, continued to write in Irish and found that the linguistic and musical resources of the Gaelic song tradition provided a rich and sustaining resource. Crosson discusses the work of Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh in particular, revealing how their work is inflected in various ways by their interest and participation in Gaelic song traditions. The pastness of song is one of the most appealing characteristics for poets, coupled with the mysterious moment of performance when texts over two hundred years old emerge on the breath of contemporary voices. This miracle of controlled bodily practice, comprised in the immediacy of performance can seem to heal temporarily the rupture, dislocation and instability felt by writers towards their indigenous heritage. Whether such an impression is justified or not, the dynamism of the living moment retains a compelling allure for Irish poets and other writers. Crosson shows that this allure has been a constant draw for Irish writers in both linguistic traditions and that it arguably represents one defining characteristic of the poetic traditions of the island. This pioneering work is sure to herald other studies in this rich field of inquiry, and provides an exemplary model which leads the way with confident assurance.

Lillis Ó Laoire
Lá Coille 2008

INTRODUCTION

Let your quacks and newspapers be cutting their capers
'bout curing the vapours, the scratch and the gout,
With their powders and potions, their salves and their lotions,
Óchon! in their notions, they're mighty put out.
Would you know the true physic to bother pathetic
And pitch to the devil, cramp, colic and spleen?
You will find it, I think, if you take a big drink
With your mouth to the brink of a glass of whiskey.

So stick to the craytur, the best thing in nature
For sinking your sorrows or raising your joys:
Oh, whack botheration, no dose in the nation
Can give consolation like whiskey, me boys.¹

On the 22nd of April 2005, Ciaran Carson launched his translation of Brian Merriman's classic eighteenth-century Gaelic² poem, "Cúirt an Mheán Oíche", by singing the verses above from the song "Paddy's Panacea", a song he learned from Clare singer Tom Lenihan.³ The song is set to the jig "Larry O'Gaff", a tune first recorded by Michael Coleman, the Sligo-born fiddler whose recordings after emigration to the US in 1914 were to have a considerable influence on Irish traditional music in the twentieth century.⁴ Carson chose this song to illustrate his own use of the metre of a jig in approximating the rhythms of Merriman's original Gaelic text in the English language. In the foreword to the translation Carson maintains that Merriman's prowess as a traditional violin player may have influenced the metre of "Cúirt an Mheán Oíche", even going so far as to suggest Merriman as a precursor to the "great Clare fiddle masters", Junior

¹ Quoted in Ciaran Carson, *The Midnight Court* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 2005), p. 11.

² In this book the term "Gaelic" will be used to refer to Irish-language literature and song up to the twentieth-century. The term "Irish-language" is the more accepted term, by writers and critics, for literature in this language written since the early twentieth-century and will be used when discussing poets from this period.

³ Carson, *The Midnight Court*, p. 11.

⁴ P.J. Curtis, *Notes from the Hearts: A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1994), pp. 11-12.

Crehan, John Kelly and Martin Rochford.⁵ The measures Carson found in “Paddy’s Panacea” were, he posits,

not such a far cry from the prosody of ‘Cúirt an Mheán Oíche’, with its internal rhymes and four strong beats to the line; and I decided to adopt it as a basis for my translation. The 6/8 rhythm is essentially dactylic, for the one long and two short beats of the dactyl correspond to the crochet [*sic*] and two quavers of a jig.⁶

There is no evidence, however, that Brian Merriman was an accomplished traditional musician as Carson suggests. While John O’Daly does record, as Carson indicates, that Merriman was “an excellent performer on the violin”,⁷ there is no suggestion that he was playing “traditional tunes”. Further, the rhyming scheme of “Cúirt an Mheán Oíche” (rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter) arguably owes more, as Declan Kiberd contends, to the influence of Augustan poets such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Oliver Goldsmith “which is plausible given that Merriman had exposure to their work through his membership of the Royal Dublin Society”.⁸

Carson has elsewhere described the lines of his poetry as comparable to the rhythm of a reel. However, his comments are not consistent and the equation of the reel’s metre with the length of the distinctive line as found in his poetry collections, such as *The Irish for No*, has changed from four to eight bars of a reel in separate interviews.⁹ Carson’s allusion to traditional music, in common with the work of other poets examined in the following chapters, reflects more an anxiety regarding the historical discontinuity in Irish writing and poets’ own uncertain relationship with a contemporary audience. Traditional music offers, through the rituals of its

⁵ Carson, *The Midnight Court*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ Erionnach (George Sigerson), *The Poets and Poetry of Munster: A Selection of Irish Songs by the Poets of the Last Century. Second Series with Metrical Translation* (Dublin: John O’Daly, 1860), p. 86.

⁸ Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 184. See also Eugene O’Brien’s discussion of the influence of the English poetic tradition on Merriman’s poem in *Seamus Heaney, Creating Irelands of the Mind* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002), pp. 132-134.

⁹ Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*, Programme on Ciaran Carson [including interview] from May 16 2001, <http://www.rnw.nl/culture/html/carson010514.html>, (accessed April 15, 2003). Rand Brandes, “Ciaran Carson”, *Irish Review* 8 (Spring 1990): 82. This point is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

performance, a perceived authenticity and sense of community which Irish poets have attempted to recreate for the reception of their own work.

Carson's launch of *The Midnight Court* highlights a number of issues central to this book. His choice of the song "Paddy's Panacea" indicates the poet's engagement with music and performance techniques to introduce the work to the audience. The audience's positive engagement with his rendition, through shouts and exclamations, approximated a process Henry Glassie has described as "goodmanning", a practice through which members of an audience insert comments between the stanzas to indicate their attentiveness.¹⁰ In that moment, a connection is made between artist and audience, a brief "community of engagement", and it is this engagement that Irish poets, like Carson, have attempted to address through performance.¹¹

Carson's translation of Merriman's poem also reflects a frequent interest among Irish poets in Gaelic texts. Seamus Deane has noted the

recurrent tendency of Irish poetry to avail of antiquarian and historical research into the past as it sought for a principle of continuity with which to ally itself. This search was itself a symptom of the Irish writer's sense of disorientation in relation to a past which seemed hopelessly fragmented and discontinuous.¹²

As I will consider below, this discontinuity has been a continual anxiety among the poets considered here, reflected in their comments and through the incorporation of elements from Gaelic texts into their poetry, as well as their translations of earlier, and contemporary, work from Irish to English.

¹⁰ Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1995), pp. 111, 141.

¹¹ Another example of a poet using song, and performance, to introduce a new volume to the public is the manner in which the late Michael Hartnett (a poet for whom the Gaelic and ballad traditions were a vital resource and whose work indicated a concern with both a contemporary and historical community) launched his *Maiden Street Ballad* in 1981. Róisín Ní Ghairbhí notes that when Hartnett launched this book, "chan sé féin é oíche seolta an leabhair" ["he sang it himself the night of the book's launch"] [Róisín Ní Ghairbhí, *An tSiobairne idir Dhá Theanga: Saothar Beirt Scribhneoirí Dátheangacha, Michael Hartnett agus Eoghan Ó Tuairisc* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, National University of Ireland, Galway, Scoil na Gaeilge, 2004), chapter 10, p. 10].

¹² Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 235.

Carson's engagement with traditional music to both inform and communicate his work is also mirrored in the work of his contemporaries who, like audiences both in Ireland and abroad, have displayed a growing interest in traditional Irish music since the late 1950s. As Dillon Johnston has noted, an "enthusiasm for traditional Irish music seems as pervasive among [Irish] poets as their interest in Gaelic".¹³ Johnston contends that "traditional music offers the Irish poet an encouraging example of a wider audience responding enthusiastically to a traditional art".¹⁴ However, he qualifies his remarks by denying that the impact of traditional music has been "as influential on their writing".¹⁵

In approaching this study of the relationship of traditional music to the work of modern Irish poets, I am aware that Johnston's reservation is representative of a general scepticism that exists regarding any possible role or presence, beyond the most superficial, of traditional music in Irish poetry. A central question this work attempts to address, therefore, is whether the manifestations of traditional music in the work of Irish poets indicate a more significant influence. I will argue in the following chapters that the presence of traditional music in modern Irish poetry reveals an anxiety regarding the relationship of poets' work both to the tradition of Irish writing and to contemporary audiences. These concerns, regarding tradition and audience, are complex impulses that result in sometimes contradictory remarks from poets, but remain recurrent preoccupations, particularly from the late 1950s onwards (a period examined in more detail in Chapter Three) and it is these years that are the central focus of this work.

Traditional Music: Continuity and Change

Traditional music implies continuity, the creation of new music within an established framework. That framework is musical language [...] it is learned by listening, by imitation, by engaging in social discourse¹⁶

¹³ Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 47. To reflect the increasing importance of the relationship between poetry and traditional music in contemporary Ireland, RTÉ Radio 1 commissioned a series entitled *The Music of Words* in 2005 that featured a contemporary poet and traditional musician from their area in each episode [Des Geraghty, "The Music of Words", RTE Radio 1, 16 June - 21 July 2005, <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/themusicofwords/>, (accessed July 10, 2005).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 47.

¹⁶ Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletress Press, 1986), p. 6.

As noted by several writers on the area, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give a simple definition of traditional Irish music.¹⁷ Nicholas Carolan, director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, defines it as "a very broad term that includes many different types of singing and instrumental music, music of many periods, as performed by Irish people in Ireland or outside it, and occasionally nowadays by people of other nationalities".¹⁸ According to Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott, "Irish musicians use the term 'traditional' to describe several categories of music and dance: songs in Irish Gaelic, songs in English, instrumental slow airs (which are usually based on song melodies), dance music, solo step dances, and group step dances".¹⁹ Ciaran Carson also defines traditional music as "two broad categories; instrumental music, which is mostly dance music (reels, jigs, hornpipes, polkas, and the like), and the song tradition, which is mostly unaccompanied solo singing".²⁰ By the song tradition, Carson is referring particularly to *sean-nós* [old-style] singing in Irish found primarily in the Gaeltacht regions along the west coast of Ireland. For the purposes of this work (unless otherwise stated), I will be referring to these forms of traditional music, instrumental and sung, as outlined by Hast and Scott, and Carson.

Since the late 1950s, and particularly in the 1960s, traditional music has experienced a significant revival in popularity.²¹ As I will consider in more detail in Chapter Three, this has also been a time of considerable change during which traditional music provided an important point of perceived continuity. There is also some evidence, as indicated in Chapter Four, of a re-engagement with the Irish language in this period. Those cultural artefacts that offered continuity with what was considered a more assured past became increasingly important in this context of rapid

¹⁷ As well as the writers considered above, see also Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998), p. 8.

¹⁸ Nicholas Carolan, "'What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics', Number 1 of a series of information leaflets", 1996, *Irish Traditional Music Archive / Taisce Cheol Dúchais Éireann*, <http://www.itma.ie/home/leaf1a.htm>, (accessed March 7, 2005).

¹⁹ Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott, *Music in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 15.

²⁰ Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1985 [reprint 1999]), p. 5.

²¹ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp. 262-263. See also Eugene McEldowney, "An Irishman's Diary", *The Irish Times*, Wednesday, May 17, 2006, <http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/opinion/2006/0517/647726028DIMAY17.html>, (accessed May 17, 2006).

change. “Tradition” as Simon J. Bronner has noted, “guides and safeguards continuity in a world of change”.²²

Bernadette Quinn has attributed the popularity of traditional music to “nostalgia for the past which characterises the post-modern era. Viewed as such, traditional Irish music represents a much sought after ‘authenticity’”.²³ Walter Benjamin has defined authenticity as “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced”.²⁴ For many Irish people, particularly at points of revival, traditional music seemed to offer this point of reference to the past while contributing to the creation of community in the present. As John Hutchinson has observed in his discussion of the cultural revival of the late eighteenth century, its aims were to “reconcile the different traditions of Ireland and guide a reunited Irish people into a golden future via a return to the exemplars of the ancient past”.²⁵ For these revivalists it was the music of the surviving harpists (“who practiced an art form that had flourished in the households of the Gaelic nobility until around 1600”²⁶) that provided, what Edward Bunting described as, “the mental cultivation and refinement of our ancestors [...] in a perfect state from the earlier times”.²⁷

In the revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the popular folk dance music of Ireland, including jigs, reels and hornpipes, that represented (as the major collector of this period Francis O’Neill noted) “the ancient melodies of a country”. For O’Neill, these

²² Simon J. Bronner, *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore: New Directions* (Utah: Utah State University, 1992), p. 1.

²³ Bernadette M. Quinn, *Tradition, Creativity and Change in Irish Traditional Music*, Working Paper No. 18 (Service Industries Research Centre: University College Dublin, February 1997), p. 5.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 215.

²⁵ J. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 56

²⁶ Helen O’Shea, “Foreign Bodies in the River of Sound: Seeking Identity and Irish Traditional Music” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Technology, 2005), p. 44.

²⁷ Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland: An Edition comprising the three collections by Edward Bunting originally published in 1796, 1809 and 1840* (Dublin: Waltons, 1969), p. 8. Bunting, as we will see in Chapter Two, was the foremost collector of Irish music in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

tunes "afford us one of the most unerring criterions by which we can judge of the natural temperament and characteristic feelings of its people".²⁸

By the 1950s and 1960s it was organisations such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) (founded in 1951 to promote traditional music and organise an annual festival, *An Fhleadh Cheoil*) which promoted their own concept of Ireland's "ancient music". As Helen O'Shea observes:

CCÉ, with its centralised, state-supported and Fianna Fáil-supporting bureaucracy, was a powerful agent in co-opting selected rural musical practices and repertoires to become "Irish traditional music", emblematic of a unified national culture. The organization's competitions encouraged standardization of performance practices and repertoires. Diverse domestic musical practices from the very recent past were idealized as part of an ancient national culture at the same time as they were being commodified and transformed into standardized, public, folkloric performances, largely within the expanding tourist industry.²⁹

Traditional music was perceived to provide an important link both to the past and to community, involving, as Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson have noted,

[a] continuous link between present and past; [incorporating] degrees of variation emanating from individuals and within communities; and [involving] a process of selection by the community determining how the music survives.³⁰

This perception has had important consequences, considered below, for the engagement of Irish poets with traditional music.

²⁸ Francis O'Neill, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: 1001 Gems* (Dublin: Waltons, 1903), p. 8.

²⁹ Helen O'Shea, "Foreign Bodies in the River of Sound: Seeking Identity and Irish Traditional Music" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Technology, 2005), pp. 96-97.

³⁰ Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson, *The Rough Guide to Irish Music* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2001), p. 5.

Traditional Music: Ritual as Process

Anthony Giddens has noted several key elements associated with “tradition”, notably including the concepts of *ritual* and *collectivity*.³¹ Giddens argues that,

[t]radition’s truth is ritual and bound up with its practice. Taking part in a tradition doesn’t involve the cognitive question of whether what you’re doing approximates to something valid in the world. Tradition’s truth and authenticity is carried in its ritual, and it is the ritual which gives it its power. Ritual repeats the past (even if that past is invented), enshrining it in the repetitive nature of the ceremonial.³²

Ritual, as Giddens suggests, is process rather than content, and it is a process realised for traditional music through its performance. As a form essentially oral in character, Irish traditional music has typically been “transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of performance”.³³ Indeed, Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, director of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick, has argued that *sean-nós* singing itself “is process” in his description of the singer Nioclás Tóibín:

Tradition bearer a bhí ann, Nioclás Tóibín, *tradition bearer*, sin a thuig sé. Thuig sé go raibh an traidisiún aige agus go raibh sé ana-thábhachtach go mbeadh an traidisiún san i lár an tsaoil a bhí aige, agus do bhí [...] *sean-nós*, is *process* é agus do thuig Nioclás é sin, ionas go raibh sé in ann an *process* sin a chur i bhfeidhm air mar shampla *product* nó amhrán taobh amuigh den traidisiún [...] Bhí sé mar *mediational point* idir an saol a bhí imithe nó a bhí ag imeacht agus saol a bhí tagtha nó ag teacht nó le teacht – ní féidir domsa an dá rud a scaradh.³⁴

[Nioclás Tóibín understood that he was a tradition bearer. He understood that he had the tradition and that it was very important that that tradition should be at the centre of his life, and it was [...] *sean-nós* is process and Nioclás understood that, such that he could implement that process, for

³¹ Anthony Giddens, “Tradition”, 24 November 1999, *The Director’s Lectures, Runaway World: The Reith Lectures revisited. Lecture 3*, <http://www.polity.co.uk/giddens/pdfs/Tradition.pdf>, (accessed April 2, 2005).

³² Giddens, “Tradition”.

³³ Nicholas Carolan, “‘What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics’”.

³⁴ Micheál Ó Súilleabháin in Seán Ó Cualáin’s documentary *Orpheus na nDéise* (Galway: TG4, 12 Nov. 2005).

example, on a product or song that was from outside the tradition [...] He was a mediational point between the world that was gone or was going and the world that had come or was coming – I can't separate the two things.³⁵

While oral traditions, such as traditional music and song, may be believed to constitute permanence and continuity, as Ó Súilleabháin suggests, they could more correctly be described as "process". For Jan Vansina "any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication".³⁶ Timothy R. Tangherlini also argues that "it is more worthwhile to view tradition as process" suggesting the expression "will to permanence"³⁷ as more appropriate to the dynamic involved in oral traditions. As will be discussed in coming chapters, process has also been a recurring concern of some of the poets under consideration in this work, including Thomas Kinsella, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Indeed, Mac Lochlainn includes, in his 2004 collection *Rakish Paddy Blues*, examples of the creative process taking shape in his work.

The transmission process in traditional music, as realised in moments of performance, could be described using Milton Singer's phrase, as "cultural performances".³⁸ Clifford Geertz has described this phrase, in religious terms, as representing "not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined by the detached observer".³⁹ As the co-author of a study on traditional Irish music, American composer Stanley Scott could not be described as a completely "detached observer". Scott recorded encountering "the interplay of two sets of rituals" in a traditional session in the Góilín Singers' Club in Dublin, that is, "those of Irish pub life in general, and those of this singers' club in particular". He goes on to note that these "special rituals" come "into play when the singing is about to begin".⁴⁰ Scott then details these "rituals" including the prearrangement of

³⁵ All translations in this book, unless otherwise indicated, are by the present author.

³⁶ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1985), p. 2.

³⁷ Timothy R. Tangherlini, "'Oral Tradition' in a Technologically Advanced World", *Oral Tradition* 18.1 (2003): 136.

³⁸ Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 71.

³⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system", *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 113.

⁴⁰ Hast and Scott, *Music in Ireland*, p. 85.

the first few songs by club members to set the tone for the evening; the procedure for getting permission to sing, processed through a club member; and the rituals of the performance of songs themselves. In these, he notes a concern among club members with the authenticity of their performances, apparent in the absence of instrumental accompaniment:

The art of accompanying Irish singing on the harp, only recently revived after a break of almost two centuries, has not reentered common practice, and the guitar, in the minds of many traditional music enthusiasts, is associated with staged, professional (and therefore ‘inauthentic’) performances.⁴¹

This quest for authenticity, and the existence of rituals within such traditional performances, indicates the importance of continuity and of preserving a link with the past for practitioners. Their concern with the use of the guitar, a non-indigenous instrument, also indicates an unease regarding the relationship of performers with audience. When belief in the rituals that preserve a tradition no longer hold, those who were formerly participants become simply an audience. The ritual is transformed, consequently, into something to be “staged”, artificial and, in effect, a form of entertainment. It is this tension between community and audience which is a recurring concern of poets considered in this study and one they have observed within the performance of traditional music.

The place of traditional music in Irish society has changed significantly during the twentieth century. While traditional music was played for generations in homes and at crossroads throughout the country to accompany dancing, the introduction of the Dance Hall Act in 1935 was interpreted as prohibiting these activities. Its consequences would be far reaching. As Bernadette Quinn has noted:

Traditional Irish music has shown a relentless movement away from the home, and into the pub, onto the stage, into the recording studio, the summer school, the festival. In short, traditional Irish music has moved into spaces with which it was once entirely unfamiliar but in which it now seems to be increasingly ‘at home.’⁴²

While it may appear to be “at home” in these spaces, this movement has had significant consequences for the relationship between the community and the performer. As I argue in Chapters One and Two,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴² Quinn, *Tradition, Creativity and Change in Irish Traditional Music*, p. 7.

traditional music played a central role historically in connecting communities to their past and to each other in the present. However, as its place in society changed, so too did its relevance in people's lives. As the Clare fiddler Junior Crehan has noted,

The country house was the center of all social activity in those days. It was not only a place of entertainment, it was also a school where the traditions of music making, story telling and dancing were passed on from one generation to the next, and when the house dances passed away, much of our native culture was lost. The clergy started to build the parochial hall to which all were expected to go, and the government collected twenty five percent of the ticket in tax. In these halls, modern dance bands played a different kind of music for a different kind of dancing - Foxtrot, One Step and Shimmy Shake. But country people found it hard to adjust and, to them, the dance halls were not natural places of enjoyment; they were not places for traditional music, storytelling and dancing. They were unsuitable for passing on traditional arts. The Dance Hall Act closed our schools of tradition and left us a poorer people.⁴³

As will be considered in Chapter One, while commentators have observed the important role traditional music has played historically in connecting community members to their past as well as to each other, most people encounter traditional music today primarily for entertainment. In the work of poets considered below, one senses a concern with the changing nature of this relationship between performer and audience in traditional music. Similarly, while poets are concerned about the relationship of an artist with an audience, they seek a more intimate relationship with an engaged community, sometimes a community they feel impelled to imagine for their own work, as apparent in the study of Thomas Kinsella in Chapter Three.

⁴³ Junior Crehan, Interview with Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, Miltown Malbay, County Clare, July, 1986. Quoted in Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, "Dancing on the Hobs of Hell: Rural Communities in Clare and the Dance Halls Act of 1935", *New Hibernia Review* 9.4 (2005): 17-18. See also Harry Hughes and Múiris Ó Rocháin, "Junior Crehan Remembers", *Dal gCais: Journal of Clare* 3 (1977): 72. Despite Crehan's remarks, Lillis Ó Laoire has noted the importance of such dancehalls on the island of Tory for the continuation of traditional music and, particularly, dancing. See Lillis Ó Laoire, *Ar Chreag i lár na farraige: amhráin agus amhránaithe i dToraigh* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), pp. 141-176, 180-182.

Traditional Music and Community

The interpretation of the term “community” has changed considerably over the past two hundred and fifty years. The onset of modernity, particularly, has had a crucial bearing on how community has been understood. As Gerard Delanty notes:

[m]odernity produced three major upheavals, which gave rise to the main discourses of community: the American and French revolutions, industrialization from the end of the nineteenth century, and the present age of globalization. The many expressions of community that have derived from these and other developments have varied from alternative and utopian communities to traditional villages and urban localities in industrial cities to transnational diasporas and virtual communities. Communities have been based on ethnicity, religion, class or politics; they may be large or small; ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ attachments may underlie them; they may be locally based and globally organized; affirmative or subversive in their relation to the established order; they may be traditional, modern and even postmodern; reactionary and progressive.⁴⁴

In addition to the bases noted by Delanty above, as is discussed in Chapter Two, language has also had an important bearing on definitions of community in the Irish context.

While it has acquired many different meanings since first entering the English language, the word “community” is derived from the Latin terms *munus*, meaning, among other things, “gift”,⁴⁵ “spectacle”, “service” or “tribute”, and *cum*, which includes among its meanings “with”, “together” or “accompaniment”.⁴⁶ In other words, the word implies the sharing of gifts (and possibly through performance as the word “spectacle” suggests), a process readily apparent in traditional music. While there are many definitions of traditional music they almost always share an emphasis on the oral, and aural, characteristic of the music as it is “passed on by mouth

⁴⁴ See Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 2.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Pádraig de Paor has pointed out that the Irish word for poem, *dán*, is related to the Latin word *donum* which also has the word “gift” among its meanings. See Pádraig de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 2005), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Charles T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1879 [Reprint 1966]), pp. 1177, 489.

and by ear, not by written word or musical notation".⁴⁷ As Micheál Ó Súilleabháin notes "[t]raditional music has to come out of an actual meeting of bodies in space, you know, people communicating; and I think it always has that immediacy and root and warmth as a result".⁴⁸

For G. Crow and G. Allan "'community' plays a crucial symbolic role in generating people's sense of belonging".⁴⁹ Their emphasis on the "symbolic" reflects the influence of one of the most persuasive and influential studies of community in the twentieth century, Anthony P. Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. For Cohen "[p]eople construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity".⁵⁰ The rituals that have historically surrounded the performance and transmission of traditional music and song have provided precisely such a symbolic construction for the communities participating in these performances. "Ritual" according to Giddens, must be "collective for tradition to exist [...] [it] is primarily social and collective, and it's something to do with the relationship between ritual and collectivity that defines something as traditional".⁵¹ Alan P. Merriam has also noted the important relationship between music and collectivity arguing that "[m]usic provides a rallying point around which the members of society gather to engage in activities which require the cooperation and coordination of the group".⁵² Similarly, for Jacques Attali, "[a]ll music, any organization of sounds, is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community",⁵³ while Benedict Anderson has emphasised the "special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs".⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Nuala O'Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2001), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Quoted in O'Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ G. Crow and G. Allan, *Community Life. An introduction to local social relations* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 6.

⁵⁰ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London; New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 118.

⁵¹ Giddens, "Tradition".

⁵² Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 227.

⁵³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 6.

⁵⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 145.

Traditional Music and Contemporary Irish Poets

The rise in popularity of traditional music, as noted above by Dillon Johnston, offered an example for contemporary Irish poets of a large audience engaging again with a traditional art form through performance while also offering a degree of continuity with an older Irish tradition. A sense of tradition encompasses both of these elements and is an important concern among Irish poets, reflected in their engagement with Gaelic texts, both from the distant past and from the present. As Peter Denman has noted:

A sense of tradition may be useful to a writer on any one of a number of counts. As a formative influence it situates him *vis-à-vis* his material and audience, for, irrespective of whatever he claims to write within or outside some perceived tradition, it provides a necessary reference point. The sense of a tradition can also be of comfort to an artist; it is a token of continuity and so confers some permanence on the artistic endeavour. Tradition also embodies a collective literary memory; as with all memory, it may be random and lead to distortions and miniature oblivions, and be characterised by an arbitrary selectivity, but it nevertheless constitutes a source of strength.⁵⁵

However, as Seamus Deane observes, “one of the recurrent paradoxes of Irish writing” generally is “its continuous preoccupation with the experience of discontinuity”.⁵⁶ Thomas Kinsella was one of several poets in the 1960s who articulated a sense of discontinuity evident in Irish society during this transitional period, a sense that alerted poets to what Kinsella describes as the “rift” apparent within the tradition of Irish writing itself. Among poets writing in the 1960s there was what John Goodby describes as, “a keen awareness of the threat it was felt modernity offered to traditional Irish culture”.⁵⁷ In 1966, Kinsella delivered an address to the Modern Languages Association in New York in which he indicated his own sense of disconnection from Irish literary history:

⁵⁵ Peter Denman, “Austin Clarke: Tradition, Memory and Our Lot”, *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 74-75.

⁵⁶ Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature*, p. 248.

⁵⁷ John Goodby, “New Wave 1: ‘A Rising Tide’; Irish Poetry in the ‘60s”, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 119.

For my own part I simply realise that I stand on one side of a great rift, and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of people and places as well as writing: of coming, so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives.⁵⁸

Kinsella's work suggests, both through his translations of Gaelic texts and through the incorporation of motifs from Gaelic literature into his poetry, an attempt to connect with an earlier tradition of Irish composition. Chapter Three will describe parallel developments in traditional music, including in the work of Kinsella's close friend Seán Ó Riada, a central figure within the revival of traditional music. As Nuala O'Connor has noted:

Traditional music changed radically and became accessible to a modern audience largely under [Ó Riada's] visionary direction. It was through traditional music that the cultural life of Ireland would be invigorated.⁵⁹

Ó Riada also collaborated with Kinsella's contemporaries, John Montague (who along with Kinsella was among the pallbearers at Ó Riada's funeral on October 3rd 1971)⁶⁰ and Richard Murphy, and would also feature in the work of other poets to emerge in the 1960s. Foremost among these was Seamus Heaney whose work is considered in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

The issues of a broken tradition and community lie at the centre of this work as it explores the relationship, both historically and contemporaneously, between Irish poetry and traditional music. Chapter One examines theoretical paradigms in Word and Music Studies and argues for a more flexible framework – cognisant of research in orality studies, ethnomusicology and recent literary theory – which may offer a more nuanced understanding of how Irish poets are influenced by traditional music. Chapter Two provides a historical overview of the relationship between music and poetry in Ireland and highlights the centrality of the

⁵⁸ Thomas Kinsella, "The Irish Writer", *Éire-Ireland* 2.2 (Summer 1967): 10.

⁵⁹ O'Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music*, p. 74

⁶⁰ John Engle, "That Always Raised Voice: Seán Ó Riada and Irish Poetry", *Contemporary Irish Writing*, ed. by James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 35.

themes of community and continuity to this relationship. Chapter Three turns to the work of Thomas Kinsella. Kinsella is a seminal figure in Irish poetry since the 1950s, a poet whose work and relationship with Seán Ó Riada marks a significant engagement both with the tradition of Irish literature and with Irish traditional music. In his commentaries and poetry, Kinsella has described the discontinuity, as highlighted above, while constructing a space in which the relationships between the past and the present can be articulated. Chapter Four will examine two of the foremost contemporary Irish-language poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, whose work reflects a continuing engagement with the tradition of Gaelic composition and with Irish song, providing Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh with enabling forms, and occasionally transgressive voices, for their work. Chapter Five focuses on three Northern poets, Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Heaney's continuing preoccupation with traditional music resulted in his recording of the album, *The Poet and the Piper*, in 2002, with the uilleann-piper Liam O'Flynn, an album which will be examined as part of this chapter. Accomplished traditional musician, Ciaran Carson, writes poetry and prose which are informed considerably by traditional music while his performances are often accompanied by song and music. Finally, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn represents the latest generation of poets to recognise the importance of traditional music to their work as they attempt to articulate a distinctive poetic voice, anxious to connect with an older tradition while relating to a contemporary community. This final chapter also contrasts the understanding, and relationship, of Heaney with traditional music with that of the two Belfast poets. While Heaney's work focuses on a perceived stability within traditional music, Carson's and Mac Lochlainn's respective engagements are informed more by concerns with process and community.

The title of this book is taken from an early poem by Heaney. The phrase "The Given Note" evokes a number of issues that are central to this study with the ambiguity of the word "given", in particular, providing a pivot on which this book's findings turn. "Given" implies something that is passed on, inherited, granted - something that one may acquire through tradition - but it also suggests something that may be passed on in the present to a contemporary community. The placing of this phrase within inverted commas, however, indicates the uncertainty regarding both tradition and community that I argue is a recurrent feature of contemporary Irish poetry.

CHAPTER ONE

“*THE MUSIC OF POETRY*”: A THEORETICAL SURVEY

The music of poetry, however understood, is of primary importance. Rhythms and rhythmical structures and the rhythm of form – not merely the audible rhythm line by line but the achievements of a totality and the thematic connections against one’s material – all of that is absolutely primary.

—Thomas Kinsella.¹

Music and poetry have often been viewed together as both are considered “auditory, temporal and dynamic art forms”.² Studies of the relationships between these arts have grown throughout the twentieth century. This was underscored in 1997 with the foundation of The International Association for Word and Music Studies (WMA), dedicated to the promotion of “transdisciplinary scholarly inquiry devoted to the relations between literature/verbal texts/language and music”.³ However, its relative youth as a field of enquiry is apparent in the disputed nature of its title. Sometimes referred to as “melopoetics”, this term, as Werner Wolf observes, appears “somewhat arcane [...] because it implies, or at least suggests, a questionable, not to say misleading, privileging of some aspects of the interrelations between music and words/literature”.⁴ Wolf

¹ Denis O’Driscoll, “Interview with Thomas Kinsella”, *Poetry Ireland Review* 25 (1989): 63.

² Steven Paul Scher, “Literature and Music”, *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982), pp. 230-231.

³ “What is the WMA?”, *The International Association for Word and Music Studies*, June 8 2005, <http://www.wordmusicstudies.org/>, (accessed May 24, 2006).

⁴ Werner Wolf, “Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality: Theoretical Aspects of Word and Music Studies”, *Word and Music Studies Defining the Field: Proceedings of the first International conference on Word and Music Studies at Graz, 1997*, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1999), ff 2, p. 39.

suggests, therefore, that “word and music studies” seems to have gained the upper hand over “melopoetics” in recent years. The use of the term “melopoetics” does indicate, nonetheless, a major focus of the discipline which has often tended to be from a musical, rather than a literary, perspective. It is also, as Wolf notes “a discipline in which the construction of a theoretical and terminological framework has not received due attention”.⁵ Where a framework has been suggested, it is focused primarily on the relationship between classical music and literature and gives little consideration to how the performance of music and song of an essentially oral character or in non-classical forms (such as traditional Irish music) may influence a poet’s work. This chapter will examine the existing schemas and argue for a more flexible framework, cognisant of research in orality studies, ethnomusicology and recent literary theory, which may offer a more discerning appreciation of how Irish poets are influenced by traditional music.

Calvin S. Brown

The field of Word and Music Studies owes much to the pioneering work of Calvin S. Brown whose book, *Music and Literature*,⁶ was the first major study of the relationships between the two arts in the twentieth century. His reputation in the field, as Walter Bernhart has noted, “is so high and his seminal role as the father of modern research in this area so undisputed that an assessment of his scholarly achievement seems almost superfluous”.⁷ When Brown first published *Music and Literature* in 1948, the area of comparative literature as an academic discipline was still quite new.⁸ Brown’s approach was focused firstly on exploring the raw

“Melopoetics”, through its use of the Latin word for “tune” or “song”, *Melos*, seems to prioritise the musical aspect of the relationship.

⁵ Werner Wolf, “Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality: Theoretical Aspects of Word and Music Studies”, p. 37.

⁶ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (1948) (2nd ed., Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987).

⁷ Walter Bernhart, “A Profile in Retrospect: Calvin S. Brown as a Musico-Literary Scholar”, *Musico-Poetics in Perspective Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein, (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), p. 116.

⁸ Calvin S. Brown, “Literature and Music: A Developing Field of Study”, *Musico-Poetics in Perspective Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein, (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), p. 254. Brown remarked in this article upon the relative newness of the area of comparative literature generally as a discipline.

materials "by means of which [sound] can be organized into coherent works of art".⁹ These included rhythm, pitch, timbre, harmony, and counterpoint and the similarities and differences in each of these elements as they are applied to literature and music.¹⁰ While recognising some similarities between literature and music with regard to these elements, Brown concentrated on examining the applicability of what were, for him, essentially musical terms to literature. He was quite separatist in his approach to the two arts and in an earlier paper had expressed his concern about the danger of the application of terms inexactly from one art to the other:

Since many terms have exact meanings in music, and also extended, symbolical, or sometimes merely vague general or literary applications, the study of musico-literary relationships has been considerably obscured by those who play fast and loose with their terms, 'calling in ambiguity of language to promote confusion of thought'.¹¹

For Brown, it was important to emphasize the differences, as much as the similarities, between music and literature. As Walter Bernhart has noted, this position "has had decisive methodological consequences in the field of Comparative Arts".¹² Brown summarized his understanding of the relationship in a 1978 article when he argued that:

It would seem to be best for each art to mind its own business, not hesitating to steal from the other art anything that will actually serve its own purpose, but not making an issue or a virtue of it [...] An artist should borrow from another art as a man borrows a neighbor's lawnmower, not as an acrobat dances on a tightrope.¹³

Furthermore, this attitude has been somewhat superseded by the increasingly interdisciplinary approach of today. As Bernhart observes

⁹ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Ulrich Weisstein, "The Miracle of Interconnectedness – Calvin S. Brown: A Critical Biography", *Musico-Poetics in Perspective Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), p. 95.

¹¹ Calvin S. Brown, "The Poetic use of Musical Forms", *Musical Quarterly* 30 (1944): 87.

¹² Walter Bernhart, "A Profile in Retrospect: Calvin S. Brown as a Musico-Literary Scholar", p. 120.

¹³ Calvin S. Brown, "Theme and Variations as a Literary Form", *Yearbook of Comparative & General Literature* 27 (1978): 43.

“one could well say that today’s cultural climate is ‘synthetic’ and ‘syncretistic’ rather than ‘separatist’ in outlook”.¹⁴ Clifford Geertz has expressed similar reservations about the separatist approach arguing that

[g]rand rubrics like ‘Natural science,’ ‘Biological Science,’ ‘Social Science,’ and ‘The Humanities’ have their uses in organising curricula, in sorting scholars into cliques and professional communities, and in distinguishing broad traditions of intellectual style [...] But when these rubrics are taken to be a borders-and-territories map of modern intellectual life, or, worse, a Linnaean catalogue into which to classify scholarly species, they merely block from view what is really going on out there where men and women are thinking about things and writing down what it is they think.¹⁵

Indeed, Bernhart suggests that the genre and media approach itself has become less significant in theory as the focus has moved away from the “the signifier to the interpretant”, such that “the media perspective loses its dominant position in art and art criticism”.¹⁶ As indicated below, this has been reflected in theoretical findings in those disciplines, including literary theory, which inform this study.

The Tripartite Framework for Word and Music Studies

As well as his examination in *Music and Literature* of the fundamental elements of both music and poetry, Brown also considered their association in vocal music; the influence of music on literature; and, finally, the effect of literature on music. This tripartite framework was later developed and adapted by Steven Paul Scher who divided the study of the relationships between the two arts into three groups; music and literature, literature in music, and music in literature.¹⁷

Scher identified the area of music and literature as primarily “vocal music” in which “literary text and musical composition are inextricably

¹⁴ Walter Bernhart, “A Profile in Retrospect: Calvin S. Brown as a Musico-Literary Scholar”, p. 122.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 7.

¹⁶ Walter Bernhart, “A Profile in Retrospect: Calvin S. Brown as a Musico-Literary Scholar”, p. 122.

¹⁷ Steven Paul Scher, “Literature and Music”, *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982), p. 226.

bound".¹⁸ Brown himself later described this area as "combination".¹⁹ The clearest example of "vocal music" is song in which both music and the text are bound together in performance.

While Scher defined "Literature in Music" as "works customarily referred to as 'program music'",²⁰ he describes the area of "music in literature" as "the only one of the three areas of the interrelationship that encompasses exclusively literary works of art".²¹ Scher limited the application of this category considerably by insisting that all works in this group represent "attempts at 'musicalization' of literature or verbalization of music",²² thereby excluding consideration of how music may influence literature without literature necessarily attempting to be musical. This includes the contextual issues, discussed below, that surround the performance and transmission of traditional music.

Scher delineates three basic areas in which he argues music is apparent in literature: "word music", "musical structures and techniques in literary works", and "verbal music".²³ "Word Music" refers for Scher to "a rather common type of poetic practice that aims primarily at imitation in words of the acoustic quality of music" through the composition of "verbal structures consisting predominately of onomatopoeic words or word clusters".²⁴

The practice of attempting to use musical structures and techniques in literary work has become an "irresistible challenge"²⁵ for many poets, according to Scher. He finds two major types of such borrowing namely "the adaptation of larger musical structures and patterns" and "the application of certain musical techniques and devices common to both arts".²⁶

Scher's second category in this area, "the application of certain musical techniques and devices common to both arts",²⁷ was described by Brown as "Parallel" or "Analogy" as these techniques are of

¹⁸ Scher, "Literature and Music", p. 226.

¹⁹ Calvin S. Brown, "Theoretical Foundations for the study of the Mutual Illumination of the Arts", *Musico-Poetics in Perspective Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein, (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), p. 288.

²⁰ Scher, "Literature and Music", p. 227.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Scher, "Literature and Music", p. 231.

independent origin or, in some cases, go back to a common source which is neither musical nor literary. Many of the normal practices of the two arts are common to both simply because they are inherent in the nature of temporal art.²⁸

The final group Scher delineates within the “music in literature” category is that of “verbal music” which he differentiates from “word music” as “any literary presentation (whether in poetry or prose) of existing or fictitious musical compositions: any poetic texture which has a piece of music as its ‘theme’”.²⁹

Problems with the Tripartite Framework

Despite making important connections between the two arts and adding increasing legitimacy to the area as one worthy of academic study, this tripartite framework is limited in a number of important respects. These limitations can be traced to the pioneering work of Calvin S. Brown himself. Firstly, as Alrich Weisstein has noted “there is little evidence that [Brown’s] interests reached beyond the pale of Western music”.³⁰ Brown himself acknowledged that “the general musical range” of his seminal study “was from about 1600 to 1900”.³¹ In fact, Brown was noted for his quite discriminatory concept of art, in which he disparaged “mere *Unterhaltungsliteratur*”³² and described art as a mode of communication wherein “the experiences communicated are human experiences which we feel to have some permanent value” and “are of such a nature that their communication requires particular ability and is not a matter of everyday occurrence”.³³ Thus, Word and Music Studies throughout the twentieth century has been primarily focused on classical music.

²⁸ Calvin S. Brown, “Theoretical Foundations for the study of the Mutual Illumination of the Arts”, p. 293.

²⁹ Scher, “Literature and Music”, pp. 234-35.

³⁰ Ulrich Weisstein, “The Miracle of Interconnectedness – Calvin S. Brown: A Critical Biography”, *Musico-Poetics in Perspective Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*, ed. by Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000), p. 93.

³¹ Calvin S. Brown, “Music and Literature at the University of Georgia: A Historical Note”, *Yearbook of Comparative & General Literature*, 36 (1987): 119.

³² Calvin S. Brown, “Musico-Literary Research in the Last Two Decades (1950-1970)”, *Yearbook of Comparative & General Literature* 19 (1970): 22.

³³ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*, p. 5.

One of the major differences between the evolution of Western classical music and traditional Irish music is the manner in which each has been transmitted. While classical music developed associated with literature and notation, the various types within Irish traditional music, as Nicholas Carolan has noted, are of "an essentially 'oral' character",

that is, they belong to a tradition of popular music in which song and instrumental music is created and transmitted in performance and carried and preserved in the memory, a tradition which is essentially independent of writing and print.³⁴

Furthermore, as Marie McCarthy observes "[t]raditional music was passed on in a predominately oral culture, characterised by low levels of general and musical literacy".³⁵ While traditional musicians in the twentieth century are increasingly literate and the music is now often passed on through songbooks, it remains a form which evolved until very recently (and continues to do in some communities, and through traditional sessions) primarily through oral, and aural, transmission. Indeed, traditional musicians still insist on the importance of acquiring songs through performance, and participation in sessions, rather than from textual sources, while "secondary orality" (an expression discussed below), through the acquisition of tunes from recordings, has also become a vital part of the learning process.³⁶

Orality Studies and Performance

The oral characteristic of traditional music and song has led writers on this topic to draw on work in orality studies, such as that of Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, Ruth Finnegan and Walter J. Ong, to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and characteristics of traditional Irish music, particularly the song tradition. As noted above, traditional Irish music is not just concerned with the traditional dance tunes "rooted in the

³⁴ Nicholas Carolan, "'What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics', Number 1 of a series of information leaflets", 1996, *Irish Traditional Music Archive / Taisce Cheol Dúchais Éireann*, <http://www.itma.ie/home/leaf1a.htm>, (accessed March 7, 2005).

³⁵ Marie McCarthy, *Passing it On* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 6.

³⁶ See Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun: In and Out of Time with Irish Music* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), pp. 7-13, 149-156.

popular music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”,³⁷ but also with the distinctive song styles, including *sean-nós*, found primarily along the west coast of Ireland.³⁸ Tomás Ó Canainn in the introduction to his study of *Traditional Music in Ireland* chose to quote from one of the pioneers of orality studies, Albert B. Lord, whose work with Milman Parry did much to reveal the oral origins of what were once regarded as foundational texts in Western literature, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Ó Canainn argues that Lord’s description of a Balkan epic singer could just as readily be applied to the performer of traditional Irish music and song, particularly in their use of “clichés in variation or composition”:

The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator. His manner of composition differs from that used by a writer in that the oral poet makes no conscious effort to break the traditional phrases and incidents; he is forced by the rapidity of composition in performance to use these traditional elements. To him they are not merely necessary, however; they are also right. He seeks no others, and yet he practices great freedom in his use of them because they are themselves flexible. His art consists not so much in learning through repetition the time-worn formulas as in the ability to compose and recompose the phrases for the idea of the moment on the pattern established by the basic formulas. His traditional style also has individuality.³⁹

Lord was referring to a common characteristic of primary oral cultures where the composition process involves the incorporation of elements from previous songs, a feature apparent in the Gaelic song tradition. It is a characteristic also found in contemporary Irish poetry. Both Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, for example (as discussed in Chapter Four), include lines, phrases or sometimes entire verses from the song tradition within their work.

One also finds descriptions of the performance of traditional music, and *sean-nós*, in contemporary Irish poetry. Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Thomas Kinsella and Seán Lucy all have poems describing performances by the musician Seán Ó Riada. Derek Mahon, Montague and Kinsella have also given us striking descriptions of the performance of *sean-nós* including the extract below from Montague’s *The Rough Field*:

³⁷ Nuala O’Connor, *Bringing it all back home: The Influence of Irish music* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2001), p. 5.

³⁸ Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986), p. 5.

³⁹ Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 4-5. Quoted in Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 4.

With the almost
Professional shyness of the folk-singer
He keeps us waiting, until he rises,
Head forced back, eyeballs blind.
'*An Bunnán Buí*'. As the Gaelic
Rises and recedes, swirling deep
To fall back, all are silent,
Tentacles of race seeking to sound
That rough sadness. At the climax
He grips the chair before him
Until the knuckles whiten –
Sits down abruptly as he rose.
Man looks at man, the current
Of community revived to a near-
Ly perfect round [...]⁴⁰

This circular motif suggested in the final lines is one that recurs throughout contemporary Irish poetry, and one I will return to in my study of Thomas Kinsella's work in Chapter Three, a chapter which also explores the strong associations of the circle with traditional Irish music.

Furthermore, the extract above from *The Rough Field* highlights a number of issues central to this study: poets' efforts to connect with an older tradition, and their attempts to create a community in the present. While the song connects the audience with an older culture "swirling deep/To fall back", it brings the listeners in the present together,

⁴⁰ John Montague, from "The Last Sheaf", *The Rough Field, Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1995), pp. 46-47. A major influence on Montague during his days at the junior Diocesan Seminary, St. Patrick's College Armagh, in the 1940s was Seán O'Boyle (who Paul Muldoon has also referred to as an important early influence), an expert on the Ulster folksong tradition who is quoted elsewhere in this work. It is not surprising, therefore, that songs, from both the Irish and English languages, feature throughout Montague's work. Seán Lucy has also sensed the influence of bardic poetry on Montague's work and described him as "a master of [the Anglo-Irish bardic stanza]", particularly apparent in the poem "Courtyard in Winter" included in *A Slow Dance* (1975), a poem that often approximates the "old seven-syllable bardic-line", Lucy describes as "clearly linked, through Clarke and others, to formal Gaelic prosody" [See John Montague, "The Challenges of Translation", *Agenda*, <http://www.agendapoetry.co.uk/documents/Translation-Montague.pdf>, (accessed February 13, 2008), New York State Writer's Institute, "John Montague", *State University of New York*, <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/montague.html>, (accessed February 20, 2006), Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Chester Springs (PA): Dufour Editions, 1996), pp. 13-14, and Seán Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", *Irish University Review* 8.2 (1978): 176-177].

connecting as “tentacles of race” reach out and community is “revived to a near-/Ly perfect round”. Indeed, contributing to the creation of community is a central function of the performance of *sean-nós*. As Tomás Ó Canainn has noted, “*sean-nós* is only completely at ease [...] where the singer and his listener are in real communication”,⁴¹ while Breandán Ó Madagáin’s description of Irish song in the nineteenth century remains relevant for the portrayal Montague provides: “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”.⁴² Similarly, John Moulden has opined that “[f]or the song to have any but a transient influence upon its audiences it must be absorbed by the community”.⁴³

Traditional flautist and flute-maker Hammy Hamilton argues that variation, one of the distinctive characteristics of traditional Irish music and song, necessitates the involvement of the audience in performance:

The principles of variation and decoration as used by Irish traditional musicians and singers [...] depend very much for their success as stylistic elements on the assumption that the listeners have a great degree of familiarity with the basics of the music. Variations depend for their effect on the contrast that they make with the basic tune, and it therefore follows that this basis must be well known to the listeners.⁴⁴

Fiddler and historian Martin W. Dowling has also drawn attention to the form of traditional Irish music which, he argues, “is itself important in giving rise to the sociability that is so infectious, attractive, and enduring in terms of playing, listening and dancing”.⁴⁵ In Chapter Three and Chapter Five I will return to a consideration of this form and its

⁴¹ Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 49.

⁴² Breandán Ó Madagáin, “Functions of Irish Song in the Nineteenth Century”, *Béaloideas* 53 (1985): 132.

⁴³ John Moulden, “The Printed Ballad in Ireland” (unpublished doctoral dissertation: National University of Ireland, Galway, 2006), p. 242.

⁴⁴ Hammy Hamilton, “Innovation, Conservatism, and the Aesthetics of Irish Traditional Music”, *Crosbhealach an Cheoil – The Crossroads Conference 1996: Tradition and Change in Irish Traditional Music*, ed. by Fintan Vallely (Cork: Ossian Publications Ltd., 1999), p. 84.

⁴⁵ Martin W. Dowling, “Communities, Place and Traditions of Irish Dance Music”, *Crosbhealach an Cheoil – The Crossroads Conference 1996: Tradition and Change in Irish Traditional Music*, ed. by Fintan Vallely (Cork: Ossian Publications Ltd., 1999), p. 67.

congruence with the work of contemporary poets such as John Montague, Thomas Kinsella and Ciaran Carson.

While music has played a crucial role in Irish society in connecting members of a community to each other, it has also performed an important function in preserving the historical memory of communities. As Allen Feldman and Eamon O'Doherty have noted:

If traditional music is considered as a form of inherited knowledge, the musician possessed the emotional and aesthetic history of his culture in his music [...] The music conferred identity on a vastly decentralised culture; it was history translated into sound. This is why personalised oral transmission of the musical tradition from members of one generation to another was a crucial process in the life of the rural community. This spontaneous transfer of the oral tradition between generations connected the community with its own history.⁴⁶

One finds references to oral traditions in the work of several contemporary poets including Eavan Boland's poem "The Oral Tradition". It is also apparent in Paul Durcan's wish to "belong always to the oral tradition".⁴⁷ Furthermore, performance itself has played an increasingly important role in the transmission of Irish poets' work since the 1960s. These performances were occasionally accompanied by traditional music allowing poets to connect both to tradition, and to a larger contemporary audience than they might have otherwise. Richard Murphy's *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968), for example, was originally written for the BBC's *Third Programme* and its first broadcast in 1968 was accompanied by a soundtrack of traditional tunes arranged by Seán Ó Riada and played by his group Ceoltóirí Chualann.⁴⁸ Murphy has described this work as an attempt to "occupy ground midway between history on the one hand, and

⁴⁶ Allen Feldman and Eamon O'Doherty, *The Northern Fiddler: Music and Musicians of Donegal and Tyrone* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1979), pp. 24-5.

⁴⁷ Paul Durcan, "The Dublin-Paris-Berlin-Moscow Line", *A Snail in My Prime: New and Selected Poems* (London: Harvill/Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), p. 238.

⁴⁸ It is clear that Murphy regarded the music as central to the realisation of this poem. Letters from as early as October 1962 to the producer of the BBC's *Third Programme*, Douglas Cleverdon, already contained ideas for music, including making contact with Seán Ó Riada. See Richard Murphy, "Letter to Douglas Cleverdon", dated 31st October 1962, included in *Cleverdon Manuscripts*, Manuscripts Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

music, on the other”⁴⁹ where O’Riada’s music represented “the true voice of the suffering people of Ireland at the time of Aughtim”.⁵⁰ “The sound of the uilleann pipes, a goatskin drum, a flute, a penny whistle and two fiddles”, Murphy notes elsewhere, “enchanted me as if it were coming from the ground out of a hawthorn-ringed rath, bringing the music of the dead to life with renewed vitality”.⁵¹ In addition, the poem’s performance with music and radio broadcast allowed Murphy, during a period when “there was almost no audience at all” for poetry, to find “quite a large audience, something like fifty thousand listeners”.⁵²

John Montague, like Murphy, also turned to performance to communicate his work; again traditional music provided an important accompaniment. Following its publication in 1972, *The Rough Field* was performed at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin in December of that year, a performance that was broadcast in two parts by Radio Éireann. The work was performed subsequently at the Roundhouse Theatre in London in 1973 and later in 1980.⁵³ Indeed, *The Rough Field* is a poem that lends itself easily to performance. As Montague has noted regarding the “A New Siege” section, “[i]t is based on the Anglo-Saxon metre which is chanted by the scop, a four beat line with a break in the middle, which is a great line for incantation or public speaking”.⁵⁴ On each occasion the work was performed, the readings were accompanied by traditional Irish music arranged and performed by The Chieftains, a group whose name was taken from a short story by Montague and many of whose members began with

⁴⁹ Richard Murphy, “The Use of History in Poetry”, *The Uses of the Past*, ed. by Audrey S. Eyler and Robert F. Garratt (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), p. 20.

⁵⁰ Murphy, “The Use of History in Poetry”, p. 23.

⁵¹ Richard Murphy, *The Kick* (London; New York: Granta, 2002), p. 218.

⁵² Murphy, “The Use of History in Poetry”, p. 20.

⁵³ John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave* (Arbour Hill: The Lilliput Press, 1989), pp. 224-225.

⁵⁴ John Brown, *In the Chair* (Cliffs of Moher, Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 56. Significantly, this work first appeared to the public in a reading by Montague outside Armagh jail in August 1970 to commemorate the first anniversary of “The Battle of the Bogside”, a clash between residents in Derry’s Bogside district and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) between August 12th and 14th 1969 following attempts by the RUC to force a loyalist Apprentice Boys of Derry parade along the predominately nationalist Bogside area [New York State Writer’s Institute, “John Montague”, *State University of New York*, <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/montague.html>, (accessed February 20, 2006)].

Ó Riada's seminal traditional group Ceoltóirí Chualann.⁵⁵ It is not surprising that Montague should have chosen to present his work in this manner as he has described music as "an influence on my work, whether in short pieces like 'The Country Fiddler', and 'The Siege of Mullingar', or in larger structures such as 'Patriotic Suite'", all poems included in *The Rough Field*.⁵⁶ Each of these pieces is linked by its association with traditional music while they also suggest traditional music's role in passing on tradition. "The Country Fiddler" recalls Montague's uncle's skill as a traditional musician, playing the tunes "The Morning Star" and "O'Neill's Lament". While one senses the poet's regret that his uncle's fiddle ended up "in pieces" before he learned to play it, there is also the suggestion that Montague views himself as an inheritor of sorts of his uncle's talents, as "succession passes, through strangest hands".⁵⁷

Mathew Campbell has observed that by the late 1990s, "Irish poetry filled auditoria, with [Nuala] Ní Dhomhnaill, Brendan Kennelly and Paul Durcan popular performers of their poems and satiric commentators on the public realm".⁵⁸ Theo Dorgan has noted that whereas poetry readings in previous decades were few and far between, he could count over 600 per annum by the nineteen nineties.⁵⁹ While Dorgan's figure seems speculative, a study of the annual reports of The Arts Council since its inception in 1951 indicates a substantial increase in the number of literary events funded, many of which included readings by poets. While the Council's initial focus was primarily on supporting the visual arts in Ireland, with the appointment of Seán Ó Faoláin as director in 1956, there was an increased emphasis on the performing arts, including the performance of poetry. As Brian P. Kennedy has noted "O'Faoláin's priority was to provide Irish people with opportunities to see, read and

⁵⁵ John Montague, *The Rough Field: An Ulster Epic* (Dublin: Claddagh Records, 2000). Indeed, Montague was instrumental in the setting up of the traditional label Claddagh records with Garech Browne in 1959 [Aosdána, "John Montague", <http://www.artscouncil.ie/aosdana/biogs/literature/johnmontague.html>, (accessed October 25, 2005).

⁵⁶ John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave* (Arbour Hill: The Lilliput Press, 1989), p. 46.

⁵⁷ John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1995), pp. 11-12.

⁵⁸ Mathew Campbell, "Ireland in Poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969", *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Mathew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Theo Dorgan, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 13.

hear the work of renowned artists, poets, writers and musicians”.⁶⁰ While the funding of such literary events remained relatively small compared to the funding received by the visual arts, theatre and music, there was a marked increase between the 1960s and 1990s. In its 2003 report, the Council lists almost thirty literary festivals and events receiving funding while the Association of Irish Festival Events (AOIFE) lists sixty annual festivals with a literary component.⁶¹ When one adds to this the large number of readings in arts centres, colleges and libraries throughout the country, Dorgan’s figure of six hundred readings a year does not seem unlikely and may even be an underestimation of the total.⁶²

These performances indicate an awareness of, and wish to engage with, an audience beyond the relationship that may exist between the text and its reader. As Richard Bauman has noted,

Performance as a mode of verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence [...] Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content [...] Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity.⁶³

Performance is also a means through which to engage with tradition; it constitutes “the nexus of tradition, practice, and emergence in verbal art”.⁶⁴ For some poets at least, these performances have been influenced

⁶⁰ Brian P. Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities: The State and the Arts in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Arts Council of Ireland, 1990), p. 80.

⁶¹ This information is available on the association’s website at <http://www.aoifeonline.com/festival/index.asp?action=true&search=&txtMonth=0&txtFestCategory=26&Submit=Search>, (accessed September 10, 2005).

⁶² Contemporary poet Kevin Higgins has also emphasised the importance of performance to poets allowing them to circumvent “the mainstream by appealing over the heads of the poetry establishment directly to the non-specialist reader” [Kevin Higgins, “The Role of Performance in Contemporary Irish Poetry”, Paper presented at the *First Galway Conference of Irish Studies: “Orality and Modern Irish Culture”*, Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, Wednesday June 7th 2006].

⁶³ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1977), p. 11.

⁶⁴ Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, p. 48. Kevin Higgins has also described contemporary poetry performances, in particular the Poetry Slams in which he has participated, as an opportunity to reconnect “Irish poetry with its own oral tradition” [Kevin Higgins, “The Role of Performance in Contemporary Irish

by their experiences of traditional music. Indeed, several poets, including Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney, as well as Montague and Murphy discussed above, have performed their work with traditional music.

The performance by these writers (and many others) of their own work also highlights the "musical" character, or "word music" as Scher identifies it above, of their poetry. Several commentators, including Seamus Heaney,⁶⁵ have referred to the musical quality of Irish poetry. Heaney has defined the music of poetry 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".⁶⁶ This second aspect might be described as a poem's "word music". 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. Indeed, the actual sounds and intonations of a poet reading can influence how the listener engages with that work for, as Calvin S. Brown has noted, the voice itself is an instrument which produces its own distinct timbre, including "the quality of the voice itself, and the quality of the particular speech-sound which is being pronounced at any given time".⁶⁷ Much as music affects the listener as pure sound, largely without definite meaning, so too can words and their manipulation by poets. Even prior to comprehension, the sounds poets produce in performing their work have important effects on the listener. As Aubrey S. Garlington has noted of the combination of word and music in performance,

Sensory perception, as well as cognitive reception of music and word, together, in performance - and again, preferably live performance - is but determined by the state, the condition of sound itself. Traditionally, analytic inquiry has been far more accustomed to speaking of a 'meaning of sounds', thereby implying that a rejection of any save cognitive processes as necessary for understanding. We must recognise, however,

Poetry", Paper presented at the *First Galway Conference of Irish Studies: "Orality and Modern Irish Culture"*, Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, Wednesday June 7th 2006].

⁶⁵ I am referring here particularly to Heaney's description of the "musical fullness" of Paul Muldoon's poetry in *The Annals of Chile* collection [Seamus Heaney, "Filling the Cup above the Brim", *The Sunday Independent* (Living Section), September 25, 1994, p. 8].

⁶⁶ Seamus Heaney, "The Makings of a Music", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 62.

⁶⁷ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature*, p. 38.

that it is ‘sounds’ which come first, then ‘of meaning’. Only *a posteriori* do our encounters turn inward towards understanding whatever meaning might be determined to exist as evinced by those sounds which caused response in the first place.⁶⁸

Recent critical work on Irish poetry has also emphasised the importance of engaging with the “sound of sense”,⁶⁹ or the “presence of meaning in a poem’s sound”.⁷⁰ Brian Devine has observed, drawing on the work of Walter Ong,⁷¹ that

[t]he poem is the living voice of the poet in a particular manifestation, the existential moment par excellence: the aural correlative. For in the poem, we have a process of eternal imagination and emotion becoming the working tongue, lip and larynx – the carnate word – of a physical, yet permanent voice.⁷²

Poets have long been aware of the “music of poetry”. Poetry’s manipulation for musical affect, for example, was a major concern of the writers of the French Symbolist movement, including Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, in the late nineteenth century. As Heaney’s remarks above suggest, contemporary Irish poets themselves are also very aware of this “word music”. Heaney has expressed a wish that his poems “will be vocables adequate to my whole experience”.⁷³ Contemporary poet Mary O’Malley, who has collaborated with traditional musicians throughout her life as a poet, has also remarked that musicians wishing to put music to poetry may benefit from hearing poets reading their own work in order to appreciate the unique sounds of words.⁷⁴ Equally, Cathal Ó Searcaigh has

⁶⁸ Aubrey S. Garlington, “Music, Word, Performance: Sounds of Meaning”, *Word and Music Studies Defining the Field: Proceedings of the first International conference on Word and Music Studies at Graz, 1997*, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1999), p. 339.

⁶⁹ Brian Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound* (Gerards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 2006), p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷¹ Walter J. Ong, “A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives”, *Perspectives on Poetry*, ed. by James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 120.

⁷² Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 12.

⁷³ Seamus Heaney, “Belfast”, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 37.

⁷⁴ This comment was initially made to musician Gerry O’Beirne and was shared with the author through email (20 December, 2005).

remarked in an interview that "[v]owels in Irish are vitally important. They are the animating principle of the word, its very soul. Consonants are shape-givers".⁷⁵

In common with other Irish-language poets (including Ní Dhomhnaill), and in recognition of the importance of the spoken language to appreciations of his poetry, recent collections of Ó Searcaigh's have been accompanied by recordings of the poet reading his work.⁷⁶ These recordings (including television and radio readings, interviews etc.) constitute a form of what Walter J. Ong has described as "secondary orality" whereby contemporary poetry, and information generally, is now composed, stored, retrieved, and communicated not just in scripts but in media which recreate performances and often exploit many of the pre-literate techniques of primary orality. While this form of orality is "based permanently on the use of writing and print", it can also promote a significant feeling of community among groups considerably larger than those found in primary orality cultures through the dissemination of information through various media including television and recordings.⁷⁷

The distinctiveness of Ó Searcaigh's recordings has been commented upon by Michael Longley, a poet who has little if any Irish:

I have listened to him read on a cassette recording, and I register at once a lovely musicality. His poetry is clearly rooted in the rhythms of everyday speech, and yet I sense a subtle verbal interplay that must challenge the translator.⁷⁸

Lucy Collins has similarly emphasised the importance of Ní Dhomhnaill's readings in both Irish and English, even if few in the audience may have knowledge of the Irish language. These dual language readings, according to Collins,

⁷⁵ Taken from an interview with Cathal Ó Searcaigh by Marion Kleinschmidt and included in Kleinschmidt's unpublished dissertation "Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Translator-Poets between Irish and English", (unpublished master's thesis: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, 2003), p. 22.

⁷⁶ In recent years Ó Searcaigh's poetry has been published with accompanying recordings because of the importance of the spoken word to the author and his audience. These include *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1991) and *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolais* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2003).

⁷⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 136.

⁷⁸ Michael Longley, "A Going Back to Sources", Review of *An Bealach 'na Bhaile*, *Poetry Ireland Review* 39 (Autumn 1993): 92.

allow listeners to absorb both languages, though they may understand only one of them, and to consider the significance of the shape and sound of the poems, as well as their meaning. The emphasis on the voice in this poet's work both connects to and examines the place of the oral tradition in Irish letters, and her readings likewise reinforce the energy of this tradition while also tracing significant changes within it.⁷⁹

It is important, however, to note that while the sounds of words can have a significant impact on listeners, their arbitrariness in a language foreign to the listener can lead to contrary understandings. "Poetry", as T.S. Eliot remarked, "is not something which exists apart from meaning":

We can be deeply stirred by hearing the recitation of a poem in a language of which we understand no word; but if we are then told that the poem is gibberish and has no meaning, we shall consider that we have been deluded - this was no poem, it was merely an imitation of instrumental music.⁸⁰

Readings of Ní Dhomhnaill's poem "Dubh" ["Black"], for example, indicates this ambiguity of sound. This poem, which laments the destruction of the town of Srebrenica during the Bosnian war in 1995, includes the repetition of the word "dubh" to emphasise the devastation of the city and its effect on the poet. Ní Dhomhnaill uses the percussive effect of the repetition of the word to represent the falling of mortar shells on the city: "dubh, dubh, dubh". However, to the non Irish-speaking English speaker, *dubh* (at least as spoken in Munster Irish by Ní Dhomhnaill) approximates the sound of the word "dove" in English, which offers an almost entirely contradictory association. As Calvin S. Brown noted,

there is no reason, in the nature of things, why a certain combination of speech-sounds should be associated with any particular external object or concept. Even such an imitative word as *whisper* is far from inevitable: the French say *chuchoter*, the Germans *flüstern*, the Italians *bisbigliare*, the Spaniards *cuchichear*.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Lucy Collins, "Performance and Dissent: Irish Poets in the Public Sphere", *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 224.

⁸⁰ T.S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry", *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 30.

⁸¹ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature*, p. 12.

and the Irish *cogar*. It is through collective agreement that meanings become associated with words. As Brown goes on to argue, in "practice [...] the association of a certain sound (and of the alphabetical symbols used to represent it) with a certain concept is no more than an arbitrary association arising from the fact that speakers of the same language have always heard these collections of sounds used in connection with certain objects or concepts".⁸² Thus, it is through relationships between people, and the development of communities that words acquire meaning. Furthermore, for poets, meanings depend on this communicative act between themselves and their readers. As Eliot again posits,

While poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another; and this is just as true if you sing it, for singing is another way of talking [...] The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place*.⁸³

Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch has noted how approaches to orality have changed over the past fifty years such that the emphasis is now primarily on "the participatory processes whereby everyone plays a role in the social communication and creativity that characterises every group and subculture within society as a whole".⁸⁴ As a result, Ó Cruaíoch argues that all texts are,

to be regarded as a record, a fragmentary record, of the words, the speech, the oral linguistic performance that underlies it and all text is necessarily wanting as a representation of the linguistic behaviour-in-context that gives rise to oral literature in the views, the valuation and the ears of the local indigenous audience.⁸⁵

⁸² Brown, *Music and Literature*, p. 12.

⁸³ T.S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry", p. 31. Walter J. Ong has also observed that "[w]ords are never fully determined in their abstract signification but have meaning only with relation to man's body and to its interaction with his surroundings" [Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 56].

⁸⁴ Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, "Otherworld Harmonies and Heroic Utterance: The Fruits of the Literary Act Amongst Us", *Irish Review* 23 (1998): 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Writers, as Walter J. Ong has noted, are always faced with the reality that their audience is “a fiction”.⁸⁶ By this, Ong refers both to how the writer must imagine an audience of some description while he writes, while the audience must “correspondingly fictionalise itself”⁸⁷ by playing the role an author has cast for them. However, in oral performance, such as story-telling, the teller “reacts directly to audience response. Oral storytelling is a two-way street” unlike written or printed narrative.⁸⁸ Performance permits contemporary poets to bridge the imaginative gap between themselves and their audience.

Ó Cruaíaoich has argued that Irish oral culture (be it “the winter hearth, the summer bog, the knitting bee, the wedding feast, the wakehouse”⁸⁹) offers the contemporary writer an example of how, in a communal and oral setting, language would develop naturally to “a standard judged excellent”.⁹⁰ He equates this with the “literary plane”, the level at which language and expression moves from functional conversation to high art. Henry Glassie has recorded this movement in his study from the early 1970s of the small Ulster community of Ballymenone, County Fermanagh. Describing the progress of an evening in the local public house, Glassie remarks,

Talk struggles upward to chat, chat rises to stories, stories at the top of their arc swing through rhythm and echoing sound toward poetry. Song is speech at its decorated peak.⁹¹

Encouraged by the “company’s social communication”, it is this point of the night, when a tale or a song is performed, that, according to Ó Cruaíaoich, “is recognisable to the outside observer as ‘oral literature’”.⁹²

This “peak” is also paralleled by the emergence of community as this orientation towards art, Glassie notes, involves the crowd surging “toward

⁸⁶ Walter J. Ong, “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction”, *An Ong Reader: Challenges for further inquiry*, ed. by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2002), p. 411.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 417.

⁸⁹ Ó Cruaíaoich, “Otherworld Harmonies and Heroic Utterance: The Fruits of the Literary Act Amongst Us”, p. 66.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

⁹¹ Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and history of An Ulster Community*, p. 77.

⁹² Ó Cruaíaoich, “Otherworld Harmonies and Heroic Utterance: The Fruits of the Literary Act Amongst Us”, p. 68.

unity".⁹³ It is not just in the text, or the performance, that literary quality resides. Rather, as Ó Cruaíaoich writes,

it is located, on the one hand, in the context of the audience and the readership who receive and register the result of the speech act and, on another, in the context of the excellence of performance, in rhetorical terms, of the speaking on the part of the writer or narrator.⁹⁴

As we will see in the coming chapters, the poets under consideration in this study have expressed both an awareness of this context Ó Cruaíaoich describes and a wish to recreate some of what Ciaran Carson has called the "urgency" of traditional music within, and for, their own work.

Context in Word and Music Studies and New Musicology

This context within which music or literature is performed and received is an area with which research in Word and Music Studies was reluctant to engage. Indeed, in Brown's seminal study music was "sound *qua* sound" with "no relationship to anything outside the musical composition".⁹⁵ However, such essentialist positions have been found lacking by many musicians, musicologists, and increasingly, by those working in Word and Music Studies itself. Edwin Fischer, for example, has emphasized the communicative role of music, describing the musician as "only the medium, only the mediator between the Divine, the Eternal, and Man".⁹⁶ Similarly, Carl Dahlhaus has referred to the "provocative claim made by extreme relativists that there are as many 'Eroica' Symphonies as there are listeners in our concert halls",⁹⁷ while John Cage suggests that "now structure is not put into a work, but comes up in the person who perceives it in himself. There is therefore no problem of understanding but the possibility of awareness".⁹⁸ Similarly classical

⁹³ Ibid., p. 81.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

⁹⁵ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*, p. 11. Indeed this was one of the differentiating features for Brown between music and literature, where literature for him described "an art employing *sounds to which external significance has been arbitrarily attached*" [Brown, *Music and Literature*, p. 11].

⁹⁶ Edwin Fischer, *Reflections on Music* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1951), p. 22.

⁹⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 152.

⁹⁸ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 2004), p. 259.

musician Michael Capps, while noting the reducing audiences for contemporary classical music, suggests that the

self-sufficient composer may even find that brewing handcrafted music for specific communities might just be the best place to re-engage the audience, by writing not for an abstract listener, but for a community to which one is connected, and with which one shares interests and concerns.⁹⁹

Indeed, criticisms that musicology itself was too narrowly focused, and needed to consider contextual issues including those surrounding audience and signification, were part of the inspiration for the development of the New Musicology movement.¹⁰⁰ As New Musicologist Susan McClary has noted, “musicology fastidiously declares issues of musical signification off-limits to those engaged in legitimate scholarship”.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, McClary argues that instead of

protecting music as a sublimely meaningless activity that has managed to escape social signification, I insist on treating it as a medium that participates in social formation by influencing the ways we perceive our feelings, our bodies, our desires, our very subjectivities - even if it does so surreptitiously, without most of us knowing how.¹⁰²

Equally for Rose Rosengard Subotnik “the notion of an intimate relationship between music and society functions not as a distant goal but as a starting point of great immediacy, and not as an hypothesis but as an assumption”.¹⁰³

A movement towards a new musicologist approach in reaction to older formalist or positivist methods is also apparent in scholarship in Word and

⁹⁹ Michael Capps, “Classical Music – Something Rich and Strange”, *Image* 42 (Spring/Summer 2004): 63.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this issue see Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. xv-xvii.

¹⁰¹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 4.

¹⁰² Susan McClary, “Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert’s Music”, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 211.

¹⁰³ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, “On grounding Chopin”, *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 105.

Music Studies over the past twenty years.¹⁰⁴ For new musicologists and, increasingly, those involved in Word and Music Studies, a comprehensive understanding of music is not possible without an appreciation of the relationship between music and society and a consideration of questions of production, reception, and interpretation.

Literary Theory

The movement from "the signifier to the interpretant"¹⁰⁵ apparent within New Musicology and Word and Music Studies is echoed in the growing prominence of reader-centred criticism in literary theory. Terry Eagleton has mapped the development of literary theory in three stages, moving from "a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years".¹⁰⁶ This final area Eagleton refers to could be, according to Peter J. Rabinowitz, "more broadly but more accurately be called, audience-orientated criticism".¹⁰⁷ Rabinowitz has noted the growing prominence of reader-centred criticism in literary theory such that

it is now hard to find serious literary theorists who do not, in one way or another, feel the need to account for the activities of the reader. From Wolfgang Iser (who sees literature as a set of directions for the reader to follow) to Roland Barthes (who, in his later years, saw the best texts as unlimited opportunities for orgasmic free play), from narratologists like Gerald Prince to subjectivists like David Bleich, a wide range of contemporary critics ground their arguments in the reader as a perceiving subject rather than in the text as an autonomous object.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ See Hayden White, "Form, reference, and ideology in musical discourse", *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 289-290.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Bernhart, "A Profile in Retrospect: Calvin S. Brown as a Musico-Literary Scholar", p. 122.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1983), p. 74.

¹⁰⁷ Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Whirl without End: Audience Orientated Criticism", *Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. by G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Whirl without End: Audience Orientated Criticism", p. 81.

This movement from text to reader has meant that text itself has come to reflect, in some respects, an indeterminacy associated with music. While Plato was uncertain as to “why [music] should exist at all”,¹⁰⁹ for Aristotle “it is not easy to define either what the effect of music is, or what our object should be in engaging in it”.¹¹⁰ This indeterminacy has been remarked upon as one of the major difficulties in writing about music. In the nineteenth century, Eduard Hanslick drew attention to this characteristic of music by noting that music “has no model in nature, it expresses no conceptual content [...] What is simply description in the other arts is already metaphor in music”.¹¹¹ Roland Barthes, similarly, describes music as “inactual”,¹¹² while for Marshall Brown it is “abstract”.¹¹³ Equally, while structure is overt in music and meaning often hard to distinguish, meaning in a literary work may appear more accessible while structure can be harder to define.¹¹⁴ However, as John Neubauer has noted, post-modern theories of literature have themselves found the

‘work in itself’ diffuse rather than organically coherent and meaningful. Their sensitivity to the ‘fuzziness’ of literary texts may actually move literature closer to music, for it attributes a kind of elusive semantic content to literature that has traditionally been considered typical of music [...] That artworks have a ‘weak identity’ is an idea that informs such widely differing conceptions as Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Wolfgang Iser’s ‘Leerstellen,’ Umberto Eco’s ‘open works of art,’ Roland Barthes’s ‘scriptable texts,’ and various formulations of ‘expression’ including Nelson Goodman’s definition of it as ‘metaphoric exemplification.’ All of these writers imply today’s critical commonplace that art works are

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Brace & World, 1958), p. 33.

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. by T.A. Sinclair (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 1339a, p. 462.

¹¹¹ E. Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig, 1854; rpt Darmstadt, 1981), p. 34. Quoted in Thomas Grey, “Metaphorical modes in nineteenth-century music criticism: image, narrative, and idea”, *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 93.

¹¹² Roland Barthes, “Le Chant Romantique”, *L’obvie et l’obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 253. Quoted in Marshall Brown, “Origins of modernism: musical structures and narrative forms”, *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 75.

¹¹³ Marshall Brown, “Origins of Modernism: Musical Structures and Narrative Forms”, p. 75.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

inexhaustibly interpretable, but they draw different consequences from it.¹¹⁵

While the development of print and particularly widespread literacy has seen reading replace performance as a primary mode of access to culture and information,¹¹⁶ literary theorists increasingly see the act of reading itself as a performative act, "an act" as John Neubauer has argued "by which the text is actually constituted, not unlike the performative constitution of music".¹¹⁷ Neubauer has also found similarities between the manner in which musical performers are now being given flexibility to interpret music with the growing freedom given in literary theory to readers to interpret text:

The enfranchisement of literary readers which parallels the 'emancipation' of performers in music, may be indicated by a shift in the musical metaphor applied to reading. If readers were formerly enjoined to 'listen' to the author's 'voice', they are now encouraged to 'perform' acts of reading.¹¹⁸

Umberto Eco, similarly, in his book *The Role of the Reader*, contends that "every 'reading', 'contemplation' or 'enjoyment' of a work of art represents a tacit or private form of 'performance'".¹¹⁹ Equally, for Wolfgang Iser,

literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves. Their aesthetic quality lies in this 'performing' structure, which clearly cannot be identical to the final product, because without the participation of the individual reader there can be no performance [...] fictional language has the basic properties of the illocutionary act. It relates to conventions which it carries with it, and it also entails procedures which, in the form of strategies, help to guide the reader to an understanding of the selective processes underlying the text. It

¹¹⁵ John Neubauer, "Music and Literature: the institutional dimensions", *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Though, as noted above, this is complicated today by the "secondary orality" of popular forms such as radio and television.

¹¹⁷ Neubauer, "Music and Literature: the institutional dimensions", p. 8.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p. 65.

has the quality of 'performance,' in that it makes the reader produce the code governing this selection as the actual meaning of the text.¹²⁰

This focus on the performative role of the reader is also apparent in the work of contemporary Irish poets, a focus particularly evident, as we will see in Chapter Three, in the work of Thomas Kinsella.

Ethnomusicology

The focus delineated above on audience is also important to another relatively new discipline, ethnomusicology, a discipline which informs the work of several recent commentators on traditional Irish music and song, including James R. Cowdery and Lillis Ó Laoire. It is a discipline that offers us a more nuanced approach to traditional music, particularly, as it has been focused, chiefly (though not exclusively) on societies primarily oral in nature. As George List has remarked, ethnomusicology is "to a great extent concerned with music transmitted by unwritten tradition".¹²¹

Helen Myers describes two major schools of ethnomusicology evolving in America in the 1950s, one comprised of those from a musical background led by Mantle Hood and the other encompassing scholars with an anthropological background led by Alan Merriam. Hood emphasised the importance of "bi-musicality", or being able to play instruments from a foreign culture, in order to study or communicate with that culture.¹²² As he wrote of those who wished to comprehend oriental music:

If his desire is to *comprehend* a particular Oriental musical expression so that his observations and analysis as a musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing, he will persist in practical studies until his basic musicianship is secure.¹²³

Merriam, however, defined ethnomusicology not in terms of subject matter but as "the study of music in culture"¹²⁴ and latterly stated that

¹²⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 26-27, 61.

¹²¹ George List, "Ethnomusicology in higher education", *Music Journal* 20.20 (1962): 24.

¹²² Mantle Hood, "The Challenge of Bi-Musicality", *Ethnomusicology* 4.2 (1960): 55-59.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 58. Emphasis in the original.

¹²⁴ A.P. Merriam, "Ethnomusicology-Discussion and Definition of the Field", *Ethnomusicology* 4.3 (1960): 109.

"music *is* culture and what musicians do *is* society".¹²⁵ Following Merriam's understanding, ethnomusicologists are interested not just in music *per se* but also the many concomitant activities related to music. "Thus" according to List,

we study the texts of the songs sung, the making and playing of musical instruments, the kinetic activities that occur simultaneously with the music. Of particular interest are the concepts held by the members of the culture concerning the music they produce.¹²⁶

John Blacking, in his seminal study *How Musical is Man*, concurred with this approach arguing that "in order to find out what music is and how musical man is, we need to ask who listens and who plays and sings in any given society, and why".¹²⁷ Blacking also stressed that one of the central beliefs in ethnomusicology is that no musical style has its own terms. Rather "its terms are the terms of its society and culture, and of the bodies of the human beings who listen to it, and create and perform it". "Ethnomusicology's claim", he continues:

to be a new method of analysing music and music history must rest on an assumption [...] that because music is humanly organised sound, there ought to be a relationship between the patterns of human organisation and the patterns of sound produced as a result of human interaction.¹²⁸

Henry Glassie found this relationship in Ballymenone where he describes the shape of Ballymenone's concept of sound

as a terraced sequence leading upward from silence to music and from separation to social accord. Silence, talk, chat, crack, story, poetry, song, music: with each step, entertainment increases, sound becomes more beautiful, and the intention of the creator of sound becomes more clearly to please the listener.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ A.P. Merriam, "Definitions of 'Comparative Musicology' and 'Ethnomusicology': an Historical-Theoretical Perspective", *Ethnomusicology* 21.2 (1977): 204. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁶ George List, "Ethnomusicology: A Discipline Defined", *Ethnomusicology* 23.1 (1979): 2.

¹²⁷ John Blacking, *How Musical is Man* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 32.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹²⁹ Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and history of An Ulster Community*, p. 37.

For Glassie entertainment included various pleasures in life from the gift of food to speech, song and music.¹³⁰ Lillis Ó Laoire argues that Glassie's idea of "entertainment" is very close to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of play.¹³¹ Gadamer examines play in terms of the "mode of being of the work of art itself"¹³² and describes it as

the to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end [...] rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement.¹³³

Similarly in traditional Irish music, and particularly in the related song tradition, audiences have historically played an important role.¹³⁴ Ciaran Carson has noted this in his book on Irish Traditional music, *Last Night's Fun*, when he describes listeners to a traditional session as "not an audience, for 'audience' implies a passive formality".¹³⁵ Equally, folklorist and singer Tom Munnely has emphasised the performative role of audience in a traditional performance:

normal audience reaction is part and parcel of the event, and applause and encouragement are customary audience responses. The members of the audience too are performers with circumscribed roles. In Irish tradition they are not meant to be passive.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 36, 37.

¹³¹ Ó Laoire, *Ar Chreag i lár na farraige: amhráin agus amhránaithe i dToraigh*, p. 52.

¹³² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 101.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 103.

¹³⁴ As noted in the introduction, with developments in traditional music particularly since the 1950s, and the increasing engagement of an international tourist market with this music, this role has changed significantly as traditional music has become a form of entertainment for many rather than part and parcel of their communal experience. However, as the comments of musicians above indicate, audiences still have an important role to play in traditional music.

¹³⁵ Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun*, p. 136.

¹³⁶ Tom Munnely, "Applause and effect: observations on the dynamics of Traditional song performance and social evolution in Ireland", *Northern Lights: Following Folklore in North-Western Europe, Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist*, ed. by Séamus Ó Catháin (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p. 200. George Zimmerman, quoting from folklorist Robert Georges, has also noted the importance of the audience to the traditional storyteller: "audience members expect, and are expected, to be stimulated by the behaviour of narrators and to

Henry Glassie describes the audience's ongoing role in encouraging performers in Ballymenone as "goodmanning" where members of the audience insert words ("Oh now", "Oh man", "Man dear", "That's a sight", "That's a terror", "Terror", "Oh aye", "I see", "I know", "Good man", "Go on")¹³⁷ between the stanzas of the performer to indicate their attentiveness.¹³⁸

John Blacking has also stressed the participative role that audiences play in performance, a role Blacking describes as "creative listening". For Blacking,

the creation and performance of most music is generated first and foremost by the human capacity to discover patterns of sounds and to identify them on subsequent occasions. Without biological processes of aural perception, and without cultural agreement among at least some human beings on what is perceived, there can be neither music nor musical communication [...] Creative listening is [...] as fundamental to music as it is to language.¹³⁹

"Creative listening" is most apparent in traditional singing where audiences actively participate in performances not just through encouraging the singer, but also on occasion in the tradition of *sean-nós* singing, holding the singer's hand as he performs, moving it up and down to the rhythm of the music. 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.¹⁴⁰

A further description of *sean-nós* singing by the poet John Montague, emphasising the important communal role of its performance, was considered earlier, while Thomas Kinsella's own encounter with *sean-nós*

respond in ways that in turn stimulate narrators" [Robert Georges, "Communication Role and Social Identity in Storytelling", *Fabula* 13 (1990): 55, quoted in George Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 466.

¹³⁷ Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, p. 111.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Blacking, *How Musical is Man*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴⁰ Derek Mahon, "Aran", *Selected Poems* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 31.

(described in his poem “The Shoals Returning”) and its relationship to this concept of “creative listening” will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Conclusion: Overt and Covert Intermediality

While the tripartite approach to the relationship between music and literature, apparent in the work of Calvin S. Brown and Stephen Paul Scher, offers an important starting point in any study such as this, its limited application and failure to engage with the cultural context in which music is composed and transmitted, requires a movement beyond this narrowly focused position to encompass other theoretical approaches. Particularly relevant to any consideration of traditional Irish music are studies in both ethnomusicology and orality. Each of these areas provides important insights into traditional music and song and also the work of contemporary Irish poets.

While theoretical approaches to music and literature increasingly emphasise the role of the audience or reader, the audience has always played a central role within the performance of traditional music and song. This movement from the signifier to the interpretant, apparent across various disciplines, has also meant that literature is increasingly seen to possess an indeterminacy more usually associated with music. Indeed, the act of reading itself has been described as a “performative act” much as music only truly exists in performance. This is particularly relevant for traditional Irish music (including the related song tradition) which, as essentially oral in character, requires a more nuanced approach to its study than that offered by either Brown or Scher.

This conclusion will consider a final theoretical framework for Word and Music Studies which may be flexible enough to consider the issues discussed above. Conscious of the limitations of previous schemas, Werner Wolf has offered “intermedia” as a more appropriate context for the discipline and suggests a reconceptualisation of Brown and Scher’s primarily tripartite division of Word and Music Studies. He proposes that the most fundamental forms in a general theory of intermediality are

- a) direct or “overt” intermediality,
- b) indirect or “covert” intermediality.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Werner Wolf, “Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality: Theoretical Aspects of Word and Music Studies”, *Word and Music Studies Defining the Field: Proceedings of the first International conference on Word and Music Studies at*

Wolf considered overt, or direct intermediality as coinciding with Scher's category of "music and literature" and defined it as:

a form in which at least in one instance more than one medium is present in an artifact, whereby each medium appears with its typical or conventional signifiers, remains distinct and in principle separately 'quotable' [...] the 'intermedial' quality of the artifact is immediately discernible on its surface (hence 'direct' or 'overt' intermediality), and it often, though not always, creates a specific 'artistic' genre.¹⁴²

Wolf offers as examples of such overt/direct intermediality the opera and the sound film. This category goes somewhat beyond Scher's in so far as Scher seemed to confine "music and literature" primarily to "vocal music" whereas Wolf's category also includes an area of increasing importance for contemporary Irish poets, the reading, or performance, of poetry with music.

"Indirect" or "covert" intermediality is defined by Wolf as:

the involvement of (at least) two conventionally distinct media in the signification of an artifact in which, however, only one (dominant) medium appears directly with its typical or conventional signifiers, the other one (the non-dominant medium) being only indirectly present 'within' the first medium as a signified (in some cases also as a referent).¹⁴³

Wolf refers to and develops several of the instances offered by Scher in the categories of "music in literature" and "literature in music" under this heading including "word music", "verbal music" and the imitation of musical structures in literature. He adds to these categories that of "thematization" which Wolf defines as "references to, or discussions of, music in literature".¹⁴⁴ For Wolf covert intermediality stretches from "thematization" at one pole to "imitation" or "dramatization" at the other where one form (such as literature) is informed by another (such as music) to the extent that elements or forms of literature adopt characteristics, or appear to embody those of music.¹⁴⁵ However, Wolf limits covert intermediality somewhat by insisting on the presence of the "secondary", "covert", medium "as a signified (in some cases also as a referent)" in the

Graz, 1997, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1999), p. 42.

¹⁴² Wolf, "Musicalized Fiction and Intermediality", pp. 42-43.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

“first medium”. Furthermore, possibly influenced by Brown’s more essentialist approach to both arts, Wolf does not reflect on the manner in which the context in which music is performed may influence a literary work and/or how poets choose to engage with an audience. Such issues could be considered, nonetheless, by redefining his suggested term, covert, or indirect intermediality, to offer a more comprehensive and useful concept through which to study the interrelationship between the two arts.

Traditional music has had important overt influences on contemporary poets, apparent in the performance of poets’ work accompanied by traditional music. It has also had significant covert influences. This includes poets’ choice of performance as a means of transmitting their poetry; their incorporation of elements from other poems into their work; the language they use in their poetry, that may not necessarily allude to music but is nonetheless influenced by the context in which traditional music is performed; and how these performance moments themselves have informed poets’ own understanding of the role of the reader in their work. In all of this, the issues of tradition and community are persistent concerns, concerns which have also informed the historical relationship between music and literature in Ireland explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

“*ONE ESSENTIAL FACT*”: A HISTORICAL REVIEW



Both *Barde* and Harper is prepared, which by their cunning art,
Doe strike and cheare up all the gestes with comfort at the hart.
—John Derricke, 1581.¹

There is one essential fact about Irish poetry which must never be forgotten if we are to appraise it justly: it is, with the possible exception of certain didactic compositions, composed for the ear, and at all periods of its history has been associated with music, the word-music of its characteristic form and the music of an accompanying instrument.²

There is considerable scholarship to suggest a close relationship historically between poetry and music both internationally and in Ireland. In the Irish context, the oldest records indicate that the performance of poetry in Gaelic Ireland was normally accompanied by music, providing a point of continuity with past tradition while bolstering a sense of community in the present. Music also offered, particularly for poets writing in English from the eighteenth century onwards, a perceived

¹ This woodcut and commentary by the sixteenth-century English engraver John Derricke is included in John Montague's 1972 volume *The Rough Field* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, [reprint 1989]), p. 55.

² Eleanor Knott, *Irish Classical Poetry* (Dublin: At the Sign of the Three Candles, 1960), p. 18.

authenticity, a connection with an older tradition untarnished by linguistic and cultural division. As poets reflected on the role of their predecessors in Gaelic society, they encountered the *file*, an individual central to the functioning of that society. While recording events to an engaged and appreciative contemporary community, the *file* functioned as the historical memory of his³ people. He provided continuity with the community's past, while bringing the community together in the present, functions in which music played an important role.

The breakdown of community and its replacement with an "audience" is a major factor in the concern of poets, particularly those writing in English, with Irish music from the late eighteenth century onwards. Music seemed to offer a link back to the mores of an older and what was perceived to have been, a more engaged community, while offering the hope that such possibilities of engagement might emerge again in the present. This chapter will consider the development of this relationship between music and poetry and its continuing relevance to poets in the twentieth century.

Historical Relationship Internationally

Albert Wellek has suggested that the relationship between poetry and music is as old as the history of music as "music was originally vocal music and grew out of it. This means that, historically, there was no music without speech and not even formal and ritual speech without music at the beginning".⁴ Wellek's assertion is based more on speculation than hard evidence as there is little surviving data to substantiate the relationship of poetry and music in ancient pre-literate societies. However, his position has been supported by C. M. Bowra's comments on the songs of the pre-literate Yamana Indians in Argentina. These songs are composed of ordinary sequences of apparently senseless syllables, without meaning in either the language of the Yamana tribe or any other. For Bowra, such "senseless sounds" constitute "the most primitive kind of song. They anticipate later developments by making the human voice conform to a tune in a regular way, but the first step to poetry came when their place was taken by real words".⁵ Consequently, Bowra argues that poetry is "in

³ While there were female *filidh*, as is discussed at more length in Chapter Four, surviving records would suggest that poets were generally male in Gaelic Ireland.

⁴ Albert Wellek, "The Relationship between Music and Poetry", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21.2 (1962): 150.

⁵ James Anderson Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: History of the Relations between Poetry and Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 1.

its beginnings intimately welded with music", that "song rises from rhythmical action"⁶, and "dancing and wordless melody precede the rhythmic patterning of intelligible words".⁷ Bowra argues that the steps in the evolution of songs can be summarised in five stages, "the meaningless line, the repeated intelligible line, the single stanza, the accumulation of stanzas into larger songs, and the accumulation of such songs into cycles".⁸

In societies where records survive due to the arrival of literacy, such as that of ancient Greece, it is clear that there was a close association between poetry and music. The older Greek word for poet (*aoidos*) describes him as a singer and the word *mousike* applied equally to "dance, melody, poetry, and elementary education".⁹ The few fragments of Greek musical notation that have survived attest to the common ancient source of both arts,¹⁰ while John Hollander observes that it was not until "the adaptation of Greek meters to Latin that poetry, originally inseparable from music, began to grow away from it. And it was then that poetry began to develop, in its meter, a seeming music of its own".¹¹

Music and Poetry in Early Ireland

While Seán O'Boyle argues that as "far back as our national records go, music and poetry have always been associated",¹² there are few accounts of music or its relationship to poetry in early Ireland. The earliest indirect accounts of music are given by the secular and monastic scholars following the arrival of Christianity and Latin literacy in the fifth century.¹³ Music played an important role in the new religious institutions that emerged, a role often associated with poetry. As Marie McCarthy has noted,

From early medieval manuscripts, it is evident that a principal function of music in society lay in its religious context. In the Christian monasteries,

⁶ C.M. Bowra, *Primitive Song* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962). Quoted in Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence*, p. 1.

⁷ Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence*, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 11.

¹² Seán O'Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition* (Dublin: Gilbert Dalton, 1976), p. 19.

¹³ Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 15.

which flourished in the fifth to the eighth centuries, psalmody figured in all the monastic rules with poetry and music developing simultaneously.¹⁴

It is in the Brehon laws that the first accounts of music are given in Gaelic. One of the most important documents regarding music is the *Crith Gabhlach* which includes an account of social status within this society and is believed to date in its written form from around the eighth century. This document indicates the high ranking accorded, above all other musicians, to the *cruitire* [harper] in the Gaelic culture of this time.¹⁵

Surviving records suggest that poetry in early Ireland was usually performed to the accompaniment of harp music.¹⁶ In his study of early Irish and Welsh poetry, James Travis finds that “metrical tracts, ancient laws, common musico-poetic terminology and certain characteristics common to Celtic music and early Celtic verse” indicate that “Celtic music was performed coincidentally with Celtic poetry”.¹⁷ While Seán O’Boyle suggests that the cooperation of musician and poet necessitated that “such music as was played by Irish harpers must have been determined as to measure by the length of the poet’s lines”,¹⁸ Travis contends that music also had a significant influence on the verse foot in early Celtic poetry:

so far as the rhythm is concerned, the end result of the influence of Celtic song on its attendant lyrics would be the emergence of a *verse foot* that recognised no distinction of trochee or iamb, dactyl or anapaest, but rather only a stress complex of strong and weak, or weak or strong [...] the strong stress may precede or follow the weak; and the foot may contain more than one strong and more than one weak stress.¹⁹

From the limited surviving evidence, it seems likely that music had a significant influence on the poetry that emerged in early Ireland, an influence that persisted into the early modern period.

¹⁴ Marie McCarthy, *Passing it On* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 31.

¹⁵ Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 15.

¹⁶ O’Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition*, p. 19.

¹⁷ James Travis, *Early Celtic Versecraft* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1973), p. 15.

¹⁸ O’Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Travis, *Early Celtic Versecraft*, pp. 18-19.

Early Modern Ireland

When we turn to the era referred to by Irish-language scholars as the early modern period (1200-1600), we find the continuing performance of poetry with music. As Ó hAllmhuráin observes,

Harp music was a vital corollary to the delivery of verse at the Gaelic court. As with all official verse, the eulogies of the *file* (poet) were sung by a *reacaire* (reciter) who was accompanied by harp music performed by the court *cruitire* (harper).²⁰

The *file* held a central position in this society, one that went beyond the composition of poetry or mere entertainment: he offered an important link for his community to the past. As Joep Leerssen has noted,

The poet did not aim at providing entertainment, but rather at applying his lore and his craftsmanship with language to a celebration of the events of his day, thereby establishing a link between the past and the present. The poet was the cultural guardian of the Gaelic heritage, whose task it was to guarantee historical continuity, to legitimise the present in terms of past history. It is significant that the skills of the poet, the historian and the judge to some extent overlapped: the highest degree for all three callings was that of *ollamh*, 'scholar, professor', and the poet would as often call himself *saoi*, 'sage', as *file*, 'poet'; other terms were *fear dána* or *éigeas*, both meaning 'a man of learning'.²¹

Even after the Norman invasion of the twelfth century, Irish music and poetry continued to flourish throughout the early modern period under the patronage of both native Irish and Norman Chieftains. Some of the major poets of this period, including Gearóid Iarla Fitzgerald (1335-1398), Third Earl of Desmond, were themselves of Norman stock. The arrival of the Normans also contributed further to the association of music and poetry as they brought the influence of the Troubadour and Trouvère traditions which had emerged in France in the eleventh century. These travelling singers dealt primarily with themes of courtly love and Seán Ó Tuama has suggested that

[m]any of the models on which [Gaelic] folk poetry [finally written down from the end of the eighteenth century onwards] was based – in particular

²⁰ Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 26.

²¹ Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork: Cork University Press in Association with Field Day, 1996), p. 153.

the love poetry – are clearly those that were common in Western European society from about 1100 to 1400. It is likely that some of these models came to Ireland in the wake of the Norman invasion in the late twelfth century, with the introduction of French literature and song.²²

Those *filidh*, or court poets, who emerged from 1200 onwards were trained in bardic schools which continued in Ireland down to the mid-seventeenth century.²³ The *file*, on appointment to his position, was given the right to bear his wand of office which was known as the golden musical branch.²⁴ This reflected the importance of music both to their education and profession, which is intimated by Joseph Cooper Walker's late eighteenth-century account of training in a bardic school:

Here they were taught the powers of verse and song by being initiated in the mysteries of metrical cadence, vocal harmony, and graceful action. These branches of knowledge were deemed indispensably necessary to young princes, to candidates for magistracy, and to the Ollavain.²⁵

Ríonach Uí Ógáin has also noted the close association between the two arts in bardic schools where there was “an essential overlap between poetry and song, and a close association between magic, chanting, rhythm and song”.²⁶

One of the best records of the bardic schools and profession is that given in the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* where we find a description of bardic training and performances in the early seventeenth century. As Osborn Bergin notes, the bardic tradition was so conservative it could well hold for many centuries before.²⁷ In one passage, the *Memoirs* record the performance of bardic poetry:

²² Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, “Introduction”, *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1981), p. xxxi.

²³ Osborn Bergin, “Bardic Poetry”, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, ed. by David Greene and Fergus Kelly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984), p. 3.

²⁴ Kathleen Hoagland, *1000 Years of Irish Poetry* (Old Greenwich, Connecticut: The Devin-Adair Co., 1975), p. xxxi.

²⁵ Joseph Cooper Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Bards* (Dublin: Luke White Publishing Co., 1786), p. 26. Quoted in McCarthy, *Passing it On*, p. 31.

²⁶ Ríonach Uí Ógáin, “Traditional Music and Irish Cultural History”, *Irish Musical Studies: Music and Irish Cultural History*, ed. by Gerard Gillen and Harvey White (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), p. 91.

²⁷ Bergin, “Bardic Poetry”, p. 5.

The last part to be done, which was the Action and Pronunciation of the Poem in Presence of the Maecenas, or the principle Person it related to, was perform'd with a great deal of Ceremony in a consort of Vocal and Instrumental Musick. The Poet himself said nothing, but directed and took care that everybody else did his Part right. The Bards²⁸ having first had the Composition from him, got it well by Heart, and now pronounc'd it orderly, keeping even Pace with a Harp, touch'd upon that Occasion; no other musical Instrument being allowed for the said Purpose than this alone, as being Masculin, much sweeter and fuller than any other.²⁹

The twelfth-century Welsh Ecclesiast, Giraldus Cambrensis, has given us one of the first and most striking descriptions of Irish harp music in his *Topographia Hibernica*, which, as indicated in the next chapter on Thomas Kinsella, has reappeared in contemporary poetry. While he found little to praise about the Gaelic society he encountered, Cambrensis described the Irish *cruitire* (harper) as

incomparably more skilful than any other nation I have ever seen. For their manner of playing on these instruments, unlike that of the Britons to which I am accustomed, is not slow and harsh, but lively and rapid, while the melody is both sweet and pleasing. It is astonishing that in such a complex and rapid movement of the fingers the musical proportions can be preserved, and that throughout the difficult modulations on their various instruments the harmony, notwithstanding shakes and slurs, and variously intertwined organising, is completely observed. They delight with so much delicacy, and soothe so softly, that the excellence of their art seems to lie in concealing it.³⁰

²⁸ Bergin notes that this is used here in the sense of a "reciter", "for which the technical term was 'reacaire'" [Bergin, "Bardic Poetry", ff. 1, p. 8]. Bergin also asserts that "[t]he title 'bard' is rare in Irish. In early times the 'bard' was a lower rank than the 'file' [...] The supposed 'rise of the bard' is explained by the fact that the word 'bard' came to be used in English, not in Irish, to denote an official Gaelic poet". Furthermore, by the seventeenth century, "both terms [*file* or *bard*] had come to be used more or less indiscriminately [...] though at an earlier period there was a technical distinction of rank between them" [Bergin, "Bardic Poetry", pp. 4-5].

²⁹ Quoted in Bergin, "Bardic Poetry", p. 8. Brian Devine has found an echo of such "management by Gaelic poets of a poem's recital" in William Butler Yeats's "proprietary interest in the speaking, or performance, of poetry", discussed below [Brian Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound* (Gerards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 2006), p. 88].

³⁰ Cambrensis as quoted in W.H. Grattan Flood, *A History of Irish Music* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1913), p. 61.

There are several poems surviving from the late middle Irish period praising the harp, and harpists, including the poem “To a Harp” by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh. These “harp poems” indicate respect for the instrument and its powerful ability to entrance the listener. An anonymous poem, dedicated to the blind harper Nioclás Dall, dating from the early seventeenth century, describes music as “the foundation of the knowledge of art” and offers the following description of the effect of harp playing, while also alluding to its use in accompanying the recitation of poetry:

Cumadóir na gcleas ndoilbhthe,
gaduidhe na geamhoidhche,
musgladh brón baoithchridhe ban,
glór nach saoilfidhe a síothbhruigh.

Adhbhar caomhnaidhe cumhadh,
Sás meanman do mhórughadh,
Siansa ón girre laoi leabhra,
Nach binne caoi Céideamhna.

Colloid ré caoine a sheanma
Na beathadhaigh bhrúideamhla,
Ag éisdeacht mharbhchor a mhér mbras,
Do anfadh én re a amas.³¹

[Framer of mystic feats, thief of the winter night, a stirring of sorrows in the wayward hearts of women, a voice one would not think to hear in fairyland.

Cause of the cherishing of grief, expert in exalting courage, melody that shortens long days, sweet as the cuckoo in May.

The brute beasts sleep at the beauty of his playing: harkening to the dying strains from his quick fingers, the bird would wait to be struck.]³²

The description of the harp here, and its effects on the listener, suggest that the performance of this music in conjunction with poetry was an important part of the transmission process, influencing how the community interacted with the work of the *file*. This is apparent in the following sixteenth-century description of the performance of poetry from Thomas Smyth’s *Information for Ireland* (1561):

³¹ Bergin, “Bardic Poetry”, p. 197.

³² Ibid., p. 305.

Now comes the Rymer [*file*] that made the Ryme, with his Rakry [*reacaire*]. The Rakry is he that shall utter the ryme: and the Rymer himself sits by with the captain varie proudlye. He brings with him also his harper, who please all the while that the rakry sings the ryme.³³

The poems themselves were “thoroughly social”, that is they were “composed for social purposes”, and their content was concerned with issues relevant to the society in which they were proclaimed.³⁴ Above all, it was poetry composed to be heard, rather than read, “poetry for the ear not for the eye”.³⁵

Ireland: 1600-1800

With the undermining of the Gaelic order following the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 the structures that had previously supported poetic and musical production went into decline.³⁶ Equally, as the power of musicians and poets had been feared by the British establishment throughout the sixteenth century, efforts were made to limit their influence. 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.³⁷ Possibly influenced by the statutes’ failure to prevent such interaction, in 1533 a further British statute prohibited the performance of “the rhymer, the *piobaire* (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”.³⁸ By 1603, the Lord President of Munster issued a proclamation calling for the execution of “all manner of bards, harpers, etc.”³⁹ due to their perceived role in the Nine Years War. This proclamation was followed shortly after by an order by Queen Elizabeth “to hang the harpers wherever found”.⁴⁰

³³ Quoted in J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, trans. by Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff :University of Wales Press; Belmont, MA: Ford and Bailie, 1992), pp. 163-164.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁶ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, p. xxi.

³⁷ McCarthy, *Passing it on*, p. 33.

³⁸ Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, pp. 29-30.

³⁹ O’Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Conditions did not improve significantly under Oliver Cromwell by which time, in 1654, all musicians (including harpists and pipers) had to obtain a detailed passport from their local magistrate outlining their personal details, including hair colour and personal circumstances, while all musical instruments considered to be “popish” were destroyed.⁴¹

The reactions of the colonial administration towards Irish music, both before and after the decline of the Gaelic order, suggest a subversive element was presumed to exist within the music. Musicians offered a distinctive form of identity (as articulated above by Cambrensis) separate from the colonial that bespoke a continuity with a pre-colonial society while facilitating a significant Gaelic community in the present. Each of these issues disrupted the colonial agenda and served to undermine its legitimacy. The suppression of Irish music, however, as discussed below, contributed to its politicisation within Ireland in the following century in a manner not clearly articulated within the indigenous Irish culture previously, and provided a point of resistance to the colonial enterprise. For poets, a new feature apparent in their work was “the emphasis on the political and cultural significance of one’s choice of language”⁴² so that, as Leerssen notes, “[t]he Irish language can thus in itself be used to express an Irish identity”.⁴³ Leerssen lists a considerable number of seventeenth-century poems that celebrate the uniqueness and importance of the language including the following by Séathrún Céitinn [Geoffrey Keating]:

Milis an teanga an Ghaedhealg,
Guth gan chabhair choigcríche,
Glór géar-chaoín glé glinn gasta,
Suaire séimhidhe sult-blasta.

[So sweet a language is Irish, a voice untainted by foreign aid, a speech brightly pealing, clear, pure and sprightly, pleasant, mild and sensuous in the mouth.]⁴⁴

“In all of these endeavours”, Leerssen continues, “the main value of the language is seen to lie in the fact that it represents a link to a golden past; thus the poet’s concern for his language echoes the older bardic concern for the continuity of history, for the historical continuity of culture”.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 204.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 205. Translation by Leerssen.

⁴⁵ Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 208.

However, in seventeenth-century Ireland, those who were formerly exalted *file* were now often reduced to *sráid-éigse* or "street poetry".⁴⁶ As 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".⁴⁷ The result was to bring musician and poet together in the one performer⁴⁸ whose compositions particularly by the eighteenth century, gradually became "less distinguishable from the oral folk-tradition of anonymous poetry and song".⁴⁹

While the themes of poetry changed in this period to reflect the decline of the bardic order, so too did the metre, from the primarily syllabic metres of the bardic poets, to accentual metres characterised by a regular number of stresses per line, rather than a fixed number of syllables. These accentual metres were composed primarily of triple rhythms. Virginia Blankenhorn suggests that this may be because "lines of any length can be composed in triple rhythms, whereas the use of duple rhythms seems to be more limited".⁵⁰ She lists five forms of this triple pattern in Gaelic verse, in which (a) and (b) below predominate:

(a) | ♪ ♪ ♪ |

(b) | ♪ ♪ |

(c) | ♪ ♪ |

(d) | ♪ . |

(e) | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ |

Included below is an example of the song, "Cé sin ar mo thuama?", which follows primarily the more popular (a) pattern Blankenhorn delineates:

⁴⁶ Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 172.

⁴⁷ O'Boyle, *The Irish Song Tradition*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), p. 497.

⁴⁹ Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 202.

⁵⁰ V.S. Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 75.

Tá/clog ar mo/chroí 'stigh, 'tá /líonta le /grá dhuit,
 /lionndubh taobh /thíos de chomh /ciardhubh le /hairné;
 'Má /bhaineann aon /ní dhíot 's go /gcloífeadh an /bás tú,
 /beads' im shí /gaoithe romhat /thíos at na /bánta.⁵¹

[There's a sore on this heart, that is full of your love,
 And a dark mood beneath it jet-black as the sloe,
 'But if anything threatens and death overcomes you
 A wind-gust I'll be on the fields out before you.'

(Trans. Thomas Kinsella)^{52]}

Another example of a poem composed in this triple rhythm is one of the best known *sean-nós* songs still sung today, “Dónall Óg”, a song that has reappeared in contemporary Irish poetry in the work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

/Tá mo /ghrá-sa ar /dhath na /sméara
 is ar /dhath na /n-airní /lá breá /gréine,
 ar /dhath na /bhfraochóg ba /dhuibhe an /tsléibhe,
 's is /minic a bhí /ceann dubh ar /cholainn /ghléigeal.⁵³

[My love is the colour of blackberries
 And the colour of sloes on a sunny day,
 The colour of the blackest mountain heather,
 And there's often a dark head on the whitest body.]

The first two lines are made up almost entirely of disyllabic feet, which conform primarily to the pattern (b) above, with the exception of the penultimate foot of the second line, *lá breá*, where the word *breá* is distressed for metrical and linguistic reasons. The following two lines, however, use a mixture of (a), (b) and (c) patterning.⁵⁴

Much of this poetry composed from the seventeenth century onwards was known as *amhrán* [song] and characterised by *amhrán* metres. As Virginia Blankenhorn has noted,

⁵¹ Quoted in Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600*, p. 76. Pádraig de Brún, Breandán Ó Buachalla agus Tomás Ó Concheanainn, *Nua-Dhuanairé, Cuid 1* (Baile Átha Cliath: Institiúid Ardléinn, 1971), p. 79.

⁵² Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanairé*, p. 313.

⁵³ Quoted in Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600*, p. 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

Not for nothing have most of the accentual metres of Irish verse been collectively referred to down the centuries as *amhrán* ('song'): most of the poetry [...] owed its survival in at least some measure to its musical context.⁵⁵

These songs were an important part of the daily lives of people in Gaelic Ireland, providing continuity with the past while affirming community in the present. "[T]here was scarcely a form of human activity, literally from the cradle to the grave", Breandán Ó Madagáin observes, "into which song did not enter [...] [it] had a role in the moulding and perpetuation of the culture, and enhanced the sense of belonging of both singer and audience".⁵⁶

Gaelic Ireland also included a sophisticated form of lament poetry or song, the *caoineadh* (also referred to as *caoine*), to remember and record the passing of loved ones. Ó Madagáin has emphasised that the *caoineadh*, similarly, was a communal event which played an important role in the ordering of the mourning "turning what might have been a private expression of grief into a dramatic communal performance".⁵⁷ Music was a central part of this process. Indeed, for Ó Madagáin it is impossible to appreciate the social significance of the *caoineadh* without considering its music. He has criticised Peter Levi's lecture on one of the finest *caoineadh* of the eighteenth century (and one of the few to survive into the modern era), Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill's "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" ["Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire"], for considering this work just as poetry and thereby failing

completely to give an understanding of this 'communicative event' in which the music [...] was equally important as the verse. Not only that but it is clear from international comparisons that it was the music that was the most basic and forceful part of the *caoine* from the beginning.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 346.

⁵⁶ Breandán Ó Madagáin, "Functions of Irish song in the Nineteenth Century", *Béalóideas* 53 (1985): pp. 131, 172.

⁵⁷ Breandán Ó Madagáin, "Irish Vocal Music of Lament and Syllabic Verse", *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. by Robert O'Driscoll (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1982), p. 315.

⁵⁸ Breandán Ó Madagáin, "Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900", *Saol na hÉigse: Aistí in Omós do Sheán Ó Tuama*, ed. by Pádraigín Riggs, Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Ita, 2000), p. 93.

There is considerable evidence of a close connection between poetry and music in Gaelic-speaking Ireland during the eighteenth century. Ó Madagáin argues that they both were considered as one unit by poet, singer and audience in this period.⁵⁹ In fact, as Blankenhorn notes, “in the vast majority of [Gaelic verse] one may expect poetic structure and musical structure to coincide with one another, at least insofar as stanzaic length is concerned”,⁶⁰ suggesting that the poems were composed with an awareness of the music that might accompany them.

This century also witnessed, inspired by the Jacobite insurrections in Scotland of 1715 and 1745, the emergence of an indigenous politically engaged poetry as poets such as Aogán Ó Rathaille, Piaras Mac Gearailt, Seán Ó Tuama, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill and Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin produced work confident of the return of the Stuart Kings to power and the revival of the Gaelic aristocracy. The articulation of the work of these poets primarily through song further promoted the association of Irish music with a distinctive subversive politicised community in opposition to the colonial establishment. One of the most popular genres to evolve in this period was the *aisling*. These vision poems featured the poet, on falling asleep, imagining he is visited by a beautiful woman who reveals herself as Ireland and laments her oppression. There are antecedents in both European,⁶¹ and earlier Irish literature, of the *aisling* form but it developed an important political significance in this period.⁶² As George Petrie noted, “the *aisling* poems used the ‘guise of a love-song put on to conceal treason’”.⁶³

The *aisling* was to have a significant impact on communities which persisted well beyond the time when the return of the Stuarts was still possible. Commenting on the persistence of Eoghan Rua’s *aisling*, Ó Madagáin has contended that the songs were still sung widely in the nineteenth century when the Stuarts were but a distant memory.⁶⁴ Ó

⁵⁹ Ó Madagáin, “Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900”, p. 83.

⁶⁰ Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600*, p. 372.

⁶¹ Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 237. Leerson refers particularly to the French *reverdie* or *pastourelle* which also came to Ireland following the Norman invasion.

⁶² For a fuller discussion of the *aisling* see Gerard Murphy, “Notes on Aisling Poetry”, *Éigse* 1 (1939-40): 40-50. Murphy notes that one genre of *aisling*, the “love” or “fairy” *aisling*, dates back to at least the eighth century. Also Seán Ó Tuama, *An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine* (Baile Átha Cliath: Clóchomhar, 1960) and Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling ghéar: Na Stíobhartaigh agus an t-aos léinn* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1996).

⁶³ George Petrie, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1855), p. 37.

⁶⁴ Ó Madagáin, “Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900”, p. 89.

Madagáin has attributed a similar import to the songs of Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill⁶⁵ and the poems of Aogán Ó Rathaille, while suggesting that Ó Rathaille's work must also have been sung as it would have been extraordinary if he was an exception to the tradition that preceded and followed from him.⁶⁶ The eighteenth-century Ulster poet Art Mac Cumhaigh, some of whose finest poems were *aislingí*, composed poems which were also, according to Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, "undoubtedly written to be sung".⁶⁷ The importance of the community to these poets has also been noted by Leerssen who contends that

The poetical tradition following Ó Rathaille does indeed become far more community-orientated: the poets seem to have accepted their reduced status (as small farmers, peddlers, innkeepers or schoolmasters) among the common Gaelic populace, and function as the spokesmen of their peers.⁶⁸

While this "poetical tradition" may have become more community orientated, the nineteenth century was a period of increasing decline for the Irish language and Gaelic culture. This decline alerted the major English-language writers to emerge in this century to the discontinuity of Irish culture itself.

The Emergence of Irish Poetry in English

Robert Welch recognises "something broken, hesitant and uncertain"⁶⁹ in the work of nineteenth-century writers such as Thomas Moore, Jeremiah Callanan, Samuel Ferguson, William Carleton, Thomas Davis, Gerald Griffin and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. One of the major reasons for this uncertainty was the linguistic change which Ireland was undergoing, a change which would see a dramatic shift in an extraordinarily short time from Gaelic to English for most of the population. As Welch remarks "[a] culture becomes a community through the system of signs, codes, transmissions that it organises to give meaning and coherence to its life

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

⁶⁷ Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, *A Hidden Ulster: People, songs and traditions of Oriel* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 350.

⁶⁸ Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 240.

⁶⁹ Robert Welch, "Constitution, Language and Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Irish Poetry", *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 7.

experience”.⁷⁰ These signs and codes include not just the language, but also the music, song and dance, and the rituals that accompany their performance. Furthermore, such a sense of community is strengthened by the “transmissions” or continuity between one generation and the next. With the decline of the national language, and the culture that accompanied it, as the leader of the Young Ireland movement, Thomas Davis, noted, this continuity became increasingly problematic:

To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation - 'tis to tear their identity from all places - 'tis to substitute arbitrary signs for picturesque and suggestive names - 'tis to cut off the entail of feeling, and separate the people from their forefathers by a deep gulf - 'tis to corrupt their very organs, and abridge their power of expression.⁷¹

Davis's use of the phrase “such a people” suggests his own sense of separateness, as middle-class, English-speaking, and Protestant, from the majority of Irish people. With the shift from Gaelic to English, and the alienation of Irish people not just from their ancestral language but from each other (divided between Gaelic and English-speakers as well as Protestants and Catholics), a coherent and unified Irish linguistic or cultural community seemed impossible. The anxiety regarding this development in the work of Irish writers in the nineteenth century betrays their own sense that this community might already be irreparably ruptured and their desire to cultivate an audience in its place. In Gaelic society, Irish poets were perceived as relating with a physically immediate community, responsive to the poet's work. Now poets imagined, and sought, a national audience. Indeed, Davis noted the lack of a “national” voice in the surviving Gaelic songs, songs that reflected the more local focus of the artist, a focus Davis objects to as “clannish”:

There is one want, however, in *all* the Irish songs - it is of strictly national lyrics. They are national in form and colour, but clannish in opinion. In fact, from Brian's death, there was no thought of an Irish nation, save when some great event, like Aodh O'Neill's march to Munster, or Owen Roe's victory at Beinnburb, flashed and vanished. These songs celebrate McCarthy or O'More, O'Connor or O'Neill - *his* prowess, *his* following,

⁷⁰ Welch, “Constitution, Language and Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Irish Poetry”, p. 8.

⁷¹ Thomas Davis, “Our National Language” (1840), 2001-2004, *From Ireland*, <http://www.from-ireland.net/history/nationallanguage.htm>, (accessed May 15, 2005).

his hospitality; but they cry down his Irish or 'more than Irish' neighbour as fiercely as they do the foreign oppressor.⁷²

The work of the Young Ireland poets anticipates the tension between an intended "audience" and "community" that would become increasingly apparent as the nineteenth century developed. In this context, political solidarity replaced a cultural community as writers attempted to articulate a distinct Irish literature and identity. As considered below, faced with this challenge, poets frequently turned to Irish music to complement their work. Irish music seemed to offer an authenticity and continuity that allowed a connection to a perceived ancient indigenous tradition while also building a contemporary audience for their political ideals through song. However, this authenticity depended largely on a selective remembering of Irish music.

Charlotte Brooke and Edward Bunting

While the Gaelic language and culture were in considerable decline in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this period was nonetheless important for the rejuvenation of Irish nationalism, Irish music and the emergence of a distinctive Irish poetry in English. While the Society of the United Irishmen under Wolfe Tone helped define Irish Republicanism and inspire the 1798 Rising,⁷³ the efforts of antiquarians assisted in the preservation of some of the native literature and music while eventually inspiring a coming together of Irish poetry in English and traditional airs in the work of Thomas Moore. In 1789, the first translations of Gaelic poetry and songs, *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, were published by Charlotte Brooke.⁷⁴ While Brooke inserted herself "into the discourse of those attempting to imagine the Irish community through its music and literature",⁷⁵ she was also the "first mediator of importance between the Irish-Gaelic and the Anglo-Irish literary traditions".⁷⁶ As

⁷² Thomas Davis, "The Songs of Ireland", *Selections from his Prose and Poetry* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1914), p. 226.

⁷³ The slogan of the United Irishmen, "It Is New Strung and Shall Be Heard", referring to the harp that was the organisation's emblem, indicates the symbolic importance of Irish music to their project.

⁷⁴ Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 77.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Leerson, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, p. 363. Quoted in Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 77.

Leith Davis has noted, the Irish harpist, in the person of harper and poet Turlough O'Carolan, played a crucial role in this project. "Brooke employs the figure of Carolan", Davis observes, "to suggest continuity between the ancient chivalric heroes and the present-day Irish".⁷⁷

A number of harp festivals towards the end of the 18th century, including three in Granard, Co. Longford, in 1781, 1782 and 1785 and, most famously, the Belfast Harper's Festival of July 1792, brought together some of few remaining Irish harpists, still playing the traditional wire-strung instrument, in an attempt to preserve the ancient music they performed.⁷⁸ These itinerant harpists comprised the last remnants of the old bardic order and were supported by the few Gaelic Lords who had managed to preserve some property and, occasionally, by members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. They represented the fusion of poet and musician, and were believed by the cultural nationalists of the time to offer an authentic insight into an ancient and unique Irish identity, as evident in the remarks of Edward Bunting, who compiled the airs of these harpers in his *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music* in 1796.⁷⁹

The festival and Bunting's efforts reflected the romantic nationalist movement of the time and its attempt to "recover from the past a state of

⁷⁷ Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 83. Davis also notes the manner in which O'Carolan was repackaged as a "Celtic bard" towards the close of the eighteenth century and the importance of the bardic motif in binding the nation together (pp. 47-48). Quoting from Katie Trumpener's work on *Bardic Nationalism*, she notes how "Irish and Scottish antiquarians reconceive national history and literary history under the sign of the bard" in the eighteenth century, suggesting in their accounts that "bardic performance binds the nation together across time and across social divides; it reanimates a national landscape made desolate first by conquest and then by modernization, infusing it with historical memory" [Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. xii. Quoted in Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 48].

⁷⁸ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73. Indeed, the advertisement for the competition that would bring the harpers together, posted by Doctor James McDonnell prior to the event in many Irish newspapers, emphasises the perceived close relationship not just between Irish poetry and music but also between both these forms and national identity: "When it is considered how intimately the *spirit* and *character* of a *people* are connected with their *national poetry* and *music*, it is presumed that the Irish patriot and politician will not deem [*sic*] it an object unworthy of his patronage and protection" [Quoted in Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 95].

cultural 'purity' uncontaminated by foreign influences".⁸⁰ As Bunting himself wrote of the tunes in the collection,

[They] bear the impress of better days, when the native nobles of the country cultivated music as part of education; and amid the wreck of our national history are, perhaps, the most faithful evidences we have still remaining of the mental cultivation and refinement of our ancestors.⁸¹

The airs published in Bunting's collections were believed to offer a distinctive and authentic Irishness and to express "ancient and essentially Irish qualities".⁸² For Bunting, the tunes were "unapproachably unique, so unlike any other music of the nations around us" and preserved in "a perfect state from the earliest times".⁸³

However, it was a selective process with which Bunting was involved. He collected what was in effect an Irish art music that had evolved in the aristocratic households of Gaelic Ireland before its collapse in the early seventeenth century. The popular dance music of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries – the jigs played on pipes and fiddles throughout the country – was not collected. In addition, as Helen O'Shea notes, Bunting "had 'improved' some of the melodies from modal to diatonic scales, a change that was amplified when he added harmonic accompaniments for

⁸⁰ Mary Trachsel, "Oral and Literate Constructs of 'Authentic' Irish Music", *Éire-Ireland* 23 (Fall 1995): 32.

⁸¹ Edward Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music*, reprint edn (Dublin: Waltons, 1969), p. 8.

⁸² Helen O'Shea, "Foreign Bodies in the River of Sound: Seeking Identity and Irish Traditional Music" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Technology, 2005), p. 45.

⁸³ Bunting, *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music*, reprint edn, pp. 8, 2. Leith Davis has noted similar sentiments in the earliest historical survey of Irish music, Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786), where Walker presents Irish music "as pure, untainted by influences that occur in a more 'refined' state of society" while providing "a means of establishing a subconscious bond between the members of [the] nation" [Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 57]. Bunting would further emphasize the antiquity and excellence of Irish music, as well as its centrality in formulations of the Irish nation, in the 1840 edition of *The Ancient Music of Ireland* in which he argues that "[w]hatever differences of opinion may exist as to the high degree of early civilisation and national glory laid claim to by the Irish people, it has never been questioned that, in the most remote times, they had at least a national music peculiar to themselves, and that their bards and harpers were eminently skilful [*sic*] in its performance" [Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1840), p. 1].

piano”,⁸⁴ to allow for their performance in the drawing rooms of the period.

Thomas Moore

In the early-nineteenth century, “the darling of the London drawing rooms”⁸⁵ was Thomas Moore, whose romantic and nostalgic nationalist compositions were included in successive collections of *Irish Melodies* published in ten volumes between 1808 and 1834. These poems were set to many of the tunes included in Bunting’s collection, arranged for drawing-room performance by the composer Sir John Stevenson and, later, Henry Bishop. Moore’s involvement with the *Irish Melodies* project came about after he was approached, following minor success in England with his first publications *Odes of Anacreon* (1800) and *Epistles, Odes and Other Poems* (1806), by the Irish publishers James and William Power, who had previously contracted John Stevenson to “arrange a number of Irish melodies for the piano”.⁸⁶

Moore’s use of Irish melody to accompany his work, while garnering him great popularity, provoked considerable debate, even during the poet’s lifetime. William Hazlitt criticised Moore’s work for converting the “wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff box”⁸⁷ while the Irish novelist and journalist William Maginn expressed his astonishment “that the people of Ireland should have so tamely submitted to Mr. Thomas Moore’s audacity,

⁸⁴ O’Shea, “Foreign Bodies in the River of Sound”, p. 45.

⁸⁵ A. Norman Jeffares, *Anglo-Irish Literature* (Dublin: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1982), p. 105.

⁸⁶ Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, pp. 141-142. As well as the Powers, Stevenson and Bishop, another important influence on Moore’s work (and particularly his engagement with Bunting’s collections) was his fellow student at Trinity college in the 1790s, the musician Edward Hudson, who was later imprisoned and exiled for his involvement with the United Irishmen in the 1798 rebellion. Moore described Hudson as “the first who made known to me this rich mine of our country’s melodies” by introducing him to Bunting’s collection and Irish music generally in 1797 [See Thomas Moore, “Preface to Irish Melodies” available at *Musica, Virtual Choral Library*, <http://www.musicanet.org/robokopp/moorepre2.html>, (accessed July 4, 2006). See also Harry White, *The Keeper’s Recital* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1988), p. 45].

⁸⁷ Quoted in Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 65.

in prefixing the title of *Irish* to his *Melodies*".⁸⁸ While Hazlitt and Maginn question the authenticity of Moore's composition, they also suggest a movement which Moore's work represented from songs emerging from an engaged community (characteristic of earlier Gaelic society) to work more concerned with entertaining an often foreign audience, reflected in the popularity of Moore's work in England where he hoped to improve "British awareness of Irish grievances".⁸⁹

Seán O'Boyle has also denied any connection between Moore's poetry and Gaelic culture, arguing that Moore's use of certain phrases within his work indicated his lack of knowledge of Gaelic as if he "had been even remotely interested in the folk-poetry of his time he would never have written - to the very same tune used by the ballad-maker - the line which English critics at one time considered among the strongest in English literature - 'At the mid-hour of night when stars are weeping I fly'".⁹⁰

Other twentieth century critics, however, including Thomas McDonagh, Pádraic Colum and Seán Lucy, have argued that Moore's writing was influenced by the Irish melodies. Indeed, Lucy argues that the force of the Gaelic metric was first felt in Moore's work, a point discussed at more length in Chapter Five. Lucy particularly emphasises the manner in which Moore brought the triple rhythms (particularly through the use of trisyllabic feet) associated with Irish music and verse into the serious lyric

⁸⁸ Quoted in Patrick Rafroidi, "Thomas Moore: Towards a Reassessment?", *Irish Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1992), p. 58.

⁸⁹ Robert Welch, *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 377. See also Tom Dunne, "Haunted by History: Irish Romantic Writing, 1800-1850", *Romanticism in National Context*, ed. by R. Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 86. Moore's efforts echo those of his predecessor Charlotte Brooke who was similarly concerned with gaining "England's respect for Ireland, its history and its people" [Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 77]. Of course, Moore was also interested in gaining popularity and profit in England for himself as a poet and his success was at least partly assured by the support of English ascendancy figures such as Lord Moira and the patronage of the Prince of Wales, who permitted Moore to dedicate his 1800 volume of translations *Odes of Anacreon* to him [See Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 141].

⁹⁰ Seán O'Boyle, "Irish Traditional Music", *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, ed. by Michael Longley (Belfast: Arts Council, 1971), p. 123

in English and its influence on writers of the Romantic period such as Lord Byron.⁹¹

Moore's combination of nationalist lyric, evoking Ireland's heroic past, and Irish melody brought him wide popularity, both in Ireland and abroad, making him, at least in this respect, one of the most successful Irish poets that ever lived. He considered his work in combining words in English to the Irish melodies "truly national"⁹² and his use of Irish music to accompany his poetry reflected his belief in the close connection between Irish music and national identity.⁹³ "[H]ow much they are connected, in Ireland, at least", he wrote,

appears too plainly in the tone of sorrow and depression which characterises most of our early songs [...] The poet [...] must feel and understand that rapid fluctuation of spirits, that unaccountable mixture of gloom and levity, which composes the character of my countrymen, and has deeply tinged their music.⁹⁴

While Moore recognised the beauty of the music and song of the ordinary, often Gaelic-speaking, Irish people, as a member of an emerging middle-class he imagined his audience among the higher echelons of society, among those "who can afford to have their national zeal a little stimulated without exciting much dread of the excesses into which it may

⁹¹ See Thomas McDonagh, *Literature in Ireland* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1916), pp. 27, 59 and Seán Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", *Irish University Review* 8.2 (1978): 151-77.

⁹² Thomas Moore, *The Letters of Thomas Moore*, Vol. 1, ed. by Wilfred S. Dowden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.), p. 143. Indeed, the major political figure in Ireland in the early nineteenth century, Daniel O'Connell, found a great deal to praise in Moore's work attributing "much of the present state of feeling, and the desire for liberty in Ireland to the works of that immortal man [Moore] – he has brought patriotism into the private circles of domestic life". However, this development itself, particularly as it applied to the embrace by women of Moore's music, was criticised by later commentators such as Charles Gavan Duffy, who described Moore as the "pet of petticoats" [Howard Mumford Jones, *The Harp That Once-: A Chronicle of the Life of Thomas Moore* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1937), p. 292, Charles Gavan Duffy, "Thomas Moore", *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 1, ed. by Seamus Deane et al (Derry: Field Day Publications; London: Faber and Faber (distributors), 1991), p. 1251].

⁹³ This point is made by Robert Welch in Welch, *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1980), p. 21.

⁹⁴ Thomas Moore, *The Letters of Thomas Moore*, Vol. 1, ed. by Wilfred S. Dowden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.), p.116.

hurry them".⁹⁵ This remark is indicative of a disquiet apparent elsewhere in Irish and British literature in this period regarding the difficulty in controlling the Irish once their "passions" were aroused. Luke Gibbons, for example, has noted a recurring concern amongst commentators in Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century regarding the ease with which apparently peaceful individuals could be transformed into "the common resolution of the crowd" bent on violence and destruction.⁹⁶ Writing of Gothic literature in this period, Gibbons argues that commentators themselves occasionally became swept up in the passions of "the crowd", such that

[t]he inability to stand back and achieve the comparative distance of spectatorship becomes the hallmark of the individual in Ireland when faced with the pull of the crowd [...] Not least of the implications of this collapse of optical distance, the reversal of roles between audience – or even perpetrator – and victim, is that it raises questions over who corresponds to what role in the Gothic genre, at least as it is manifested in the radical instability of colonial narratives in Ireland.⁹⁷

Moore's combination of poetry and music brought his work to a wider audience in Ireland than any previous English-language poet in Ireland had enjoyed. His *Melodies* became "the secular hymn-book of Irish nationalism" in the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ As Thomas Kinsella has noted, he was regarded by many during his lifetime as "Ireland's national poet" and his *Irish Melodies* was "possibly the most popular book ever produced in Ireland".⁹⁹ Furthermore, Liam de Paor suggests that Moore was "one of

⁹⁵ Quoted in McCarthy, *Passing it on*, p. 41.

⁹⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], ed. by JT Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 82. Quoted in Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen House in Association with Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, 2004), p. 52.

⁹⁷ Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture*, p. 56.

⁹⁸ Donal O'Sullivan, *Songs of the Irish* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan Limited, 1960), p. 7. Indeed, it has been suggested that Moore's poems even enjoyed "great popularity" amongst Irish speakers through the translations of Archbishop John McHale [See J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, trans. by Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff: University of Wales Press; Belmont, MA: Ford and Bailie, 1992), pp. 291-292, Also Thomas Moore, *A Selection of Moore's Melodies. Translated into the Irish language by John MacHale* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1871)].

⁹⁹ Thomas Kinsella, "Introduction", *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xxvi.

the most significant figures of the transition at the point where Anglicisation was beginning to be fully effected".¹⁰⁰ He represents the beginnings of the articulation of Irish identity and culture, on a national scale, in the English language.

The Young Ireland Poets, *The Nation* and the Ballad

While Moore found in Irish music a means through which to access what he believed to be the national spirit of Ireland and reach an audience few other Irish poets in English had enjoyed, those poets associated with the nationalist newspaper, *The Nation* (which began publication in 1842) found similar sustenance in the ballad. From the seventeenth century onwards the ballad was an increasingly important part of Irish cultural life, firstly as "broadsheet ballads" which were imported from Scotland and England before being produced in large numbers in Ireland. However, as Hugh Shields notes, "its association with the common people gave it low status among the learned and polite".¹⁰¹ Though the ballad provided an important resource for the poets associated with *The Nation*, they also recognised that many were not appropriate among the "polite society"¹⁰² to which they belonged, particularly the "miserable street ballads".¹⁰³ The ballad nonetheless provided an important form for *The Nation* contributors as they sought to access the "authentic" voice of the Irish people. While Charles Gavan Duffy was writing of what he described as "Anglo-Irish" ballads, or "the production of educated men, with English tongues but Irish hearts"¹⁰⁴, the language of these ballads included in his *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (first published in 1843) was, he opined, nonetheless

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Michael Ó Suilleabháin, "'All Our Central Fire': Music, Mediation, and the Irish Psyche", *Irish Journal of Psychology* 15.2 and 3 (1994): 338.

¹⁰¹ Hugh Shields, *Narrative Singing in Ireland: Lays, Ballads, Come-all-yes, and Other Songs* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993), p. 41.

¹⁰² John Moulden, "The Printed Ballad in Ireland" (unpublished doctoral dissertation: National University of Ireland, Galway, 2006), p. 281.

¹⁰³ Anonymous, *The Nation*, December 14, 1844, p. 152. Indeed, Charles Gavan Duffy had quite a discriminatory understanding of the ballad and where he includes a "street ballad" in his *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, such as "The Lamentation of Hugh Reynolds", he describes it as "probably written for or by the ballad-singers; but it is the best of its bad class" [Charles Gavan Duffy, *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (Dublin: James Duffy and Company, 1866 [39th edition]), p. 142. Quoted in Moulden, "The Printed Ballad in Ireland", p. 280].

¹⁰⁴ Charles Gavan Duffy, *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland* (Dublin: James Duffy and Company, 1866 [39th edition]), p. 20.

as essentially Irish if they were written in Gaelic [...] The soul of the country, stammering its passionate grief and hatred in a strange tongue, loved still to utter them in its old familiar idioms and cadences. Uttering them, perhaps, with more piercing earnestness, because of the impediment; and winning out of the very difficulty a grace and triumph.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, for Thomas Davis in a review of Duffy's *Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, this book was "compounded" of the essential elements of Irish nationality:

The elements of Irish nationality are not only combining - in fact, they are growing confluent in our minds [...] It must contain and represent the races of Ireland. It must not be Celtic, it must not be Saxon - it must be Irish. The Brehon law and the maxims of Westminster, the cloudy and the lightning genius of the Gael, the placid strength of the Sasanach, the marshalling insight of the Norman - a literature which shall exhibit in combination the passions and idioms of all, and which shall equally express our mind in its romantic, its religious, its forensic, and its practical tendencies - finally, a native government, which shall know and rule by the might and right of all; yet yield to the arrogance of none - these are components of *such* a nationality.

But what have these things to do with the "Ballad Poetry of Ireland"? Much every way. It is the result of the elements we have named - it is compounded of all; and never was there a book fitter to advance that perfect nationality to which Ireland begins to aspire.¹⁰⁶

The ballad also allowed *The Nation* contributors what Seamus Deane has called "a kind of anonymity" that gave fame to their poems rather than to themselves.¹⁰⁷ Charles Gavan Duffy has indicated the anonymity these writers sought in his remarks on Thomas Davis. Davis's aims, Duffy wrote,

were far away from literary success. All his labours tended only to stimulate and discipline people [...] [He] used to say that, if he had his will, the songs of *The Nation* would be remembered in after times, and the authors quite forgotten.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Duffy, *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Davis, "Ballad Poetry of Ireland", pp. 210-211.

¹⁰⁷ Seamus Deane, "Poetry and Song 1800-1890", *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. 2, (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Short Life of Thomas Davis 1840-46* (London: T. Fisher Unwin; Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1895), p. 2.

This anonymity did not represent a neutral sense of self-effacement, but rather was a key element in the subversive project of the Young Ireland writers. For these writers, anonymity allowed them to imaginatively overcome the fragmented nature of Irish society linguistically and culturally. The ballads of the Young Irelanders aspired to represent the consciousness of a people, rather than an individual writer, and thereby articulate the voice of a nation.

The ballad had also long been considered a subversive form, and therefore appropriate to an organisation such as Young Ireland dedicated to the overthrow of the colonial administration in Ireland. In common with Irish music generally, the ballad had been viewed with suspicion among the colonial administration in Ireland from as early as the sixteenth century. As Hugh Shields has noted,

On 27 November 1593 Dublin castle issued “a commission for putting into execution the acts concerning the royal supremacy” of Elizabeth in the matter of inspecting suspicious cargoes reaching Ireland by sea, as well as the houses and shops of suspected merchants. After mentioning Papist ecclesiastical vestments it goes on to list “books, ballets, songs, sonnets, works, treatises, rymes or writings or any other reliques”, for importing which imprisonment or fine will be incurred. The seditious ballad sheet is, then, already a reality.¹⁰⁹

The ballad played a central role in realising the ambitions of *The Nation* contributors as they attempted to form a national literature and inspire a nation. “A great literature” as Denis Florence Mac Carthy remarked “was either the creation or the creator of a great people”.¹¹⁰ For David Lloyd, the ballad offered writers of *The Nation* a means through which to resolve the problems they faced (including the bilingual nature of Irish society and the existence of much of this society’s ancient literature in a language most of *The Nation* contributors did not speak let alone read)

¹⁰⁹ Shields, *Narrative Singing in Ireland*, p. 43. John Moulden has suggested that this may be misreading by Shields as it was sometime later before the ballad would become a significant presence in Ireland. For Moulden, this remark suggests rather a *preemptive move* by the administration in Ireland aware of the ability of the ballad, already established as a popular form in England, to incite passions against the establishment [See John Moulden, “The Printed Ballad in Ireland” (unpublished doctoral dissertation: National University of Ireland, Galway, 2006), pp. 176-177].

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: Part II or four years of Irish history 1845-1849*, (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1887), p. 72.

in their attempt to construct an Irish literature in the language of the coloniser:

If the national literature is to be "the very flowering of the soul" of the nation,¹¹¹ rather than an institution arbitrarily imposed on it, it will, like the nationalist himself, need to be made "racy of the soil", and to absorb the spirit of the people. By the time [Denis Florence] McCarthy assembled his *Book of Irish Ballads* in 1846, the idea that ballads represented the original and primitive poetry of a people was a critical commonplace.¹¹²

Mac Carthy emphasised in his introduction to this anthology the importance of creating a literature from the people "based upon the revelations they themselves have made, or the confessions they have uttered", and argued that Homer created his work "on the original ballads that were probably floating among the people"¹¹³ (a remark which anticipates views expressed by the twentieth-century "balladeer" Patrick Kavanagh in his poem "Epic"). Mac Carthy believed Irish ballads could offer the basis for a truly Irish literature comprising the "distinct character and peculiar charm" of Irish people.¹¹⁴ *The Nation* writers sought to create an informed, nationalist, and politicised audience, dedicated to their separatist aims and inspired by the "authentic" literature of the people themselves.

While the ballad provided a form for their work, the poems of the Young Ireland writers were often best known as songs, most famously in the case of Davis's "A Nation Once Again" and "The West's Awake". Indeed, when Charles Gavan Duffy edited an enlarged edition of *The Spirit of the Nation* in 1845 (an anthology of poems and ballads from *The Nation*), it included music "*Original and Ancient*" which was to accompany the compositions. The importance of the music was emphasised in the book's preface, which also highlighted music's role in bringing Irish people together:

¹¹¹ Lloyd here quotes from the article "Ballad Poetry of Ireland", *Nation*, 2 August 1845, p. 698.

¹¹² David C. Lloyd, "Great Gaps in Irish Song: James Clarence Mangan and the ideology of the Nationalist Ballad", *Irish University Review* 14.2 (Autumn 1984): 180. He is referring here to Denis Florence Mac Carthy's *The Book of Irish Ballads* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1869).

¹¹³ Quoted in Lloyd, "Great Gaps in Irish Song: James Clarence Mangan and the ideology of the Nationalist Ballad", p. 181

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The greatest achievement of the Irish people is their music. It tells their history, climate, and character [...] Music is the first faculty of the Irish, and scarcely anything has such power for good over them. The use of this faculty and power, publicly and constantly, to keep up their spirits, refine their tastes, warm their courage, increase their union, and renew their zeal, is the duty of every patriot.¹¹⁵

The great popularity of this publication (it would appear in fifty editions by 1870) made it, according to Robert Welch, the “patriotic hymnbook”¹¹⁶ of the second half of the nineteenth century. Similarly a collection of James Clarence Mangan’s translations from Gaelic, *Poets and Poetry of Munster*, was accompanied by music to which they were to be sung¹¹⁷ while his first contribution to *The Nation* was meant to be sung to the music of “Rory O’More”.¹¹⁸ In addition, Mangan’s free translation of the Gaelic song “Róisín Dubh” [as “Dark Rosaleen”] has been described as the “most widely known nationalist poem” of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁹ As Seamus Deane has noted, poetry in English in this period “finally achieved popularity by allying itself with music”.¹²⁰

Despite the importance of music to the Young Ireland writers, there was, nonetheless, a greater emphasis placed by Thomas Davis on the superiority of the text, and, indeed, of reading, over the oral mode of performance and transmission. Davis was concerned that oral transmission could lead to unwanted change and excessive ornamentation, while printing could ensure conformity and thus stability of meaning.¹²¹ As Leith Davis has noted, drawing on the comments of Davis in his essay “Ballad History of the Nation”,

It is the labor involved in reading that Davis wants to encourage. He pays lip-service to the oral nature of the proposed ballad history, suggesting that patriot ballads that will go into creating that history will ‘pass from mouth

¹¹⁵ Charles Gavan Duffy et al, *The Spirit of the Nation: 1845* (Poole, England; Washington, D.C.: Woodstock Books, 1998), p. vi.

¹¹⁶ Robert Welch, *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 533.

¹¹⁷ James Clarence Mangan, *Poets and Poetry of Munster* (Dublin: O’Daly, 1849).

¹¹⁸ Patrick Raffroidi, *Irish Literature in English: The Romantic Period, 1789-1850*, Vol. 1 (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1980), p. 143.

¹¹⁹ Colin Meir, *The Ballads and Songs of W.B. Yeats: The Anglo-Irish Heritage in Subject and Style* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 3.

¹²⁰ Deane, “Poetry and Song 1800-1890”, p. 3.

¹²¹ Thomas Davis, “A Ballad History of Ireland”, *Selections from his Prose and Poetry* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1914), pp. 240-248.

to mouth like salutations.' But what he also describes is a desire for the elimination of oral transmission [...] Davis wants to eliminate the ambivalent traces of meaning belonging to the ballads and to concentrate the reader's attention on the present meaning and the present moment.¹²²

With the advent of the Literary Revival at the end of the nineteenth century the close association between music and literature would further break down. In addition, the type of anonymity *The Nation* poets sought through the ballad form was rejected in the emphasis placed by poets such as William Butler Yeats on subjectivity and personal expression. "It is the presence of a personal element alone", Yeats remarked, "that can give [art] nationality in a fine sense, the nationality of its maker".¹²³

The Literary Revival

During the Literary Revival, literature became a central focus for the revitalization of Irish culture, though attempts were also made through organisations such as the Gaelic League (founded in 1893) to preserve and encourage indigenous musical practices. The League's first president Douglas Hyde did much to popularise the Gaelic poetic tradition through his translations in *Abhráin Grádh Chúige Connacht/The Love Songs of Connacht* and *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht/The Religious Songs of Connacht*, published respectively in 1893 and 1905. As Caerwyn Williams notes it "is difficult to overemphasise the impact which [The Love Songs of Connacht] made on the public",¹²⁴ while Declan Kiberd observes how the book became "an instant bestseller".¹²⁵

However, these collections were published without the accompanying music, even though the poetry's very existence depended largely on its performance as songs among the communities in which they were collected, rather than as literary works to be read. Revivalists, such as Hyde, sought to emphasise the literary over the oral in this period in an attempt to elevate the work they collected as the authentic creations of a sophisticated people. While this may have appealed to a growing audience for Irish material in this period, it did not reflect the community of

¹²² Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender*, p. 177.

¹²³ W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 233.

¹²⁴ J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, trans. by Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff : University of Wales Press ; Belmont, MA: Ford and Bailie, 1992), p. 267.

¹²⁵ Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p. 306.

engagement from which the songs emerged. Hyde regarded the songs as “literature in the best sense of the word” and argued that they could never be “adequately translated” as “acquaintance with Irish literature had best be made – in fact must be made – at the fountain head of the original”.¹²⁶

This emphasis on the “original text” also reflects Hyde’s belief in the centrality of the Irish language “in the rejuvenation and growth of a unique and independently-minded Irish community”,¹²⁷ while wishing to “bridge the chasm between the two [literary] inheritances” in the Irish and English languages.¹²⁸ These issues had considerable influence on writers who emerged during, and after, the revival. While Hyde’s collections inspired other individuals both in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere in Ireland to produce literature in Irish¹²⁹ (some of which we will consider later in this chapter), his works were also an important inspiration for the major English-language writers of the Literary Revival including Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge and William Butler Yeats. These writers also viewed these works as the authentic creations of sophisticated communities, providing continuity with an ancient culture. The volume revealed to Lady Gregory that “while I had thought poetry was all but dead in Ireland, the people about me had been keeping up the lyrical tradition that existed in Ireland before Chaucer lived”¹³⁰ while for Yeats the poems were “as they were to many others, the coming of a new power into literature”.¹³¹

These songs also revealed to Yeats a literature growing from a community, suggesting an intimate connection between the artist and his community. As Kiberd observes,

After an age of specialisation, in which the well-springs of art had been removed from life, [Yeats] was yearning for a moment when the sources of an art, neither literary nor knowing, might again be found within the community [...] and the community might be a place where every man and woman could be an artist.¹³²

¹²⁶ Douglas Hyde quoted in Breandán Ó Conaire, *The Songs of Connaught* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1985), p. 13.

¹²⁷ Ó Conaire, *The Songs of Connaught*, p. 15.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹²⁹ Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 270.

¹³⁰ Douglas Hyde, *Poets and Dreamers: studies and translations from the Irish by Lady Gregory* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1974), p. 251.

¹³¹ Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 193

¹³² Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p. 319.

However, in the work of both Hyde and Yeats, the focus was primarily on the text, on the songs as poems rather than as musical works. As Harry White argues,

Between Yeats and Hyde, as it were, the idea of music throughout this formative period of Irish cultural history could function only as a symbol of imaginative (linguistic) aspiration. Other than that, it served to reinforce the claims of an ethnic reinvigoration (as it did in the Gaelic League). The sheer pressure of the moment was overwhelmingly linguistic, not musical.¹³³

White contends that literary invention among writers such as James Joyce, Synge and Yeats became almost “a *substitute* for musical composition in Ireland”.¹³⁴ The relationship of Yeats (the central figure in the Literary Revival) to music and song had far-reaching consequences for the movement of poetry away from its association with music in the English, and Irish languages, and from its position as a popular art of the people.

William Butler Yeats

Central to Yeats’s aesthetic when he began writing in the 1880s was the desire to form a community of artists and an audience inspired by the ancient literature of Ireland. For Yeats “the poets and populace shall have one heart – that there shall be no literary class with its own way of seeing things and its own conventions”.¹³⁵ He met the Fenian John O’Leary in 1885 and O’Leary had a significant influence on Yeats’s engagement with Irish literature both from the Gaelic tradition (in translation) and the popular ballad-poetry in English. In 1888, Yeats co-edited the anthology of the work of the early Literary Revival entitled *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, which included work from Douglas Hyde, Katharine Tynan and himself. His first collection *The Wanderings of Oisín and other Poems* (1889) was influenced, he admitted later, by a wish “to be as easily understood as the Young Ireland writers, - to write always out of the common thought of the people”.¹³⁶ The influence of the Young Ireland

¹³³ Harry White, *The Keeper’s Recital* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1988), p. 116.

¹³⁴ White, *The Keeper’s Recital*, p. 97. Italicised by White.

¹³⁵ W.B. Yeats, “Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland”, *Uncollected Prose*, Vol. 1, ed. by John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 150.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Meir, *The Ballads and Songs of W.B. Yeats*, p. 11.

poets is also apparent in his use of the ballad form for several poems in the subsequent collection, *Crossways* (1889), including “The Ballad of Father O’Harte”.¹³⁷

While Yeats admired the audience that his Anglo-Irish predecessors had created for poetry, he gradually came to recognise the limitations of the work itself. He later wrote critically of his early work and described the poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” as “my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music”.¹³⁸ However, finding this “music” also involved the loosening of “rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings”.¹³⁹ While *Crossways* includes a rewriting of the folk-song “Down by the Sally Gardens”,¹⁴⁰ Yeats could not in general countenance the association of his poetry with music, beyond the metaphorical use of musical terms to describe his art. His experiences as a child did not encourage an interest in music or song, as the following extract from his autobiographies suggests:

Then I was sent to a dame-school kept by an old woman who stood us in rows and had a long stick like a billiard cue to get at the back rows. My father was still at Sligo when I came back from my first lesson and asked what I had been taught. I said I had been taught to sing, and he said, ‘Sing then,’ and I sang

¹³⁷ Brian Devine has completed a comprehensive study of the influence of Irish poetic traditions on Yeats’s work in his book *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, where Devine provides persuasive evidence of the influence of both the ballad and Gaelic song on Yeats’s poetry, emphasising particularly the influence of the “Irish speech rhythms” Yeats discerned in the ballads “which not unnaturally (if somewhat ironically) were also the vehicle for a prose-based straightforward presentation of its semantic message” [Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 137. Also pp. 109–175]. Devine also illustrates the manner in which Yeats would frequently internalise performance within his poems in order to “lessen that ‘performance-gap’ which remains between the active, social speech to which [Yeats] aspired and the less-immediate, printed page”, Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 114.

¹³⁸ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan 1926), p. 153.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ This poem is, nonetheless, an important example of Yeats drawing on the Gaelic music tradition. Brian Devine has noted the poet’s “superb matching of words to the Gaelic air, ‘Cailín Thrá na Moirne’ (‘The Maid of Mourne Shore’), which he picked up from an old woman in Sligo and which he named ‘Down by the Sally Gardens’”. Indeed, Devine goes on to suggest that “several early poems of Yeats came from Irish music” and furthermore, “in Yeats’s Ireland, the gap between song and poetry was not so pronounced as it is today, and the thought of the young Yeats getting tunes for his poetry out of Irish traditional music is not untenable” [Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, pp. 218–219].

Little drops of water,
 Little grains of sand,
 Make the mighty ocean,
 And the pleasant land,
 High up in my head.

So my father wrote to the old woman that I was never to be taught to sing again; and afterwards other teachers were told the same thing.¹⁴¹

One is tempted to suggest that the description by one of Yeats's contemporaries of the poet as "tone deaf"¹⁴² may partly account for his father's reluctance to hear his son sing again. However, Yeats was also disinclined to allow music to accompany his poetry in later life. His contemporary, American poet Robert Frost remarked that there was "nothing he hated more than having his poems set to music - it stole the show".¹⁴³ Indeed, this is an important characteristic of Yeats's work. While Irish poetry prior to the revival was often popularly sung as song and characterised by anonymity, Yeats believed in a deeply personal expression of his own subjective experience.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Quoted in McCarthy, *Passing it on*, p. 1.

¹⁴² Edward Malins, *Yeats and Music* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968), p. 490. This description of Yeats, however, is somewhat simplistic and has been critiqued by several commentators including Hugh Kenner who has remarked that "the ritual statement that he was 'tone-deaf' names a condition unknown to ontological science. It merely alludes to the fact that he could not sing", Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p. 143. BBC producer George Barnes has also noted that, while Yeats had difficulties humming the tunes he sought to accompany his work, "his ear for the sound of speech was so sensitive that it outran comprehension. He noticed nuances which the actors could hardly hear" [Quoted in Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, pp. 160-161].

¹⁴³ K. P. S. Jochum, *W. B. Yeats: a classified bibliography of criticism including additions to Allan Wade's Bibliography of the writings of W. B. Yeats and a section on the Irish literary and dramatic revival* (Folkestone, Eng.: Dawson, 1978), p. 943.

¹⁴⁴ As he remarked in his dedication to A.E. at the beginning of his collection of short stories based on Irish legends, *The Secret Rose*, "My friends in Ireland sometimes ask me when I am going to write a really national poem or romance, and by a national poem or romance I understand them to mean a poem or romance founded upon some famous moment of Irish history, and built up out of the thoughts and feelings which move the greater number of patriotic Irishmen. I on the other hand believe that poetry and romance cannot be made by the most conscientious study of famous moments and of the thoughts and feelings of others, but only by looking into that little, infinite, faltering, eternal flame that we call ourselves" [W. B. Yeats, *The Secret Rose* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1897), p. vii].

Yeats saw the development of poetry itself as a movement from a poetry of the people to the personal lyric of the individual. In an address in 1893 to the National Literary Society entitled “Nationality and Literature” he delineated three stages through which he argued literature had to pass in order to progress: “the period of narrative poetry, the epic or ballad period; next the dramatic period; and after that the period of lyric poetry”.¹⁴⁵ For Yeats, Irish literature “alone, perhaps, among the nations of Europe” remained in the “ballad or epic age”, and “among the simple, primitive poems of the world”.¹⁴⁶ It was “still a poetry of the people in the main, for it deals with the tales and thoughts of the people”.¹⁴⁷ He argued, however, that in the lyric age, to which he believed Irish literature needed to aspire,

poets no longer can take their inspiration mainly from external activities and from what are called matters of fact, for they must express every phase of human consciousness no matter how subtle, how vague, how impalpable. With this advancing subtlety poetry steps out of the market-place, out of the general tide of life and becomes a mysterious cult, as it were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few.¹⁴⁸

As this quote suggests, Yeats’s idea of audience became a highly specialised and guarded one, “an almost secret religion made by the few for the few”. This could partly be accounted for by a differentiation between the terms “audience” and “community”. Yeats respected the engaged community he imagined existed for poetry in the past, and wished to find such a contemporary community for his work. As he wrote while looking out over the plains of Galway:

There is still in truth upon those great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart of imaginative action. One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece. Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it?¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ W.B. Yeats, “Nationality and Literature”, *Uncollected Prose*, Vol. 1, ed. by John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 269.

¹⁴⁶ Yeats, “Nationality and Literature”, p. 273.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

¹⁴⁹ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 213. Significantly, this is a quote which appears in several essays by Thomas Kinsella, a

Yeats grew to despise the fickle audience he saw emerging during the Literary Revival, an audience that he condemned during several riots at the Abbey Theatre as well as within his own poetry. The music that emerged "out of the common thought of the people" no longer sufficed in creating this community of engagement Yeats sought. As Seamus Deane has noted:

[Yeats's] writings contain dozens of references to the need for an audience which would be radically different from the mass following which commercial theatre, the literature of Young Ireland, or the popular novel commanded. The audience he envisaged would be an integral group, bonded together by a shared ideal or abiding interest.¹⁵⁰

However, Yeats's approach to music was not consistent across his work and he found the conjunction of music and verse important to his theatrical productions. While his earlier nationalistic plays such as *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, were accompanied by popular folk-song (in this case "The Lament for Yellow-Haired Donogh"), his later Nōh plays, including *At the Hawk's Well* (1916) and *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), include musicians among the characters who are instructed to sing their lines in the play. While his plays lack clarity in terms of the music by which they should be accompanied, it is clear he found music an important complement to the performance of his theatrical work. His final play, *The Death of Cuchulainn* (1939) includes "A singer, a Piper, and a Drummer" among its cast of characters who sing or perform at points throughout the production.

Edward Malins has also noted Yeats's unusual use of music in rehearsals of his plays.¹⁵¹ Yeats had the French instrument-maker Arnold Dolmetsch make a psalter which was tuned chromatically with semi-tones to follow the intonations of the speaking voice. Yeats's friend, the musician Florence Farr, accompanied rehearsals of his plays with performances on the psalter. Yeats, who "never felt that reading was better than an error",

hoped that with this instrument, with its quiet tone which so suited his unrhetorical and intimate speaking, one would be able to take the best possible reading of a poem and listen carefully to the music or the lilt

poet we will consider in the next chapter [Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), p. 1].

¹⁵⁰ Seamus Deane, "Yeats: the Creation of an audience", *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 31.

¹⁵¹ Edward Malins, *Yeats and Music* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968), pp. 483-508.

which the voice takes from the natural intonation of the words. Then one could write it down in so many notes of music, with the right dynamics and stresses, and then teach others to adopt this so-called tune, for it grows out of the words and is one with them. The voice is therefore not attached to any particular note at any moment, but the ideal pattern was worked out by Yeats and Florence Farr, herself a musician.

Yeats remarked that he wished he could have heard Homer's epics recited to the lyre. With extraordinary insight, or perhaps knowledge [...] he had hit upon the chief characteristic of ancient Greek speaking of verse. From the only two extant examples, on marble, of early Greek notation one can make out the rhythmic accents with a very similar ictus to Yeats's in English.¹⁵²

Yeats's distinctive approach to the performance of his plays, many of which were composed of verse, was also reflected in performances of his poetry. English poet, and friend of Yeats, John Masefield described his readings as

not like that of any man. He stressed the rhythm until it almost became a chant. He went with speed, making every beat and dwelling on the vowels. That wavering ecstatic song then heard by me for the first time was to remain with me for years.¹⁵³

These performances are still apparent on the "aurally memorable BBC recording of Yeats reading his own poetry".¹⁵⁴

Yeats's disillusionment with the Ireland that emerged in the twentieth century found expression in his poem "The Fisherman" in which he writes in "scorn of this audience". While he began by trying to inspire an audience he felt already existed, he eventually felt compelled to imagine a community for whom he wrote his poems. His poetry marks an important moment between the nineteenth-century popular ballad and its combination with music and the separation of the two arts in the Literary Revival. Yeats nonetheless continued to adopt the ballad form in later poems, and titled poems and collections with allusions to music and song. However, this was not a recognition of the assistance such music might have provided for the transmission of the poet's work through

¹⁵² Malins, *Yeats and Music*, p. 485.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 484.

¹⁵⁴ Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 120. Devine is referring to the BBC recording of Yeats made on 28th February 1935 and included on the CD *Poetry on Record: 98 Poets Read Their Work 1888-2006*, released by "Shout! Factory" records in April 2006.

performance. Rather, Yeats' allusion to music and song was "as a symbol of imaginative (linguistic) aspiration".¹⁵⁵ As he remarked in a letter to Mrs Shakespear on March 2nd 1929, prior to completing his collection *Words for Music Perhaps*, the title did not indicate "so much that [the poems] should be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself".¹⁵⁶ In a later letter to her on September 13th 1929, Yeats remarked that, "'For Music' is only a name, nobody will sing them".¹⁵⁷ The title of the collection itself is suggestive of Yeats's own ambiguous attitude towards music: while it was rarely found in association with his poetry it was a recurring feature of his theatrical work.

Irish-language Poetry in the Early Twentieth Century

While English-language poets in Ireland in the early twentieth century wrote very much under the shadow of Yeats, Irish-language poets faced yet another challenge: finding appropriate forms for their literature. The debate that surrounded this issue would further associate literature with music through a focus on the "musical" or metrical characteristics of poetry, a focus that would continue in the debates surrounding the poetry of Seán Ó Ríordáin later in the century. I have already alluded to the significant role the Irish song tradition played in this period – particularly through the work of the Gaelic League's founder Douglas Hyde – in providing material and inspiration for contemporary poets. A leading Gaelic scholar at the turn of the century, and professor of Gaelic at University College Cork, Father Richard Henebry, produced one of the first major works of the twentieth century on Irish music: *A Handbook of Irish music*.¹⁵⁸

For Henebry music and language were intimately connected as

language is indebted to music for its two great properties of tone and stress accent, and hence the last definition of words in human speech is attained by a recourse to the aid of music. For its musical element is what gives the

¹⁵⁵ Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1988), p. 116.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1969), p. 370.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Henebry's work was alluded to more recently in Ciaran Carson's account of traditional Irish music, *Last Night's Fun*, where Carson describes *A Handbook of Irish Music* as, "brilliant, eccentric and sometimes opaque" [Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), p. 11].

finer shades of meaning to language. By that language is learned and originally understood, and the last modification given to the force of words.¹⁵⁹

He proposed a return to older sources, arguing that “the classical literature, whether good Modern, Middle or Old Irish, must be the source from which we draw material for our Irish writings. And it must be the exclusive source”.¹⁶⁰ Much that was published during the Gaelic Revival was, for Henebry, “not in continuity with any Irish literature that ever went before it”.¹⁶¹ Henebry’s views on Gaelic literature were also apparent in his writings on music. For him,

The additions to human music, comprised under the heading development, hardly make adequate compensation for the loss of higher and more spiritual qualities. The feelings of savage peoples are undoubtedly more elemental and profound and in closer communion with reality and ultra-reality than those of us moderns who have been bleached of the humanising spell of tradition, and as music is a true expression of feeling in both cases, the deeper feeling will inevitably produce the better music.¹⁶²

Henebry’s concern with continuity and tradition, and his close association of music with language, informed his criticism of poets of the Gaelic Revival, criticisms often focused on the metrical forms adopted by poets in this period. His critique anticipated a central debate within Irish-language poetry in the twentieth century regarding the proper poetic models to adopt: a contemporary literature based on seventeenth and eighteenth-century forms as practised by writers such as Séathrún Céitinn or the living language, *caint na ndaoine*, as spoken among contemporary communities in Ireland.¹⁶³ It is significant that poets’ concerns focused not so much on the subject matter of poems *per se*, but rather on poetry’s “musical” or metrical qualities. “The predicament” of Irish-language poets at the turn of the century according to the major poet of the Gaelic

¹⁵⁹ Richard Henebry, *A Handbook of Irish Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1928), p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Philip O’Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921: Ideology and innovation* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 269.

¹⁶¹ O’Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival*, p. 48.

¹⁶² Henebry, *A Handbook of Irish Music*, p. 12.

¹⁶³ O’Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921*, pp. 1-18. This book as a whole is an excellent study of these debates during this period.

Revival, Pádraic Pearse, was that "until now, they have had only two models: the fettered, complicated, vacuous eighteenth century [Gaelic] model, and the English language model, which had itself colonised the spirit of poetry".¹⁶⁴

While Pearse acknowledged the importance of an awareness of the tradition of Gaelic literature, he also promoted an Irish-language literature cognisant of the living language among Irish-speaking communities. This focus on the community also reflected a concern with the audience for poetry. The dwindling audience for Irish-language literature has been a matter of concern for writers throughout the twentieth century. As the leading Irish-language prose-writer, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, remarked "[i]t is hard for a man to give of his best in a language which seems likely to die before himself, if he lives a few years more".¹⁶⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that the notion of community, rather than audience, has been a recurring concern among poets writing in Irish – as it has been for poets writing in English. This debate would somewhat hinder creativity during the Gaelic Revival with little poetry of merit being produced in this period.

The year 1939 has been described as a "turning point" in the fortunes of Irish-language poetry: "From that time on", J. E. Caerwyn Williams has argued, "the number of genuine poets and the quality of their verse seemed suddenly to increase significantly".¹⁶⁶ Notably, the issue of metrical forms continued to be a major concern both for critics and the major Irish-language poets of this period, Máirtín Ó Díreáin, Seán Ó Ríordáin, and Máire Mhac an tSaoi. As Ó Díreáin wrote in his introduction to his 1957 collection *Ó Mórna agus Dánta Eile*,

In matters of form and style we were greatly handicapped by having no proper models of the kind we needed badly, that is, some authoritative poet attempting to deal with contemporary style [...] We had two choices when we began, to go on using the traditional style which had been squeezed dry long before we were born, or to use the natural power of the language as we knew it. We took the second choice. As Eliot says: *since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us to purify the dialect of the tribe*. So it was with us.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Translation quoted in Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 6.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 325. Translation by Patrick K. Ford.

¹⁶⁶ Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 296.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, pp. 296-297. Translation by Patrick K. Ford.

Ó Díreáin nonetheless drew on both sources in his work. While the speech of the community in which he grew up on Árainn was an important source for his work from his first self-published collection, *Coinnle Geala* (1942), he turned, particularly from the collection *Ó Mórna agus Dánta Eile*, to forms apparent in the work of earlier Irish-language poets.¹⁶⁸ As Louis de Paor notes, Ó Díreáin's language was "culled from the argot of peasant farmers and fishermen in his native Aran and enhanced by echoes of Ó Bruadair, Ó Rathaille and others among his predecessors in the annals of Irish literature".¹⁶⁹

Seán Ó Tuama suggests that it was free verse forms "often quite closely based on songs and quatrains prevalent in the Gaeltacht" which were most common amongst poets of this post-war generation.¹⁷⁰ Ó Tuama has also argued of Ó Díreáin, Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Seán Ó Ríordáin,

Fuair an triúr acu amach dóibh féin, nach mór, mar a deir Eliot, 'the ghost of some simple metre' a bheith ar chúlaibh na saorbhéarsaíocht is scaoilte féin. Ach ní hiad meadarachtaí an ochtú haois déag, ná na meadarachtaí siollacha, a fuaireadar fé lán réim ins na Gaeltachtaí inar chónaíodar nó a thaithíodar. Is é a fuaireadar rompu go nádúrtha mar oidhreacht liteartha, mar thraidisiún beo, ná litríocht bhéil na ndaoine. Agus is iad múnlaí nó foirmeacha na litríochta sin, ón rosc go dtí an cheathrú neamhornáideach, ach iad a bheith bogtha, ábhar, is bun nádúrtha leis an bhfoirm sa chuid is fearr dá saothar.¹⁷¹

[The three of them found out for themselves, that it was necessary, as Eliot said, to have 'the ghost of some simple metre' behind the freest free-verse. But it wasn't the metres of the eighteenth-century, or the syllabic metres, that they found prominent in the Gaeltachts in which they lived or visited.

¹⁶⁸ Mícheál Mac Craith and Michelle MacLeod recognise in this collection "the tautness and sparseness of seventeenth-century epigrams. The artful spontaneity of Ó Díreáin's earlier poems now gives way to a conscious imitation of the Gaelic poets of the past. Furthermore, Ó Díreáin deliberately adopts as his own the concept of the poet in Gaelic tradition as a guardian and transmitter of tradition and culture" [Mícheál Mac Craith and Michelle MacLeod, "Home and Exile: A Comparison of the Poetry of Máirtín Ó Díreáin and Ruairaidh MacThòmais", *New Hibernia Review* 5.2 (2001): 73].

¹⁶⁹ Louis de Paor, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000", *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, Volume II: 1890-2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 319.

¹⁷⁰ Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 7.

¹⁷¹ Seán Ó Tuama, *Aguisíní* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim; Galway: Centre for Irish Studies, [forthcoming])

What they found as a natural literary heritage, as a living tradition, was the oral literature of the people. And a looser version of the shapes or forms of that literature, from the *rosc* to the unornamented quatrain, provides a natural underpinning for the form in their best work.]

While the "jingling verse forms" of Seán Ó Ríordáin's work occasionally recall ballad metres (in poems such as "Rian na gCos" and "An Moladh"), Ó Tuama contends that many of the poems of his most acclaimed collection *Brosna* are "based on popular song in the Irish language".¹⁷²

Ó Ríordáin's contemporary Máire Mhac an tSaoi brought a thorough knowledge of the Gaelic literary tradition to her work, reflected in her use of both bardic and *amhrán* metres in her poetry. She also included several *amhráin ghrá* [love songs], including "Úna Bhán", in her collection of translations *A Heart Full of Thought* and has expressed her wish to be remembered as a writer who developed the literary tradition of Munster, a tradition closely associated, as noted above, with songs in Gaelic:

Ba mhaith liom go gcuimhneofaí ar mo chuid filíochta mar bhláthú ar mheán liteartha na Mumhan. Mionbhláth - ach mar shaothrú ar thraidisiún liteartha na Mumhan. Ba mhaith liom é sin.¹⁷³

[I would like my poetry to be remembered as a flowering of the literary medium of Munster. A small flowering – but as a cultivation of the Munster literary tradition. I would like that.]

Seán Ó Ríordáin is regarded as the great modernist of Irish-language poetry, a writer whose "deliberate disordering of language"¹⁷⁴ produced an original, distinctive and, for many, controversial poetics in Irish. This controversy encompassed not just his peers writing in the Irish language but also leading English-language poets such as Patrick Kavanagh.¹⁷⁵ While Máire Mhac an tSaoi emphasised the importance of engagement with, and responsibility to, the forms and metres of the Gaelic poetry tradition, "Ó Ríordáin's work is a profound challenge to the notion that

¹⁷² Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions*, p. 24.

¹⁷³ Aoife Nic Cormaic, "Agallamh Beo: Máire Mhac an tSaoi", *Beo* 28 (Lúnasa 2003), <http://www.beo.ie/2003-08/agallamh.asp>, (accessed April 25, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ De Paor, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000", p. 16.

¹⁷⁵ For a comprehensive overview of the debate regarding Ó Ríordáin's use of "non-traditional" forms in his poetry, see Seán Ó Coileáin, "Tá ina Chath", *Seán Ó Ríordáin: Beatha agus Saothar* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1982), pp. 234-266.

such a tradition exists and that an unproblematic relationship is possible between the received patterns of Irish and the individual poet".¹⁷⁶ It is significant that this debate, arguably the single most controversial episode surrounding Irish-language poetry in the twentieth century, should have been focused on the issue of metrics. Even Ó Ríordáin's supporters admitted an over-reliance by the poet on ballad forms associated with the English language, with Ó Tuama criticising the "over-obvious intrusion of English influences" on Ó Ríordáin's work.¹⁷⁷

In common with both Mhac an tSaoi and Ó Díreáin, Ó Ríordáin was also deeply aware of the long tradition of Gaelic poetry preceding him, and his later work particularly emphasised the importance of returning again to the work of earlier poets, while also engaging with contemporary Irish-speaking communities, exemplified in his poem "Fill Arís" ["Return Again"].¹⁷⁸

Early Twentieth Century English-Language Poetry

While Irish poets writing in Irish in this period faced the difficulties of a declining language and audience, their English-language contemporaries had to contend with yet another challenge. Irish poetry in English in the early twentieth century was dominated by the imposing figure of William Butler Yeats. Austin Clarke spoke for Irish poets generally when he described the Nobel Laureate as "rather like an enormous oak-tree, which, of course, kept us in the shade and of course we always hoped that in the end we could reach the sun, but the shadow of that great oak-tree is still there".¹⁷⁹ Despite his call to Irish poets to "sing the peasantry", Yeats had been concerned to separate poetry from its historical association with music in Ireland, apart from its use as a "symbol of imaginative (linguistic) aspiration".¹⁸⁰ However, he continued to use forms associated with music, such as the ballad, in an attempt to connect with a popular Irish tradition. The ballad would also continue to provide an enabling form for Irish poets emerging in the early twentieth century, including Patrick Kavanagh.

¹⁷⁶ De Paor, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000", p. 16.

¹⁷⁷ Ó Tuama, *Repossessions*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁸ Seán Ó Ríordáin, "Fill Arís", *Brosna* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal and Dill, 1964), p. 41.

¹⁷⁹ W. R. Rodgers (ed.), *Irish Literary Portraits* (London: BBC 1972), p. 72.

¹⁸⁰ White, *The Keeper's Recital*, p. 116.

Patrick Kavanagh

The ballad provided the form for much of Kavanagh's early poetry, and indeed it was a form the poet returned to throughout his life. As Antoinette Quinn recalls,

Much of Kavanagh's early versifying attempted to imitate the homespun models of *Ireland's Own* or *Old Moore's Almanac* or the popular ballads found on the coloured ballad sheets sold at fairs in Dundalk and Carrickmacross. In the beginning the verse was designed for family or public entertainment, like his father's melodeon-playing or the stories told by customers and hangers-on in the cobbler's shop. In the 1920s, when the possession of a wireless set was still a rarity (the Kavanaghs did not own one until 1933), the local community was largely self-reliant in the matter of entertainment and the talent of holding an audience was highly prized.¹⁸¹

Quinn also notes that one of Kavanagh's earliest influences was the local ballad-maker, John McEnaney, popularly known as the Bard of Callenberg.¹⁸² This early experience of a local artist in a close relationship with his community had a significant influence on Kavanagh throughout his career and informed his poetry. For Kavanagh the local provided the material for great poetry while also enabling a work to have significance beyond "these whitethorn hedges".¹⁸³ "Parochialism" he once remarked "is universal: it deals with the fundamentals",¹⁸⁴ a position apparent in his sonnet "Epic".¹⁸⁵ It also contributed to an accessible form that has made him one of the most admired Irish poets in Ireland in the twentieth century.

Kavanagh's father was an accomplished melodeon player (recalled in the poem "A Christmas Childhood"), and Patrick played both the

¹⁸¹ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), p. 50.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Patrick Kavanagh, "Innocence", Patrick Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1999), p. 48.

¹⁸⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse* (London: MacGibbon & Kee 1967, 1973), p. 164.

¹⁸⁵ Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry*, pp. 47-48. Brian Devine has detected the influence of Gaelic song poetry on Kavanagh's "Epic" in its use of a "half-conversational verse [...] so characteristic of the Gaelic folk-poets": "I inclined/ / To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin/ / Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind/ / He said: I made the Illiad from such/ / A local row [...]" [Quote from Daniel Corkery included in Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, pp. 155-156].

melodeon and tin-whistle while growing up. As his brother Peter has noted, “Patrick loved music and for a time was a member of the Inniskeen Piper’s band [...] He played the melodeon reasonably well – at least to his own enjoyment”.¹⁸⁶ As Peter’s remark suggests, Kavanagh was never an accomplished musician and preferred singing. He was known to perform on occasion his favourite ballads, some composed by himself.¹⁸⁷ Another early influence on the poet was his teacher in Kednamensha National School, Brigid Agnew, who introduced Kavanagh to the songs of Thomas Moore. Agnew was transformed, in Kavanagh’s fictionalised autobiography *The Green Fool*, into the figure of Miss Moore who provides the young protagonist of the novel with “Tom Moore for singing lessons each day”.¹⁸⁸

One of Kavanagh’s most successful early poems, a poem that also remembers the centrality of traditional music and dance in his community, articulates his sometimes uncomfortable relationship with this community. While “Enniskeen Road: July Evening” suggests a wish to connect and belong, there is also a sense of the importance of the poet’s distance, a theme that recurs throughout Irish poetry in the twentieth century:

The bicycles go by in twos and threes -
 There’s a dance in Billy Brennan’s barn tonight,
 And there’s the half-talk code of mysteries
 And the wink-and-elbow language of delight.
 Half-past eight and there is not a spot
 Upon a mile of road, no shadow thrown
 That might turn out a man or woman, not
 A footfall tapping secrecies of stone.

I have what every poet hates in spite
 Of all the solemn talk of contemplation.
 Oh, Alexander Selkirk knew the plight
 Of being king and government and nation.
 A road, a mile of kingdom. I am king
 Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Peter Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: 1904-1967, a life chronicle* (New York: Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 2000), p. 47.

¹⁸⁷ Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: The Columbia Press, 2000), p. 83.

¹⁸⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 84. See also Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 100 for further on this.

¹⁸⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 6.

As Quinn has noted, Kavanagh was a poet for whom the audience was important: "As the punning title of 'Auditor's In' indicates, he was an audience-conscious poet; a working journalist, he wrote with the expectation of being read".¹⁹⁰

In one of the poet's most popular compositions "On Raglan Road", Kavanagh "reorientated in a city setting one of the oldest traditional ballads",¹⁹¹ "The Dawning of the Day", a popular translation of the eighteenth-century *aisling* "Fáinne Gael an Lae", the tune of which Kavanagh learned while playing with the Inniskeen Piper's band. "On Raglan Road" is a poem arguably better known today as a song and one Kavanagh himself was fond of singing.¹⁹² Indeed, folksong was a recurring influence on Kavanagh's work, including the poem "If ever you go to Dublin Town":

I saw his name with a hundred others
In a book in the library,
It said he had never fully achieved
His potentiality.
O he was slothful,
Fol dol de di do,
He was slothful
I tell you.¹⁹³

Kavanagh sings a version of this poem in his introduction to a recording of his readings made by Claddagh records in the 1960s.¹⁹⁴

While Kavanagh could be dismissive of the Gaelic tradition, remarking "that in a thousand years Ireland has not produced a major poet or indeed a good minor poet",¹⁹⁵ Pearse Hutchinson has recalled Kavanagh's enjoyment of hearing songs sung in Irish, despite his description of contemporary Irish-language poetry as "the doodling and phrase-makings

¹⁹⁰ Antoinette Quinn, "Introduction", *Patrick Kavanagh: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. xxx.

¹⁹¹ Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 235.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁹³ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: W.W. Norton 1973), p. 173

¹⁹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, *Almost Everything*, Claddagh Records, 2005, <http://www.claddaghrecords.com/www/product.asp?PID=66&cID=4&c=272358>, (accessed July 10, 2005).

¹⁹⁵ He made this remark on Radio Éireann in 1952, and it is noted in Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: A biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (The Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1979), p. 266.

of mediocrities”.¹⁹⁶ Hutchinson remembers meeting Kavanagh in McDaid’s pub in the 1950s, when Kavanagh requested a rendition of the song “Cill Chais” from Hutchinson’s friend, Muiris Ó Duibhir:

‘Can yeh sing Kilcash?’ ‘I can.’ ‘In Irish or English?’ ‘In Irish.’ ‘Sing it.’
Do chan Muiris Cill Chais agus do chan sé go maith é. Agus bhí Kavanagh
ansan agus a dhá lámh trasna ar a chéile agus é á luascadh féin agus an-
taitneamh go deo á bhaint aige as an amhrán. Mhol sé go spéir é¹⁹⁷

[‘Can yeh sing Kilcash?’ ‘I can.’ ‘In Irish or English?’ ‘In Irish.’ ‘Sing it.’
Muiris sang Cill Chais and he sang it well. And Kavanagh was there with
his two arms crossed, rocking himself and getting great satisfaction out of
the song. He praised the song highly]

Dillon Johnston has suggested that the final line of one of Kavanagh’s finest poems, “Canal Bank Walk”, “parallels the trailing off of the Irish *sean-nós* singer who rapidly slides out of his moving lyric. Both artists depend on the audience’s sense of the form against which the poet or singer plays”: “For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven/From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.”¹⁹⁸

Johnston has also picked out the poem “Art McCooey” as among the “best poems” in *A Soul for Sale* (1947).¹⁹⁹ In “Art McCooey”, Kavanagh reimagines the eighteenth-century Ulster poet/singer (and writer of the famous song “Úr-Chill an Chreagáin” [“The Churchyard at Creagán”]) in the rural locale of County Monaghan. McCooey (or Mac Cumhaigh in Irish) lived not far from Inniskeen in the south Armagh townland of Cregan. He worked as a farm labourer and according to local legend in that area would fall into a “poetic trance while carting dung for a farmer and kept coming and going with the same load until he was brought back to his senses by a yell from his irate employer”.²⁰⁰ Kavanagh adopts the voice of the poet composing poetry from the ordinary occurrences of rural life:

¹⁹⁶ Patrick Kavanagh quoted in Ó Coileáin, “Tá ina Chath”, p. 249.

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous, “‘Rus in Urbe’ comhrá le Pearse Hutchinson Ráth Garbh, Baile Átha Cliath, Eanáir 1988”, *Innti* 11 (Cáisc 1988): 59.

¹⁹⁸ Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 137. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 295.

¹⁹⁹ Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce*, p. 132.

²⁰⁰ Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 154.

Wash out the cart with a bucket of water and a wangle
Of wheaten straw. Jupiter looks down.
Unlearnedly and unreasonably poetry is shaped
Awkwardly but alive in the unmeasured womb.²⁰¹

Despite his protestations, Kavanagh did value the Gaelic literary tradition but only as articulated through an authentic contemporary voice such as that apparent in this poem.

Austin Clarke

Much of Austin Clarke's poetry constituted a sustained critique of the legacy of Catholicism in Southern Ireland in his own attempt to articulate a distinct voice beyond the shadow of Yeats's "enormous oak-tree". Inspired by the example of revivalist figures such as Douglas Hyde, Clarke endeavoured to bring together Irish literature from both the Irish and English-language traditions. His early collections including *The Vengeance of Fionn* (1917), *The Fires of Baal* (1918), and *The Sword of the Nest* (1921), drew inspiration, much as Yeats did throughout his career, from Ireland's ancient legendary tales. These publications were influenced stylistically by Yeats's work but Clarke was also inspired by his mentors at University College Dublin, Thomas McDonagh, Stephen McKenna and George Sigerson (as well as Douglas Hyde), and each imparted to him an appreciation of the Gaelic song tradition. As he wrote in his autobiography,

As an undergraduate I escaped at one step from the snobbery of school life and discovered the *Love Songs of Connaught*, those poems and translations which had started the Literary Revival. Their poet-translator was on the rostrum, and, though I could not always follow the swift rush of Dr. Hyde's western Irish, I knew from his gestures that he was speaking a living language [...] From [Dr. Sigerson] I learned about the subtle art of our formal poetry. Then, to complete so much good fortune, there was Stephen MacKenna - moody, eloquent, a man consumed by some inner flame. He would turn from Rabelais to roll out some passionate protest of Ua Bruadair, forget Plotinus to denounce those who belittled the elegance of Carolan and failed to appreciate his rhythmic improvisations.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 17.

²⁰² Austin Clarke, *Twice Round the Black Church: Early Memories of Ireland and England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 169.

Clarke later adapted in English several of Turlough O'Carolan's compositions including "Mild Mabel Kelly",²⁰³ and "Peggy Browne". The nineteenth-century translator Samuel Ferguson was also an important source for much of Clarke's early work and Peter Denman suggests that the poem *The Vengeance of Fionn* stands "in a complementary relationship to Ferguson's ["The Death of Dermid"]".²⁰⁴ Denman contends that Gaelic poetry, and Clarke's early adaptations, particularly the poems, "The Young Woman of Beare", and, "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", afforded the poet "a voice which will enable him, eventually, to speak obliquely of personal matters".²⁰⁵ He also suggests that Clarke was helped to "find his voice [in the collection *Night and Morning* (1938)] by feeling that the basic impulse behind his utterance is validated by a link with a venerable tradition".²⁰⁶ Clarke became increasingly interested in the Ireland of the Celtic-Romanesque (the eighth to the tenth-centuries) and poetry from this period informed his work particularly from the mid-1920s onwards.

A considerable change in Clarke's work was apparent in the 1925 collection, *A Cattedrive in Connaught*,²⁰⁷ which, as Eamon Grennan has noted, revealed a different style "being much more dramatically colloquial in speech, character, and poetic texture".²⁰⁸ Grennan recognises in the poems of this collection an attempt by Clarke to establish a poet's traditional relationship with the people: "he is making a deliberate attempt to close the gap in the Irish poetic tradition opened by the traumatic transition from the Irish to the English language"²⁰⁹ epitomised for Grennan in a poem such as "A Curse":

Black luck upon you Seamus Mac-an-Bhaird
Who shut the door upon a poet

²⁰³ Seán Ó Riada also recorded a version of this tune as "Máible Shéimh Ní Cheallaigh" included on the album *Ó Riada's Farewell*.

²⁰⁴ Peter Denman, "Austin Clarke: Tradition, Memory and Our Lot", *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 65.

²⁰⁵ Denman, "Austin Clarke: Tradition, Memory and Our Lot", p. 67.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁰⁷ As the title of this volume suggests, the collection reflects Clarke's attempt "to come to terms with the Ulster Epic", *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, particularly in the title poem. See G. Craig Tapping, *Austin Clarke: A Study of his Writings* (Dublin: The Academy Press, 1981), pp. 46-49.

²⁰⁸ Eamon Grennan, *Facing the Music* (Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 1999), p. 149.

²⁰⁹ Grennan, *Facing the Music*, p. 149.

Nor put red wine and bread upon the board;
My song is greater than your hoard,
Although no running children know it
Between the sea and the windy stones.²¹⁰

Much of Clarke's poetry from the 1929 collection *Pilgrimage and other Poems* through the 1930s is characterised by an attempt to put Gaelic speech-rhythms, metre and content into English poetry. Among the poems included in *Pilgrimage* is "The Scholar", a poem that in its assonantal pattern very closely approximates the model of the Gaelic poem, "An Mac Léighinn" that inspired it. John Montague has compared the rich play of sound patterns throughout the poem with the "characteristic embroidery of Irish music".²¹¹

Summer delights the scholar
With knowledge and reason.
Who is happy in hedgerow
Or meadow as he is?

Paying no dues to the parish,
He argues in logic
And has no care of cattle
But a satchel and stick.²¹²

By drawing on Gaelic metre, Clarke attempted to connect his poetry with an historical Irish poetic tradition, particularly that of the bardic poets, in a move away from the mythical allusions characteristic of his earliest work. In taking inspiration from the bardic poets, Clarke was moving beyond the late romantic notions apparent in Yeats's comments and work. As G. Craig Tapping has noted:

The romantic poet envisages himself as the seer in whose individual imagination is to be conceived the elements of poetic truth. The bardic poet adopted no such pretence; his voice was from within society. Its function was to record, satirise, explain, even to entertain. Its method was its craft, learned by the poet and in turn developed by him.²¹³

²¹⁰ Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974), p. 118.

²¹¹ John Montague, *A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his seventieth birthday, 9 May 1966* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1966), p. 8.

²¹² Clarke, *Collected Poems*, p. 162.

²¹³ Tapping, *Austin Clarke: A Study of his Writings*, pp. 17-18.

While Clarke's early work, influenced by Yeats, evinced the romantic mode, he eventually developed into a "classicist who believed in the social relevance of his poetry and frequently tried to explain its preoccupations to a wider public".²¹⁴ Dissatisfaction with the public's response to his published poetry may have influenced his decision to bring his poetry onto the stage through his formidable body of verse-plays. These include *The Son of Learning* (1927) and *As the Crow Flies* (1943), both of which are set, like some of his poetry, in Ireland's distant past and draw on Gaelic literature. The Dublin Verse Speaking Society, which he founded with Roibeard Ó Faracháin in 1938, also performed Clarke's poetry and verse plays on Radio Éireann between 1940 and 1953.²¹⁵ As Conor O'Malley observes,

He persistently maintained that poetry was not meant to be a 'silent art.' When he completed a poem, he was 'seized by an almost uncontrollable and atavistic instinct to rush out and shout, groan or by other vocal means pour his lines into the ear of the first spectator.' Clearly, it was not enough for the inner ear of the reader to 'hear' the poetry. It needed to be spoken aloud if the nuances of verbal pattern and music were to be fully realised.²¹⁶

Clarke's poetry from the late 1920s onwards would move beyond the personal and the private to consider issues of public concern but in a more accessible language through which he hoped to "communicate with his public".²¹⁷ His primary purpose became "to influence his reader's opinions and to challenge their moral assumptions".²¹⁸ He often directly engaged with Irish society in a stark and candid manner, revealing a searing critique of the Catholic Church and the repressive society he perceived in Ireland, apparent in poems such as "Penal Law":

Burn Ovid with the rest. Lovers will find
A hedge-school for themselves and learn by heart
All that the clergy banish from the mind,
When hands are joined and head bows in the dark.²¹⁹

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

²¹⁵ Conor O'Malley, *A Poet's Theatre* (Dublin: Elo Press Limited, 1988), p. 17.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Tapping, *Austin Clarke*, p. 26.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 21.

Clarke had been an enthusiast for the violin in younger life²²⁰ and, while his poetry was informed by his knowledge of the Gaelic literary tradition, he also refers to traditional music in his compositions, suggesting an awareness of the importance of music to the transmission of Gaelic poetry. His allusions to music indicate a belief in the antiquity and authenticity as well as the important communicative function of music. His novel, *The Singing Men at Cashel*, features the character Anier MacConglinne who expresses a wish to "perform the oldest and best known of Irish jigs, heel to toe, together in the dark".²²¹ Clarke's 1963 collection, *Flight to Africa and Other Poems*, incorporated a section entitled "Eighteenth-century Harp Songs", including the Turlough O'Carolan adaptations mentioned above.²²² This collection also contained a poem entitled "Aisling", one of several in Clarke's *oeuvre*. His awareness of the compelling communicative role of traditional music was most clearly articulated in one of his final compositions, "The Healing of Mis". This poem, described as having "overtones of the traditional ballad",²²³ includes a description of the powerful effects of harp-playing on listeners, including the curing of illnesses:

Holding his harp, the consolation of his bosom,
He played a suantree with grace-notes that enspelled
Traditional tunes and, smiling quietly at his ruse,
Waited. Soon his sense knew the loneliness
Stood by, a bareness modestly draped in tangle-
Black hair,
With timeless hands, listening to the special
Melling that drew and soothed her mind [...]²²⁴

Conclusion

There is a long history internationally of an intimate connection between poetry and music. Ireland is no exception in this regard. While music played an important role in the transmission of poetry in early Ireland and during the bardic period, the combination of music and poetry

²²⁰ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 75.

²²¹ Austin Clarke, *The Singing Men at Cashel* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1936), p. 154.

²²² Clarke, *Collected Poems*, pp. 295-298.

²²³ Tapping, *Austin Clarke*, p. 307.

²²⁴ Clarke, *Collected Poems*, p. 509.

in song performed a vital function in bringing communities together and engaging them with their past following the decline of Gaelic Ireland.

With the linguistic change of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nationalists (now frequently writing in English) attempting to articulate a distinctive Irish literature often turned to music and song for inspiration and accompaniment. Both were considered to offer an authentic connection to a more unified Irish past while contributing to the formation of an audience for poets' work in the present. Also apparent in the work of poets, particularly as the nineteenth century progressed, is the tension between the concepts of "audience" and "community". While music might contribute to the transmission of a poet's work to a larger audience than the work might garner alone, it did not assure poets of a community of engagement with the work itself. Music could, as Yeats suggested, steal "the show".²²⁵ Poets, while increasingly frustrated with both fickle and declining audiences, sought an engaged community for their work. While Yeats was an important poet in this regard, this continued to be a concern in the work of Austin Clarke and, more recently, Thomas Kinsella.

Austin Clarke in many respects is a predecessor to Kinsella in his attempt to connect Ireland's ancient literature with twentieth-century Irish poetry in English. As Dillon Johnston has noted,

Separated from the last great Irish Catholic poets by their urban and modern settings and by their loss of the mother tongue, [Clarke and Kinsella] developed a special attachment for Irish and for poets such as Carolan, Ó Bruadair, and Ó Rathaille. Consequently Clarke and Kinsella often adopt the role of intermediate copyist or redactor for the lost dark ages of Irish poetry.²²⁶

Within Clarke's work one finds concerns apparent in the work of Kinsella, the poet central to the next chapter: to connect with a poetic tradition which was rapidly being lost in its original language while seeking an engaged contemporary community (similar to that believed to have existed in the past) for his compositions in the present. For Kinsella, traditional music and song have played important informing and enabling roles in this process.

²²⁵ K. P. S. Jochum, *W. B. Yeats: a classified bibliography of criticism including additions to Allan Wade's Bibliography of the writings of W. B. Yeats and a section on the Irish literary and dramatic revival* (Folkestone, Eng.: Dawson, 1978), p. 943.

²²⁶ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 75.

CHAPTER THREE

BRIDGING THE GAP: THE POETRY OF THOMAS KINSELLA

Reviewing Richard Murphy's first volume, *The Archaeology of Love*, in December 1955, Thomas Kinsella welcomed the new poet but gloomily pronounced that '[a] volume from an Irish poet is a rarity in these desolate days.' It is a measure of the change - more appropriately, the transformation - poetry in Ireland has experienced in subsequent decades that Kinsella's pronouncement now seems excessive. Yet he could not have anticipated either the succession of major Irish poets - not just Murphy but John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley - or the remarkable regeneration of Austin Clarke.¹

The "transformation" Brian John notes above in the fortunes of Irish poetry since the 1950s was not confined to the literary realm. The appointment of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach in 1959 heralded a new era of economic expansion and cultural change, inspired by the economic expansionist plans of the secretary of the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker. This change of focus, from the economic nationalism associated with Éamon de Valera, also accelerated the transformation of Ireland from a primarily rural society to an increasingly urban one while opening the country to new economic, political and cultural influences. Telefís Éireann, Ireland's first indigenous television channel, began broadcasting on 31st December, 1961. In 1965 Ireland applied for the first time for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) and was finally admitted in 1973. In 1967, the Minister for Education, Donagh O'Malley, introduced free secondary education for all. In the same year, Ireland's strict Censorship of Publications Act was amended significantly so that books which had been banned as "indecent or obscene" could now only be banned for twelve years without being resubmitted for reconsideration. A similar amendment was made to the Censorship of

¹ Brian John, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella* (Washington: The Catholic University Of America Press, 1996), p. 1.

Films act in 1970 which permitted the resubmission of films which had been banned over seven years previously.²

While Lemass's policies brought economic success in the 1960s, Terence Brown has documented the "much concerned, even heated, discussion" which the rapid changes in Irish society prompted. Central to this debate was the issue of national identity, "in circumstances", as Brown continues, "where many of the traditional essentialist definitions – language, tradition, culture and distinctive ideology – were widely felt to fly in the face of social reality".³ Furthermore, the change from a primarily rural to an increasingly urban society "threatened the continuity of the Irish language and of rural traditions important to Ireland's national identity".⁴

Significantly, while Irish society was undergoing a period of considerable change during the 1960s, traditional music experienced an unprecedented revival.⁵ As discussed in the introduction, this music, and its related song tradition, provided a point of perceived continuity and authenticity in a time of transition. A central figure in this revival was Cork-born composer and musician, Seán Ó Riada, who collaborated with some of the major Irish poets to emerge in this period, including John Montague, Richard Murphy and Thomas Kinsella,⁶ the central focus of this chapter. While each of these poets articulated a sense of discontinuity

² Kevin Rockett, "Film Censorship and the State", *Film Directions* 9 (1980): 12.

³ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 255.

⁴ Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 39.

⁵ Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, pp. 262-263.

⁶ In a communication with the present author (Personal letter, November 2, 2004), Kinsella was resistant to the idea that either traditional music or song, or his relationship with Ó Riada, had a significant influence on his work in this period. Kinsella emphasised instead that "American and other modern poetry" were his primary interests. While I do not wish to underestimate the importance of these influences on his work, particularly the poets Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Robert Lowell, it seems remarkable that his close relationship with such a seminal figure as Ó Riada, or his encounter with traditional song – described in the poem "The Shoals Returning" – could have had no influence whatsoever on the poetry which emerged, particularly between the late 1950s and early 1970s. The very fact that a poem exists – and an extensive commentary – inspired partly by Kinsella's experience of traditional singing in Irish, as well as the recurring references to Ó Riada within his work, requires that we at least consider this encounter, if only to come to a better understanding of the specific poems themselves.

in their work and comments, each found inspiration for their poetry, and occasionally accompaniment for their readings, in traditional music and song. In this chapter I want to chart in particular some significant developments in Kinsella's work in this period, and indeed, intriguing parallels, and shared emphases, apparent in the comments and work of both Kinsella and Ó Riada. For Kinsella, his experience of traditional song preceded the incorporation of Gaelic literature into his poetry while his recurring emphasis on the audience's role in the act of communication echoes his own identification of a central characteristic of the performance of traditional song, or *sean-nós*, in Irish.

Seán Ó Riada

Seán Ó Riada has been described as the "outstanding artistic figure in the Ireland of the sixties"⁷ and as being responsible for "transforming" the status of traditional music.⁸ Ó Riada's life was dedicated to finding, and becoming one with, an authentic tradition of Irish culture and music. He began as a composer of classical music, influenced by the total serialism movement, prominent in classical music during the 1950s, an influence apparent in his classical compositions.

Over time, Ó Riada's interest grew in the various forms of Irish music including the pre-nineteenth-century music associated with harpists such as Turlough O'Carolan and contemporary traditional dance music, comprising primarily jigs, reels and hornpipes. At all times, one senses in his work and in his writings a search for authenticity of sound, place and community. Ó Riada eventually moved from Dublin, where he worked as musical director with the Abbey Theatre, to live in the Cork Gaeltacht of Cúil Aodha in 1964. Here he formed the *Cór Chúil Aodha*, for which he composed his still popular *Cúil Aodha Mass*, re-released in November 2005 as *Ceol an Aifrinne agus Aifreann 2* by Gael Linn.⁹ His decision to live and compose in Cúil Aodha represented Ó Riada's continuing engagement with the Irish language and culture, to create, what Thomas Kinsella has described as, "an even closer relationship between music and

⁷ Louis Marcus, "Seán Ó Riada and the Ireland of the 1960s", *The Achievement of Seán Ó Riada*, ed. by Bernard Harris and Grattan Freyer (Terrybaun: Irish Humanities Centre and Keohanes, 1981), p. 16.

⁸ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998), p. 147.

⁹ Gael Linn, "Seán Ó Riada: Ceol An Aifrinne & Aifreann 2", <http://www.gaellinn.ie/GaelLinn/MusicStore/ProductInfo.aspx?ProductSKU=ORIADACD02>, (accessed December 1, 2005).

community”.¹⁰ Indeed, Kinsella has described Ó Riada’s greatest achievement as his “revival of the old native relationship between Irish traditional music and the Irish community, and his renovation of it for the twentieth century”.¹¹

Ó Riada provided arrangements for films from the late 1950s onwards including the enormously popular documentary *Mise Éire* (1959) as well as the films *The Playboy of the Western World* (1962) and *An Tine Beo* (1966). He also formed Ceoltóirí Chualann, the seminal traditional music group whose dynamic new sound brought traditional music into a “brave new world”.¹² Throughout all these endeavours, as Thomas Kinsella notes, Ó Riada

reached out and swiftly captured a national audience, lifted the level of musical practice and appreciation, restored to his people an entire cultural dimension, and added no little to the gaiety of the nation.¹³

Ó Riada was a key figure both in the transformation of the fortunes of traditional music in the twentieth century and the increasing engagement of poets with this music and related song traditions.

Thomas Kinsella

Carolyn Rosenberg has suggested that it was Thomas Kinsella’s father who passed on the family interest in music, and particularly traditional Irish music, to his son Thomas,¹⁴ an interest apparent in Kinsella’s allusion to his grandfather’s playing of the reel and traditional ballad “The Wind that Shakes the Barley” in the poem “His Father’s Hands”:

[...] his bow hand scarcely moving,
scraping in the dark corner near the fire,
his plump fingers shifting on the strings.

To his deaf, inclined head
he hugged the fiddle’s body,
whispering with the tune

¹⁰ Thomas Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹² Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 148.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁴ Carolyn A. Rosenberg, “Let Our Gaze Blaze: The Recent Poetry of Thomas Kinsella” (unpublished doctoral dissertation: Kent State University Graduate College, 1980), pp. 89-90.

with breaking heart
whene'er I hear
in privacy, across a blocked void,

the wind that shakes the barley [...] ¹⁵

Another tune his grandfather might have played, "Tabhair dom do lámh", ¹⁶ is mentioned, in translation, in the "Exit" section of *Out of Ireland* (1987):

The dance is at our feet.
Give me your hand.
A careful step [...] ¹⁷

In *St Catherine's Clock* (1987), Kinsella remembers his aunt Bridie "the pair of us so alike", whom he describes as "the musical one of the family". ¹⁸ He has also recalled his father surrounding him with both books and music as he grew up, while his brother John went on to make a distinguished career for himself as a composer. ¹⁹

¹⁵ Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 177-178.

¹⁶ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin notes that this tune was written by the sixteenth-century harper, Rory "Dall" Ó Catháin, for the Scottish noble Lady Eglinton [Ó hAllmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 70].

¹⁷ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 267.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁹ Thomas Kinsella, "The Poets", *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* 17 (1958): 2. Indeed, the poet's father remembers John (who is featured in the poems "After the Service" and "From My Journal" in *Personal Places* (1990)) as a child "laughing in bed while reading mini-scores". In 1968, John (also known as Jack) retired from an executive position with a computer company and joined the Music Department of Radio Telefís Éireann (R.T.É), where he rose to the position of Head of Music. He resigned in 1988 to focus full time on composition. He composed a number of orchestral pieces and many pieces of chamber music, mostly (in common with Seán Ó Riada) in the atonal tradition. His compositions have included a setting for Kinsella's publication *A Selected Life*, written as a tribute to Seán Ó Riada [Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", pp. 90-91. *Aosdána*: An affiliation of creative artists in Ireland, "John Kinsella" <http://www.artscouncil.ie/aosdana/biogs/music/johnkinsella.html>, (accessed November 28, 2005)]. Interestingly, while John accepted membership of the government supported artists' group *Aosdána*, Thomas refused, remarking that "I was invited early on but decided not to be a part of it. It was a matter of standards. When I saw the membership, I thought I would be standing for higher standards

When he began writing poetry at the age of eighteen, Kinsella's first poem was titled "Ode to Music".²⁰ In his younger life he hoped to produce music as well as poetry. In 1946, the year he entered university, Rosenberg tells us "[Kinsella] planned a versatile career",²¹ that included music and apparently dabbled in the composition and performance of music between 1946 and 1951.²² Indeed, in a 1962 interview with Peter Orr, he admitted his "favourite poet is in fact Anon. – all songs of all time, and Robbie Burns".²³

Throughout his career, music, and allusions to it, has featured regularly in Kinsella's work. "Dusk Music", "Night Songs", and "Song of the Night" are among the titles in his *Collected Poems*, while his 2006 volume *Marginal Economy* includes the poems "Songs of Exile" and "Songs of Understanding".²⁴ There is also a section entitled "Song" in *Moralities* (1960) while titles of his self-published Peppercanister volumes have included *Song of the Night* (1978) and *Songs of the Psyche* (1985). Other publications have included three books based on the poet's recollections of the life and premature death of his close friend, Seán Ó Riada: *A Selected Life* (1972), *Vertical Man* (1973) and *Out of Ireland. Her Vertical Smile* (1987), while including further reminiscences of Ó Riada, takes its inspiration from two works by the Austrian composer Gustav Mahler, his eighth symphony and his final composition *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), which Kinsella has indicated he listened to "again and again" with Ó Riada in the composer's apartment in Lower Mount Street, Dublin, in the early 1950s.²⁵

As *Her Vertical Smile* suggests, classical music has been an important inspiration for Kinsella and he has spoken of his intention to write "a poem in thanks to Bach, for extricating order and presenting it as he does".²⁶ One senses the same gratefulness to Mahler in *Her Vertical Smile*, which Kinsella has described as being "on a theme of violence, order and

out of it rather than in it" [Belinda McKeon and Sylvia Thompson, "Is it worth joining Aosdana?" *The Irish Times*, 21 December 2001, <http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/features/2001/1221/archive.01122100061.html>, (accessed December 1, 2005)].

²⁰ Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²³ Thomas Kinsella, *The Poet Speaks: Interviews With Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 108.

²⁴ Kinsella, *Marginal Economy* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2006), pp. 29-30, 32-33.

²⁵ Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead*, p. 65.

²⁶ Andrew Fitzsimons, "An Interview with Thomas Kinsella", *Poetry Ireland Review* 82 (2005): 91.

music".²⁷ Based on Mahler, and set in Europe before the outbreak of the First World War, as Brian John has noted,

music dominates the work, providing both narrative material and technique. The poem draws heavily upon events in Mahler's musical career to illustrate Kinsella's major concerns, while the division into 'Overture,' two movements separated by an 'Intermezzo,' and a concluding 'Coda' is supplemented further by the musical interweaving of themes and analogies.²⁸

Whether as inspiration, or an important recurring theme, music has provided Kinsella with a vital resource for his poetry.

Kinsella and Gaelic Literature

As well as being an acclaimed English-language poet, Kinsella has been one of the most important translators of Gaelic literature into English. His work includes a translation of the early Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*] as *The Táin* (1969), and translations of Gaelic poetry in both *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981) and *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986). "Translation", as Ciaran Carson has noted, "is one way of trying to come to terms with the already created conscience of the Irish language".²⁹ However, while Kinsella's first translations appeared in 1954 with *The Breastplate of St. Patrick* and *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*,³⁰ few of his earliest poems in English from the 1950s reflected his interest in Gaelic literature.³¹ It was with his 1960 chapbook *Moralities* (which was included in *Downstream* (1962)) that themes from this literature began to appear in his work. In the "Love" section of *Moralities*, Kinsella draws upon Irish mythology and literary history with the poems "Seventeenth Century Landscape: Near Ballyferriter", and "Sisters". Both

²⁷ *Her Vertical Smile* peppercanister, 1985, flyer and price list.

²⁸ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 212.

²⁹ Ciaran Carson, "Sweeneys Ancient and Modern", *The Honest Ulsterman* 76 (Autumn 1984): 73.

³⁰ An important initial influence on Kinsella's decision to translate Gaelic texts was the founder of Dolmen Press, Liam Miller, who encouraged Kinsella's translation efforts and published both *The Breastplate of St. Patrick* and *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*, as well as *The Táin* (1969). Miller had set up Dolmen Press in 1951 and also published Kinsella's earliest collections including *Poems* (1956) and *Another September* (1958).

³¹ See also John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 114.

poems feature the seventeenth-century Corca Dhuibhne [the Dingle Peninsula] chieftain and poet of Norman descent, Piaras Feiritéar [Pierce Ferriter], who was eventually captured and executed in 1653 following his participation in the Rising of 1641. Importantly, in a significant act of identification, Kinsella adopts the voice of the seventeenth-century poet in the first of these poems:

A last short-cut along Croaghmarhin's base
Before the dark, the set sun at my back;
On shales of desolation ends my race.³²

The second poem features Feiritéar's wife, Sybil, who, in grief at her husband's death, threw herself from the walls of Feiritéar's castle in Corca Dhuibhne onto rocks below. Kinsella also connects her to an earlier period of Gaelic composition by comparing her death to that of the mythical "Deirdre of the Sorrows", the female protagonist in *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*, who kills herself following her lover Naoise's killing under the orders of the king of Ulster, Conchobar Mac Nessa:

Grim Deirdre sought the stony fist, her grief
Capped at last by insult. Pierce's bride,
Sybil Ferriter, fluttered like a leaf
And fell in courtly love to stain the tide.
Each for a murdered husband – hanged in silk
Or speared in harness – threw her body wide,
And offered treachery a bloody milk;
Each cast the other's shadow when she died.³³

Kinsella's interest in Feiritéar is evident in his work following a holiday spent, along with Seán Ó Riada and his family, at Baile an Fheirtéaraigh [Ballyferriter] in Corca Dhuibhne in 1959.³⁴ He has described it in some detail in *Fifteen Dead*, in which he depicts the visit for Ó Riada as a "kind of liberation".³⁵ "But a profounder consequence of our holiday", Kinsella continues in the same essay, "was his unabated new drive toward Irish music".³⁶ This drive was signalled later that year when George Morrison's *Mise Éire* was released with a soundtrack (orchestral

³² Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 27.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁴ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 55.

³⁵ Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead*, p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70. See also Tomás Ó Canainn, *Seán Ó Riada: His Life and Work* (Cork: Collins, 2003), pp. 34-35.

settings for traditional tunes including "Róisín Dubh" and "Sliabh na mBan") provided by Ó Riada.³⁷ Its release was a major national event taking, as Ruth Barton has noted, "the Irish press by storm, garnering ecstatic reviews, even in the anglophile *Irish Times*, whilst filling cinemas".³⁸ It played a significant role in the revival of fortunes for traditional music throughout the 1960s.

While Brian John suggests that Ó Riada's work with traditional Irish music "paralleled in many ways [Kinsella's] own translations and increasing preoccupation with the Gaelic tradition",³⁹ Carolyn Rosenberg finds that Ó Riada's interest in delving "ever deeper into the music and lifestyle of the Gaeltacht was to influence Kinsella's own increased use of traditional Irish literature and material in his work".⁴⁰

Among the poems inspired by Kinsella's visit to Baile an Fheirtéaraigh was "The Shoals Returning" (included in the *Nightwalker* (1968) collection), an elegy for local fisherman Jerry Flaherty. Kinsella and Ó Riada met Flaherty during their visit and both were impressed by his *sean-nós* singing in Kruger Kavanagh's pub in Dún Chaoin [Dunquin]. Flaherty tragically died in a drowning accident a week after returning from the All-Ireland final the following September. Kinsella has recalled meeting Flaherty and the legendary *sean-nós* singer and melodeon player Seán de hÓra (whom Kinsella had also met in Dún Chaoin) during their visit to Dublin for the All-Ireland, indicating in his recollection the source of the title of the poem dedicated to Flaherty: "In Reidy's house in Galloping Green they spoke of the good fishing season that was just starting: after years elsewhere the big mackerel shoals had come back and they were anxious to get home and make the most of it".⁴¹

Kinsella draws considerably on the *caoineadh* in "The Shoals Returning". As noted by several commentators, the *caoineadh*'s significance stretched beyond the immediate event and provided an important social significance.⁴² For Kinsella this includes the decline of

³⁷ The film was premiered at the Cork Film Festival on September 30th 1959 [Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 86].

³⁸ Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 70.

³⁹ John, *Reading the Ground*, pp. 149-150.

⁴⁰ Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 344.

⁴¹ Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead*, p. 70.

⁴² Lillis Ó Laoire, "Ag Tabhairt Teanga don Tost", *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolais*, pp. 17-18. See also Breandán Ó Madagáin, "Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900", *Saoi na hÉigse: Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*, ed. by Pádraigín Riggs,

the Irish language and culture, which he appears to evoke in the poem's closing stanza, in a figure reminiscent, as Brian John has noted,⁴³ of one of the most accomplished Gaelic poets from the eighteenth century, Aogán Ó Rathaille:

A withered man, a coat
 Across his shoulders, watches
 From the cliff over the gorge
 - A black outcrop thrust
 Partly out of the soil
 Into the salt wind.
 The shale-grass shivers around him.
 He turns a shrunken mask
 Of cheekbone and jawbone
 And pursed ancient mouth
 On the sea surface.
 A windswept glitter of light
 Murmurs toward the land.
 His eyes, under tortoise lids,
 Assess the crystalline plasm,
 Formations of water
 Under falls of air.⁴⁴

An earlier reference in the poem to “The Wave of Tóime”⁴⁵ also seems to suggest this allusion for, as Seán Ó Tuama has observed, “[Ó Rathaille] lived for a time in poor circumstances at Tonn Tóime, at the edge of Castlemaine Harbour”.⁴⁶ Equally, the “crystalline plasm” mentioned above echoes Ó Rathaille’s allusion to crystal in one of his most famous poems “Gile na gile” [“Brightness most bright”].⁴⁷ The final verse is also reminiscent of the final verse of another Ó Rathaille poem “Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhírfhliuch” [“The drenching night drags on”] in which the poet laments his pitiful state as he looks out upon the waves off Castlemaine harbour:

Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Ita, 2000), p. 93.

⁴³ John, *Reading the Ground*, pp. 95-96.

⁴⁴ Kinsella, *Nightwalker*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ “Gile na gile do chonnarc ar slí in uaigneas,/criostal an chriostail a goirmroisc rinn-uaine”, [“Brightness most bright I beheld on the way, forlorn./Crystal of crystal her eye, blue touched with green” (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)] [Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 150-151].

A thonna thíos is airde géim go hard,
meabhair mo chinnse cloíte ód bhéiceach tá;
cabhair dá dtíodh arís ar Éirinn bhán,
do ghlam nach binn do dhingfinn féin id bhráid.

[You wave down there, lifting your loudest roar,
The wits in my head are worsted by your wails.
If help ever came to lovely Ireland again
I'd wedge your ugly howling down your throat! (Trans. Thomas
Kinsella)]⁴⁸

Furthermore, the description in verse two and three of "The Shoals Returning" of the powerful and destructive natural forces – epitomised in the "Wave of Tóime" – that pound the cliffs of Corca Dhuibhne, "chewing the solid earth", also resonates with Ó Rathaille's verse. In addition, Kinsella uses lines from "Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhírfhliuch", along with several others by Ó Rathaille, for Ó Rathaille's direct speech elsewhere in *Nightwalker*, in "The Poet Egan O'Reilly, Homesick in Old Age", where he again adopts the voice of the eighteenth century poet lamenting the turmoil of his life and how natural forces seem to have facilitated his enemies:

'Princes overseas, who slipped away
In your extremity, no matter where I travel
I find your great houses like stopped hearts. [...]

Our enemies multiply. They have recruited the sea:
Last night, the West's rhythmless waves destroyed my sleep;
This morning, winkle and dogfish persisting in the stomach ...'⁴⁹

Brian John is surely correct in recognising in "The Shoals Returning" the "'dramatic or story-telling voice,' which Kinsella and Seán Ó Tuama identify [...] as characteristic of much post-1600 poetry in Irish", in the marking off of "the different phases of the action with the equivalent of stage directions or subheadings ('*He comes from the sea,*' '*He sings,*' '*He returns,*' '*He disappears*')." ⁵⁰ This structuring of the poem is reminiscent of one of the finest laments in the Irish language, Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill's "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" (1773). Kinsella's translation of this *caoineadh* – including subheadings – was published in *An Duanaire*

⁴⁸ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁹ Kinsella, *Nightwalker*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 92. Italicised in original.

1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed in 1981. In his introduction to *An Duanaire*, Ó Tuama describes this voice as following a clear pattern where “a situation or story is postulated, imaginatively developed and resolved in the presence of a listening audience”.⁵¹ Significantly, the audience features prominently in “The Shoals Returning”. Indeed, in adopting the simple present tense for much of the poem, Kinsella seems to describe events as they happen, as if he too is part of this audience, listening (while writing) to the voice of Jerry Flaherty as he sings. He may well be attempting here to give the reader a sense of the immediacy of *sean-nós* singing that can only be truly appreciated in the live performance, rather than the recorded act, evident in the focus given in the poem to the audience’s response:

He sings

A voice rises flickering
From palatal darkness, a thin yell
Straining erect, checked
In glottal silence. The song
Articulates and pierces.

A boot scrapes the floor. Live eyes
Shine, each open on its rock,
In horn-darkness of paraffin,
Rope and gas cylinders.
Wet glasses of stout
Cling to boxes and casks;
Men, sunk in shade, listen
On their benches, bodies tainted
With cold sea wind.
Their eyes respond;⁵²

Discontinuity

Kinsella’s increasing concern with the Gaelic poetic tradition in the 1960s, reflected in his incorporation of aspects of this tradition into his poems, was highlighted in his address to the Modern Languages Association in 1966. Included below is a substantial extract from this address to indicate the extent of the poet’s engagement with this tradition in his attempt to uncover his own identity. Significantly, tradition and community are prominent concerns within his remarks:

⁵¹ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, p. xxxiii.

⁵² Kinsella, *Nightwalker*, pp. 38-39.

If I look deeper still in the need to identify myself, what I meet beyond the nineteenth century is a great cultural blur. I must exchange one language for another, my native English for eighteenth century Irish. After the dullness of the nineteenth century, eighteenth century Irish poetry is suddenly full of life: art in the service of real feeling [...] And all of this in full voices, the voices of poets who expect to be heard and understood, and memorised - Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin, Donnchadh Ruadh MacConmara, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin. They are the tragic end of Gaelic literature - but they are at home in their language; they have no more need to question the medium they write in than, say, John Clare writing in English.

Beyond them is the poet Aogán Ó Rathaille writing at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth [...] Beyond Ó Rathaille, the course of Irish poetry stretches back for more than a thousand years [...] Here, in all this I recognise simultaneously a great inheritance and a great loss. The inheritance is mine, but only at two enormous removes - across a century's silence, and through the exchange of worlds.⁵³

The discontinuity Kinsella discerns in the Irish tradition was also a concern for his peers writing in the 1960s, John Montague and Richard Murphy. Montague's *The Rough Field*, published in 1972 (though bringing together work written throughout the 1960s), includes a section entitled "Hymn to the New Omagh Road" which contrasts, in the form of a balance sheet, the loss of connection with tradition with the gains of modernity and commercialism. "The removal of all hillocks/and humps, superstition styled fairy forts/and long barrows" has been such that now "[t]he dead of Garvaghey Graveyard (including my grand-/father) can have an unobstructed view".⁵⁴ Furthermore, the landscape in which the poet grew up offers him tantalising glimpses into a culture that has passed away and which he has lost the ability to access:

All around, shards of a lost tradition:
From the Rough Field I went to school
In the Glen of the Hazels. Close by
Was the bishopric of the Golden Stone;
The cairn of Carleton's homesick poem.
Scattered over the hills, tribal-
And placenames, uncultivated pearls.
No rock or ruin, *dún* or dolmen
But showed memory defying cruelty

⁵³ Thomas Kinsella, "The Irish Writer", *Éire-Ireland* 2.2 (1967): 9.

⁵⁴ Montague, *Collected Poems*, pp. 56-57.

Through an image-encrusted name [...]

The whole landscape a manuscript
 We had lost the skill to read,
 A part of our past disinherited;
 But fumbled, like a blind man,
 Along the fingertips of instinct.⁵⁵

One finds a similar impulse in the work of Montague's contemporary Richard Murphy, a poet of Anglo-Irish decent. Murphy's major work in the 1960s, *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968), revealed his sense of discontinuity with the past, apparent in the present where the poet/persona's kinsman "auctioned grandfather's Gallipoli sword/And bought a milking machine".⁵⁶ Much as the "New Omagh Road" replaced the traditional markers of place for Montague, so too historical objects are traded for practical modernity in Murphy's poem. As Deborah A. Sarbin notes "the farm is built not from continuity with the landscape or the family, but from a sense of the future; there is discontinuity rather than the connection the native Irish sought".⁵⁷

Kinsella's sense of discontinuity with the Gaelic tradition appears to have encouraged his own engagement with it. As noted in Chapter Two, one of the most popular forms in the Gaelic song tradition in the eighteenth century, of which Aogán Ó Rathaille was one of the finest exponents, was the *aisling* and it is a form Kinsella repeatedly alludes to in his work. This includes the poems "Invocation" (in the Cuala edition of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972)), and the central sequence of *Songs of the Psyche* (1985) which includes a familiar tale of the poet encountering a woman, only to awaken towards the sequence's conclusion to find it was all but a dream.⁵⁸ One of Kinsella's most famous poems takes its structure from an eighteenth-century Gaelic parody of the *aisling* form. In the poem "The Stranger" from *Poems from Centre City* (1999) Kinsella recalls his use of Brian Merriman's "Cúirt an Mheán Oíche" in *Butcher's Dozen* (1972)⁵⁹ to provide "a structure for my mess of angers".⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁶ Richard Murphy, *The Battle of Aughrim*; and *The God who eats Corn* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 22.

⁵⁷ Deborah A. Sarbin, "Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994), p. 112.

⁵⁸ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, pp. 236-240.

⁵⁹ *Butcher's Dozen* was written as a highly critical reply to the publication of the findings of Lord Widgery's Tribunal set up to examine the events in Derry on

Brian John has also drawn attention to Kinsella's incorporation of elements of Gaelic poetry in his work, specifically in the poem "Finistère" which was originally published as a pamphlet in 1972 but later included in *One* (1974). Kinsella's interest and use of ancient Gaelic literature in his work is exemplified in this poem, based on incidents from the twelfth-century Gaelic mythical and historical originary narrative of the Irish race from the beginning of time to the Middle Ages, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* [*The Book of Invasions*]. "Finistère" focuses specifically on the first sighting of Ireland from the continent by the Sons of Míl; the journey by sea and the great storm that prolongs the trip; Aimhírgain's calming of the storm; and Aimhírgain laying claim to Ireland for the Sons of Míl. Aimhírgain is the *file* of the invading Milesians, or sons of Míl, who orchestrate the last invasion of Ireland recorded in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. Significantly, unlike the third-person view of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, "Finistère" adopts a first person perspective. According to Carolyn Rosenberg, "[Kinsella] imagines himself into Aimhírgain's skin, reliving not only the fear of the invaders but also the capacity of Aimhírgain to deal with that fear".⁶¹ He is also adopting the voice of an individual considered the first Irish poet, thereby connecting his work with the beginning of that tradition.⁶²

John argues that Kinsella's articulation of the prayer of the sons of Míl to calm the storm

goes beyond mere imitation of early Irish poetic techniques: he has skilfully adapted those techniques to express his own distinctive purpose and view, and at the same time he has captured expression that seems ageless and the root of a primary world.⁶³

January 30, 1972 (better known today as Bloody Sunday) when 13 civilian demonstrators were killed by the parachute regiment of the British army. Rory Brennan suggests that "no other piece of Irish verse since the war has made such an impact on its immediate period" [Rory Brennan, "Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Overview", *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. by Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 6].

⁶⁰ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 313.

⁶¹ Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 432.

⁶² Apart from the poets already mentioned – Feiritéar, Ó Rathaille and Aimhírgain – , Kinsella also adopts the voice of the nineteenth-century poet and translator James Clarence Mangan in the poem "Clarence Mangan" [Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 20].

⁶³ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 169.

John draws specific attention to the internal rhyming of the opening lines – “ill”/“well”, “mild”/“wild” - and the assonance and alliteration apparent throughout the poem:

— Ill wind end well
 mild mother
 on wild water pour peace

who gave us our unrest
 whom we meet and unmeet
 in whose yearning shadow
 we erect our great uprights
 and settle fulfilled
 and build and are still
 unsettled, whose goggle gaze
 and holy howl we have scraped
 speechless on slabs of stone
 poolspirals opening on
 closing spiralpools
 and dances drilled in the rock
 in coil zigzag angle and curl
 river ripple earth ramp
 suncircle moonloop [...] ⁶⁴

If we read the first two lines above as one line, they also share with early Irish verse the typical seven-syllables. In addition, the phrasing is reminiscent of this type of poetry with its scarcity of demonstrative and relative pronouns. Ruth Lehman’s “imitative” translations of early Irish verse, included below, bear comparison with this verse from Kinsella:

Daith bech buide a úaim i n-úaim
 ní súaill a vide la gréin;
 fó for fluth sa mag már;
 dag a dál, comol ’na chéir.

Bee, flying fast cup to cup,
 Sup in sun, hying from home;
 fair in flight toward the high heath,
 nigh beneath come feast in comb. ⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 169.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, ed. and trans. by Barbara Hughes Fowler (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 9.

While John sees in "the intricate rhyming patterns" of "Finistère" an imitation "of early Irish syllabic meters",⁶⁶ Kinsella's verse quoted above seems closer to the earlier rhymeless non-stanzaic alliterative verse⁶⁷ in which "Aimhírgain's Invocation" was written, a verse Kinsella indicated a familiarity with in his later translation of this poem in the *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*.

Dillon Johnston and Carolyn Rosenberg have both highlighted another feature of Gaelic poetry evident in Kinsella's work: the inclusion of a gloss or comment within or next to the text of a work by the transcriber of texts often found in Gaelic manuscripts.⁶⁸ As Johnston writes, Kinsella frequently adopts the role "of the redactor as he reviews the past necessarily in terms of the present and splices into legendary material personal asides".⁶⁹ While Johnston draws attention to its use in the poems "Survivor" (also based on an extract from *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*) and "Finistère", it is also apparent in Kinsella's own reminiscences of his childhood in poems such as "Tear" and "Hen Woman":

The cottage door opened,
a black hole
in a whitewashed wall so bright
the eyes narrowed.
Inside, a clock murmured "Gong ..."

(I had felt all this before ...)

She hurried out in her slippers
muttering, her face dark with anger,
and gathered the hen up jerking
languidly. Her hand fumbled.
Too late. Too late.

It fixed me with its pebble eyes
(seeing what mad blur?) [...]

Nothing moved: bird or woman,
fumbled or fumbling - locked there

⁶⁶ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 169.

⁶⁷ Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1961), p. 1.

⁶⁸ Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 100. Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 487.

⁶⁹ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 100.

(as I must have been) gaping.⁷⁰

The inclusion in these poems of the voice of the contemporary poet as almost an intermediary between a memory or description and the reader reflects Kinsella's own engagement with audience in his work.

Audience

Thomas Kinsella's description of Jerry Flaherty's singing in "The Shoals Returning" (in which, as identified above, we find a significant focus on the audience) is relevant to a recurring theme of each of Kinsella's first four Peppercanisters, *Butcher's Dozen* (1972), *A Selected Life* (1972), *Vertical Man* (1973), and *The Good Fight* (1973): the relationship between the artist and his audience. This relationship is one which Kinsella considers "integral to art and vital to community",⁷¹ and it is a theme that appears throughout his work including his 2000 volume *Citizen of the World*:

Absurd conceits [...]
 When a man is out of humour
 he thinks he will vex the world
 by keeping away from it; whereas the world
 are too busy about themselves to think of him [...]⁷²

Indeed, Kinsella's choice to write in English, rather than in Irish, was influenced by a wish to engage with the society around him as fully as possible. Writing in Irish would mean, for Kinsella, a "commitment to the Irish language [...]. And that would mean loss of contact with my own present – abandoning the language I was bred in for one I believe to be dying".⁷³ Kinsella's translations from Irish-language literature, nonetheless, also reflect his engagement with his community by bringing, as Derval Tubridy points out, "Irish literature into the hands and language of his contemporaries, much as Ó Riada's work with Irish traditional

⁷⁰ Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 9.

⁷¹ Derval Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella: The Peppercanister Poems* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2001), p. 26.

⁷² Kinsella, *Citizen of the World* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2000), p. 14.

⁷³ Kinsella, "The Irish Writer", p. 10.

music brought it from the edges of the Gaeltacht to the heart of the cities".⁷⁴

Significantly, Kinsella's commentary on Flaherty's *sean-nós* singing is included in *Fifteen Dead* (1979), his Oxford collection of the first four Peppercanisters:⁷⁵

A voice from a dark corner near the fireplace began to sing. The song was Casadh an tSúgáin and the singer Jerry Flaherty [...] Nothing intervened between the song and its expression. The singer managed many difficult things, but the result was to focus attention on the song, not on the performance or on the quality of the voice. It was a special voice, adapted (like a reptile or an insect) to its function. Mere beauty of tone would have distracted, attracting attention for its own sake. And the singer's act of communication was thoroughly completed by his audience. They sat erect and listened, lifted their glasses and drank, and murmured phrases of appreciation.⁷⁶

In this description, Kinsella gives one a sense not just of the appropriateness of Flaherty's voice for *sean-nós* and the immediacy of his singing, but also the communal event which the performance represented.

Performance

It is interesting to note, given the significant impression Flaherty's performance made on Kinsella, apparent in both "The Shoal's Returning" and his subsequent commentary above, Kinsella's own increasing engagement in performance in the 1960s. Indeed, some critics have suggested that performance itself in this period may have played a part in the development and transmission of his poetry. Donatella Abbate Badin observes that Kinsella made "many public appearances" and "participated in poetry readings, debates, and musical performances of his poems".⁷⁷ Carolyn Rosenberg, while listing many readings Kinsella gave in this period, argues that "hearing his work in the presence of an audience apparently serves as a 'sounding board', as effectively as seeing it in print

⁷⁴ Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella*, p. 26

⁷⁵ Indeed, the peppercanister series began the year after Ó Riada's premature death and two of the first four, *A Selected Life* and *Vertical Man*, deal directly with the musician's passing and its aftermath.

⁷⁶ Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead*, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁷ Donatella Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 7.

had formerly done”.⁷⁸ Indeed, while the Beat poetry movement in the United States (where Kinsella emigrated with his family in 1965 to teach at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale) was establishing the persona of the “performance poet”, Kinsella’s contemporaries in Ireland, including Richard Murphy and John Montague (see Chapter One), were also engaging increasingly in the performance of their poetry, performances which were closely associated with traditional music as poets sought to connect both with tradition and a contemporary audience. While The Chieftains accompanied the first performances of Montague’s *The Rough Field* in 1972, they had also accompanied a reading by Kinsella of selections from his translation of *The Táin* in July 1969 at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin. “Sponsored by Claddagh Records”, Rosenberg notes, “the program also featured a pair of sisters who excel at *sean-nós* ‘old custom’ or traditional singing, Sarah and Rita Keane, as well as two other poets, Austin Clarke and John Montague, reading from work of theirs that fit into the traditional theme”.⁷⁹

The theme of performance has also been a recurring concern in Kinsella’s work. His 1972 collection *Notes from the Land of the Dead* includes the poem “Worker in Mirror, at his Bench”, a work which, as John Greening has observed, probably best expresses Kinsella’s *ars poetica*.⁸⁰ Central to the poem is a sequence in which a craftsman fashions masks out of mirrors before inquisitive onlookers whose presence he barely tolerates. Interspersed with descriptions of the creative process (“The process is elaborate, /and wasteful”),⁸¹ the “worker” describes the exchanges between himself and the “customers” as they examine his creations. His descriptions of this interaction throughout the second part of this poem, and into the third, are phrased as answers by “the worker” to questions: “Yes everything is deliberate.” “It is tedious, yes.” “Most satisfying, yes.” “Yes, I suppose I am appalled/at the massiveness of others’ work”.⁸² While suggesting the tense relationship between the artist and his audience, as Brian John notes “such drama relates to Kinsella’s practice of having the reader participate in and choose between positions in a search for understanding.”⁸³

⁷⁸ Rosenberg, “Let Our Gaze Blaze”, p. 174.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁸⁰ John Greening, “Review of *Collected Poems* by Thomas Kinsella”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6th September 2002, p. 24.

⁸¹ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 128

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129

⁸³ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 138.

Volumes throughout the seventies, eighties, nineties and into the twenty-first century - including *A Selected Life*, *Vertical Man*, *One* (1974), *Her Vertical Smile* (1985) and *Littlebody* (2001) - all offer descriptions of performances by characters such as Seán Ó Riada, members of Kinsella's family, Gustav Mahler, and, in *Littlebody*, a leprechaun. *Out Of Ireland* includes, as a preface, an extract from one of the earliest descriptions of Irish music by the Welsh-born Anglo-Norman ecclesiastic Giraldus Cambrensis. It is a description that echoes Kinsella's account of Flaherty's singing above, particularly in Cambrensis' emphasis on the audience's role in the performance:

the perfection of their art seems to lie in their concealing it, as if 'it were the better for being hidden. An art revealed brings shame.' Hence it happens that the very things that afford unspeakable delight to the minds of those who have a fine perception and can penetrate carefully to the secrets of the art, bore, rather than delight, those who have no such perception - who look without seeing, and hear without being able to understand. When the audience is unsympathetic they succeed only in causing boredom with what appears to be but confused and disordered noise⁸⁴

Yet, occasionally there is an unease regarding public performance apparent in Kinsella's work, particularly in his poems concerning Ó Riada. Kinsella provides a vivid description of Ó Riada performing at Galloping Green in May 1962 at the beginning of *A Selected Life*:

He clutched the shallow drum
and crouched forward, thin
as a beast of prey. The shirt
stretched at his waist. He stared
to one side, toward the others,
and struck the skin cruelly
with his nails. Sharp
as the answering arid bark
his head quivered, counting.⁸⁵

It is a description, however, that suggests disquiet through the use of words loaded with ambiguous, and negative, potential: "clutched", "crouched", "beast of prey", "cruelly". Indeed, the focus of Kinsella's poem moves quickly from the performance quoted above to a reflection on the scene of Ó Riada's funeral and burial in Cúil Aodha where the poet's

⁸⁴ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 261.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

recurring concern with “the creative-destructive aspects of the muse and the artist’s experience of, and submission to, the world’s appetite”⁸⁶ are graphically depicted. There is a further doubt apparent here in the description of Ó Riada as “Pierrot”, the buffoon of French pantomime⁸⁷:

A flock of crows circled
the church tower, scattered
and dissolved chattering
into the trees. Fed.

His first buried night
drew on. Unshuddering.
And welcome.
Shudder for him,

Pierrot limping forward in the sun
out of Merrion Square, long ago,
in black overcoat and beret,
pale as death from his soiled bed,

swallowed back: animus
brewed in clay, uttered
in brief meat and brains, flattened
back under the flowers.⁸⁸

In the subsequent Peppercanister publication, *Vertical Man*, also concerning Ó Riada, Kinsella questions further still the relationship of the musician with his audience and the problematic passions it may have inspired:

That you may startle the heart of a whole people
(as you know) and all your power,
with its delicate, self-mocking adjustments,
is soon beating to a coarse pulse
to glut fantasy and sentiment.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ John, *Reading the Ground*, p. 150.

⁸⁷ “Pierrot”, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001–04, <http://www.bartleby.com/65/pi/Pierrot.html>, (accessed December 5, 2005).

⁸⁸ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 145.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

While poor health has been a contributory factor, Kinsella's withdrawal from public readings may also be related to a concern with audience, or, more particularly, a concern to encourage a particular intensity of engagement with his work, an intensity unlikely to emerge through public readings of his poems. "Thou shalt not entertain, /charm or impress" we are told in "Echo"⁹⁰ and as Donatella Abbate Badin observes,

Kinsella does not believe that poetry should be a form of entertainment, nor could one imagine what form of enlightenment an audience sipping a cup of coffee or a pint of beer could derive from a difficult poetry which, in order to communicate, necessitates the most profound form of cooperation from the reader.⁹¹

If we look again at Kinsella's description of Flaherty's singing in *Fifteen Dead*, and "The Shoals Returning" (and indeed at Cambrensis' account of early Irish music), it is apparent that it is not the performance that is the central concern of the poet: "the result was to focus attention on the song, not on the performance or on the quality of the voice [...] [a]nd the singer's act of communication was thoroughly completed by his audience".⁹² What appeals to Kinsella here is the process through which Flaherty *deemphasises* his performance whereby the "poet" disappears and understanding is achieved,⁹³ a process that, as Brian John observes, has been an enduring "commitment, from at least *Nightwalker*" (the collection that included "The Shoals Returning") in Kinsella's work.⁹⁴

Floyd Skloot, a student of Kinsella's during his time at Southern Illinois University, remembers a seminar in modern poetry given by the poet in 1969 in which he discussed, in terms familiar from his description of Flaherty's singing above, "something he valued and wanted to do himself" in poetry:

Kinsella talked about stripping away everything that stood between the song and its expression, things like predetermined forms and logic,

⁹⁰ Kinsella, *Citizen of the World*, p. 10.

⁹¹ Donatella Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 10.

⁹² Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead*, p. 68.

⁹³ Whether such understanding was actually achieved by the audience to which Flaherty sang is debatable. However, Kinsella's comments suggest that he believed it was.

⁹⁴ John, *Reading the Ground*, pp. 76-77.

imposed shape, literary reference, anything that implied the presence of a writer behind the poem.⁹⁵

This process necessitated for Kinsella a rejection of “received forms and rhyme” in favour of “free forms” and poems with “unique shape”,⁹⁶ in an attempt to find structures more amenable to his overriding concern: to discern order and understanding out of life. As he remarked in a 2004 interview:

It seems that poetry at its best, in the great exceptional times, can contribute a view of ‘the process’ [towards understanding] as a whole. But even in the less fortunate times there is the valuable individual experience contributing the significant detail, together with a sense of the wholeness and importance of the process.⁹⁷

This central concern has also influenced the motifs that characterise Kinsella’s poetry, some of which are also apparent in traditional song and a description of traditional music offered by Kinsella’s friend, Seán Ó Riada.

Circularity and the Ouroboros

In 1982, Dolmen Press issued *Our Musical Heritage*, a compilation of the texts from a series Seán Ó Riada presented on traditional Irish music on Radió Éireann twenty years previously. In his attempt to emphasise the distinctiveness and authenticity of Irish music, Ó Riada was keen to distinguish it from other forms of European music, and employed the image of the snake with its tail in its mouth, or ouroboros, to describe its form:

The first thing to note, obviously enough, is that Irish music is not European [...] Ireland has had a long and violent history during which she remained individual, retaining all her individual characteristics [...] Traditional Irish art never adopted the Greco-Roman forms spawned by the Renaissance, which have become the basis for European art [...] The simplest picture of traditional Irish art is the ancient symbol of the serpent

⁹⁵ Floyd Skloot “The Simple Wisdom: Visiting Thomas Kinsella”, *New Hibernia Review* 7.2 (2003): 12-13.

⁹⁶ John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 108.

⁹⁷ Andrew Fitzsimons, “An Interview with Thomas Kinsella”, *Poetry Ireland Review* 82 (2005): 87.

with its tail in its mouth: 'In my end is my beginning'. It is essentially a cyclic form [...] It is represented in the carved stones of the great burial ground at Newgrange, in the curvilinear designs of the Book of Kells, in the old mythological stories, episodic and cyclic in form, in all Gaelic poetry - even in James Joyce's 'Ulysses' and 'Finnegans Wake'; and in the *sean-nós* singing which still survives as an art-form today. The basic pattern of the song remains in each verse, but the events, the ornaments, vary.⁹⁸

While Ó Riada's exegesis does appear overly simplistic, incorporating thousands of years of history, and diverse artistic forms, according to a single motif, it would seem to have been influential for those poets closest to him. John Montague, for example, has described experiencing "the circular aesthetic of an art older than Western music" while listening to the traditional air "The Queen of the O'Donnells", played by the Sliabh Luachra fiddle player Denis Murphy.⁹⁹ Brian John also finds a similar circularity to that suggested by Ó Riada present in Montague's poems, a circularity "most explicitly evident in *The Rough Field* and bear[ing] upon the poet's awareness of the world's rhythms".¹⁰⁰

A comparable circularity is apparent within Kinsella's work while his recurring use of the ouroboros motif echoes Ó Riada's description of traditional music. Indeed, *Our Musical Heritage* was edited by Kinsella who also contributed a preface to the book in which he compliments Ó Riada's "analytic ear for clarifying [...] the native music".¹⁰¹ Critics have commented on the circular process of Kinsella's work, often characterised by allusion and repetition, both within and between volumes, to previous poems as well as the eclectic array of influences the poet draws upon. Derval Tubridy argues Kinsella's poetry eschews "linear progression in favour of a doubling or reflexive movement by which the early poetry finds itself being read from the perspective of the later work, and indeed, other's work".¹⁰² As Floyd Skloot has noted, Kinsella:

⁹⁸ Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, ed. by Thomas Kinsella (Portlaoise: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh i gcomhar le The Dolmen Press, 1982), pp. 19-22.

⁹⁹ John Montague, "I also had Music", *The Figure in the Cave* (Dublin: Lilliput Press Ltd., 1989), p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ Brian John, "The Montague Music: 'Everything Has a Sound'", *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague*, ed. by Thomas Dillon Redshaw (Omaha: Creighton University Press: 2004), p. 222.

¹⁰¹ Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, ed. by Thomas Kinsella (Portlaoise: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh i gcomhar le The Dolmen Press, 1982), p. 12.

¹⁰² Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella*, p. 227.

has habitually absorbed his past work into his new work, referring back to specific images and scenes, returning to situations dealt with in earlier poems, using the concluding lines of previous books as the opening lines of new ones, and developing a set of references that serve as the circulatory system for his body of work.¹⁰³

This “circulatory system” is contributed to through the repeated revision of, and allusion to, his earlier poetry. It is also complemented by the manner in which volumes lead naturally from one to the next, sometimes through the use of an epigraph taken from poems in an earlier book. Such an epigraph is found at the beginning of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, taken from the final four lines of “Phoenix Park”, the final poem of the previous *Nightwalker* collection:

*A snake out of the void moves in my mouth, sucks
At triple darkness. A few ancient faces
Detach and begin to circle. Deeper still,
Delicate distinct tissue begins to form,*¹⁰⁴

While Kinsella has stated the importance of this snake motif to his poetry, as a means through which his “poems can organise their own behaviour”,¹⁰⁵ it also contributes to the sense of circularity in his work, particularly when represented by the ouroboros. As the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, a further important influence on Kinsella’s poetry,¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Floyd Skloot, “The Evolving Poetry of Thomas Kinsella”, *New England Review* 18.4 (1997): 174.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 2. Italicised in the original.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel O’Hara, “An Interview with Thomas Kinsella”, *Contemporary Poetry* 4 (1981): 17.

¹⁰⁶ As Dillon Johnston notes “much of Kinsella’s recent poetic recovery of personal and public history can be clarified by the dream-analysis of Carl Jung and by the process Jung calls ‘individuation’. As Jung defines it, individuation requires both the recognition within the self of the arbitrariness of the public persona and a healthy communication between the conscious mind and the personal and collective unconscious” [Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 99. Johnston draws on Jung’s *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read et al. (New York: Pantheon Books; Princeton University Press, 1953-79), pp. 171-72].

Jung has also being an important influence on the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. As Pádraig de Paor notes “[i]s chuig saothar iardhalta de chuid Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, a chasann Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill ina tionscnamh i gcoinne ‘impiriúlachas an réasúin’” [“It is to the work of Freud’s former student, Carl

has noted "[i]n the age-old image of the urobouros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process".¹⁰⁷ The snake motif has featured regularly in Kinsella's work, particularly following O' Riada's death in 1971. While it appears repeatedly in *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (first published by the Cuala press the following year), it is included among the drawings by Anne Yeats that accompany the third Peppercanister publication in 1974, *One*. However, as Carolyn Rosenberg notes it is a presence in many of Kinsella's volumes:

Wrapping in and out of all the texts, the snake that foreshadowed, in 'Phoenix Park' (*Nightwalker and Other Poems*), the new series serves as an additional guide [...] The snake which opens *Notes* with 'hesitate' and *One* with 'Prologue' moves explicitly in 'The great cell of nightmare' (*One*) but more subtly in 'Good Night' (*Notes*), *The Messenger*, and many other poems.¹⁰⁸

It also appears in later volumes including *Madonna and Other Poems* (1991)¹⁰⁹ while snakes are featured on the cover of both *The Messenger* (1978) and *Godhead* (1999). *Songs of the Psyche* also alludes to a snake in the poem "Model School, Inchicore" where the poet remembers rolling a ball of "marla" [Plasticine] "into a snake curling/around your hand".¹¹⁰

The use of the epigraph, quoted above, at the beginning of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* leads the reader into Kinsella's deeper exploration of Irish mythology and his own unconscious. Kinsella has described this as an attempt "to plunge into the land of the dead to find my own roots".¹¹¹ *Notes from the Land of the Dead* draws on several ancient Gaelic texts,

Gustav Jung, that Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill turns in her project against the 'imperialism of reason'"]. Pádraig de Paor, *Tionscnamh Filíochta Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta., 1997), p. 7-8. See also Chapter One of this book, "Idir Aircití is Steiréití: An íomháineacht iomlánafoch", pp. 1-72.

¹⁰⁷ Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the separation and synthesis of Psychic opposites in Alchemy*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read et al. (New York: Pantheon Books; Princeton University Press, 1953-79), p. 365.

¹⁰⁸ Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 526.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Kinsella, *Madonna and Other Poems* (Dublin: Peppercanister, 1991), pp. 20, 23.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Kinsella, *Songs of the Psyche* (Dublin: Peppercanister, 1985), p. 11.

¹¹¹ Daniel O'Hara, "An Interview with Thomas Kinsella", *Contemporary Poetry*, 4 (1981) 16.

including the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in “The Route of the Táin”¹¹² and, particularly the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (in the poems “Nuchal”¹¹³ and “Survivor”¹¹⁴).

Influenced by Jungian psychology, and particularly the concept of the “collective unconscious”, Kinsella’s work in *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, and subsequent volumes in the 1970s and 1980s, places recent events in Irish history “into the larger circle of Irish patterns, using archetypes that stress the unconscious of his society. He places the current in terms of universals (such as fairy tales) that suggest recurrence and the potential to occur again”.¹¹⁵ These archetypes include motifs such as the egg, the *cailleach*,¹¹⁶ and the snake, or ouroboros, all reminiscent of patterns and characters in Irish music and song.

In the first poem of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, “Hen Woman”, the symbolism of the circle, and the snake, in Kinsella’s work is further developed. While the volume offers us various important experiences in Kinsella’s life that contributed to the formation of his identity, this poem recalls specifically his memory of his grandmother’s attempt to collect an egg from her hen and its subsequent breaking and disappearance through a “grating”:

I saw the egg had moved a fraction:
a tender blank brain
under torsion, a clean new world.

As I watched, the mystery completed.
The black zero of the orifice
closed to a point
and the white zero of the egg hung free,
flecked with greenish brown oils.

It slowly turned and fell.
Dreamlike, fussed by her splayed fingers,
it floated outward, moon-white,

¹¹² Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, pp. 124-5.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116.

¹¹⁵ Sarbin, “Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry”, p. 38.

¹¹⁶ The *cailleach*, meaning “old woman” or hag, was a mythological sorceress in early Gaelic culture who was transformed into a motif for Ireland in popular nationalist ballads. She is also alluded to in Montague’s poetry, including in “The Wild Dog Rose” section of *The Rough Field*, and in the poem “Cailleach” by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, included in *Feis* (1991).

leaving no trace in the air,
and began its drop to the shore.
I feed upon it still, as you see;
there is no end to that which,
not understood, may yet be noted
and hoarded in the imagination,
in the yolk of one's being, so to speak,
there to undergo its (quite animal) growth,
dividing blindly,
twitching, packed with will,
searching in its own tissue
for the structure
in which it may wake.
Something that had - clenched
in its cave - not been
now was: an egg of being.¹¹⁷

The circular motif is suggested most obviously by the egg (this first section of this collection is also entitled "an egg of being") but also by the development of the poem in which the poet witnesses the emergence of an egg "in the sphincter" of the hen, to its eventual breaking as it "smashed against the grating/and slipped down quickly out of sight" followed by the woman's laughter and remark "It's all the one/There's plenty more where that came from!"¹¹⁸ While the egg may be gone, more eggs will be laid, and life goes on. During the poem, the child also witnesses a dung beetle's (a creature associated, in ancient Egypt, with life and rebirth) attempt to roll a ball of dung:

A beetle like a bronze leaf
Was inching across the cement,
Clasping with small tarsi
A ball of dung bigger than its body.¹¹⁹

The final lines of the poem "*Hen to pan! /It was a simple world*",¹²⁰ brings us back again to Ó Riada's description of the form of Irish music, summarised above, as similar to "the ancient symbol of the serpent with its tail in its mouth".¹²¹ As Carolyn Rosenberg has noted, the phrase "Hen to pan":

¹¹⁷ Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-12.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹²¹ Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, p. 21.

links [Kinsella's] world to that of the Gnostics, who used a similar phrase in a wider sense. They used the Greek expression *Hen to Pan* (l. 84), which means 'The one, the all' as an inscription under depictions of the ouroboros.¹²²

However, while this image of the ouroboros is associated with "the primitive idea of a self-sufficient Nature", of one which "continually returns, within a cyclic pattern, to its own beginning",¹²³ the oval image which appears at the end of the first untitled poem of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* suggests yet another significance.

Conclusion

Deborah Sarbin, drawing on the work of Dillon Johnston, has described the oval image that appears at the end of the first untitled poem of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* as an important symbol in the collection representing both "an egg and the uroboros, a snake ingesting its own tail".¹²⁴ While Daniel O'Hara has also suggested a numerological purpose to this oval,¹²⁵ Sarbin has argued that this "figure from Celtic art suggests the circularity of time and culture, and, further, the insularity of a culture feeding upon itself."¹²⁶ However, both neglect the fact that this oval (depicted in Fig. 1), unlike zero, the ouroboros or the egg, is broken:

¹²² Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze", p. 270. Underlined in original.

¹²³ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 235.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Sarbin, "Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry", p. 50.

¹²⁵ For O'Hara this oval represents "the zero-opening of consciousness in childhood". The numerological "plot" as O'Hara describes it, continues in *One, A Technical Supplement*, *Song of the Night*, and *The Messenger*, where there "is a loosely Jungian Process of individuation being worked out" [Daniel O'Hara, "Appropriate Performance: Thomas Kinsella and the Ordeal of Understanding", *Contemporary Irish Writing*, ed. by James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 76].

¹²⁶ Sarbin, "Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry", p. 50.



Fig. 1¹²⁷

Indeed, a broken egg is the theme of the first poem of this collection, "Hen Woman". This broken "ouroboros" may well refer to a persistent concern within modern Irish poetry, a concern with the fractured nature of the Irish tradition which Kinsella has outlined at length in *The Dual Tradition*. Following his encounter with traditional singing, and his long friendship with Seán Ó Riada, who has also used the image of the ouroboros to describe traditional music and song, Kinsella would subsequently incorporate aspects of Gaelic literature into his poetry, as he engaged with his fractured literary "inheritance [...] across a century's silence, and through the exchange of worlds",¹²⁸ reflected in the gapped "ouroboros".

The Gaelic song tradition, as described by Kinsella, also involved a close connection between the artist and his community. While Kinsella's work and comments suggest a belief that such a contemporary relationship may no longer be possible through public performance, he has imagined it occurring within the text itself. Wolfgang Iser has argued that the reader's place is "marked by the gaps in the text - it consists of the blanks which the reader is to fill in." "Whenever the reader bridges that gap" Iser continues, "communication begins. The gap functions as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves".¹²⁹ Similarly, much as the experience of *sean-nós* singing brought home to Kinsella the central active role an audience plays in this tradition, he too has emphasized this role for his own readers, and in language familiar from his description of the performance of *sean-nós*, as his work has increasingly been marked by

¹²⁷ Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Kinsella, "The Irish Writer", p. 9.

¹²⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 169.

a change in style that necessitated a particular intensity of engagement.¹³⁰ In 1975, Kinsella described poetry as “a two-way process: the reader completes an act of communication initiated by the poet”.¹³¹ In an interview in the mid-1990s, he required the “reader to complete the act of communication. I don’t want to entertain. If a person is looking for entertainment or information, or is merely curious, I am not interested”.¹³² In 2004, Kinsella reiterated these words remarking: “[c]ommunication is central - an audience completing an act of communication”.¹³³ In *A Technical Supplement* (1976), Kinsella describes this act of reading as the completion of a “circuit” between author and reader:

But for real pleasure there is nothing to equal
 Sitting down to a *serious* read,
 Getting settled down comfortably for the night
 With a demanding book on your knee
 And your head intent over it,
 Eyes bridging the gap, closing the circuit [...]¹³⁴

However, the next verse clarifies the final line above by noting that, in fact, “it is not a closed circuit”.¹³⁵ There is always room for ambiguity, for more possibilities in the text. As the gapped oval suggests, it is the assembling, accumulating, building of an understanding that is important for Kinsella, as much as the closure which the complete ouroboros might represent, a process with which he believes his “ideal audience”¹³⁶ must also be engaged.

Kinsella’s concern with communication has influenced his decision not to write in Irish, even though he has being one of the most important translators of Gaelic texts. Despite his misgivings, Irish-language poetry continued to develop in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, from 1970 onwards it enjoyed a revival in fortunes with the emergence of the *Innti* movement and poets such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh. It is to these poets we turn in the next chapter.

¹³⁰ Indeed Dillon Johnston has referred to Kinsella’s “shrinking readership’s perplexity” in response to this changing style [Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 97].

¹³¹ Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, p. 189.

¹³² Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella*, p. 198.

¹³³ Fitzsimons, “An Interview with Thomas Kinsella”, p. 92.

¹³⁴ Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 197.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹³⁶ Fitzsimons, “An Interview with Thomas Kinsella”, p. 92.

CHAPTER FOUR

“THE METRICAL, LINGUISTIC AND EMOTIONAL STYLE OF THE OLD SONGS”:

THE POETRY OF NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL AND CATHAL Ó SEARCAIGH

‘The ruined maid complains in Irish’, writes Seamus Heaney in ‘Ocean’s Love to Ireland’ (from *North*), a poem which refers – among other things – to the linguistic colonization of the island. Despite the inexorable erosion of the language over the past few centuries, the ruined maid still complains in Irish: its position as the language of revolution is, for better or worse, enshrined in Sinn Féin’s cultural policy; poetry and prose is being written in Irish, largely ignored by students of Irish literature. And if Irish is still alive, however vestigially, the position of English can never be wholly authoritative.¹

In the previous chapter we quoted at length from Thomas Kinsella’s address to the Modern Languages Association (MLA) in 1966 in which he outlined his concerns regarding the discontinuity of the Irish literary tradition. During this address, Kinsella indicated his doubts regarding the appropriateness of the Irish language to contemporary life:

A writer who cares who he is, and where he comes from, might look about him and begin by examining his colleagues. In that act a writer in Ireland makes a basic choice: do I include writers in Irish? Or am I to think of them as a minor and embattled group, keeping loyal – for the best reasons – to a dead or dying language? Some of the best writers in Irish already believe that their language is doomed, rejected by its people. They are pessimistic, but I think they are right.²

¹ Ciaran Carson, “Sweeneys Ancient and Modern”, *The Honest Ulsterman* 76 (Autumn 1984): 73.

² Thomas Kinsella, “The Irish Writer”, *Éire-Ireland* 2.2 (Summer 1967): 8.

Within four years of this article, however, a new generation of Irish-language poets would achieve recognition through the pages of the literary journal *Innti*, a publication and movement that marked an important revival in the fortunes of Irish-language literature. It would seem that Kinsella's prediction of the death of Irish-language literature and its rejection "by its people" had been somewhat premature.

This chapter will focus on two of the poets to emerge in the 1970s, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh. In common with Kinsella, traditional song would play an informing role in their work, alerting them to the Gaelic tradition and encouraging their engagement with this tradition and with the communities from which these songs have emerged. Traditional music and song also alerted Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh to the importance of the aural element in their work and encouraged their engagement in performance. Indeed, performance has become an important part of their poetic process such that some of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh's respective collections have been published accompanied by recordings of each poet reading their work.

However, occasionally one senses an over-reliance on the song tradition in the work of both poets suggesting an anxiety regarding their relationship with the fractured Irish tradition as well as their uncertain relationship with a contemporary audience. Unlike their predecessors prior to the nineteenth century, Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh must now write knowing that most people will encounter their work, even in their home country, in translation. Encouraging a reading that places their work within an older, more assured tradition, as both poets do through allusion to the song tradition, partly suggests an unease regarding their own position as Irish-language poets. This is further implied, in Ní Dhomhnaill's work, by her occasionally contradictory remarks regarding the tradition of writing in Irish and the place of women within it. For Ó Searcaigh the obvious influences from poetic movements outside of Ireland on his poetry are deflected in favour of emphasising the influence of the Gaelic tradition.

Nonetheless, while drawing on theories of intertextuality and hybridity, this chapter will argue that the Irish song tradition has provided Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh with enabling, and sometimes transgressive, forms for their poetry allowing them to articulate distinctive contemporary voices while connecting to the Gaelic tradition.

The Irish Language and *Innti*

In the introductory chapter I noted the “heated” debate that took place during the 1960s regarding national identity, prompted by a period of rapid and considerable change in Irish society.³ A significant subject of contention was the question of the Irish language which, by the 1960s, was in a perilous state with every possibility that it would not survive as a living language beyond the end of the century. However, the findings of the *Committee on Irish Language Attitude Research* established by the Minister for Finance in 1970 to investigate “attitudes of the Irish public to Irish”, indicated that approximately two-thirds of Irish people recognised “the intrinsic cultural importance of the language”.⁴ Furthermore, those surveyed regarded the Irish language as valuable to “national or ethnic identity, or as a symbol of cultural distinctiveness”.⁵ The committee also found some limited evidence of a revival of interest in Irish culture, including the language, particularly among seventeen to nineteen year olds.⁶

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith has argued that the 1960s resulted in an increasing sense among poets of the country being “ar dhá cheann” [“on a cusp”].⁷ Seán Ó Ríordáin described poets as: “ag strachailt idir dhá intinn agus ag marcaíocht ar dhá teanga. Níl duine ar bith againn nach beirt sinn” [“wrestling between two minds and straddling two languages. There’s no one of us that is not divided”].⁸ Like Thomas Kinsella, Ó Ríordáin expressed in his poetry his own sense of discontinuity with the Irish literary tradition and his anxiety that his poetry was moving further and further from a contemporary community, an anxiety increased by his constant battles with ill-health:

A Ghaeilge im pheannsa,
Do shinsear ar chaillis?
An teanga bhocht thabhartha
Gan sloinne tú, a theanga?

³ For a fuller discussion of this debate see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp. 254-265.

⁴ Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research, *Tuarascáil* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig Dhíolta Foilseacháin Rialtas, 1975), p. 293. Quoted in Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, p. 260.

⁵ Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002*, p. 260.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁷ Quoted in Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Léacht Uí Chadhain 2004: Athnuachan na Filíochta”, *Comhar* 65.1 (Eanáir 2005): 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Bhfuil aoinne inár dteannta
 Ag triall ar an tobar?
 Bhfuil aon fhocal seanda
 Ag cur lenár gcogar?⁹

[O Gaelic in my pen,
 Have you lost your ancestry?
 Are you a poor illegitimate,
 Without a surname, O Language. (Trans. Declan Kiberd)

Is there anyone among us
 travelling to the well?
 Are there any ancient words
 Adding to our whisper.¹⁰

While this poem begins the *Brosna* collection, by its close the answer for Ó Ríordáin is to “Fill Arís” [“Return Again”] to the living Irish-speaking communities, “Dún Chaoin fé sholas an tráthnóna”,¹¹ [“Dún Chaoin under the evening light”] in an attempt to address the division in his own psyche. He further calls for readers to “Dún d’intinn ar ar tharla/Ó buaileadh Cath Cionn tSáile/Is ón uair go bhfuil an t-ualach trom/Is an bóthar fada” [“Close your mind to what happened/since Kinsale/and from the time of the heavy burden/and the long road”] and to “bain ded mheabhair/Srathar shibhialtacht an Bhéarla/Shelley, Keats is Shakespeare”¹² [“remove from your mind/the tackling of English

⁹ Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Brosna* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1976), p. 9.

¹⁰ Translated by the present author.

¹¹ Ó Ríordáin, *Brosna*, p. 41.

¹² Ibid., p. 41. Such a refusal to “recognise history” has been criticised by Seamus Heaney who remarked: “If he would obliterate history since Kinsale, the loyalist imagination at its most enthusiastic would obliterate history before Kinsale. If Ó Ríordáin needs to unshackle his tongue of its English harness in order to create a secure and true spiritual home, the anti-Ó Ríordáin would exclude all taint and acquaintance with the Irish dimension of his experience in order to ratify the purity and liberty of his stand [...] But the very strenuousness of this maintained effort constitutes its negative aspect. Just as the Ó Ríordáin poem, in its sectarian application, would refuse to recognise history and language other than its own espoused versions of them, just as it would turn a vision of fulfilment into an instrument of coercion, the same neurotic intensity is in danger of turning conceptions and loyalties within the unionist tradition into refusals and paranoias” [Seamus Heaney, “Forked Tongues, Céilís and Incubators”, *Forthnight* 197 (September 1983): 116. Quoted in Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2000, p. 32].

civility/Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare"]. In the place of English culture, Ó Ríordáin calls on "Eoghan béal binn,/Aindrias Mac Craith, Seán Clárach, Aoghán"¹³ ["Eoghan of the sweet mouth,/Aindrias Mac Craith, Seán Clárach, Aoghán"]. These poets he invokes to inspire his work: "A sheanfhilí, múinídh dom glao"¹⁴ ["Old poets teach me to call"].

Ó Ríordáin's *Brosna* was published in 1964 and, despite his pessimism, that year would be important for the publication of a considerable number of major Irish-language texts as well as renewed interest in the Irish language and literature. For Irish-language scholar Eoghan Ó hAnluain:

Is dóigh liom gurbh é buaic na spéise i bhfilíocht na Gaeilge roimh 1966 ná Mór chruinniú an Chumann Liteartha i gColáiste na hOllscoile [Baile Átha Cliath] sa bhliain 1964, agus ag cur leis sin scata leabhar suntasach a foilsíodh an bhliain chéanna nó go gairid roimhe sin, mar atá: *Faoileán na Beatha* (1962) Seán Ó Tuama; *Ár Ré Dhearóil* (1962) Máirtín Ó Díreáin; *Cama-Shiúlta* (1964) Seán Ó hEigearthaigh; *Aistí Dána* (1964) Art Ó Maolfabhail; *Bláth agus Taibhse* (1964) Micheál Mac Liammóir; *Athphreabadh na hÓige* (1964) Réamonn Ó Muireadhaigh; *Lux Aeterna* (1964) Eoghan Ó Tuairisc; *Brosna* (1964) Seán Ó Ríordáin.¹⁵

[In my opinion, the height of interest in Irish-language poetry before 1966 was the large meeting of the University College Dublin Literary Society in the year 1964, and in addition the group of distinctive books that were published the same year or shortly before that, including: *Faoileán na Beatha* (1962) Seán Ó Tuama; *Ár Ré Dhearóil* (1962) Máirtín Ó Díreáin; *Cama-Shiúlta* (1964) Seán Ó hEigearthaigh; *Aistí Dána* (1964) Art Ó Maolfabhail; *Bláth agus Taibhse* (1964) Micheál Mac Liammóir; *Athphreabadh na hÓige* (1964) Réamonn Ó Muireadhaigh; *Lux Aeterna* (1964) Eoghan Ó Tuairisc; *Brosna* (1964) Seán Ó Ríordáin.]

As Ó hAnluain suggests, 1966, the year Kinsella expressed his doubts regarding the future for Irish-language writers, was nonetheless a significant year for Irish-language literature. The first major journal dedicated solely to critical studies of contemporary Irish-language literature, *Irisleabhar Muighe Nuadhat*, was published as well as the contemporary poetry and short-story collection, *Cnuasach 1966*. This volume featured work from three of the major figures in Irish-language

¹³ Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Scáthán Véarsaí: Rogha Dánta* (Áth Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1980), p. 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁵ Eoghan Ó hAnluain, "Nuafhilíocht na Gaeilge 1966-1986: Úire agus Buaine", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille: An Nuafhilíocht* 17 (1986): p. 10.

literature in the twentieth century: Máirtín Ó Díreáin, Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Seán Ó Ríordáin. In a remark that might function as a riposte by Irish-language writers to Kinsella's dismissal of their work quoted above, the editor Breandán Ó hAodha indicated the main aim of the collection to be:

spreagadh a thabhairt do scríbhneoirí na Gaeilge tré aird an phobail a dhíriú ar a gcuid saothair, ach is mian linn freisin a léiriú don domhan mhór go bhfuil litríocht fhiúntach á cumadh i nGaeilge fós, in ainneoin chorra crua an tsaoil agus neamh-shuime an stáit.¹⁶

[to encourage Irish-language writers by directing the attention of the public onto their work, but we would also like to show the whole world that there is worthwhile literature being composed in Irish still, despite the vicissitudes of life and the state's lack of interest.]

Four years later in 1970, the establishment of the *Committee on Irish Language Attitude Research* coincided with the emergence of a remarkably popular Irish-language poetry movement in Cork, a movement influenced by Ó Ríordáin, then writer-in-residence in University College Cork (UCC). The movement centred around the poetry broadsheet *Innti*, and, initially, the poets Michael Davitt, Liam Ó Muirthile, Gabriel Rosenstock and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. The Donegal poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh later became associated with the movement through his attendance at workshops facilitated by Seán Ó Tuama, an important influence on the movement and Professor of Modern Irish at UCC at the time.¹⁷ As students in UCC, the four founding members came under the influence of not just Ó Ríordáin and Ó Tuama, but also Seán Ó Riada who was a lecturer in music in the college at that time.¹⁸

The founding editor of *Innti*, Michael Davitt, has described the atmosphere in UCC in the late 1960s that had a formative influence on the seminal journal and the poets who contributed to it:

Nuair a chuas-sa chun an Choláiste ar dtús, Deireadh Fómhair na bliana '68, bhí comhlúadar bríomhar Gaelach ann [...] an buntáiste mór a bhí as an saol Gaelach, ó thaobh tharraingt agus mhealladh na mac léinn de ná go raibh rabharta faoi athbheochan an cheoil dhúchasaigh: na seisiúin bhailéad agus uirlise go mór sa bhfaisean; an Riadach i mbarr a

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁷ Gréagóir Ó Dúill, "Infinite Grounds for Hope", *Poetry Ireland Review* 39 (1993): 13.

¹⁸ Alan Titley, "Innti and onward: the new poetry in Irish", *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 83.

mhaitheasa, cónaí air i gCúil Aodha agus post aige i Roinn an Cheoil sa Choláiste.¹⁹

[When I first went to college, October 1968, there was an energetic Gaelic community there [...] the main advantage of the Gaelic life, with regard to drawing and attracting the students, was the flourishing revival of the native music: the ballad and instrumental music sessions greatly in fashion; Ó Riada at the height of his powers, living in Cúil Aodha and with a job in the music department in the college.]

Davitt noted the importance of public recognition for the work of his contemporaries writing in Irish in UCC at this time following the publication of their first poems in the college journal *An Síol*: “Ba mhór an t-uachtach a thug sé dúinn daoine a theacht chugainn á rá gur thaitin ár gcuid dánta leo. Gur thaitníodar leo! Bhí pobal againn!”²⁰ [“It gave us great encouragement for people to come to us and tell us they liked our poems. That they liked them! We had a community!”]. Davitt’s use of the word “pobal” evokes the distinction already delineated in this work between “audience” and “community”. “Pobal” refers both to “public” and “community”, though, as Cathal Ó Searcaigh has noted, it was a community that the *Innti* poets sought:

[the *Innti* poets] craved for a community that they represented, that listened to them, admired them [...] that was in dialogue, a reciprocal process. Their poetry comes out of that. There is the public performance aspect to it.²¹

The contemporary Irish-speaking community of Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht (the community that had also inspired Thomas Kinsella’s poetry following his visit to Baile an Fheirtéaraigh in 1959) provided an important inspiration for the work of the *Innti* poets. At the very least, Davitt contended, the poets associated with *Innti* believed strongly:

sa Gaeilge mar theanga bheo labhartha faoi mar a labhraíodh sa Gaeltacht í; níor spéis linn bheith ag gabháil do chineál Laidine. Ba mhó go mór fada a bhí gnáthmhuintir Chorca Dhuibhne ina bhfoinse léinn, oiliúna agus inspioráide againn ná na cúrsaí léinn a bhí idir lámha againn sa choláiste [...] D’fhág san go raibh tábhacht ar leith ag an gcluais inár saothar; filíocht, ba mhaith linn a cheapadh, a raghadh chun an bhoilg trí mheán na

¹⁹ Michael Davitt, “Uige an Chuimhnimh...”, *Comhar* 43.12 (Nollaig 1984): 32.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Personal interview with Ó Searcaigh by the present author, 5 April, 2005.

cluaise, ar chuma an cheoil: fileatas seachas litearthacht a bheadh mar inneach inti. Dhéanfaí a reacaireacht os comhair slua éisteachta.²²

[in Irish as a living language much as it was spoken in the Gaeltacht; we weren't interested in working with a type of Latin. The ordinary people of Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht were much more important as a source of education and inspiration than the educational courses we were doing in the college [...] it meant that the ear held a particular importance in our work; poetry, we would like to think, that went to the stomach through the ears, in the way of music; poetic rather than literary quality would be the substance of it. One could recite it before an audience.]

As Davitt's remarks indicate, their encounter with traditional music and a living Irish-speaking community was crucial for *Innti* poets' engagement with oral forms and the importance of the acoustic element in their work. Music is a recurring theme throughout the work of poets emerging in this period. Some of Davitt's poems, for example, have been described as being written in a "rock music idiom"²³ while several poems have musical allusions including "Cuimhní Cré" ["Clay Memories"] (which features a reference to John Lennon) and "String Quartet".²⁴ He also wrote two poems dedicated to the seminal *sean-nós* singer, Joe Heaney, "(Positively) Sráid Fhearchair"²⁵ ["(Positively) Harcourt Street"] and "Dán do Sheosamh Ó hÉanaí" ["Poem for Joe Heaney"], in which the poet expresses his respect for this tradition-bearer:

Ba chomaoín ar an teach tú a theacht.
Comharthaí sóirt an tseanfhoíd
a thugais leat thar lear
bhíodar leat arís abhaile
thar tairseach isteach: [...]

Mhaireamar mí ar an sean-nós.
Tharchéimnigh do mhóinghlór
leamhas leathscartha an bhruachbhaile:
do shúile uaigneacha teallach-oscailte
do scéalta faoin seansaol i gCárna [...]

²² Davitt, "Uige an Chuimhnimh...", p. 32.

²³ Proinsias Ó Drisceoil, "Triplet traps", *Irish Press*, Saturday, March 10, 1984, p. 9.

²⁴ Michael Davitt, *Gleann ar Ghleann* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal Ó Marcaigh, 1981), pp. 17, 59.

²⁵ Michael Davitt, *Freacnairc Mhearcair/The Oomph of Quicksilver*, ed. by Louis de Paor (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), p. 62.

[Your arrival was communion in our house.
Relics of the 'old sod'
you had carried abroad
came back with you again
across the threshold: [...]

We lived for a month on *sean-nós*.
Your turf voice transcended the semi-detached,
the dull suburban:
your lonesome hearth-open eyes
your stories of the old life in Carna [...] (Trans. Mary O'Malley)]²⁶

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, recalling an earlier remark of Seán Ó Tuama, has emphasised the importance of Davitt for poets emerging in the early 1970s. "Davitt was to us what Diaghelev was to the Ballet Rus", she has contended, "an impresario, a Piped Piper".²⁷ In the work of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh, one finds a comparable emphasis on the aural, partly informed by their awareness and experience of the Gaelic song tradition. While Ní Dhomhnaill has indicated the influence of *sean-nós* early in her career, Ó Searcaigh has acknowledged how Donegal *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire encouraged his engagement with traditional song.²⁸ This engagement became apparent within the themes and metrics of both poets' work, while also providing enabling, and sometimes transgressive forms, for the expression of distinctive contemporary voices.

Performance

Given Davitt's comments, and the context within which the publication emerged, it is not surprising that *Innti* was a movement characterised by public performance. Indeed, Theo Dorgan has suggested that *Innti* was central to "the contemporary and enduring (so far) wave of public interest

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 68-69.

²⁷ Liam Carson, "The Fortnight Interview: Dark but funny and transformative", *Fortnight* 428 (September 2004), <http://www.fortnight.org/carson428.html>, (accessed December 5, 2005).

²⁸ Louis de Paor, "Interview with Cathal Ó Searcaigh", NUI, Galway, 29 November 2003. Pádraig de Paor has also noted the important influence of the "Gaeilgóirí" Anraí Mac Giolla Chomhaill and Gearóid Stockman in encouraging Ó Searcaigh's interest in "a thraidisiún Ultach" ["his Ulster tradition"] [de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge*, p. 124].

in readings”.²⁹ As Alan Titley has noted, “the *Innti* phenomenon brought poetry out of the academy and back on to the streets - or at least back into the pubs and halls”.³⁰ Brian Ó Conchubhair has also highlighted this characteristic of the movement: “The *Innti* writers”, he observes, “envision poetry as a public art form that is funny, shocking and relevant”.³¹ The public would seem to have responded to this movement, at least in its early years. As Titley notes:

It was not unusual for hundreds of people to come along to their early poetry readings, and one piece of folklore has it that a thousand people turned up in the Silver Springs Hotel in Cork in 1971 for the launch of *Innti* 3 to hear the young poets from UCC and the visiting Gaelic poets from Scotland read their wares and do their thing.³²

Performance allowed poets to move beyond the often neglected pages of Irish-language collections in an attempt to create a contemporary engaged community for their work, in the manner of traditional performers in both the Gaelic poetic and musical traditions. Indeed, it was the performance of *sean-nós* singing particularly that brought home to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill the importance of performance and of this tradition to her poetry. When she began reading her own work publicly, Ní Dhomhnaill would find her contemporary exemplars among practitioners of the song tradition. As she has recalled,

At my very first ever reading, ‘Filí Éireann go hAointeach’, at the first ever Cumann Merriman Winter School in my hometown of Nenagh in February 1969, I was congratulated and encouraged by no less a personage than Caitlín Maude herself, back from England, reciting poetry impromptu when she was not singing incredible ‘sean-nós’ songs like ‘Dónall Óg’ or ‘Liam Ó Raghallaigh’. I was utterly enthralled. I had found my role model.³³

²⁹ Theo Dorgan, “Introduction”, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 13.

³⁰ Alan Titley, “Innti and onward: the new poetry in Irish”, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 84.

³¹ Brian Ó Conchubhair, “Cathal Ó Searcaigh: Teip agus Téagar na Teanga/Falling Down and Falling Back on Language”, *On the Side of Light: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, ed. by James Doan and Frank Sewell (Galway: Arlen House, 2002), p. 170.

³² Titley, “Innti and onward: the new poetry in Irish”, p. 83.

³³ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “The Hidden Ireland: Women’s Inheritance”, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 106-107.

Both of these *sean-nós* songs are alluded to repeatedly in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. She has released a recording of herself reading her work³⁴ and been a frequent, and memorable, participant in recent years in the ever growing number of literary festivals both in Ireland and throughout the world. Her emphasis on the significance of the sounds of her poetry also indicates the importance of the aural element, and the necessity of performance, if only through the voiced recitation of the poem by the reader. As she noted in a 2004 interview, "[p]oetry is to a large degree sound. The sound pattern emerges first, then the words, then the meaning, in that order. But last of all, it's the meaning of it. The meaning can change quite arbitrarily, depending on whether the sound is right or not".³⁵ She has argued further that "i mbéarla is don tsúil inmheánach a bhímid ag scríobh faid is don gcluais a bhímid ag scríobh i nGaeilge"³⁶ ["in English we write for the internal eye, whereas it is for the ear that we write in Irish"].

Frank Sewell has commented on Ní Dhomhnaill's use of sound in her poetry, particularly her use of English words where Irish words exist, a characteristic of her work which has been criticised. Gabriel Rosenstock has noted Ní Dhomhnaill's "common use of béarlachas or Englishisms such as "airtisióc"/artichoke" and "that she uses English itself [...] when Irish [...] would do".³⁷ However, as Sewell argues, it is Ní Dhomhnaill's

³⁴ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Spíonáin is Róiseanna* [Caisead CIC L21] (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1993). Indeed, Ní Dhomhnaill has noted the importance of hearing, rather than reading, poetry in Irish in encouraging her to return to Ireland in 1980 and continuing to write in Irish, after spending seven years in the Netherlands and Turkey: "Bhí ceirnín Sheáin Uí Ríordáin agam agus ceann Uí Dhireáin. Is cuimhin liom bheith ag éisteacht le Ó Díreáin i lár na hoíche nuair nach bhféadfainn codladh is é ag rá: 'Faoiseamh seal a gheobhadsa.' An guth a bhí aige! Chuirfeadh sé gráinní ar do chraiceann. Is thosnaíós ag scríobh ansan de réir a chéile. Thánag abhaile". ["I had a record of Seán Ó Ríordáin agus one of Ó Díreáin. I remember listening to Ó Díreáin in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep and him reciting: 'Faoiseamh seal a gheobhadsa.' The voice he had! It would give you goose bumps. And I gradually began to write then. I came home".] [Louis de Paor, "Ó Liombó go dtí Sráid Grafton: Comhrá le Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *Innti* 12 (Samhain 1989): 48].

³⁵ Liam Carson, "The Fortnight Interview: Dark but funny and transformative", *Fortnight Magazine* 428 (September 2004), <http://www.fortnight.org/carson428.html>, (accessed December 5, 2005).

³⁶ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "An Fhilíocht á Cumadh: Ceardlann Filíochta", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille: An Nuafhilíocht* 17 (1986): 177.

³⁷ Quoted in Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 195.

interest in the phonetic possibilities of language that has led to her inclusion of such words. He offers the example of her recording of “Éirigh, a Éinín” [“Rise, little bird”] noting how Ní Dhomhnaill’s use of the word “grapefruit” rather than the Irish form “seadog” reflects her concern with the rhythm of her verse and wish “to play the ‘g’ and ‘gr’ sounds of grapefruit” off the “c” and “cr” sounds of “‘críocha...córach...cruinn’ and even ‘cíor gruaige’ in the next line”.³⁸

go bhfuil a bolg slim is buí ón ngréin,
a cíocha mar *grapefruit*, córach agus cruinn,
cíor gruaige ina deasóg is buidéal seampú Loxene ina láimh chlé [...]

[Tell how her belly is sun-browned,
her breasts like grapefruit full and round,
a hairbrush in her hand, a tube of Loxene gel [...]] (Trans. Michael Hartnett)³⁹

Examples of this use of English can be found throughout Ní Dhomhnaill’s work, including the rhyming of the words “power” and “cabhair” in the following verse from the poem “Plútóiniam” [“Plutonium”]:

Ba mhór an *power* é.
Ba mhór an chabhair é
chun greim docht daingean an uafáis
a dh’agairt ar an bpobal áitiúil.

[It was a terrible power -
It was the power of terror
That kept the grip of dread
Firmly on the local people. (Trans. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin)]⁴⁰

In recent years, the importance of performance for Cathal Ó Searcaigh’s work has been underscored by the fact that some collections have also been accompanied by recordings of the poet reading his work.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1990), pp. 28-29.

⁴⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Plútóiniam”, *The Water Horse* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1999), pp. 64-65.

⁴¹ Both *An Bealach ‘na Bhaile/Homecoming* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1993) and *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2000) were published with recordings of

While such recordings constitute a virtual, rather than immediate engagement with audience, he too has been one of the most distinctive voices at literary festivals and readings throughout the country. Gabriel Rosenstock has drawn attention to his style in an introduction to Ó Searcaigh's collection *Suibhne* (1987):

Aon duine a chuala Cathal Ó Searcaigh ag aithris a dhunta cuimhneoidh sé go deo ar an gceolmhaireacht, ar an ngrástúlacht, dord údarásach a shamlaímid leis na baird [...] An teangeolaí a d'éistfeadh leis ghlanfadh sé a chluas láithreach lena lúidín mar tá cúpla fóinéim agus allafón i gcanúint Chathail ar ábhar tráchtais iad.⁴²

[Anyone who has heard Cathal Ó Searcaigh performing his poems, he will always remember the musicality, the graceful, authoritative drone that we could imagine coming from the bards [...] The linguist that might listen to him would clean his ears out immediately with his little finger because there are a few phonemes and allophones in Cathal's speech that you could write a thesis about.]

Lillis Ó Laoire has also emphasised the distinctive oral style of Ó Searcaigh's poetry. In his commentary on the poem "Caoradóir" ["Shepherd"], Ó Laoire emphasises particularly the manner in which Ó Searcaigh's language operates firstly on the ear and the body before affecting the intellect:

Tá an teanga díreach anseo, cinnte, gan mórán deacrachta leis, ach is i ngaibhe fhéitheogach charnach chóiriú na bhfocal [...] atá céadbhua an dáin. Bheir an Searcach amach go láidir bua na hurlabhra ar an dóigh sin, ar bhealach a oibríós ar chluas agus ar chorp sula gcastar an chiall ar chor ar bith air. Sampla ionadach é sin den ionramháil chumtha theanga is dual don tSearcach, an lá is fearr atá sé.⁴³

[The language is direct here, clear, without much difficulty, but it is the rough muscular cumulative arrangement of the words [...] [that is the] main quality of the poem. Ó Searcaigh demonstrates strongly the power of speech in this way, in a way that affects the ear and the body before it ever

Ó Searcaigh reading his work, while *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolais* includes a version of the poem "Sráideacha" set to music by Diane Ní Chanainn.

⁴² Gabriel Rosenstock, "Brollach", *Suibhne* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 1987), p. 4.

⁴³ Lillis Ó Laoire, "Ag Tabhairt Teanga don Tost", *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolais*, Cathal Ó Searcaigh (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2000), p. 18.

reaches the mind. That is a representative example of the natural manipulation of language composition for Ó Searcaigh, on his finest day.]

Ó Laoire has also suggested that it is only in Ó Searcaigh's performance of one of his most provocative poems, "Gort na gCnámh" ["Field of Bones"] (discussed at more length below), that the full force and distinctiveness of the poem's subject and language become apparent. This poem was commissioned by Donegal Central Library and Arts Centre and was first revealed to the public through its performance by Ó Searcaigh for the opening of the library in Letterkenny in 1995. It is exhibited to this day in the foyer of that building⁴⁴ and marks an important engagement by the poet with a topic of increasing public concern in the 1990s in Ireland. Its public import was underscored in 1997 when it was adapted by Carol Moore into an award-winning short film *Field of Bones*.⁴⁵ Ó Laoire has recorded the impact of the poem on local people of Gort an Choirce in Donegal as they listened to Ó Searcaigh recite:

Is minic a chuala mé Cathal ag léamh an dáin seo, agus bíonn siad ann i gcónaí nach dtaitníonn fórsa agus tiomáint dhosheachanta an dáin leo. Léigh sé é Oíche Fhéile Bríde amháin i nGort an Choirce os comhair scaifte de mhuintir na háite, rud a chuir corraí ar chuid acu. Ba suimiúil an rud é gur dhúirt cara eile liom a bhí i láthair ag an ócáid chéanna, go dtug an dán focail ar ais chun a cuimhne nár chuala sí le fada roimhe sin. Is ar leibhéal na teanga a rinne sí teagmháil leis agus chuaigh an léiriú cumhachtach ar an uafás i bhfeidhm go mór uirthi.⁴⁶

[I have often heard Cathal read this poem, and there are those always that don't like the inescapable force and drive of the poem. He read it St. Brigid's night in Gort an Choirce before a group of local people, and upset some of them. It was interesting that a friend of mine who was present at the same occasion said that the poem reminded her of words she hadn't heard for a long time before that. It was at the level of language that she connected with the poem and the powerful performance of the horror affected her greatly.]

Ó Searcaigh has collaborated with several musicians, including Brian Kennedy, and his performances have also occasionally been accompanied

⁴⁴ This information was given to me by librarian Bernie Campbell at the central library, Letterkenny where the poem is framed and exhibited in the foyer to this day.

⁴⁵ Carol Moore, *Gort na gCnámh (Field Of Bones)* (Belfast: Straight Face Productions, 1997).

⁴⁶ Ó Laoire, "Ag Tabhairt Teanga don Tost", p. 17.

by music.⁴⁷ In recent years he has performed with the West Ocean String Quartet, whose leader, Neil Martin, has composed arrangements for several of Ó Searcaigh's poems. From time to time Martin has also accompanied the poet's readings on cello.⁴⁸

Brian Ó Conchubhair has suggested that the *Innti* movement was also influenced by the Beat Poetry movement in the US in the late 1960s, a movement characterised by performance, and performances that were frequently accompanied by music.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that this movement had a significant influence on Ó Searcaigh's work, reflected in the titles of several of his poems, such as "Do Jack Kerouac" ["For Jack Kerouac"] and "Déagóir ag *Drifáil*" ["Teenager Drifting"].

The Beat Movement was heavily influenced by music, particularly jazz.⁵⁰ Such was the inspiration of jazz for Beat poets that it has been suggested that its influence is apparent within the metrics of Beat Poetry itself. Mike Janssen has argued that the Beats "used the principal ideas of bebop playing and applied it to prose and poetry writing, creating a style sometimes called 'bop prosody'".⁵¹ This style was characterized in prose by a stream of consciousness technique "words blurted out in vigorous

⁴⁷ Personal interview with Ó Searcaigh by the present author, 5 April, 2005.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ó Conchubhair, "Cathal Ó Searcaigh: Teip agus Téagar na Teanga/Falling Down and Falling Back on Language", p. 170.

⁵⁰ The name of the Beat movement itself came from jazz as, according to Ann Charters, the "word 'beat' was primarily in use after World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted" [Ann Charters, (ed.) *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. xvii]. The leading prose writer of the movement Jack Kerouac, interpreted the name slightly differently, though nonetheless clearly in a musical context, as coming from "beatitude, not beat up. You feel this. You feel it in a beat, in jazz real cool jazz" [Jack Chambers, *Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 247]. Indeed, as John Arthur Maynard writes, for the Beat Poetry Movement "[j]azz served as the ultimate point of reference, even though, or perhaps even because, few among them played it. From it they adopted the mythos of the brooding, tortured, solitary artist, performing with others but always alone. They talked the talk of jazz, built communal rites around using the jazzman's drugs, and worshipped the dead jazz musicians most fervently. The musician whose music was fatal represented pure spontaneity" [John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 48].

⁵¹ Mike Janssen, "The Influence of Jazz on the Beat Generation", *The Beat Begins: America in the 1950s* 1994, <http://www.honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/archive/Janssen.html>, (accessed March 23, 2004).

bursts, rarely revised and often sparsely punctuated for lines and lines”.⁵² Jack Kerouac described his writing as having “No periods [...] but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (like a jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)”⁵³ while Allen Ginsberg regarded himself as a poet in the style of a jazz musician “a bebop musician” according to Mike Janssen “because he lengthened the poetic line to fit the length of his own breath, paused for air, and launched another line, sometimes starting with the same word as the last line”.⁵⁴

Critics have noted the influence of Beat Poetry on Ó Searcaigh’s use of the long line in his poetry. Nobuaki Tochigi, for example, argues that Ó Searcaigh “employs long lines in poems such as ‘Déagóir Ag *Driftáil*/Drifting’ [...] and ‘Do Jack Kerouac/ For Jack Kerouac’, [...] whose style reminds the reader of Whitman or Ginsberg”. Tochigi also suggests that the poem “Kathmandu”, uses “an applied version of the long-line form [...] and the breath of his poetic voice seems freer”⁵⁵ reminiscent of Ginsberg’s own attempt, noted by Janssen above, to lengthen his line to “fit the length of his own breath”:

Ó, a Khatmandu, a strainséir dhuibh, a Sadhu fhiáin an tsléibhe,
 bhuaíl mé leat aréir i mbeár buile na hoíche
 anois siúlann tú isteach i mo dhán
 suíonn tú síos ag béile bocht seo an bhriathair
 le do chlapsholas cnocach
 a thiteann mar chleite;
 le do chuid adharcanna rabhaidh a chuireann m’aighe ag *motoráil*
 i *rickshaw* na samhlaíochta;

[O Kathmandu dark stranger wild Sadhu of the mountain
 I met you last night in a rowdy nightclub
 now you stroll into my poem

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jack Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”, *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 57-58. Alan Ginsberg has suggested that “Kerouac learned his line from - directly from Charlie Parker, and Gillespie, and Monk. He was listening in ’43 to Symphony Sid and listening to ‘Night in Tunisia’ and all the Bird-flight-noted things which he then adapted to prose line” [Allen Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue* (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1980), p. 41].

⁵⁴ Janssen, “The Influence of Jazz on the Beat Generation”.

⁵⁵ Nobuaki Tochigi, “Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Transfiguring representations of the native”, *On the Side of Light: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, ed. by James Doan and Frank Sewell (Galway: Arlen House 2002), p. 163.

you sit down at this poor altar of the word
with your mountain dusk
that falls like a feather
with your alarm-horns that send my mind
racing in a rickshaw of imagination; (Trans. Frank Sewell)]⁵⁶

Whether informed by the Gaelic song tradition, their respective communities or international poetic movements, performance is an integral part of the work of both Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill.

The Relationship of Poets to Tradition

While indicating poets' engagement with contemporary audiences, performance also connects poets with the transmission of poetry historically in Ireland, already discussed in Chapter Two. Both Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill have indicated an awareness of this precedent with Ní Dhomhnaill describing herself as "being a product of a largely oral tradition".⁵⁷ Speaking also of female poets, Bríona Nic Dhiarmada has noted,

Is ceist an-tábhachtach í ceist an traidisiúin, ní hamháin do bhanfhilí ach d'fhilí i gcoitinne [...] ní thagann an fhilíocht as an nua ar fad; ní mór don fhile dul i ngleic leis an traidisiún bealach amháin nó bealach eile. Ní foláir leanúachas éigin a bheith i gceist bíodh is gur leanúnachas diúltach é sin .i. diúltú maidir leis na gnásanna cumadóireachta a bhíodh i réim roimhe. Bíonn gach straitéis filíochta ag seasamh i gcoibhneas leis an traidisiún, na filí agus an corpus filíochta a chuaigh roimhe, ar láimh amháin, agus le braistíní, cúraimí agus ábhair mhachnaimh an fhile féin ar an láimh eile.⁵⁸

[The question of the tradition is very important, not just for female poets but also for poets in general [...] poetry does not come entirely from the new; a poet must grapple with the tradition one way or another. It must involve some continuity even if it's a negative continuity i.e. rejection of the previous dominant composition conventions. Every poetic strategy stands in relation to the tradition, the poets and the body of poetry that went before, on one hand, and the feelings, concerns and reflections of the poet herself on the other.]

⁵⁶ Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1997), p. 194-195.

⁵⁷ Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, "The English for Irish", *The Irish Review* 4 (Spring 1988): 116.

⁵⁸ Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, "'Ceist na Teanga' Dioscúrsa na Gaeilge, An Fhilíocht agus Dioscúrsa na mBan", *Comhar* 51.5 (Bealtaine 1992): 161.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith has suggested “go bhfuil an dialógachas go smior i saothar roinnt de na filí is spéisiúla dá raibh ag saothrú na teanga le leathchéad bliain agus breis againn, ón Ríordánach i Leith”⁵⁹ [“that dialogism is at the heart of the work of some of the most interesting poets that have worked with Irish for the past fifty years and more, from Ó Ríordáin onwards”]. Mac Giolla Léith refers here to the dialogic theories of the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, to account for the multi-voiced nature of much Irish-language poetry since Ó Ríordáin, as alert to past traditions and compositions as to present circumstances. In Bakhtin’s work dialogism referred to “the idea that all utterances respond to previous utterances and are always addressed to other potential speakers, rather than occurring independently or in isolation”.⁶⁰ For Bakhtin, while each utterance responds to those that have come before, it often “refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account”.⁶¹ As J. Allan Cheyne and Donato Tarulli note “[o]ur utterances are thereby inhabited by the *voices* of others”.⁶² For French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva, Bakhtin was the first to bring to literary theory the understanding that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another”.⁶³

This notion of intertextuality is evident throughout Gaelic poetry and often reflects a recurring concern with tradition, particularly apparent in the work of Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Tradition

Few Irish poets are more concerned with tradition than Ní Dhomhnaill and her work consequently engages in a dialogic rapport with her predecessors. These include Máire Mhac an tSaoi, a poet who in poems

⁵⁹ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Léacht Uí Chadhain 2004: Athnuachan na Filíochta”, *Comhar* 65.1 (Eanáir 2005): 17.

⁶⁰ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 211.

⁶¹ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 91.

⁶² J. Allan Cheyne and Donato Tarulli, “Dialogue, Difference, and the ‘Third Voice’ in the Zone of Proximal Development”, *University of Waterloo* 1999, <http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/ZPD.html>, (accessed August 16, 2005). Emphasis in original.

⁶³ Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel”, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), p. 37.

such as "Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin" also engaged in the incorporation of elements from the Gaelic tradition into her poetry, producing a work noted for "its continuity with the idioms and motifs of traditional song".⁶⁴

Ní Dhomhnaill's work is steeped in the myths, folklore and songs she has found both in the community of Corca Dhuibhne, where she spent considerable time with relatives in her youth, and in her researches in the Department of Folklore, at University College Dublin.⁶⁵ As Frank Sewell has noted,

For Ní Dhomhnaill, the past is always alive and has something to say which people today can interpret in various ways to broaden and expand the range of present and future possibilities made narrow by outdated but still extant orthodoxies such as patriarchy, colonialism, religion, rationalism, etc.⁶⁶

There is a sense, also, in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry of a duty to tradition. She shares this characteristic with the traditional musician who, Tomás Ó Canainn observes, sees his "performance in relation to that of other musicians who have gone before him, as well as in the context of the living tradition".⁶⁷ Indeed, in his study of the community of Ballymenone, Henry Glassie found that it was often the past that allowed people to explain the present:

To connect themselves and discover their minds people must talk. Other people provide the most obvious, useful, interesting topic. So people enjoy speaking in celebration of others, but investigation into human nature cannot be confined by affirmation, and negativity cannot be allowed to escape through community. The solution is to speak of the dead, making history the way to discuss the present. People from the past are made black holes of gossip, sucking energy into them. I was able to watch this as men died. One never mentioned in life became after death the very type of greed. Another became the model of the solid farmer.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Patrick Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1999), p. 137.

⁶⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Why I Choose to Write in Irish: The Corpse That sits up and talks back", *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. by Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 52.

⁶⁶ Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 153.

⁶⁷ Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

⁶⁸ Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*, p. 41.

When it came time for story and song in this community, Glassie notes that it was to the past, almost as much as the present, that the artist paid respects:

when the artist stands proudly before his audience, he stands humbly before the whole of the past. His excellence came in essence from others [...] The teller who repeats a story's core while sitting it gracefully in the conversational moment behaves responsibly towards his dead teachers and live listeners.⁶⁹

Furthermore, Glassie found that in the playing of a tune, there was as much a communion of past and present as there was a coming together of the community itself:

Neighbors, old companions, they treat one another with courtly delicacy, taking every chance to establish agreement. The playing, the fiddle, the tune, the past – all are used to bring the céilí into the soft words, yes and aye, into oneness.⁷⁰

Similarly, Ní Dhomhnaill has called Irish “the corpse that sits up and talks back”.⁷¹ This corpse is probably most recognisable in her poem “Oscailt an Tuama” [“The Opening of the Tomb”], from the 1998 collection *Cead Aighnis*, in which Ní Dhomhnaill’s great-grandmother’s tomb is opened only for the old woman to sit up in her grave and give directions to her descendants to perform yearly “cluichí caointe” [“lamenting games”] in her memory:⁷²

Is do chomhlíonamair na horduithe
a leag sí síos dúinn –
suí ar thulach,
trí gháir mhaíte a ardú
is ár n-olagón a dhéanamh
go fada bog binn,
is gan é a bheith de mhí-ádh
ar aon mhac mallachtan
dearmad a dhéanamh
ar a chluichí caointe a reachtáil

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 143-145.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

⁷¹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Why I Choose to Write in Irish: The Corpse That sits up and talks back”, *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. by Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 45-56.

⁷² Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 151.

gach bliain anuas
go dtí an lá inniu féin.

[And we followed the directions
She had laid down for us:
To sit on a hilltop
To raise three shouts of praise,
To make her lamentation
Long and musical,
And to let no miserable
Son of misfortune
Fail or forget
To hold her funeral games
Every year afterwards
Down to the present day. (Trans. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin)]⁷³

The importance of tradition to Ní Dhomhnaill's work is apparent from her earliest compositions. In the anthology *Rogha an Fhile/The Poet's Choice*, published in 1974 when Ní Dhomhnaill had just begun to emerge as a poet in the pages of *Innti*, she chose the poem "Eitleáin" ["Flight"],⁷⁴ to exemplify her work:

Fé mar a shiúlódh
Dhá mhuc
Shotallach
Aníos an páile

(d' alp an tarna
ceann acu cnú
mo chroí mar mheas
is ní chacfaidh sí cáithne).

[Just as
two proud
sows
would walk up the paling,

(the second one of them
Gobbled up the nut
Of my heart as mast

⁷³ Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Water Horse*, pp. 86-89.

⁷⁴ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Eitleáin", *Rogha an Fhile*, ed. by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (Castleknock: The Goldsmith Press, 1974), p. 57.

And will not shit one bit) (Trans. Ní
Dhomhnaill)]

In her accompanying commentary in *Rogha an Fhile*, Ní Dhomhnaill explains her choice of the above poem as it highlights two important and interdependent features of her work: firstly, “an ionspioráid phearsanta” [“personal inspiration”] and secondly, “béaloideas” [“folklore”]. According to Ní Dhomhnaill,

Tá nascadh mar sin idir mo thrioblóid féin agus gach a thagann anuas chugam trí mheán na teanga agus trí mheán an bhéaloidis. Sin é an príomhrud atá ag dó m’eireaball filíochta i láthair na huaire – forbairt ar an tradisiúin trína phearsanú, agus saibhriú an duine trí mheán an tradisiúin.⁷⁵

[There is a connection therefore between my own troubles and everything that comes down to me through the language and through folklore. That is the main thing that is preoccupying my poetry at the moment – the development of the tradition through its personalisation, and the enrichment of the individual through the tradition.]

Ní Dhomhnaill’s engagement with tradition represents a significant contrast with the remarks of her predecessor Seán Ó Ríordáin. Ó Ríordáin felt “smothered” by the Gaelic tradition. For Ó Ríordáin it was only when he freed himself from this tradition that he found “cead cainte”⁷⁶ [“permission to speak”]. Unlike Ó Ríordáin, Ní Dhomhnaill has found rich source material and an empowering voice within Gaelic orature,⁷⁷ for her work. As Louis de Paor has noted,

By contrast with the so-called ‘Oedipal’ anxiety of influence, with its urgent need to subvert or reject the overwhelming authority of tradition, in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems, as in those of the anonymous women poets from the Irish oral tradition, the inherited voice of tradition is an enabling force

⁷⁵ Ní Dhomhnaill, “Eitleáin”, *Rogha an Fhile*, p. 58.

⁷⁶ Seán Ó Ríordáin, “Scríobh na Filíochta”, *Scríobh* 2, ed. by Seán Ó Mórdha (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1975), p. 73.

⁷⁷ This is a useful term proposed by the Ugandan writer Pius Zirimu to denote oral “texts” [Gĩtahi Gĩtũtũ, “African Theory and Criticism”, *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, 1997, http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/free/african_theory_and_criticism.html, (accessed May 16, 2005)].

which allows her to speak with the full resonance of a language that carries within it the weight of a shared tribal history.⁷⁸

However, it would be wrong to suggest that Ní Dhomhnaill's attempt to connect to tradition has been either straightforward or unproblematic. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith has noted of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry:

déanann Ní Dhomhnaill an traidisiún a athshealbhú, a athghabháil agus a athnuachan d'fhonn é a dhéanamh níos fáiltí agus níos feiliúnaí dá haidhmeanna fileata féin. Cruthaíonn agus cothaíonn sí féiniúlacht ar leith di féin taobh istigh de dhioscúrsa na Gaeilge, féiniúlacht atá oscailte mar sin féin don iasacht, in dhá chiall an fhocail .i. don rud atá le fáil ar iasacht agus ón iasacht.⁷⁹

[Ní Dhomhnaill repossesses, recovers and renews the tradition in order to make it more amenable and more appropriate to her poetic aims. She creates and develops a distinct identity for herself inside the Gaelic discourse, an identity that is nonetheless open to the outside/foreign influence, in the two meanings of the word i.e. foreign and borrowed]

As Mac Giolla Léith suggests in his reference to Ní Dhomhnaill's efforts to make the tradition "níos fáiltí agus níos feiliúnaí dá haidhmeanna fileata féin" ["more amenable and more appropriate to her poetic aims"], women occupy an uncertain position within the tradition of Gaelic poetry. The Gaelic literary tradition would appear at best an ambiguous inheritance for Ní Dhomhnaill while the representation of women within the tradition has also been criticized.⁸⁰

Seán Ó Tuama has noted that within the Gaelic literary tradition "attested works by women are quite rare".⁸¹ For Ní Dhomhnaill "[w]oman, as woman, has only been accepted in the literary tradition as either Muse or, if she refuses to play that dreary, boring and unpaid role, then as

⁷⁸ Louis de Paor, "A Feminine Voice: The Poems of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *Irish Australian Studies: Papers Delivered at the Seventh Irish-Australian Conference, July 1993*, ed. by Rebecca Pelan (Sydney: Crossing Press, 1994), p. 102.

⁷⁹ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, "Léacht Uí Chadhain 2004: Athnuachan na Filíochta", *Comhar* 65.2 (Feabhra 2005): 17.

⁸⁰ See Máirín Nic Eoin, *B'ait Leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne i dTraidisiún Liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1998) and Máire Ní Annracháin, "'Ait Liom Bean a Bheith ina File'", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 12 (1982): 145-182.

⁸¹ Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions: selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 35.

Bitch”,⁸² much as Gilbert and Gubar found women traditionally in nineteenth-century literature represented as either angel or monster.⁸³ Ní Dhomhnaill is here referring to the common representation of women throughout Irish literature and in popular songs as motifs or mythical figures, often representing the Irish nation while bearing little relationship to the reality of female experience.⁸⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem “An tSeanbhean Bhocht”, for example, alludes to the late eighteenth-century song, “The Shan Van Vocht”, which Pádraic Colum describes as a “peasant song made at the time when the Irish were expecting help from revolutionary France, in 1798”.⁸⁵ While the Shan Van Vocht is, according to Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, “an enduring figure who appears in many guises in Irish legend and culture but is best known in the modern age in the literature of the Revival”,⁸⁶ Ní Dhomhnaill’s “An tSeanbhean Bhocht” is far from the glorious figure personifying Ireland of the 1798 ballad. Rather the lady of the title is a self-pitying cantankerous old woman who may indeed represent England, or possibly the Queen of England, as much as Ireland. Ní Dhomhnaill appears, perhaps a little mischievously, to pity those who saw her in the glory of her youth and felt obliged to fight in the British army many miles away in order to escape from her:

Féachann sí orm anois leis an dtruamhéil fhuar
a chíféa go minic i súile a bhí tráth óg is breá
ag meabhrú di féin im fhianaise, leath os íseal
is leath os ard, gur mhéanar don té a fuair amharc
ar an gcéad lá a shiúil sí go mómharach síos an phromanáid
mar ríon faoina parasol; ar na céadta céadta gaiscíoch
is fear breá a chuaigh le saighdiúireacht in arm na Breataine
nó a theith leo ar bord loinge go dú na tíortha teo,
aon ní ach éaló ós na saigheada éagóra

⁸² Ní Dhomhnaill, “The Hidden Ireland: Women’s Inheritance”, p. 114.

⁸³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 17.

⁸⁴ This issue is also discussed by Eavan Boland in *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), pp. 8-9.

⁸⁵ Pádraic Colum (ed.), *Anthology of Irish Verse* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922). Bartleby.com, 2001, <http://www.bartleby.com/250/43.html>, (accessed June 7, 2004). John Montague has also written a poem taking its title from this song, “The Sean Bhean Bhocht”, which was included in his 1958 collection *Forms of Exile* [John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1995), pp. 190-191].

⁸⁶ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 187.

a theilgeadh sí orthu de shíor faoina fabhraí tiubha.

[That ice-blue pity stares through me, she
Whose eyes were radiant once with youth and blue fire –
How privileged they were, the poor unfortunates
Who caught a glimpse of her in all her majesty, gliding
On the promenade beneath a queenly parasol; the regiments
Of stricken youths who took to soldiering, who
Laboured in the White Man's Grave, anything
To flee the blue illicit lightening
She squandered from those eyes. (Trans. Ciaran Carson)]⁸⁷

Ní Dhomhnaill has also remarked on what she considers the uncertain position of female poets in Irish literary history:

women poets in Irish were always highly discriminated against and still are [...] the very concept of a woman poet was inherently threatening, as witnessed by the extreme hostility that surrounds the subject. I was brought up amid a welter of proverbs and formulaic phrases of the likes of: '*Na trí rudaí is measa i mbaile - tuódóir fliuch, síoladóir tiubh, file mná*' [The three worst curses that could befall a village - a wet thatcher, a heavy sower, a woman poet].⁸⁸

Her view is reflected in the work of several scholars of Gaelic literature, including Maureen Murphy⁸⁹ and Seán Ó Tuama,⁹⁰ who concur with the remark of J.E. Caerwyn Williams that "women figure only rarely among historical poets and authors of the medieval and modern literature".⁹¹ Máirín Nic Eoin has also written a persuasive study on this issue in *B'ait Leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne i dTraidisiún Liteartha na Gaeilge*,⁹² the title of which, inspired by a remark by Seán Ó

⁸⁷ Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1990), pp. 128-129.

⁸⁸ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?", *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. by Theresa O'Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 14.

⁸⁹ Maureen Murphy, "Irish Elegiac Tradition in the Poetry of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Caitlín Maude, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *New Irish Writing: Essays in Memory of Raymond J. Porter* ed. by James D. Brophy and Eamon Grennan (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), p. 141.

⁹⁰ Ó Tuama, *Repossessions*, p. 35.

⁹¹ Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 237-238.

⁹² Máirín Nic Eoin, *B'ait Leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne i dTraidisiún Liteartha na Gaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1998).

Ríordáin,⁹³ suggests the suspicion she argues women were viewed with by many in the Gaelic tradition.

However, it is not true to say that there were no female poets in the Gaelic tradition; indeed, a considerable debate has emerged among female poets themselves about their predecessors. Biddy Jenkinson, for example, has been critical of Eavan Boland who has contended that she lacked “the precedent and example of previous [...] women poets”.⁹⁴ Writing in 1997, Jenkinson argued that:

The gentle speculations and tentative conclusions of sages have become received truths. But no matter how sagacious the scholar, vision is a sighting from St. Brendan’s whale, from a temporary vantage point, thrust up under the feet of the observer by time and circumstance [...] The view that Irish women poets of the present have no antecedents seems to me to be just such a borrowed view from a sounded whale. I have always had a very healthy relationship with my living, though deceased, sisters. The occasional male mistake about them never bothered me. To find Eavan Boland, whose poetry I admire, writing them out of existence [...] was quite another matter. I am quite amused now at the surge of energy with which I decided to defend the doorstep on which I put out my empty milkbottles.⁹⁵

Máire Ní Annracháin had anticipated Jenkinson’s remarks in one of the first feminist studies of Gaelic poetry by contending that while “go deimhin is beag ainm banúdar atá le sonrú in aon stair liteartha ná catalóg láimhscríbhinní [...] ní gá go gciallaíonn sé sin nach gcumaidís tada fiúntach”⁹⁶ [“certainly there are few female poets found in any literary history or manuscript catalogue [...] that doesn’t necessarily mean that they composed nothing worthwhile”]. Jenkinson’s remarks have also been supported by the research of Gerardine Meaney who has likewise criticized the failure of Boland to recognize her female antecedents.⁹⁷ The

⁹³ See Seán Ó Ríordáin, “Banfhile”, *Tar Éis Mo Bháis agus dánta eile* (Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1978), p. 45.

⁹⁴ Eavan Boland, “The Women Poet in a National Tradition”, *Studies* 76 (1987): 150.

⁹⁵ Biddy Jenkinson, “A View from the Whale’s Back”, *Poetry Ireland Review* 52 (Spring 1997): 62.

⁹⁶ Máire Ní Annracháin, “‘Ait Liom Bean a Bheith ina File’”, *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 12 (1982): 145.

⁹⁷ Gerardine Meaney, “Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women’s Writing”, *Women: A Cultural Review* 4.2 (Autumn, 1993): 136-53. Quoted in Ríona Ní Fhrighil, “Faitíos Imní an Scáthaithe: Eavan Boland agus Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill”, *New Hibernia Review* 6.4 (2002): 140.

extent of female writing is apparent in A.A. Kelly's *Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women Poets from 1690 to the Present* in which Kelly lists seventy nine female poets since the seventeenth century,⁹⁸ while the fourth and fifth volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* include many examples of women's writing from this period and before.⁹⁹ Ní Dhomhnaill's own remarks on this subject are far from consistent, as we will consider below, and would suggest an anxiety regarding her own relationship with the history of composition in Irish. However, as her frequent allusions to both the *caoineadh* (lament) and *amhrán grá* [love song] traditions in her poetry suggests, Ní Dhomhnaill finds inspiration primarily in an Irish oral tradition. For her there is a close association between women's discourse and orality. As she has remarked "there is an equals sign between the feminine voice and basic orality, or a literature based on feminine forms".¹⁰⁰ Ní Dhomhnaill has highlighted particularly the *caoineadh* as an important example of women's composition:

The fact of the matter was though the literary canon was drawn up without them, there *were* women poets. The extensive keening tradition, or *caoineadh* was the major 'prerogative' of women poets. The very excellence of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill's lament for her husband in 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire' is proof that this was a highly intricate and extensive tradition, capable of producing enormously effective poetic compositions [...] There is no reason to believe that Eibhlín Dubh was even literate in Irish, but that does not matter one whit as she did not actually write this poem but rather composed it in a spontaneous oral performance on two separate occasions.¹⁰¹

One of the most famous surviving works in this tradition, "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire" reminded Ní Dhomhnaill "gur féidir saothar foirfe

⁹⁸ A. A. Kelly (ed.), *Pillars of the house: an anthology of verse by Irish women from 1690 to the present* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1997).

⁹⁹ Angela Bourke, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha et al (eds.), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Michael Cronin, "Making the Millennium", *Graph* 1 (October 1986): 5.

¹⁰¹ Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" p. 12. There has also been considerable debate regarding Ní Chonaill's lament, particularly the manner in which it was appropriated and transformed into a "de-gendered literary text in English" by the literary establishment. See Angela Bourke, "Performing – Not Writing", *Graph* 2 (Winter 1991-1992): 28.

ealaíne a chur ar fáil agus fós fanacht i do bhean”¹⁰² [“that you could produce accomplished artistic work and still remain as a woman”]. For Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, “Toisc [...] go samhlaítear saothar ban sa Ghaeilge – ar a laghad go dtí seo – níos mó leis an traidisiún béil, ní haon ionadh é go mbíonn Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill ag tarraingt go speisialta ar an gcuid sin dá hoidhreacht”¹⁰³ [“As women’s work was considered in Gaelic – at least until now – more with the oral tradition, it is not surprising that Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill draws particularly on that aspect of her heritage”].

While concerned about attitudes towards female writers in the Gaelic tradition historically, Ní Dhomhnaill has nonetheless found an important and rich resource in women’s orature.

Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Tradition

While Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s engagement with tradition is apparent from her earliest compositions, such an encounter with tradition is evident considerably later in the work of Cathal Ó Searcaigh. Pádraig de Paor¹⁰⁴ has recognised the occasional influence of Máirtín Ó Díreáin and Seán Ó Ríordáin in Ó Searcaigh’s first two collections, *Miontraigéide Cathrach agus Dánta Eile* (1975) and *Tuirlingt* (1978). However, a stronger presence still is that of the American Beats (including Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder) and what Ó Searcaigh has called the “Mersey Beats”¹⁰⁵ (Roger McGough, Adrian Henri, Brian Patten – a group of poets whose work was also characterised by performance). The influence of these performance poets partly reflected time Ó Searcaigh spent in London in the 1970s. Poems such as “If you’re going to Falcarragh be sure to wear your rosary beads in your hair”, “Blues na Bealtaine” [“Bealtaine Blues”] and “Cor na Síog” [“The Fairy Reel”] reveal a comparable aesthetic and similar concerns to those found in the work of these American and English poets. Indeed, the poems in these early premature collections often reveal an excitement in new spaces and experiences as much as concerns with his home place and

¹⁰² Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire”, *Comhar* 45.1 (Eanáir 1986): 25.

¹⁰³ Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, *Téacs Baineann Téac Mná: gnéithe de fhilíocht Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 2005), p. 24.

¹⁰⁴ See de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁵ Marian Kelly, “Ón Taobh Istigh: Agallamh le Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, *Macalla*, ed. by Brian Ó Conchubhair (Gaillimh: An Cumann Éigse agus Seanchais, 1996-97), p. 41.

community.¹⁰⁶ As Ó Searcaigh writes in “Miontragóid Chathrach” [“A Minor City Tragedy”]:

Tháinig mé anseo ó chnoic agus ó chaoráin,
 Ó pharóistí beaga beadaí an bhéalchrábhaidh, ó bhailte
 an bhéadáin, ó bhochtaineacht
 agus beaginnmhe mo mhuintire, ó nead caonaigh a gcineáltais,
 ó chlaí cosanta a socrachta.
 Teastaíonn fuinneoga uaim! Teastaíonn eiteoga uaim!
 Tá mé dubh thuirseach de rútaí,
 de bheith ag tochailt san aimsir chaite, de sheandaoine
 ag tiontú ithir thais na treibhe,
 ag cuartú púiríní seanchais a thabharfas cothú anama daofa
 i ndúláíocht ghortach an gheimhridh;
 de dhomboladh na staire a chuireann samhnas orm;
 de bhlaoscanna cinn mo shinsear
 ag stánadh orm go námhadach ó chrann ginealaigh mo theaghlaiigh.
 Tá mé ró-óg do sheanchuimhní! [...]

Caithim seal i siopaí leabhar Charing Cross Road
 Ag browseáil i measc na mBeats;
 Iadsan a bhfuil *voodoo* i *vibeanna* a gcuid véarsaí,
 A chuireann mise craiceáilte¹⁰⁷

[I came here from hills and bogs
 From small conceited parishes of hypocrisy, from towns
 of gossip, from the poverty
 and helplessness of my people, from the moss nest of their kindness,
 from the protecting fence of their settledness.
 I need windows! I need wings!
 I am fed-up with ruts,
 of digging in the past tense, of old people
 turning the damp soil of their homesteads,
 looking for storytelling hovels that would nourish their souls
 in the miserable hunger of winter;

¹⁰⁶ As Pádraig de Paor notes “D’fhág an Searcaigh óg a áit dhúchais chun é féin a dhealú amach go sainiúil uathúil óna phobal; d’fhág sé an baile le bheith in ann *mise* a rá seachas *muid* (i. *muid* an teaghlaiigh ina bhfásann an mé aníos)” [“The young Ó Searcaigh left his native place to differentiate himself as uniquely distinctive from his community; he left home in order to be able to say *me* rather than *us* (i.e. *us* being the family in which the *I* grows up)”] [de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge*, p. 94].

¹⁰⁷ Ó Searcaigh, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas*, p. 37.

of the personal smell of history that disgusts me;
 from the skulls of my ancestors
 staring at me hostilely from my family's genealogical tree.
 I am too young for old memories! [...]

I spend a while in the Charing Cross bookshops
 browsing among the Beats
 those who have voodoo in the vibes of their verses
 that drive me cracked.]

Despite the sentiments expressed in this poem, an increasing preoccupation with tradition became apparent in Ó Searcaigh's work on his return to Ireland in the early 1980s. "Caithfear pilleadh arís ar na foinisí"¹⁰⁸ ["We must return again to the sources"] "sean-Bhríd" tells us in his 1983 collection *Súile Shuibhne*, and Ó Searcaigh has noted how his time abroad was important for his own reengagement with his home place and how, latterly, "a lot of my poems have become an act of re-possession. Re-possessioning tongue and tradition to a large extent".¹⁰⁹ More recently Ó Searcaigh has contended that, since Máirtín Ó Díreáin, Seán Ó Ríordáin and Máire Mhac an tSaoi "there is a repossession going on [among Irish-language poets] – we are repossessioning the tradition".¹¹⁰ While Ó Searcaigh's work would continue to reflect his earlier influences (and others, including the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy and the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko), his repossession of the Gaelic tradition would become most apparent in his 1987 collection, *Suibhne*. In this volume, Ó Searcaigh would begin incorporating elements of the Gaelic song tradition into his poetry in poems such as "Caoineadh" ["Lament"], which alludes to the Gaelic lament tradition and particularly, "Ceann Dubh Dflis" ["Dear Dark-haired Love"], a rewriting of an eighteenth-century *amhrán grá*.¹¹¹ As Pádraig de Paor observes, speaking partly of the influence of Donegal's oral and song traditions on Ó Searcaigh:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Poetry Study Ireland, "A Sense of Place", *BBC Northern Ireland Learning*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/schools/11_16/poetry/senseofplace.shtml, (accessed November 24, 2005).

¹¹⁰ This remark was made during a class led by Ó Searcaigh in the Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, on April 5, 2005.

¹¹¹ This collection also contains the poem "Tá Mé ag Sforshiúl Sléibhe" ["Wandering the Mountainside"] which includes lines reminiscent of the closing verse of the *amhrán grá* "Dónall Óg": "Chiap tú mé is chráigh tú mé is d'fhág tú mar seo mé/ gan romham is gan i mo dhiaidh ach seachrán agus sliabh/ gan amach i ndán domh as duibheagán seo an dorchadais,/ óir ba tusa an ball bán a bhí riamh

Ní hé an 'teacht ar a ghlór féin' is suimiúla i saothar an tSearcaigh, ach a mhalairt: an dóigh ina ngéilleann sé go humhal do shlua glórthaí nach leis iad.¹¹²

[It is not the 'finding of his own voice' that is most interesting in Ó Searcaigh's work, but the opposite: the manner in which he submits humbly to a multitude of voices that are not his.]

However this "repossession" has not been unproblematic for Ó Searcaigh, particularly for one attempting to articulate a distinctly homoerotic voice in his work, as became increasingly apparent in *Suibhne*. That it should have taken ten years to find this voice is significant. In common with Ní Dhomhnaill's remarks above regarding the ambiguous position of women in the Gaelic literary tradition, there are few examples of obviously homosexual poetry, or poets, existing in a Gaelic tradition latterly influenced by a Catholicism often critical of homosexuality. Ó Searcaigh has referred to the work of the sixteenth-century poet Eochaidh Ó hEódhasa and the ancient right of the Gaelic *file* to "sleep" with his chieftain,¹¹³ but it is by no means certain that this right legitimated the homoerotic in medieval Irish society.

ar an oíche i mo chliabh [...] / [...] b'fhearr amharc amháin ort anocht ná solas síoraí na bhFlaitheas" ["You tormented me and you grieved me and you left me like this/ with only wandering and mountain before and after me./ with no way out for me from this abyss of darkness,/ for you were always the dawn of the night in my heart [...] / [...] better to have one look on you tonight than the perpetual light of heaven" [Ó Searcaigh, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas*, p. 165].

¹¹² de Paor, *Na Buachaillí Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge*, p. 141.

¹¹³ This remark was made during a class led by Ó Searcaigh in the Centre for Irish Studies on April 5, 2005. Lillis Ó Laoire has also drawn attention to the manner in which Ó Searcaigh, in the poem "Laoi Cumainn" ["love-song"], alludes to the "term occasionally used by the professional poets of the medieval bardic schools for praise for their chief and patron. The poet's relationship with his chief was often defined in terms of physical affection, and there are numerous references to the poet and his patron sharing the same bed [...] Ó Searcaigh reminds us of that tradition with his title and firmly places himself within it" [Ó Laoire, "Dearg Dobhogtha Cháin/The Indelible Mark of Cain: Sexual Dissidence in the Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh", p. 229]. It is unclear, however, whether this "right" had a symbolic or literal meaning, but the trope of the Gaelic *file* "sleeping" with his chieftain has provided an enabling conceit for Ó Searcaigh's work. For more on Eochaidh Ó hEódhasa and this trope see James Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics: Selected and Translated; with, The Irish Bardic Poet: A Study in the Relationship of Poet and Patron* (Mountrath, Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1985), pp. 137-138.

While Ó Searcaigh has acknowledged the influence of the Donegal *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire on his incorporation of elements of the Gaelic song tradition into his work in the mid-1980s,¹¹⁴ there was a further imperative for this engagement with tradition at this particular time. Ireland in the mid-1980s was experiencing considerable change which resulted in a deeply divided society with contrasting positions on how the country should move forward. This was reflected in successive referenda on abortion and divorce and the continuing debate surrounding the escalating conflict in Northern Ireland. Unemployment and emigration also reached levels not seen since the 1950s. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has found parallels between the 1950s and 1980s. Writing of the Ireland she returned to from England with her family in the 1950s, she surmised: “Ireland of the 1950s that my family came back to was so boring. And the Ireland of the 1980s was not only boring but dangerous as well for women”.¹¹⁵ “Ireland was confronting” as Cheryl Herr has noted “not only economic turmoil and the onslaught of modernization but also widespread civil rights agitation, paramilitary violence, the oil crisis, increasing unemployment, feminist activism and a growing understanding of postcolonial trauma”.¹¹⁶

Much as had occurred in the 1960s, the significant changes and subsequent challenges that Irish society was experiencing prompted considerable cultural debate about Irishness itself in this period, much of which became focused around the journal *The Crane Bag*, edited by Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney. Herr has summarised some of the issues central to the debate in this period and notes that

[i]n response to cataclysmic changes, Irish intellectuals engaged in extensive cultural debate about evolving aspects of Irishness [...] Psychohistorical hypotheses surfaced as part of the musings on cultural identity of writers as different as Estyn Evans, Joseph Lee, Vincent Kenny, Fintan O’Toole and Richard Kearney. According to this allegorical reading, during the 1980s the Irish suffered traumas from historical disfranchisements: the loss of the land, the loss of language, the disruptions of the Famine and of subsequent migrations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Louis de Paor, “Interview with Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, NUI, Galway, 29 November 2003. Also personal interview with Ó Searcaigh by the present author, 5 April, 2005.

¹¹⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “The Role of Irish in Contemporary Ireland”, *Ireland in the New Century*, ed. by Robert J. Savage Jnr. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 203.

¹¹⁶ Cheryl Herr, *The Field* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), p. 53.

¹¹⁷ Herr, *The Field*, p. 53.

One of the journal's frequent contributors, Desmond Fennell, contended in a 1983 article that Ireland lacked in the 1980s a "serviceable national image"¹¹⁸ arguing that,

Our first self-definition as a nation began to crumble in the '50s, was assaulted throughout the '60s, and faded away in the '70s. All that is left in its place, as a public image of Irish identity, is the factual 26-county state, without any cultural or ideological overtones other than 'democratic'. We haven't chosen it as our national image: we would prefer to have no image, to be quite invisible to ourselves and others.¹¹⁹

Again, as in the 1960s, the importance of tradition would arise in the cultural debates of the 1980s. In a seminal article published in *Innti* in 1986, Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch highlighted the dangers of the loss of tradition, of a break with a distinct perspective or discourse he associated with poets writing in the eighteenth century, including Daibhí Ó Bruadair and Aogán Ó Rathaille. He criticised the lack of a distinct Gaelic discourse among contemporary poets writing in Irish. Ó Cruaíoch argued that "cuid de dhioscúrsa filíochta an Bhéarla is ea formhór na filíochta a chumtar sa tír seo inniu as Béarla agus as Gaeilge araon"¹²⁰ ["Most of the poetry published in this country today, both in English and in Irish, is part of an English poetic discourse"]. For Ó Cruaíoch the true role of the poet "go traidisiúnta" ["traditionally"] is

ag feidhmiú mar idirghabhálaí idir daoine agus fórsaí móra rúndiamhaire na beatha [...] Tá an fheidhm sin fós á comhlíonadh ag an gcuid is fiúntaí de fhilí Gaelacha na hÉireann agus na hAlban i saol ina bhfuil teip agus tréigint mheitifisiciúil is measa ná aon bhás corpartha ag bagairt ar phobal, ar mheon, ar aigne ársa. Tá an tír seo 'ar dhá cheann', ceart go leor, i gcuachás ná fuil a réiteach soiléir ar aon leibhéal polaitíochta ná poiblí. Mara bhfuil réiteach féin, tá léiriú uasal agus *engagement* na faidhbe le fáil i saothar na bhfilí Gaeilge agus Gàidhlig i dtéarmaí a mbuanna filíochta amháin agus ní ar aon téarmaí eile.¹²¹

[operating as an intermediary between mankind and the great mysterious forces of life [...] That function is still being realized by the best of Irish

¹¹⁸ Desmond Fennell, "Choosing Our Self Image (The Problem of Irish Identity)", *The Crane Bag* 2 (1983): 194.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, "An Nuafhíliocht Ghaeilge: Dearcadh Dána", *Innti* 10 (1986): 63.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 66.

and Scottish poets in a world in which there is a worse failure and metaphysical abandonment, than any physical death, threatening a community, a disposition, an ancient mind. This country is ‘on a cusp’, alright, in a predicament for which there is no clear solution on any political or community level. If there is no solution itself, there is a fine representation and *engagement* with the problem to be found in the work of Gaelic and Gallic poets in terms of their own poetic abilities and not on any other terms.]

Significantly, the issue of *Innti* in which this article was included also carried work from Cathal Ó Searcaigh, work that would suggest an increasing engagement with tradition. “Óicheanta Geimhridh” [“Winter Nights”] recalls Ó Searcaigh’s nights as a child listening to the local “*seanchaí*” telling stories that would send the young poet “ag seilg bídh leis na Fianna/ó Oirthear Dhumhaigh go barr na Beithh”¹²² [“hunting food with the Fianna/from Oirthear Dhumhaigh to the top of na Beithh”].

Gaelic Song Forms and Metre

Oral traditions such as the *caoineadh*, and equally the *amhrán grá*, have been a feature of the work of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh. Ní Dhomhnaill has claimed to have a huge store of such songs, acquired since childhood when both her mother and father sang to her. While her mother introduced her to the *caoineadh*, including “Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire” and other *caointe*, which along with “Caoineadh na Luasach” was “the sort of thing she knew by heart”¹²³, her father “used to sing us *sean-nós* songs”.¹²⁴

As a child she remembers travelling on a school bus and while everyone else had their party pieces, the only songs she “knew how to sing were “Bean Dubh an Ghleanna” and “Róisín Dubh””. “I was embarrassed by this sort of stuff”, she admitted “but when it came down to brass tacks and singing in public, this was the level that was most vivid”.¹²⁵

For Ní Dhomhnaill, Irish-language poetry and song are closely related. As she has remarked of the revival of Irish music and singing from the 1960s, “[w]hen the singing came back, so did the poetry - the two are

¹²² Cathal Ó Searcaigh, “Óicheanta Geimhridh”, *Innti* 10 (1986): 15.

¹²³ Laura O’Connor, “Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Comhrá”, *The Southern Review* 31 (Summer 1995): 590.

¹²⁴ Lucy McDiarmid and Michael J. Durkan, “Interview with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill”, *Writing Irish*, ed. by James P. Myers Jr. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 103.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

inseparable".¹²⁶ Throughout her poetry, one finds references to this song tradition, including repeated allusions to what Seán Ó Tuama has called "the young woman's love lyric[s]",¹²⁷ amongst them "Dónall Óg" and "Liam Ó Raghallaigh". Titles serve as touchstones, recalling songs and forms from the tradition: "Mo Mhíle Stór" ["My Dearest One"], "Amhrán an Fhir Óig" ["Song of the Young Man"], "Amhrán grá" ["Love Song"], "An Mhaighdean Mhara" ["The Mermaid"]. Equally, Ní Dhomhnaill often includes words and lines from this tradition in her poetry. "Táimid Damanta, a Dheirféaracha" ["We are Damned, My Sisters"], for example, a poem which concerns women who challenge religious or social convention and celebrate their own sexuality, rewrites lines from "Liam Ó Raghallaigh", changing in the process from the second to the first person:

Beidh ár súile ag na péisteanna
Is ár mbéala ag na portáin [...]

[Our eyes will go to the worms
Our lips to the clawed crabs [...]] (Trans. Michael Hartnett)¹²⁸

Ní Dhomhnaill has also drawn on the *caoineadh* tradition in her work. As noted in Chapter Two, this is a tradition of lament for the dead, "performed in the presence of the corpse, usually by the *bean chaointe* or keening woman" and "performed to music: neither the keen of the common folk nor the learned elegy was given mere recitation".¹²⁹ As Maureen Murphy has noted, Ní Dhomhnaill has taken "elements of the *caoine* and transformed a traditional form in elegies that express [her] own poetic voice".¹³⁰ Murphy has highlighted formal aspects of the *caoineadh*,

¹²⁶ Seán Smith, "Gaelic Guardian", *The Boston College Chronicle*, 7.10 (February 4, 1999), http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/rvp/pubaf/chronicle/v7/f4/scholar.html, (accessed October 24, 2005).

¹²⁷ Seán Ó Tuama, "The Lineage of Gaelic Love Poetry from the Earliest Time", *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. by Robert O'Driscoll (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1982), p. 294.

¹²⁸ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected poems/Rogha Dánta*, trans. by Michael Hartnett (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988), pp. 14-15.

¹²⁹ Breandán Ó Madagáin, "Irish Vocal Music of Lament and Syllabic Verse", *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. by Robert O'Driscoll (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1982), p. 311.

¹³⁰ Maureen Murphy, "Irish Elegiac Tradition in the Poetry of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Caitlín Maude, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *New Irish Writing: Essays in*

specifically “the direct address to the deceased, the formulaic language, the praise for the deceased and the sympathetic response of nature” which are apparent in the poetry of Ní Dhomhnaill. “Above all”, Murphy continues “the *caoine* has provided [Ní Dhomhnaill] with an emotional context for [her] elegiac poetry”.¹³¹

Bríona Nic Dhiarmada has also noted how Ní Dhomhnaill’s use of imagery in her poem “Venio Ex Oriente” is “an-ghar don bhfriotal atá ar fáil i mblúire caoine a foilsíodh in *Éigse* II a chuir Séamus Ó Duillearga i gcló”¹³² [“very close to the language found in the fragments of a lament published in *Éigse* II by Séamus Ó Duillearga”]. However, as the subtitle (“aithris ar an sean-nós” [“in imitation of the *sean-nós*”]) of Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Caoineadh Mná na Cathrach ar a fear” [“Lament of the city woman for her man”] might suggest, it is frequently the *sean-nós* tradition, as much as the *caoineadh*, that Ní Dhomhnaill is drawing on in these poems. As Nic Dhiarmada also points out “[s]a dán ‘Caoineadh Mháire Nic Aodha’ baineann sí feidhm as an amhrán ‘Thugamar féin an samhradh linn’ mar bhunchloch ar a dtógann sí dán nua, dán úr ach a bhfuil athshondas fíoréifeachtach ag baint leis”¹³³ [“in the poem ‘Caoineadh Mháire Nic Aodha’ she uses the song ‘Thugamar féin an samhradh linn’ as the basis on which she builds a new poem, a new poem but one that has a very effective resonance”]. One finds such resonance throughout Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry, producing a rich web of allusions to the various traditions of song in Gaelic.

The Donegal *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire argues that many of Ó Searcaigh’s love poems also draw “upon the song poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”.¹³⁴ He notes four primary methods through which Ó Searcaigh incorporates this tradition into his own poetry: “by reworking and adapting old songs, by alluding to them, by incorporating lines from them into his poems, and by composing new poems which attempt to reproduce the metrical, linguistic and emotional style of the old songs”.¹³⁵ Two of Ó Searcaigh’s most successfully realised poems to draw

Memory of Raymond J. Porter, ed. by James D. Brophy and Eamon Grennan (Boston: Ionan College Press, 1989), p. 141.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹³² Nic Dhiarmada, *Téacs Baineann, Téac Mná*, p. 33.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Ó Laoire, “Dearg Dobhogtha Cháin/The Indelible Mark of Cain: Sexual Dissidence in the Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, p. 226.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227. Ó Laoire has also noted, in his introductory essay to Ó Searcaigh’s collection *Homecoming/An Bealach ‘na Bhaile*, how the “lyric poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its intricate vowel rhyming and its

on the song tradition are included in the *Suibhne* collection: "An Dífheartach" ["The Outcast"] and "Ceann Dubh Dfílis" ["Dear Dark-haired Love"]. While not as prominent as within Ní Dhomhnaill's work, Ó Searcaigh's engagement with Gaelic song does indicate his own concern to connect with the Gaelic tradition. "Ceann Dubh Dfílis" is a reworking of the eighteenth-century *amhrán grá* of the same name. It offers probably the clearest, and most accomplished, example of Ó Searcaigh's "queering" of a traditional Gaelic love song:

A cheann dubh dfílis dfílis dfílis
D'fhoscail ár bpóga créachtaí Chríost arís;
ach ná foscail do bhéal, na sceith uait an scéal:
tá ár ngrá ar an taobh thuathal den tsoiscéal.

Tá cailíní na háite seo cráite agat, a ghrá,
is iad ag iarraidh thú a bhréagadh is a mhealladh gach lá;
ach b'fhearr leatsa bheith liomsa i mbéal an uaignis
'mo phógadh, 'mo chuachadh is mo thabhairt chun aoibhnis.

Is leag do cheann dfílis dfílis dfílis
leag do cheann dfílis i m'ucht, a dhíograis;
ní fhosclód mo bhéal, ní sceithfead an scéal,
ar do shonsa shéanfainn gach soiscéal.

[My dark dear, dear dark-haired love,
our kisses open Christ's wounds up;
don't open your mouth, don't tell a soul -
our love's on the wrong side of the gospel.

The local girls are going crazy,
trying to win you away from me;
but you prefer us on our own,
kissing, cuddling till the healing comes.

Lay your dark dear, dear dark head,
Lay your dark head on my breast, dear friend;
I won't say a word to a living soul -
For you I'd thrice deny a gospel. (Trans. Frank Sewell)]¹³⁶

sinuous grace provides [Ó Searcaigh] with possibilities for experimenting with theme and form" [Lillis Ó Laoire, "Introduction: A Yellow Spot on the Snow", *Homecoming/An Bealach 'na Bhaile*, p. 27].

¹³⁶ Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1997), pp. 112-113.

A chinn duibh dhfílis dhfílis dhfílis,
Cuir do lámh mhín gheal tharam anall;
a bhéilín meala, a bhfuil boladh na tíme air,
is duine gan chroí nach dtabharfadh duit grá.

Tá cailíní ar an mbaile seo ar buile 's ar buaireamh,
ag tarraingt a ngruaige 's á ligean le gaoith,
ar mo shonsa, an scafaire is fearr ins na tuatha,
ach do thréigfinn an méid sin ar rún dil mo chroí.

Is cuir do cheann dílis dílis dílis,
cuir do cheann dílis tharam anall;
a bhéilín meala a bhfuil boladh na tíme air,
is duine gan chroí nach dtabharfadh duit grá.

[My own dark head (my own, my own)
your soft pale arms place here about me.
Honeymouth that smells of thyme
he would have no heart who denied you love.

There are girls in the town enraged & vexed,
they tear and loosen their hair on the wind
for the dashingest man in the place - myself!
But I'd leave them all for my secret heart.

Lay your head, my own (my own, my own)
your head, my own, lay it here upon me.
Honeymouth that smells of thyme
he would have no heart who denied you love. (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)]¹³⁷

Included above are both Ó Searcaigh's poem and the song that inspired it. While incorporating several lines from the song, and its four line - three verse structure, Ó Searcaigh also integrates elements of the song's metre, including a similar pattern of four feet per line. While he changes the rhyme from the abab rhyme of the song to the aabb rhyme of the poem, he does include poetic effects from the song tradition in the poem, including *comhfhuaím*, *amus* and *uaim*. *Comhfhuaím*, according to Virginia Blankenhorn, "denotes two assonating vowels occurring within the same line of verse with the function of half-lines together".¹³⁸ This is apparent throughout the poem including the first line of the second verse ("háite"

¹³⁷ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 284-285.

¹³⁸ V.S. Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600* (Queenston, Lampeter, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 6.

and “cráite”). *Amus*, meanwhile, refers to “a series of assonating syllables appearing in consecutive lines of a stanza or paragraph”¹³⁹ apparent in the highlighted syllables of verse one below:

A cheann dubh **dílís** dflís dflís
 D’fhoscail ár bpóga créachtaí Chríost **arís**;
 ach **ná** foscail do **bhéal**, na sceith uait an **scéal**:
 tá ár **ngrá** ar an taobh thuathal den tsoiscéal.

There are also examples of *uaim* (alliteration) in the poem, including the title. As Ó Searcaigh’s departure from the abab rhyming scheme in the song suggests, the poet creates a rich intertextual dialogue between his contemporary voice and the song text from the past. A similar process is at work elsewhere in Ó Searcaigh’s poetry including “An Díbeartach”, “Tá Mé ag Síorshiúl Sléibhe” and “Mise Charlie an Scibhí” [“I am Charlie the Skivvy”] – a contemporary adaptation of the early-nineteenth century song/poem “Mise Raifteirí” [“I am Raftery”].

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has produced her own contemporary “version” of “Mise Raifteirí” in the poem “Caoineadh Mhoss Martin” [“Lament for Moss Martin”]. Included below are extracts from Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem, and that ascribed to the poet, Antoine Ó Raifteirí, for comparative purposes:

^ ^ _ ^ ^ _
 Níorbh fhearra aon áit
 ^ _ ^ _ ^
 ná thall sa halla
 ^ _ ^
 ag seinm ceoil
 ^ _ ^ _ ^
 do phócaí falmh’
 ^ ^ _ ^ ^ _ ^
 gan le fáil ar feadh blianta
 ^ _ ^ ^ ^ ^
 ach pingíní pitseála
 ^ ^ _ ^ _ ^
 is nár dhiail nár shleamhnaigh

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

^ _ ^ _
an ceol uait.

[There was no place better
Than over in the hall,
You playing for peanuts,
Through the years getting damn-all
Only pittances, but never sold out
Or let slip the music from you. (Trans. George O'Brien)]¹⁴⁰

^ ^ _ ^ ^ ^ _ ^ ^ _
Mise Raifteirí, an file, lán dóchais is grá
^ _ ^ ^ _ ^ ^ _
le súile gan solas, ciúineas gan crá,

^ ^ _ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ _
ag dul síos ar m'aistear le solas mo chroí,
_ ^ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ _
fann agus tuirseach go deireadh mo shlí;
_ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ _
tá mé anois lem aghaidh ar Bhallá
^ _ ^ _ ^ _ ^ _
ag seinm cheoil do phócaí falamh.

[I am Raifteirí, the poet, full of courage and love,
my eyes without light, in calmness serene,
Taking my way by the light of my heart,
feeble and tired to the end of my road:
Look at me now, my face toward Balla,
performing music to empty pockets! (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)]¹⁴¹

While there are two beats per line in the extract from Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, if one is to read each set of two lines together as one we find four beats, and an aabb pattern (though with a silent beat in the final line above). This is comparable to the rhythmic and rhyming pattern found in Raifteirí's poem and in the *amhrán*, a form Tadhg Ó Donnchadha calls *an*

¹⁴⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1990), pp. 44-45.

¹⁴¹ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 252-253.

líne cheithirchéimeannach.¹⁴² Within the extract one also finds examples of what Ó Donnchadha calls ornamentation or “the use of metrical vowels and other features to ornament the rhythmical scheme of the verse”¹⁴³ a characteristic already noted in Ó Searcaigh’s work. Among these are the use of *aicill* between the first and second lines in the words “áit” and “ná”, *comhfhuaim* between “thall” and “halla” in the second line, and *uaim* in lines four and five.

As the examples above indicate neither Ní Dhomhnaill nor Ó Searcaigh strictly follow either the metrical or stanzaic characteristics of the *amhrán* form. Rather both poets produce an often rhythmic verse, sometimes reminiscent of the song tradition, but also attentive to the rhythms of other poetic traditions as well as to the spoken voice.

Intertextuality and Evoking Community

Apart from revealing a wish to connect to the Gaelic tradition, and to assert their own distinctive positions, the intertextuality apparent in the poetry of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh also indicates an awareness of the communities from which the Gaelic song tradition has emerged and in which the songs continue to be relevant. A brief overview of the development of the term “intertextuality” is useful at this juncture to elucidate this point further.

“Intertextuality” was first coined by Julia Kristeva who built on the work of both Mikhail Bakhtin and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to formulate a theory where texts, whether literary or non-literary are viewed

as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call intertextual. The act of reading, theorists claim, plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading, thus, becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, *Prosóid Ghaedhilge* (Corcaigh: Cló Ollsgoile Chorcaighe, 1925), pp. 54-5. Quoted in Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600*, p. 11.

¹⁴³ Blankenhorn, *Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

But this intertextual characteristic also involves those who engage with the work. For Kristeva, the word is defined in terms of a *horizontal dimension* – “the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee” – and a *vertical dimension* “the word in the text is orientated toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus”.¹⁴⁵ Intertextuality, as Graham Allen suggests, is as relevant to the audience as it is to the text: “The term intertextuality was initially employed by poststructuralist theorists and critics in their attempts to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation”.¹⁴⁶ With the alleged demise of the author in the work of Roland Barthes,¹⁴⁷ readers were empowered to uncover “multiple meanings” within the text.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, while intertextuality may suggest the connection of texts with other texts, it equally alludes to the role of the reader in bringing their own experience (including knowledge of texts), to bear on the work being read. That this type of intertextuality was also a feature of composition in primarily oral society is not surprising given the close interaction between oral artists and their community. The recognition of elements within a song, or poem, contributed to that song’s acceptance, and popularity. As Breandán Ó Madagáin has noted of Gaelic poets’ choice of music to accompany their songs in the eighteenth century, poets didn’t usually compose the music, but rather took already existing and recognisable music for their compositions in order to allow for the easier transmission of the song to the community.¹⁴⁹

Poets have been forthcoming in drawing attention to the intertextual characteristic of their work, both through commentary and, indeed, within their poems. Ní Dhomhnaill, drawing on a remark of Eavan Boland, has described all men and women as existing in “a mesh, a web, a labyrinth of associations”,¹⁵⁰ while Ó Searcaigh’s poem “Trasnú” [“Crossing”] (a poem which includes the refrain “tá muid ag fí ár dtodhchaí as ár ndúchas”

¹⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 66.

¹⁴⁶ Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Harper Collins, 1977), pp. 142-8.

¹⁴⁸ Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁹ Breandán Ó Madagáin, “Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900”, *Saoi na hÉigse: Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*, ed. by Pádraigín Riggs, Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Ita, 2000), p. 87.

¹⁵⁰ Ní Dhomhnaill, “What Foremothers?” p. 16.

["We are weaving our future out of our heritage"]) describes his contemporaries thus:

Tá muid leath-réamhstairiúil
agus leath-*postmodern intertextúil*.
Gheofá muid inniu
go tiubh sa tsiúl
ag buachailleacht *dinosours*
le Fionn Mac Cumhaill;
agus amárach thiofá orainn
ag súgradh go searcúil
le Cáit Ní Queer [...] ¹⁵¹

[We are part-prehistoric
And part-postmodern intertextual
You could find us today
busily
Herding dinosaurs
With Fionn Mac Cumhaill;
And tomorrow you could come on us
Playing lovingly
With Cáit of the queers [...]]

In Ó Searcaigh's poetry, allusion to song emphasises the role of the community, past and present, and the poet's relationship to community. For Ó Searcaigh "[t]hat was the traditional role of the poet in Irish society, the voice-piece for a community". ¹⁵² His poem "An Díbeartach", opens with a line from the eighteenth-century Ulster poet Art Mac Cumhaigh's "Úr-Chill an Chreagáin", "An tír seo bheith ag fonóid faoi gach rabhán dá ndéan tú de cheol" ["And the country scoffing at your half-baked songs..."] (Trans. Frankie Sewell). ¹⁵³ The title of the collection in which "An Díbeartach" first appeared, *Suibhne*, alludes to the middle-Irish tale, *Buile Shuibhne* [*The Frenzy of Sweeney*], the story of *Suibhne Geilt*, a Gaelic King of the Middle Ages who after being cursed by a local cleric, is transformed into a bird, banished and condemned to wander through Ireland's most desolate landscapes enduring great hardship and loneliness. ¹⁵⁴ "An Díbeartach" is the opening poem of a section entitled "I

¹⁵¹ Ó Searcaigh, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas*, p. 277.

¹⁵² Personal interview with Ó Searcaigh by the present author, 5 April, 2005.

¹⁵³ Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1997), pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁴ As noted below, *Suibhne*, or Sweeney, is a recurring figure in the work of Seamus Heaney also.

mBéal an Uaignis”, which engages with the position of outsiders excluded by their community. The community in “An Díbeartach”, is that in which Ó Searcaigh grew up, a community in North West Donegal characterised by adherence to a Catholic doctrine often intolerant of homosexuality. Yet, it is also a community to which Ó Searcaigh feels a special responsibility and one to which he believes he offers hope through his “songs”:

Ach fós beidh a chuid amhrán
ina n-oileáin dóchais agus dídine
i bhfarraigí a ndorchadais.

[And yet his songs will be
islands of hope and protection
in their mind-dark seas. (Trans. Frankie Sewell)]¹⁵⁵

This poem reflects Ó Searcaigh’s complex relationship with his community – while he feels a responsibility to remember and engage with it, he is not unwilling to criticise where he feels criticism is warranted. As Greagóir Ó Dúill argues:

Ó Searcaigh continues to negotiate his place with his community, as a young person, as an Irish speaker, as a gay man, as a poet, as someone who detests violence. His identification of and with that community develops and changes as does his identification of self, as does his poetry, with the passage of time. He is moving from the celebratory to the critical, and analysis is added to inspiration. The complexity of his community, its strengths and weaknesses, its opposing forces, remains the background to his development. He draws strength from its (sometimes uncomfortable) pride in him. He shows a fidelity to the traditions of his people while at the same time insisting on their flexibility, development and openness.¹⁵⁶

Frank Sewell contends that Ó Searcaigh’s concern with this “collective consciousness of community” was influenced by the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko who encouraged “Ó Searcaigh’s view that poet and people are mutually dependent; that the poet is not only a microcosm of the people but an essential element of the larger organism”.¹⁵⁷ Ó Searcaigh

¹⁵⁵ Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁶ Greagóir Ó Dúill, “Cathal Ó Searcaigh: A Negotiation with Place, Community and Tradition”, *Poetry Ireland Review* 48 (Winter 1996): 18.

¹⁵⁷ Frank Sewell, “Between Staisiún Chaiseal na gCorr and Stantzia zimá: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, *On the Side of Light: The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, ed. by James Doan and Frank Sewell, (Galway: Arlen House, 2002), p. 67.

is particularly concerned to engage with his own community in Mín a' Léagha through placing characters from this area centrally in poems such as "Cré" ["Creed"] (featuring local *seanchaí* Neddie Eoin) and "An Tobar" ["The Well"] (which considers the advice of his elderly neighbour "sean-bhríd"), as well as the work discussed below. In "Portráid den Ghabha mar Ealaíontóir Óg" ["A Portrait of the Blacksmith as a Young Artist"], Ó Searcaigh expresses his frustration and disappointment with life away from his community:

Tá mé dúthirseach de Dhún Laoghaire,
de mo sheomra suí leapa in Ascaill an Chrosaire.
Áit chúng a chraplaíonn mo chuid oibre
mar ghabha focal
is a fhágann mé istoíche go dearóil
ag brú gaoil ar lucht óil
seachas a bheith ag casúireacht dánta do mo dhaoine
ar inneoin m'inchinne.

[I'm sick and tired of Dún Laoghaire,
Of my bedsit in Cross's Avenue,
A pokey place that cripples my wordsmith's craft
And leaves me nightly in the dumps
Scrounging kindred among the drunks
Instead of hammering poems for my people
On the anvil of my mind. (Trans. Gabriel Fitzmaurice)]¹⁵⁸

This focus on his community is also evident in the poem, "Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na gCorr" ["Here at Caiseal na gCorr Station"], in which Ó Searcaigh reflects on the ruins of an old train station close to where he grew up, a place he feels "I dtiúin/le mo chinniúint féin is le mo thimpeallacht" ["In tune/ with my fate and environment"] (Trans. Gabriel Fitzmaurice)].¹⁵⁹ But it is also a place in which Ó Searcaigh realises the importance of poetry, and of his role as a poet in becoming "the pulse of my people's heart":

Anseo braithim go bhfuil éifeacht i bhfilíocht.
Braithim go bhfuil brí agus tábhacht liom mar dhuine
is mé ag feidhmiú mar chuisle de chroí mo chine
agus as an chinnteacht sin tig suaimhneas aigne.

¹⁵⁸ Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Homecoming/An Bealach 'na Bhaile*, (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 1993), pp. 84-85.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

[Here I feel the worth of poetry.
I feel my *raison d'être* and importance as a person
as I become the pulse of my people's heart
and from this certainty comes peace of mind. (Trans. Gabriel Fitzmaurice)]¹⁶⁰

Indeed, Ó Searcaigh suggests in the poem “Cré na Cuimhne” [“Cast in Clay”], that without his poetry, memories of the people he grew up and lived with may well be lost:

Agus ach gurb é gur chan mé thú i mo dhán, a dhuine,
rachadh d'ainm i ndíchuimhne ...

[Only I number you in my song
your name would go into oblivion ... (Trans. Frank Sewell)]¹⁶¹

Lillis Ó Laoire has also argued that Ó Searcaigh's poem “Gort na gCnámh” [“Field of Bones”] (along with several other poems, including “Bean an tSléibhe” [“Mountain Woman”], “Caoradóir”, “Oícheanta Geimhridh” and “Cré na Cuimhne”) shares with the *caoineadh* tradition “éifeacht shóisialta” [“social significance”] while also fulfilling a therapeutic and counter-establishment role:

Dán uafáis é ‘Gort na gCnámh’, arís, a scaoileas snaidhm dhamanta an tosta agus a chuireas an saol ar mhullach a chinn. Tá éifeacht shóisialta leis an fhilíocht seo i dtólamh agus roghnaíonn Ó Searcaigh an seasamh conspóideach, imeallach seo i measc a phobail féin d’aon ghnoithe. ‘Síceoilfhilíocht’ a thug Aingeal de Búrca ar shaothar na mban caointe, agus í ag cur béime ar an éirim fhrithcheannasach, theiripíúil, dar léi atá ann. Is é an dála céanna ag an tSearcach é.¹⁶²

[‘Gort na gCnámh’ is a harrowing poem that releases the terrible knot of silence and turns the world upside down. There is a social significance to the poem and Ó Searcaigh chooses this controversial marginal stance among his own community deliberately. Angela Bourke describes the work of the women lamenters as ‘Síceoilfhilíocht’ [lit: psycho-poetry] emphasising the counter-establishment therapeutic scope she sensed there. It is the same with Ó Searcaigh.]

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

¹⁶¹ Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶² Lillis Ó Laoire, “Ag Tabhairt Teanga don Tost”, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolais*, pp. 17-18.

"Gort na gCnámh" details a young girl's memories of physical and sexual abuse by her father. As well as dealing with her rape, the poem also recounts one of the results of the abuse, the child that she feels compelled to kill, such is her shame at the manner of its conception. It is a bitter and brutal poem that spares no detail, either in terms of the abuse of the young girl or the birth, and death of her child, as the following verse indicates:

IV

Ansin bhí sé 'mo mhullach, ag slóbairt is ag slogaireacht,
ag cnágáil is ag cuachadh,
fionnadh fiáin a bhrollaigh i bhfostú i mo bhéal agus é sáite
ionam, ag rúscadh
mo bhoilg, mo ghearradh is mo ghortú lena rúta righin
reamhar go bhfuair sé a shásamh.¹⁶³

[Then he was on top of me, mouthing and mauling,
Squashing and squeezing me, the scraggly hair of his chest
Caught in my mouth while, below, his fat dick poked
My guts, hacking and hurting me until he came. (Trans. Frank Sewell)]¹⁶⁴

Unsurprisingly, the poem has also been one of Ó Searcaigh's most controversial and prompted quite a debate, and some criticism, in his community. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has alleged that:

[t]he poem caused an absolute furore in Cathal's home place and caused him amongst other things, to be 'read out from the altar'; in other words a sermon was preached against him [...] that the very attempt was made to pillory Cathal over this poem is to me actually a great sign, proof positive that poetry in Ireland is still taken with a seriousness that it has lost out in most Western societies, and maybe most especially in America.¹⁶⁵

It is significant that Ní Dhomhnaill's remark focuses on the engagement of a local community with the poetry rather than with the substance of the criticism against Ó Searcaigh. It reflects again the concern of this poet, in common with her contemporaries, to find an engaged community for her work.

¹⁶³ Ó Searcaigh, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas*, p. 233.

¹⁶⁴ Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁵ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Tidal Surge", *Watching the River Flow: A Century of Irish Poetry*, ed. by Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Poetry Ireland, 1999), p. 223.

Ní Dhomhnaill's admiration for the *caoineadh*, indicated above, also reflects a realisation of the close connection between the performer of the lament and her community. Speaking of "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire", she remarked: "Ach féach nárbh é sin meas an ghnáthphobail ar an dán is go raibh cuimhne ghlé ar gach fhocal de go dtí i bhfad i ndiaidh an eachtra féin a thitim amach"¹⁶⁶ ["but remember that the ordinary people had a greater sense of its significance ensuring that it was memorised word for word for a considerable time after the event itself"]. Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry draws heavily on the songs and folklore of the community in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht in which she spent much of her childhood and returns frequently for continued inspiration. In incorporating lines from local folklore and the song tradition into her work, Ní Dhomhnaill is also reflecting and appealing to a community that recognises and appreciates the references to this older tradition. In examining Ní Dhomhnaill's incorporation of the Gaelic song tradition in her poetry, one needs to consider the community from which these songs emerged, a community which has ensured the survival of these songs, where many others have been lost. Once a text is no longer relevant, it is unusual that such a text will continue to be sung. It is the community that decides on a song's importance.¹⁶⁷ As noted earlier, traditional music "involves a process of selection by the community determining how the music survives".¹⁶⁸ It is only through the efforts of antiquarians that the few examples of songs that are no longer sung, such as the Fenian lays, have survived while their relevance, if performed, are as historical curiosities for contemporary entertainment rather than important cultural artefacts for an engaged community.

Ní Dhomhnaill has described the act of poetry as a "communicative act" in which the "act of communication is vitally important".¹⁶⁹ Indeed, she believes in the "perfect reader" for her work and attempts to address

¹⁶⁶ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire", *Comhar* 45.1 (Eanáir 1986): 24.

¹⁶⁷ As the demise of narrative lays, including the lays of Fionn Mac Cumhail, suggest, when songs are no longer relevant to a community, they will eventually die out. For an excellent account of Lays and their decline, see Hugh Shields, "Lays", *Narrative Singing in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Council, 1993), pp. 10-33.

¹⁶⁸ Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson, *The Rough Guide to Irish Music* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ This quote is taken from a class with Ní Dhomhnaill held in the Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, November 7th 2003.

him/her in her poem "Tusa" ["You"].¹⁷⁰ It seems for her this reader can come close to bridging the gap between the poet and audience, to realising this community of understanding:

Is tusa, pé thú féin,
an fíréan
a thabharfadh cluais le héisteacht,
b'fhéidir, do bhean inste scéil
a thug na cosa léi, ar éigean,
ó láthair an chatha.

Níor thugamair féin an samhradh linn
ná an geimhreadh.
Níor thrialamair ar bord loinge
go Meiriceá ná ag lorg ár bhfortúin
le chéile i slí ar bith
ins na tíortha teo thar lear.

Níor ghaibheamair de bharr na gcnoc
ar chapall láidir álainn dubh.
Níor luíomair faoi chrann caorthainn
is an oíche ag cur cuisne.
Ní lú ná mar a bhí tinte cnámh
is an adharc á séideadh ar thaobh na gréine.

Eadrainn bhí an fharraige mhór
atá brónach. Eadrainn
bhí na cnoic is na sléibhte
ná casann ar a chéile.

[Whoever you are, you are
The real thing, the witness
Who might lend an ear
To a woman with a story
Barely escaped with her life
From the place of battle.

Spring, the sweet spring, was not sweet for us
Nor winter neither.
We never stepped aboard a ship together
Bound for America to seek
Our fortune, we never
Shared those hot foreign lands.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

We did not fly over the high hills
 Riding the fine black stallion,
 Or lie under the hazel branches
 As the night froze about us,
 No more than we lit bonfires of celebration
 Or blew the horn on the mountainside.

Between us welled the ocean
 Waves of grief. Between us
 The mountains were forbidding
 And the roads long, with no turning. (Trans. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin)]¹⁷¹

A fuller appreciation of the allusions in this poem requires a considerable knowledge of the song tradition, lines and phrases from which are interlaced throughout the poem. These include “Amhrán na Páise” [“Song of the Passion”], a song in which Jesus is referred to as “an ffréan”. While the phrase “de bharr na gcnoc” [“from the top of the hills”] is one familiar from many songs and airs including the song “Mo Ghile Mear” [“My Gallant Darling”], and the air “De bharr na gcnoc is in imigéin” [“Over the hills and far away”], the reference to “faoi chrann caorthainn” [“Under a mountain ash tree”] in the third verse recalls the song “An Droighneán Donn” [“The Dark Thorn Tree”] as well as numerous other songs in which this phrase appears. Indeed, the line “is an adharc á séideadh ar thaobh na gréine” [“and the horn being blown on the sunny side”] is taken directly from the song “Sliabh na mBan” [“The Women’s Mountain”] while “is an oíche ag cur cuisne” [“and the night freezing”] appears in the traditional song “An cuimhin leat an oíche úd” [“Remember that night”] included in Ó Tuama’s *Duanaire*.¹⁷² Knowledge of each of these traditional songs adds another level to our understanding of this poem. “An cuimhin leat an oíche úd”, for example, is a fine and quite direct instance of the young woman’s love lyric,¹⁷³ in which the female narrator describes intimate moments with her beloved and attempts to convince him to come late when her family is asleep so that they can elope:

¹⁷¹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Water Horse* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1999), p. 96-97.

¹⁷² Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 294-296, 296.

¹⁷³ Ó Tuama, “The Lineage of Gaelic Love Poetry from the earliest times”, p. 294.

An cuimhin leat an oíche úd
 A bhí tusa agus mise
 Ag bun an chrainn chaorthainn
 's an oíche ag cur cuisne,
 do cheann ar mo chíocha
 is do phíob gheal á seinm? –
 is beag a shíleas an oíche úd
 go scaoilfeadh ár gcumann [...]

Tá an tine gan coigilt
 Is an solas gan múchadh,
 Tá an eochair faoin doras
 Is tarraing go ciúin í,
 Tá mo mháthair 'na codladh
 Is mise im dhúiseacht,
 Tá m'fhortún im dhorn
 Is mé ullamh chun siúl leat.

[Remember that night
 When you and I
 Were under the rowan
 And the night was freezing?
 Your head on my breasts
 And your bright-pipe playing ...
 I little thought then
 That our love could sever [...]]

The fire is unraked
 And the light unquenched.
 The key's under the door
 -close it softly.
 My mother's asleep
 And I am awake
 My fortune in hand
 And ready to go. (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)]¹⁷⁴

While it is unlikely that many of those who engage with her work, often in translation, will be alert to these references, Ní Dhomhnaill appears nonetheless as cognisant of the community in the past, as any that may exist in the present. It is a position apparent in remarks by her contemporary Biddy Jenkinson who has noted,

¹⁷⁴ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, p. 296-297.

Ní scríobhfá sílim mura mbeadh lucht dáimhe agat – lucht aon cheirde a thuigeann údar do dháin. Ní gá go mbeadh na cairde seo beo, ar ndóigh. An té a scríobhann as Gaeilge is comhghuaillithe dá chuid filí agus draoithe agus saoithe agus scéalaithe and caointeoirí agus cáinsigh agus crosáin na tíre le cian aimsire. Bíonn air caighdeán áirithe scríbhneoireachta a bhaint amach le go mbeidh siad siúd sásta leis. Déanaim mo dhícheall scríobh chun caighdeáin, le nach mbeadh na taisí míshásta liom.¹⁷⁵

[You would not write if you did not have a kindred group – a group of the same craft that understands your poem. It is not necessary that these friends are alive, of course. The person who writes in Irish is a companion of poets, druids and learned people and story-tellers and lamenters and critics and satirists of the country over a long time. He must achieve a certain standard of writing so that these groups will be satisfied with him. I do my best to write to this standard, so that the ghosts are not unhappy with me.]

Ní Dhomhnaill has been involved in a project to recover lyrics of surviving traditional airs, lyrics lost particularly during the famine years. Her remarks on this undertaking indicate a concern as much with the community from which these songs emerged as with the songs themselves:

There's a tendency to talk of famine 'victims,' [...] But to me that is an unfair description. They were not victims: They had a strength of spirit, a rich inner life. That is something one finds in these songs.¹⁷⁶

Louis de Paor has noted the uncertain relationship between contemporary Irish language poets and their audience. He finds their poetry characterised by a “continuing uncertainty as to the future of the language, and by a lingering insecurity with regard to their actual audience here and now”,¹⁷⁷ as articulated in Liam Ó Muirthile’s “Éinne amuigh thar tairseacha?” [“Is there anyone out there past the thresholds”]:

deonaigh dúinn nach macallaí
fuaimthoinne amháin ár nguí
ag luasghéarú trí shaol na saol
ar ais amach i gcirth mo scairte.

¹⁷⁵ I am grateful to Louis de Paor for sharing with me this personal communication with Biddy Jenkinson from March, 2000.

¹⁷⁶ Smith, “Gaelic Guardian”.

¹⁷⁷ de Paor, “Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000”, p. 351.

[grant that our prayer is more than echoes of a soundwave accelerating back out through eternity in the trembling of my raised voice. (Trans. Louis de Paor)]¹⁷⁸

Yet, while they are unlikely to find such an engaged community in a contemporary context, through their allusion to the song tradition in their work and commentaries, Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh seem mindful of the communities that embraced these songs in the past.

Comparative Intertextual Practice in the Gaelic Song Tradition

This practice of taking formal elements from, and adapting, older songs is very much part of the Irish song tradition. As Rachel Bromwich has contended of the *caoineadh*, "[a]ny idea that it was not legitimate to borrow freely from the work of a predecessor is entirely foreign to the nature of the keen".¹⁷⁹ Angela Bourke has also observed how the *caoineadh* were composed drawing on "a stock of formulas and themes which are associated with women's oral poetry".¹⁸⁰ Equally in his study of the *amhrán grá*, Tomás Ó Fiaich lists recurring motifs and themes within the songs¹⁸¹ while Tomás Ó Canainn has noted how similar lines and sentiments sometimes appear in different songs. As stated in Chapter One, for Ó Canainn the "traditional performer may sometimes appear to resort to the use of clichés in variation or composition – he would not see them in this light of course, but would regard them as being almost the standard building-blocks, as it were, of his art".¹⁸² Indeed, as songs were passed on orally from one generation to the next, verses from one song would frequently appear "ar iasacht" ["borrowed"] in another.¹⁸³ Seán Ó Tuama

¹⁷⁸ Liam Ó Muirthile, "Tairseacha", *Walking Time agus Dánta Eile* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2000), p. 76. Quoted in Louis de Paor, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000", p. 351.

¹⁷⁹ Rachel Bromwich, "The Keen for Art O'Leary", *Éigse 5* (1948): 445.

¹⁸⁰ Bourke, "Performing – Not Writing", p. 28.

¹⁸¹ Tomás Ó Fiaich, "Na hAmhráin Grá", *Léachtaí Cholm Cille: An Grá 6* (1975): 59-87. Other important studies of the love song, or poetry, tradition are Mícheál Mac Craith's *Lorg na hIasachta ar na Dánta Grá* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta., 1989) and Breandán Ó Madagáin's *Caointe Agus Seancheolta Eile - Keening and Other Old Irish Musics* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta Teo, 2005), pp. 35-38.

¹⁸² Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland*, p. 3.

¹⁸³ Ó Fiaich, "Na hAmhráin Grá", p. 83.

and Thomas Kinsella's anthology of Gaelic poetry since 1600, *An Duanaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, includes several examples of such, including the song "Dá dTéinnse Siar" ["If I travelled West"] in which the second verse is the same as a verse from "Dónall Óg":

Tá mo chroí chomh dubh le hairne
 nó le gual dubh a dhófaí i gceárta,
 nó le bonn bróige ar hallaí bána,
 is tá lionn dubh mór os cionn mo gháire.

[This heart of mine is as black as sloe
 or a black coal burnt in any forge
 or the print of a shoe upon the white halls
 and a black mood is above my laughter. (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)]¹⁸⁴

As Walter J. Ong has noted, ironically the word "text", itself "from a root meaning 'to weave', is, in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is 'literature', which refers to letters etymologically/ (*literae*) of the alphabet. Oral discourse has commonly been thought of even in oral milieus as weaving or stitching –

¹⁸⁴ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, p. 292-293. As the dominant language in Ireland moved from Irish to English a similar process has been found in the writing of songs in both language, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. George Zimmerman found in his examination of Irish political street ballads between 1780 and 1900 that "[t]he ballad-writers probably devoted little time to the composition of their texts. To fill up the lines they had at their disposal a stock of tags, of recurring phrases frequently employed to express similar ideas. The use of commonplace expressions is indeed common to folk poetry in general; it has been observed that sub-literary poetry preserved a mode of composition fundamentally different from that of more learned literature: it used as elements whole passages rather than isolated words" [George Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Irish Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 101]. Indeed, as several scholars have noted, it is common practice in primarily oral cultures generally that songs would be composed using elements from other songs [See Elsdon Best, *The Maori*, vol. 1 (Wellington: Memoirs of the Polynesian Society, 1924), p. 142, Colin McPhee, "The 'absolute' music of Bali", *Modern Music* 12 (1935): 165]. Alan P. Merriam in his book *The Anthropology of Music* has also found that one "of the most frequently mentioned techniques of composition is that which involves taking parts of old songs and putting them together to make new ones" [Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 177].

rhapsoidein, to 'rhapsodize', basically means in Greek 'to stitch songs together'".¹⁸⁵

However, while Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill draw inspiration from the Gaelic song tradition, they don't always succeed in reanimating familiar motifs; this results in occasionally clichéd and strained voices. Ó Searcaigh's work has been criticised for sometimes "ag brath an-iomarca ar mheafair thraidisiúnta na n-amhrán grá"¹⁸⁶ ["depending too much on the traditional metaphors of the *amhrán grá*"]. For Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, this is apparent in the poet's 1996 collection, *Na Buachaillí Bána*.¹⁸⁷ She highlights the poem "Samhain 1976", for example, in which Ó Searcaigh draws on the Gaelic song "Thugamar féin an samhradh linn":

Áit inteacht idir an Strand agus Soho Square
a casadh orm é, mé amuigh ag déanamh aeir.
A shúile suáilceacha, thuirling siad orm sa tsráid
chomh haerach le dhá fheileacán agus mé ag gabháil thar bráid.
Thug siad an samhradh leo isteach sa gheimhreadh.
Ansin i dtapú na súl bhí siad ar shiúl, slogtha sa tslua.

[Somewhere between the Strand
and Soho Square,
I was entirely taken
In by his air,
The flecks of his eyes
Butterflying by
Before the crowd wintered
The summer joy
I instantly admired,
Away. (Trans. Frank Sewell)]¹⁸⁸

The title of this collection is taken from the Gaelic *aisling* "An Buachaill Bán",¹⁸⁹ ["The White Boy"], written by the eighteenth-century Munster poet Seán Ó Coileáin, the accompanying music of which has become a popular contemporary slow air. Ó Coileáin's poem is typical of the *aisling* genre and features the appearance of a *spéirbhean* [skywoman] to the poet who reveals herself as Ireland, laments the loss of her

¹⁸⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 13.

¹⁸⁶ Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, "Na Buachaillí Bána", *Innti* 15 (Nollaig 1996): 100.

¹⁸⁷ Nic Dhiarmada, "Na Buachaillí Bána", p. 100.

¹⁸⁸ Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open*, pp. 106-107.

¹⁸⁹ Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling ghéar: Na Stíobhartaigh agus an t-aos léinn* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1996), p. 637.

“buachaill bán”, but is consoled by the poet who promises that her “white boy” (a synonym for the Stuart prince Charles Edward, better known as “Bonny Prince Charlie”) will return shortly with the armies of Europe to save her.

Ó Searcaigh’s poem takes little from the original *aísling* beyond its title and the theme of love for a boy. Rather, the poem expresses the continuing challenge Ó Searcaigh faces in articulating his homosexuality:

A bheith i ngrá le fear:
 Sin scéal nach bhfuil na focla agam go fóill
 Lena insint, lena rá
 Amach os ard, sa dóigh nach mbeidh sé ‘mo chrá.

[To be in love with a man:
 that’s a tale I haven’t the words for yet,
 to tell it, to say it out
 in a way that won’t come back on me. (Trans. Frankie Sewell)]¹⁹⁰

While *Na Buachaillí Bána* also includes, as an epigraph, lines from the popular *sean-nós* song “Casadh an tSúgáin”, in the work as a whole the influences from song are overshadowed by those of other poets. These include Constantine P. Cavafy, Nebojsa Vasovic, Ruaraidh Mac Thómais, Anna Akhmatova and Roberto Deidier, all of whom are acknowledged in the poet’s notes to this collection. Pádraig de Paor has recognised still further unacknowledged influences on this collection including the Spanish poets Antonio Machado and Vicente Aleixandre, the Japanese poets Yoshino Hiroshi and Takaki Kyoze and the American poet Mary Oliver. Indeed, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith has argued that Ó Searcaigh’s poetry exhibits:

a continuous struggle to find his own voice amid the cacophony which seems to be constantly ringing in his ears. His attempts to cope with the anxiety of a whole host of influences have on occasion resulted in a form of appropriation that might be less charitably described as outright plagiarism.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Ó Searcaigh, *Out in the Open*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁹¹ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed...The Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, *Crosscurrents in European Literature: Proceedings of the Conference of the School of Language and Literature, UCC (21-22 February 1992)*, ed. by Catherine O’Brien (Dublin: UCD Press, 1996), p. 94. Quoted in de Paor, *Na Buachaillí*

Ó Searcaigh's occasional allusion to the Gaelic song tradition, in both his poetry and commentary, suggests not only an anxiety regarding this "host of influences" but equally a concern by the poet to nonetheless connect his poems to the Gaelic tradition. While Ó Searcaigh acknowledges the influence of the Beat poets, an influence already considered, he has also been keen to attribute the distinctive long line of many of his poems to the influence of Gaelic song:

Lillis [Ó Laoire] pointed out songs to me that had huge long lines, songs that weren't that well known, that I would not have known. There is a beautiful song that Lillis sings, an extraordinary melody, a very difficult melody, called "Sliabh a' Liag". I'd never seen it before until Lillis unearthed it, or pointed it out to me and I thought that, the long line of it. I think that also influenced me.¹⁹²

Beyond Ó Laoire's influence on his work, Ó Searcaigh has also recalled growing up in an environment in which he was surrounded by songs, both from his mother and in his local community.¹⁹³ For him,

the thing about *sean-nós* singing [...] the local singers that were good, I felt that they were always recreating the song every time that they sang it, that there was an entirely new rendition of it, as if they had come to it for the first time. And that's very extraordinary, I'm very interested in that idea - do away with preconceptions about it so that you can recreate it every time and therefore it's new and alive, with all performances. I try to bring that to the way I recite poems as well in public readings.¹⁹⁴

In recent years, Ó Searcaigh has performed with traditional musicians, including *sean-nós* singer Lasairfhiona Ní Chonaola.¹⁹⁵ While his suggestions of influence from the Gaelic song tradition may be exaggerated, his eagerness to assert such an influence is significant. Ó Searcaigh's work is subject to many influences from Robbie Burns¹⁹⁶ to

Dána: Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Gabriel Rosenstock agus ról comhaimseartha an fhile sa Ghaeilge, p. 143.

¹⁹² Personal interview with Ó Searcaigh by the present author, 5 April, 2005.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ "October Arts in Ennis", October 9 1999,

<http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/cominfo/arts/whatson/octoberarts.htm>, (accessed October 26, 2005).

¹⁹⁶ Ó Searcaigh has described Robbie Burns as a formative influence on his initiation into the aural power of poetry [Marian Kelly, "Ón Taobh Istigh: Agallamh le Cathal Ó Searcaigh", p. 36].

the “Beat” writers, to the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy. It could be argued that poets such as these have been more influential for the Donegal poet than the Gaelic song tradition. Yet Ó Searcaigh’s comments reveal an urgency to assert the importance of this tradition to his work, even if this is not always convincingly accomplished or borne out in the work itself. It reveals a wish by the poet to encourage a particular reading of his poetry, a reading that places it within the Gaelic tradition.

While Nic Dhiarmada finds it strange that Ó Searcaigh fails to invest the love song tradition “leis an mbeocht cheana nó leis an gcumhacht threascairteach is a dhéanann Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill [...] agus í ag tarraingt ar an tobar céanna”¹⁹⁷ [“with the same life or with the same transgressive power as Ní Dhomhnaill [...] while drawing on the same source”], Ní Dhomhnaill’s work also reveals an occasional overreliance on the song tradition and a failure in the process to breath new life into familiar motifs. Her poem “Mo Ghrá-sa (Idir Lúibíní)” [“My Beloved (In Brackets)”], for example, appears both clichéd and derivative in its use of motifs in an apparent critique of the more romantic pretensions evident in the *amhrán grá*. A familiar trope in the *amhrán grá* is the description of the beloved as being similar to the sloe or the sloe-blossom of the blackthorn tree, motifs found in both “Dónall Óg” and “An Droighneán Donn”. In “An Droighneán Donn”, for example, the forsaken girl describes “mo ghrá-sa” [“my beloved”] “mar bhláth na n-airní atá ar an droighneán donn” [“like sloe-blossom on the dark thorn tree”] (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)].¹⁹⁸ However, Ní Dhomhnaill’s evocation of these images seems tired and fails to reanimate them in a contemporary context. As if to deflect such criticism, she provides her own internal critique (in brackets), but the poem fails to maintain the subtlety, impact or emotive power apparent in the song tradition:

Níl mo ghrá-sa
Mar bhláth na n-airní
A bhíonn i ngairdín
(nó ar chrann ar bith)

is má tá aon ghaol aige
le nóiníní
is as a chluasa a fhásfaidh siad
(nuair a bheidh sé ocht droigh síos)

¹⁹⁷ Nic Dhiarmada, “Na Buachaillí Bána”, p. 100.

¹⁹⁸ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 298-299.

[My own love -
he's no sloe-blossom
in a garden
(nor on any tree)

and if he's anything to do
with daisies
it's from his ears they'll grow
(when he's eight feet under) (Trans. Michael Hartnett)¹⁹⁹

Ní Dhomhnaill's contradictory remarks regarding her own place within the history of Irish writing suggests an anxiety concerning this issue, shared by Ó Searcaigh, which may have contributed to an occasional over-reliance on the song tradition in her work. As Ríóna Ní Fhrighil notes,

Faighimid tuairiscí difriúla sna hailt dhifriúla a scríobh Ní Dhomhnaill agus sna hagallaimh dhifriúla a rinne sí. Admhaíonn sí i gcomhrá le Medbh McGuckian gur cuidiú mór a bhí i dtraidisiún na Gaeilge agus í ina file óg toisc go raibh filíocht bhéil na mban ar a toil aici agus go raibh leithéidí Mháire Mhac an tSaoi agus Chaitlín Maude ina bhfilí aitheanta ag an am. San alt 'What Foremothers?' áfach, séanann sí tacaíocht thraidisiún na Gaeilge agus ní thugann sí an t-aitheantas ná an chreidiúint chéanna do Mhac an tSaoi nó Mhaude, rud atá le sonrú i dteideal an ailt fiú.²⁰⁰

[We get different accounts in the different articles Ní Dhomhnaill has written and in the different interviews she has done. She admits in a conversation with Medbh McGuckian that the Gaelic tradition was a great assistance when she was a young poet because she had access to the oral poetry of women and because the like of Máire Mhac an tSaoi and Caitlín Maude were recognised poets at the time. In her article 'What Foremothers?', however, she denies the assistance of the Gaelic tradition and she doesn't give the same recognition or the same credit to Mac an tSaoi or Maude, something apparent even from the title of the article.]

Ní Dhomhnaill's work also reveals a variety of influences, as likely to be from outside Ireland as within the Gaelic tradition. While Pádraig de Paor has noted the influence of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman²⁰¹ and Rainer

¹⁹⁹ Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected poems/Rogha Dánta*, pp. 82-83.

²⁰⁰ Ríóna Ní Fhrighil, "Faitíos Imní an Scáthaithe: Eavan Boland agus Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", *New Hibernia Review* 6.4 (2002): 149.

²⁰¹ See Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Terminal Activity", *Poetry Ireland Review* 43/44 (1994): 156. Also "Sionnach" ["The Fox"], Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems/Rogha Dánta*, trans. by Michael Hartnett (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988), p. 146.

Maria Rilke,²⁰² Bríona Nic Dhiarmada has also found echoes of the poetry of Anne Sexton, as well as the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva, in Ní Dhomhnaill's work.²⁰³ The Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca is also a presence, Ní Dhomhnaill's "An Bhean Mhídhílis" being a mischievous riposte to Lorca's "The Unfaithful Wife". Indeed, Nic Dhiarmada has opined that William Shakespeare's work is as important a presence in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry as any other influence, including that of the Irish song or oral tradition.²⁰⁴ For both Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill, their allusion to the Gaelic song tradition, in their poetry and commentaries, partly reflects a wish to be read in relation to a much earlier tradition of composition in Irish. While this has led to occasionally uneven work, it reflects their anxiety regarding their own relationship to this tradition and, furthermore, to their contemporary audience.

The Gaelic Song Tradition: Providing Hybrid and Enabling Contemporary Voices

Though it has not been an unproblematic process, nor always successfully achieved, Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh have created an intertextual poetry comprising a mix of texts and metres to produce a hybrid verse through their incorporation of elements of the Gaelic tradition into their work. "Hybridization" for Mikhail Bakhtin referred to "the mixing, within a single concrete utterance of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space".²⁰⁵ Its occurrence is "essentially threatening to any unitary, authoritarian and hierarchical conception of society, art and life".²⁰⁶ As writers emerging from groups that have suffered exclusion from hierarchical conceptions "of society, art and life", it is not surprising that their work should be characterised by this feature. Indeed, Ní Dhomhnaill

²⁰² de Paor, *Tionscnamh Filíochta Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*, pp. 15, 73, 49-51.

²⁰³ Nic Dhiarmada, *Téacs Baineann, Téac Mná*, pp. 36, 37, 40, 43, 44.

²⁰⁴ This observation was given as part of a paper presented at the *First Galway Conference of Irish Studies* in June 2006 [Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, "Slad agus Bradaíocht – Próiseas an aistrithe agus dinimic an traidisiúin bhéil i bhfilíocht Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill", Paper presented at the *First Galway Conference of Irish Studies*: "Orality and Modern Irish Culture", Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, Wednesday June 7th 2006]. See also de Paor, *Tionscnamh Filíochta Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*, p. 19.

²⁰⁵ Katerina Clarke and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press, 1984), p. 429.

²⁰⁶ Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 30.

has expressed a great sense of "unholy joy in breaking up this whole consensus about what [the Irish-language] is supposed to be: how it's supposed to be pure, good, idealistic the soul of the Irish".²⁰⁷ For Ní Dhomhnaill, if it is indeed the soul of the Irish "it's a very heterogeneous soul. It's a soul that is made up of shards and pieces and fragments, and all sorts of contradictions, both internal and external".²⁰⁸

It is significant that the moment "the homoerotic element of his voice" would assert "itself unequivocally",²⁰⁹ in the *Suibhne* collection (and latterly the 1996 volume *Na Buachaillí Bána*) would also be the moment in which Ó Searcaigh's poems would most obviously draw on the Gaelic song tradition. Indeed, the title of *Na Buachaillí Bána* is a term in Donegal Irish for gay men.²¹⁰ As noted above, a central influence in this reengagement by the poet was the Donegal *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire. Ó Laoire, in his own commentary on the use of the Gaelic song tradition in Ó Searcaigh's work, has suggested that the practice whereby, "[w]omen sing men's songs, and the reverse is also true"²¹¹ within the Irish song tradition allowed Ó Searcaigh to exploit this custom to enable his homoerotic address. This process is reminiscent of what Lorrie Moore has called "transgendered sympathy and ventriloquism" whereby stories are told from "from the point of view of the opposite sex of the author"²¹² and it is also apparent within Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry where the sex of the poetic voice occasionally appears ambiguous in poems such as "Leaba Shíoda" ["The Silken Bed"]. While it is far from clear that the Gaelic song tradition did allow for the expression of the homoerotic through this custom, Steve Coleman has noted how

²⁰⁷ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "The Role of Irish in Contemporary Ireland", *Ireland in the New Century*, ed. by Robert J. Savage Jnr. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 203.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ de Paor, "Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940-2000", p. 346.

²¹⁰ Ask about Ireland, "The Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh", http://www.askaboutireland.ie/show_narrative_page.do?page_id=505, (accessed October 27, 2005).

²¹¹ Ó Laoire, "Dearg Dobhogtha Cháin/The Indelible Mark of Cain: Sexual Dissidence in the Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh", p. 226.

²¹² Lorrie Moore, "Introduction", *The Best American Short Stories 2004*, ed. by Lorrie Moore (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004). Excerpt available from Houghton Mifflin, 2004, <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/titledetail.cfm?textType=excerpt&titleNumber=688120>, (accessed November 10, 2005). I am grateful to the poet Mary O'Donoghue for bringing this concept and book to my attention.

Irish-language songs, as quoted speech, lend themselves to multiple interpretive frameworks. Many songs have more than one ‘story’, as in the so-called *aisling* or dream-vision genre. Part of what Joe Heaney called the ‘secret’ of these songs is that there is more than one participation framework - more than one possible set of characters in the dialogue - two lovers conversing *or* a poet being addressed by the goddess of sovereignty (Éire herself). A ‘literal’ reading confined to any one level fails to do a song justice, flattening out its true meaning, which happens *between* all the possible readings - meanings from one framework ‘leak’ into those from another.²¹³

Moreover, some songs in this tradition, according to Ó Laoire,

are concerned with subjects which were almost impossible to discuss openly in a society bound on all sides by tradition. Love of any kind, and specifically the homoerotic, could be a difficult matter within this culture, and song provided a release from that silence and allowed expression of pent-up emotions. Those who could not themselves compose used the compositions of others. Thus these songs lent themselves to covert or encoded erotic messages.²¹⁴

Such a song is found in *An tOileánach* [*The Islandman*],²¹⁵ the autobiography of Blasket islandman Tomás Ó Criomhthain. Ó Criomhthain recalls being forced into an arranged marriage with a local woman by his family in order to build alliances among the community, despite having fallen in love with a woman from another island. His protest comprises a song sung at the wedding, “Caisleán Uí Néill” [“O’Neill’s Castle”], a lament of a girl abandoned by her true love:

Mo shlán chun na hoíche aréir, is mo léan nach anocht atá
ann,
Mo bhuchailín séimh deas a bhréagfadh mé seal ar a
ghlún:

²¹³ Steve Coleman, “Sentiment, entelechy, and text in Irish-language song tradition”. Paper presented in the session “Rethinking the Symbol” (organized by S. Coleman and J. B. Bate) at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, November 1996, <http://members.door.net/arisbe/menu/library/aboutcsp/coleman/aaa96.html>, (accessed June 15, 2004).

²¹⁴ Ó Laoire, “Dearg Dobhogtha Cháin/The Indelible Mark of Cain: Sexual Dissidence in the Poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh”, p. 226.

²¹⁵ Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An tOileánach*, ed. by Pádraig Ua Maoileoin (Báile Átha Cliath: Helicon Teoranta, 1980).

Dá neosfainn mo scéal duit is baolach ná déanfá orm rún,
Go bhfuil mo ghrá bán dom thréigean, as a Dhia ghléigil
as a Mhuire nach dubhach?²¹⁶

[My farewell to last night, and my pity it isn't tonight,
When my gentle fine boy would sweet-talk me on his knee:
If I told you my story, there's a danger you wouldn't keep the
secret on me,
That my fair-headed love is abandoning me, and O bright
God and Mary, isn't that bleak? (Trans. Declan Kiberd)]²¹⁷

Significantly, Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha ("An Seabhac"), the editor of the first edition of *An tOileánach*, omitted this song, according to Máire Mhac an tSaoi, because "its meaning was so clear a betrayal that he felt it could not be allowed to stand".²¹⁸ It was restored to the text by Ó Criomhthain's grandson, Pádraig Ua Maoileoin, in the second edition.

In the last chapter we noted the significant impression one *sean-nós* singer, Jerry Flaherty, made on Thomas Kinsella. A song which local people in Corca Dhuibhne still associate most with Flaherty (or Diarmuid Ó Flatharta as he was also known) offers an example of the features highlighted by both Ó Laoire and Coleman. The song, "An Seandúine" ["The Old Man"], was one of only two recordings which Gael Linn made of the singer before his untimely death and was released in April 2004 on the CD *Seoltaí Séidte*. Despite being sung by a man, "An Seandúine" is written from the perspective of a woman who laments her marriage to an old man in which the church was complicit. The female narrator not only expresses her disgust with the local priest and her elderly husband but also her wish that he might be "drowned in a bog hole", or have "his legs broken", so that she might "walk out with the young boys":

Is comhairle do fuaireas-sa amuigh ar an mbóthar
Ó rógaire sagairt an seandúine do phósadh;
Gur chuma leis siúd ach go méadóinn a phóca
Is go mbeinnse an fhaid a mhairfinn ag brath ar na comharsain.

Loinneog
Is ó dhera, a sheandúine, leatsa ní gheobhadsa,
Is ó dhera, a sheandúine, loscadh agus dó ort,

²¹⁶ Ó Criomhthain, *An tOileánach*, p. 157.

²¹⁷ Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p. 523.

²¹⁸ Máire Cruise O'Brien, "An tOileánach", *The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature*, ed. by John Jordan (Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press in association with Radio Teilifís Éireann, 1977), p. 36.

Ó dhera, a sheanduíne, leatsa ní gheobhadsa,
Is dá mbeinnse i mbéal dorais ná beirimse beo ort! [...]

Dá bhfaighinnse mo sheanduíne báite i bpoll móna,
A chosa a bheith briste is a chnámha do bheith leonta,
Do thabharfainn abhaile é is do dhéanfainn é a thórramh,
Is do shiúlainn amach leis na buachaillí óga.

[The advice I got out on the road from a rogue of a priest was to marry the old man; he didn't care, as long as I increased his wealth, that I'd be depending on the neighbours for as long as I'd live.

Chorus

And oh dhera, old man, I will not go with you, and oh Dhera, old man, destruction and burning on you, and oh dhera, old man, I will not go with you, and if I were at the mouth of the door, might I not catch hold of you alive [...]

If I found my old man drowned in a bog hole, his legs broken and his bones injured, I'd bring him home and I'd wake him, and I'd walk out with the young boys. (Trans. Nicholas Carolan)]²¹⁹

The Gaelic song tradition, therefore, allowed for transgressive possibilities which have resonances in the poetry of both Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill. An attempt is apparent in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry to articulate a distinctly feminine voice, beyond confines she considers were traditionally imposed on women in matters such as literacy and sexuality. This process sometimes involves a remembrance of the contribution, and sacrifice, of women in the past, including the songs they composed and sang. For Ní Dhomhnaill, lots "of women's poetry has so much to reclaim; there's so much psychic land, a whole continent, a whole Atlantis under the water to reclaim".²²⁰ While her poetry recalls heroic Irish female figures from mythology, Ní Dhomhnaill also remembers the historical female experience including, "na mná scafánta" ["the vigorous women"] who would climb down the cliffs along "An Bóithrín Caol" ["The Narrow Wee Road"] "ag dul ag baint iascán/is cliabh ar a ndroim acu"²²¹ ["going

²¹⁹ Nicholas Carolan, "Nótaí ar na Rianta/Notes on Tracks", *Seoltaí Séidte* (Baile Átha Cliath: Gael Linn, 2004), pp. 73-74.

²²⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "The Hidden Ireland: Women's Inheritance", *Irish Poetry after Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Blackrock: Four Courts Press, 1996), p. 115.

²²¹ Ní Dhomhnaill, "An Bóithrín Caol" ["The Narrow Wee Road"], *Pharaoh's Daughter*, p. 60.

to collect small fish/and their baskets on their back"]. Ní Dhomhnaill has alluded in her poetry to those women who resisted the limitations society attempted to impose on them. In the poem, "In Memoriam Elly Ní Dhomhnaill (1884-1963)", she recalls her grandaunt who held a degree when few women did, never married and spoke out strongly against patriarchy, including her father, brother and local parish priest. In return she was ostracized by her community. However, Ní Dhomhnaill regards herself as the inheritor of her grandaunt's spirit:

Cuireadh m'fhear céile
ar a aire im choinne
ar eagla an drochbhraoin chéanna,
á rá go rabhas-sa mar í féin,
cúl le cine,
is nach raibh aon oidhre eile uirthi.

[My own man was guarded
when he met me,
for fear of the same bad drop,
saying I was just like her,
a loner,
her sole heir. (Trans. George O'Brien)]²²²

Ní Dhomhnaill's allusion to the folklore surrounding *An Mhaighdean Mhara* ["The Mermaid"] also reveals her concern to articulate a distinctly feminine voice while drawing on Ireland's orature. Stories associated with the mermaid have inspired a *sean-nós* song as well as a popular slow air. Ní Dhomhnaill adapts aspects of the song and the story in "An Mhaighdean Mhara",²²³ but in a significant departure she adopts the voice of the mermaid, rather than the third person perspective, and frequently male point of view, apparent in surviving accounts. As the following summary of the tale from Bo Almquist suggests, it was the male perspective that was often found there:

As a man was walking along the strand of Glenbeigh, he saw a mermaid sitting on a rock combing her hair. He stole over to where she was and seeing a little cap near her he took it, and the mermaid, looking around for her cap could not find it. By losing this cap she had also lost her power to return to the sea.

²²² Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharoah's Daughter*, pp. 26-27.

²²³ Seamus Heaney has also composed a poem entitled "Maighdean Mara" included in his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*.

The man then brought her home and married her. They lived happily together with their children for a long time until one day the man was cleaning the loft in which he kept his fishing tackle, he threw down the mermaid's cap. The minute she saw it she grabbed at it and off with her back to the sea. Her husband and children were all very lonely after her.²²⁴

Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, however, places the female voice to the fore allowing the mermaid herself to describe her experience:

Ní gan pian
a thángas aníos
ar thalamh.
Do bhriseas
an slabhra réamhordaithe,
do mhalairtíos snámh
ar luail cos,
ag priocadh liom
ar nós na gcuirliún.

[Not without pain
have I landed:
I broke
the natural law.
I swapped swimming
for walking the earth,
picking my steps
like a curlew. (Trans. Michael Hartnett)]²²⁵

A similar process is at work throughout Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. Frequently, she adopts the voice of female figures from Irish mythology (including Mór, a pre-Christian Goddess of war, and the legendary Queen Medb of Connaght) often to castigate men, as in her poem "Labhrann Medb" ["Medb Speaks"]:

Fógraim cogadh feasta
Ar fhearaibh uile Éireann,
Ar na leaids ag na cúinní sráide
Is iad ina lúí i lúib i gceas naíon,
A bpilibíní gan liúdar
Is gan éileamh acu ar aon bhean

²²⁴ Bo Almqvist, "Of Mermaids and Marriages: Seamus Heaney's 'Maighdean Mara' and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'An Mhaighdean Mara'", *Béaloideas* 58 (1990): 4.

²²⁵ Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected poems/Rogha Dánta*, pp. 52-53.

Ach le teann fearaíochta is laochais
 Ag maíomh gur iníon rí Gréige
 A bhí mar chéile leapan aréir acu,
 Is fógraím cogadh cruaidh feasta.

[War I declare from now
 on all the men of Ireland
 on all the corner-boys
 lying curled in children's cradles
 their willies worthless
 wanting no woman
 all macho boasting
 last night they bedded
 a Grecian princess -
 a terrible war I will declare. (Trans. Michael Hartnett)].²²⁶

Two songs already referred to which recur in a number of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems are the young woman's love lyrics "Dónall Óg" and "Liam Ó Raghailigh". While one cannot be certain that these *amhráin ghrá* were actually composed by women, there is a strong tradition of women's songs in Irish and Ní Dhomhnaill has built on and developed this tradition in her own poetry. Both "Dónall Óg" and "Liam Ó Raghailigh" are alluded to in poems from Ní Dhomhnaill's 1998 collection, *Cead Aighnis*, including "Dubh" and "Faotíní" ["Whiting"].²²⁷ The title of the collection itself is reminiscent of a line from the traditional song "Droimeann Donn Dílis" ["My Faithful Brown Cow"]:

Dá bhfaighinnse cead aighnis nó radharc ar an gcoróin,
 Sacsanaigh do leadhbfaínn mar do leadhbfaínn
 Seanbhróg,

[Give me licence to fight, or one look at the Crown,
 And Saxons I'd clout as I'd clout an old shoe (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)]²²⁸

²²⁶ Ibid., pp. 110-111.

²²⁷ This collection includes several other references to both music and song, including the poems "Na Murúcha agus an Ceol" ["The Mermaids and the Music"] (which includes an account of where the music and words of the traditional air "Port na bPúcaí" ["Music of the Spirits"], came from) and "Cadenza". "Cadenza" recalls the poet/persona's daughter practicing the song, "Seoladh na nGamha" ["The Driving of the Calves"], a popular traditional song, for the Feis and includes several verses from this song.

²²⁸ Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire*, pp. 310-311.

While Thomas Kinsella translates this phrase, “Cead Aighnis”, above as “licence to fight”, a more direct translation would be right or “leave to speak”.²²⁹ While “Droimeann Donn Dílis” was written to lament Ireland’s oppression by England, Ní Dhomhnaill often subverts the more straightforward narratives of such songs, to celebrate her own right of expression through literature in contemporary Ireland, a right valued all the more given women’s problematic relationship with the canon of Irish literature in the past. The first poem in *Cead Aighnis*, for example, “Mo Mháistir Dorcha” [“My Dark Master”], develops this point particularly in its final verse where the young female subject of the poem who has hired herself out to work as a maid wonders if she will ever be allowed leave or to have her say:

O táimse in aimsir ag an mbás
is baolach ná beidh mé saor riamh uaidh.
Ní heol dom mo thuarastal ná mo phá
nó an bhfaighidh mé pá plaic nó cead aighnis.²³⁰

[I’ve hired myself out to death. And I’m afraid that I’ll not
ever be let go. What I’ll have at the end of the day
I’ve absolutely no idea, either in terms of three pots and a cot
or if I’ll be allowed to say my say. (Trans. Paul Muldoon)]²³¹

Ní Dhomhnaill has recalled the inspiration for this poem: “When I was young”, she remembers, “I knew people who had gone to hiring fairs when they were young; and what they bargained for most of all was “pá phliuic [*sic*] nó cead aighnis” - the pay of well-rounded cheeks and the right to say your say”.²³²

The “right to say your say” for Ní Dhomhnaill includes expressions of her own sexuality, often by drawing on lines from the song tradition. These songs, as Tomás Ó Fiaich has noted, frequently included references to the hair, mouth and complexion of the beloved,²³³ and all are present in one of Ní Dhomhnaill’s most sensual poems “Leaba Shíoda” [“The Silken

²²⁹ Niall Ó Dónaill agus Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *Gearrfhoclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (An Roinn Oideachais, Baile Átha Cliath, 1981), p. 9.

²³⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Cead Aighnis* (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1998), p. 14.

²³¹ Paul Muldoon (trans.), “Mo Mháistir Dorcha/My Dark Master”, *Poetry* 167.1-2 (1995): 79.

²³² Lucile Redmond, “Nobel Prize Winner Seamus Heaney Reads For Irish Press Journalists’ Fund”, *The Xpress*, Thursday, 26th October 1995, <http://www.adnet.ie/xpress/heaney.htm>, (accessed April 26, 2004).

²³³ Ó Fiaich, “Na hAmhráin Grá”, pp. 60-62.

Bed"], a poem that also draws on the "Song of Solomon" from the Bible. The poem, in common with Ó Searcaigh's work, also suggests the homoerotic, or possibly the adoption of a male voice, in the feminization of the subject addressed by the poet/persona, compared to "a bride" in one line:

Na fiúisí ag ísliú
a gceanna maorga
ag umhlú síos don áilleacht
os a gcomhair
is do phriocfainn péire acu
mar shiogairlíní
is do mhaiseoinn do chluasa
mar bhrídeog.

[The fuchsias bending low
their solemn heads in obeisance to the beauty
in front of them
I would pick a pair of flowers as pendant earrings
to adorn you
like a bride in shining clothes. (Trans. Ní Dhomhnaill)]²³⁴

This poet/persona offers to make a bed for her lover in a field under trees where they might openly make love. Apart from references to various features of the lover (skin, hair, ears), "Leaba Shíoda" also includes the line, "Is bheadh do bheola taise/ar mhilseacht shiúcra" ["And your damp lips/would be as sweet as sugar"] reminiscent of a line from one of the most famous *amhráin ghrá* "Úna Bhán" ["Fair Úna"]: "A bhéilín an tsiúcra, mar leamhnacht, mar fhíon 's mar bheoir" ["O little mouth of sugar, like new milk, like wine and like beer"].²³⁵

The sexual candidness of Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry has been remarked upon by various commentators including Máire Ní Annracháin who notes that Ní Dhomhnaill celebrates her own sexual openness and condemns the ecclesiastical system that made "cúpláil meata as suirí uasal" ["cowardly coupling out of noble lovemaking"].²³⁶ Similarly, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh has described how:

²³⁴ Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected poems/Rogha Dánta*, pp. 154-155

²³⁵ Úna bhán - Fair Una, The text of Úna Bhán, taken from Douglas Hyde's *Love Songs of Connacht*, 1895, <http://ingeb.org/songs/unabhan.html>, (accessed May 26, 2005).

²³⁶ Ní Annracháin, "Ait Liom Bean a Bheith ina File", p. 161.

[i]n poem after poem, Ní Dhomhnaill's speakers celebrate the sensual pleasures of dancing, singing, eating, and sex [...] For Ní Dhomhnaill's personae, sex involves choice, not obligation, as they actively pursue their roles as daughters of Earth. Blatantly sexual, they can be simultaneously lovers and mothers.²³⁷

Furthermore, this focus reflects a more general willingness in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry to focus on the physical, on aspects of human experience considered previously inappropriate for poetry. As Pádraig de Paor notes,

Thug sí aghaidh ar an limistéar dhorchá, dhiúltaithe sin de bheith an duine – ar an chollaíocht, ar an chác, ar an chorp, ar an neamh-chomhfhios d'fhonn teacht ar an fhuinneamh chruthaitheach a bhí in ainm is a bheith reoite nó ionchollaithe agus d'fhonn é a shaoradh chun an chomhfheasa.²³⁸

[She engaged with the dark, rejected aspects of human existence – on sexuality, on excrement, on the body, on the unconscious in order to discover the creative energy that was supposed to be frozen or incarnate and wishing to bring it to consciousness]

Both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh have employed elements of the Gaelic song tradition in their work, producing a hybrid poetry which celebrates their own sexuality and enables their distinctive contemporary voices.

Conclusion

The work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh reflects a general rise in the output and popularity of Irish-language poetry since the early 1970s, a development which reflected the reengagement of Irish society with tradition following a period of rapid change in the 1960s. While there was a rise in the popularity of traditional music in this period there is also evidence that the Irish language too was experiencing a revival of its own. Poets, including those Irish-language poets associated with the *Innti* movement, would engage in their own distinctive ways with the issues of tradition and community, often through the performance of

²³⁷ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 175-176.

²³⁸ Pádraig de Paor, *Tionscnamh Filíochta Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta., 1997), p. 7.

their work. These performances were partly informed by, and sometimes accompanied by, traditional music and song, as poets were alerted to the importance of the aural element in their work.

These performances also connected contemporary poets to the Gaelic tradition, in which performance was the primary mode of transmission. The Gaelic tradition would be a recurring concern in the work of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh, reflected in their incorporation of aspects of the song tradition into their poetry. This has not been unproblematic for either poet, both of whom found a tradition that did not always appear receptive to the distinctive voices they wished to articulate. While an engagement with the Gaelic song tradition would be apparent from Ní Dhomhnaill's earliest poetry, it would become a feature of Ó Searcaigh's work from the mid-1980s onwards. While partly the result of the influence of *sean-nós* singer Lillis Ó Laoire, it also reflected a more general engagement with tradition by Irish society in a time of change and crisis.

While their engagement with, and incorporation of, elements of the song tradition has occasionally been reflected in the form and metre of both Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh's work, it also indicates a concern with the communities from which these songs have emerged. In a time of considerable anxiety among poets regarding their contemporary audience, particularly those writing in Irish, both Ó Searcaigh and Ní Dhomhnaill would appear to be as cognisant of a community in the past (from which these songs emerged) as any community that may exist in the present for their work. However, the challenge that this presents for these poets, in their negotiation between a past community and contemporary audience, occasionally unbalances their own poetry. Furthermore, while they continue to encourage a reading of their work that connects it to the Gaelic tradition and earlier communities, their poetry often reveals a variety of influences many of which come from outside this tradition.

While it has been far from unproblematic for both poets, and not always successfully realised, Ní Dhomhnaill and Ó Searcaigh have nonetheless found in the Gaelic oral tradition a means through which to connect with the past while articulating distinctly contemporary, and occasionally subversive, poetic voices.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THE GIVEN NOTE”: TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY, CIARAN CARSON, AND GEARÓID MAC LOCHLAINN

There has always been a classical quality about Liam O’Flynn’s playing, a level, confident strength: you feel that he is unshakeably part of a tradition [...] On the occasions when I have shared a programme with Liam, I have always felt strengthened by being within his piper’s field of force
—Seamus Heaney, sleevenote to *The Given Note* album by Liam O’Flynn.¹

Chapters Three and Four examined the work of a number of poets from the Republic of Ireland and noted the considerable influence of traditional music and song on their engagement with tradition and community. This chapter will focus on three poets from Northern Ireland: Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. As well as dividing the island of Ireland politically, the setting up of the statelet of Northern Ireland in 1920 (a statelet described by former First Minister David Trimble as “a cold house for Catholics”,²) created distinct historical and political processes within that region over the past eighty years. The 1947 British Education Act, which opened secondary education up to all, “produced an emergent, upwardly mobile class of middle-class Northern Catholics capable of challenging the Ulster Protestant hegemony [...] as well as questioning the traditional values of family, the farm, the tribe”.³ For poets living in this contested space issues such as culture, language, history and

¹ Seamus Heaney, sleevenote to *The Given Note*, CD by Liam O’Flynn (Dublin: Tara Music Company Ltd., 1995).

² David Trimble, “Nobel Lecture”, Oslo, December 10, 1998, *The Nobel Foundation*, <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1998/trimble-lecture.html>, (accessed December 14, 2005).

³ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998), pp. 40-41.

identity became all the more important. This would become increasingly evident in the late 1960s with the outbreak of what has become known as "The Troubles".

This chapter considers the distinctive relationships of Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn to Irish traditional music and song. For Carson and Mac Lochlainn, issues of discontinuity, voice, process (in performance and transmission) and community inform their engagement, issues Heaney has been more hesitant to consider in his allusions to traditional music and song.

Heaney's work reveals a recurring engagement, nonetheless, with music. His poetry has been described as "so apparently musical that to comment upon it entails the risk of redundancy".⁴ Harry White has recognized a significant musical inheritance in Heaney's work, sensing a "bardic impulse" in his poetry 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".⁵

White's remarks, though at first appearing trite and vague, are nevertheless revealing. Several commentators have criticised Heaney for rehashing the romantic tropes of nineteenth-century nationalism (tropes apparent in Moore's work) while failing to engage sufficiently critically with the contemporary realities of Northern Ireland.⁶ These criticisms are also relevant to Heaney's engagement with traditional music and will be examined in this chapter.

Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn have also made similar criticisms of Heaney's work.⁷ Carson, an accomplished traditional

⁴ Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770-1970* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1998), p. 158.

⁵ Ibid. Significantly, Heaney wrote an introduction to an edition of *Moore's Melodies* in which he described song as "the inspiring medium through which I became initiated into verse" [Seamus Heaney, "Introduction", *A Centenary Selection from Moores Melodies*, ed. by David Hammond (Dublin: Gilbert Dalton, 1979), p. 9].

⁶ David Lloyd, "Pap for the dispossessed", *Anomalous States* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 13-40. Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991), Clare Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁷ Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975): 183-86. Thomas Rain Crowe, "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn", *Asheville Poetry Review* 10.1 (2003), http://www.ashevillereview.com/v10n1/Interview_Mac_Lochlainn.php, (accessed December 13, 2005).

musician, has sought to realise some of the urgency of traditional music, apparent in the distinctive form of his poetry and its combination with song and music in his performances. Traditional music and song have also encouraged, and facilitated, Carson's concerns both with community and tradition, concerns considered below.

Gearóid Mac Lochlainn is also a musician and has brought his musical talents to bear on his poetic performances. His work and comments reveal an awareness of, and wish to connect with, the tradition of Gaelic composition and performance. Furthermore, he has emphasised a responsibility to speak out in his work on behalf of his community and has found performance, sometimes accompanied by music, an important means through which to do so.

In its examination of the work of Heaney, Carson and Mac Lochlainn, this chapter considers each poet's engagement with traditional music and song and the importance of tradition and community to this process.

(Dis)continuity in Seamus Heaney's and Ciaran Carson's Poetry

David Lloyd has criticised Seamus 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".⁸ A central trope within Irish romantic nationalism was that of the land, a land that was often feminised and represented in the form of a woman, sometimes called Cathleen Ní Houlihan, at others the Shan Van Vocht and often immortalised in song. In the previous chapter we noted Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's criticisms of such a tradition whereby women were represented as motifs or mythical figures, often symbolizing the Irish nation while bearing little relationship to the reality of female experience, a criticism also apparent in Eavan Boland's work.⁹ Heaney himself nonetheless described the root of the Troubles with reference to such motifs:

To some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan van Vocht, whatever; and her

⁸ Lloyd, "Pap for the dispossessed", p. 20.

⁹ See Eavan Boland, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989), pp. 8-9.

sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange, Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a Rex or Caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power.¹⁰

As the above passage suggests Heaney regards "the feminine element" as involving "the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature".¹¹ Land, and above all the bog, is a prominent trope in Heaney's work, particularly the first four collections, including *North*. In these collections, land is often feminised, sometimes through the image of the Germanic earth Goddess Nerthus in poems such as "The Tollund Man"¹² which recalls the remarkably preserved bog bodies recovered in Denmark:

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,¹³

While Patricia Coughlan has suggested that Heaney "as a whole is insistently and damagingly gendered",¹⁴ Clare Wills has also criticised

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 57. Indeed, in Heaney's most direct engagement with the Troubles in *North*, we find several references to folksong, both from the Gaelic and English language traditions, including "Aisling" [p. 48] and "Come to the Bower" [p. 31] which takes its title from a nineteenth-century song described by John Loesberg as "[m]eant as a home-coming invitation to the exiled Irish and in particular to the American supporters of the Fenian movement" [John Loesberg, *Folk Songs & Ballads Popular in Ireland*, Vol. 1 (Cork: Ossian Publications Ltd, 1978), p. 55].

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, "Belfast", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 34. Heaney's remarks are reminiscent of the description of the Celt and the Saxon found in Mathew Arnold's "On the Study of Celtic Literature" (1866).

¹² Heaney returns to this figure in his 2006 collection, *District and Circle*, in the poem "The Tollund Man in Springtime" [Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 55-57].

¹³ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 31.

Heaney's use of feminine motifs as it effaces "the materiality of the woman's body" and because of "the elision of history which the use of such mythic metaphors demands".¹⁵ Yet these motifs reflect 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 recognises in himself, both linguistically and culturally. He feels separated not just from a language spoken by his ancestors but also from the stories that such a language holds. Speaking of the story of Cúchulainn and Ferdia from the Gaelic epic the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, he wrote:

It is a story that would have been current in everybody's mind when Irish was the *lingua franca* and it is still one of the best known and best loved legends in the Ulster cycle. So the place name, Ardee, succinctly marries the legendary and the local.

It now requires some small degree of learning to know this about Ardee. We have to retrieve the underlay of Gaelic legend in order to read the full meaning of the name and to flesh out the topographical record with its human accretions.¹⁶

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 civilisation. The most famous example is the poem "Broagh", which reflects on the distinct pronunciation of a placename in the North, sometimes difficult for "outsiders" to articulate:

Riverbank, the long rigs,
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford.

The garden mould
bruised easily, the shower
gathering in your heelmark

¹⁴ Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. by Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 108.

¹⁵ Clare Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 70.

¹⁶ Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of Place", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 132-149.

was the black *O*

in *Broagh*,
its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
difficult to manage.¹⁷

"Broagh", though ostensibly in English, also combines words of Scots ("rigs", "furrows"), and Irish ("broagh" a transliteration of the Irish word for riverbank, "Bruach") origin. There is a further inclusiveness at work in this poem, despite its suggestion of exclusion, since Heaney has noted how the word "Broagh" is "a sound native to Ireland, common to Unionist and Nationalist, but unavailable to an English person".¹⁸ As Neil Corcoran notes,

This community of pronunciation is an implicit emblem for some new political community; and it is in this sense that 'Broagh' has a significance in Heaney's work altogether disproportionate to its length. Exhilaratedly riding on its own melting, it acts as a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division.¹⁹

However, Ciaran Carson would seem to consider such euphony inappropriate to the Troubles, finding Heaney's portrayal somewhat naïve. Carson appears to satirise Heaney's impulse to simplify the Northern divisions in such a manner in the poem "Romeo" in which the reader is presented with a list of objects from a childhood in Belfast before arriving at

The Orange Lily and the Shamrock green; shades of Capulet
and Montague –

It's all a tangled tagliatelle linguine Veronese that
I'm trying to unravel

¹⁷ Patrick Crotty, *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1999), p. 199.

¹⁸ Quoted in Neil Corcoran, *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 90.

¹⁹ Ibid.

From its strands of DNA and language. Perhaps I need
a spirit level.²⁰

The final line's apparent reference to the title of Heaney's 1996 collection would suggest a rather inappropriate riposte to the divisions and complexities delineated within the poem.²¹

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 the landscape 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.²²

The Irish landscape provides that point of continuity for Heaney to which he repeatedly returns 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".²³ Elsewhere, 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:

I step through origins
like a dog turning
its memories of wilderness
on the kitchen mat:

²⁰ Ciaran Carson, *Opera et Cetera* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1996), p. 84.

²¹ Indeed, unlike Heaney's imaginative attempts to overcome the divisions in the North (apparent above in the poem "Broagh") as Alexander Ross Moore notes, Carson's poetry is characterised by a "strong sense of determinism. Typical protagonists in *Belfast Confetti* find themselves confined by the determinants of history and the actuality of their city. In *The Twelfth of Never*, reformulations of the *aisling* result in the more traditional promises of deliverance rewritten into a fatalistic scenario" [Alexander Ross Moore, "'Everything is in the ways you say them': Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson", (unpublished master's dissertation, National University of Ireland, Galway, 1999), p. 74].

²² Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of Place", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 149.

²³ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 14.

the bog floor shakes,
water cheeps and lisps
as I walk down
rushes and heather [...]
...

Earth-pantry, bone vault,
sun-bank, embalmer
of votive goods
and sabred fugitives.

Insatiable bride.
Sword-swallower,
casket, midden,
floe of history.²⁴

In contrast, for Ciaran Carson, though Belfast too has “emerged from the bog”²⁵ it is a city which “is changing daily”.²⁶ His description of the foundations of Belfast is indicative:

Belfast is built on *sleech* – alluvial or tidal muck – and is built of sleetch, metamorphosed into brick, the city consuming its source as the brickfields themselves were built upon; sleetch, this indeterminate slobbery semi-fluid – *all the public buildings*, notes Dr. Pococke, visiting the town in 1752, *are founded on a morass* - this gunge, allied to *slick* and *sludge*, *slag*, *sleek* and *slush*, to the Belfast or Scots *sleekit* that means sneaky, underhand, not-to-be-relied-on.²⁷

In such an environment, maps are no guide and place is ominously uncertain, particularly in the context of Northern violence. As Carson writes in “Turn Again”,

There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was
never built.
A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets
that never existed.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

²⁵ Mary Shine-Thompson, “Interview with Ciaran Carson”, *The Poet’s Chair: Readings and Interviews with Ireland’s Poets from the National Poetry Archive*, Volume 4/5, (Dublin: Poetry Ireland/Éigse Éireann in association with the Verbal Arts Centre and The Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 2003.)

²⁶ Ciaran Carson, “Questions Time”, *Belfast Confetti* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1989), p. 57.

²⁷ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 72.

Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back lane,
 Stone-Cutter's Entry -
 Today's plan is already yesterday's - The streets that were
 there are gone.
 And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security
 reasons.
 The linen backing is falling apart - the Falls Road hangs by a
 thread
 When someone asks me where I live, I remember where I
 used to live.
 Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into
 A side-street try to throw off my shadow, and history is
 changed.²⁸

The placenames that for Heaney provide an access to the past, to tradition and continuity are for Carson as uncertain as the day to day conversations in a pub. In his poem "Hamlet", he considers the various meanings of the "Falls road" and finds its Irish origins revealing, though far from certain:

As usual, the clock in The Clock Bar was a good few minutes
 fast:
 A fiction no one really bothered to maintain, unlike the story
 The comrade on my left was telling, which no one knew for
 certain truth: [...]
 [...] For *pound*, as
 some wag
 Interrupted, was an off-shoot of the Falls, from the Irish, *fál*,
 a hedge;
 Hence, *any kind of enclosed thing* [...]
 [...] For *fál*, is also *frontier, boundary*, as in *the undiscovered*
country
From whose bourne no traveller returns, the illegible, thorny hedge
 of time itself - [...]
 [...] other versions of the
 Falls:
*A no-go area, a ghetto, a demolition zone*²⁹

While for Seamus Heaney landscape provides a point of continuity and, indeed, a shared site of identity in the divided cultural milieu of Northern Ireland, Ciaran Carson remains unconvinced of its appropriateness in either respect.

²⁸ Carson, "Turn Again", *Belfast Confetti*, p. 11.

²⁹ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, pp. 105-106.

Poetic Voice

Ciaran Carson's poems promote instability, in terms of place, voice and story. Seamus Heaney, on the other hand, despite his attempts in collections such as *North* to "disrupt the English lyric voice"³⁰ to reflect the violent context in the North he alludes to, exploits the lyric form to reveal often deeply personal, and almost confessional, perspectives. Writing of the poem "The Tollund Man", Eugene O'Brien notes "[Heaney's] focus [...] on the 'I' as opposed to the 'we' ".³¹ Indeed, as Neil Corcoran observes of Heaney's use of the "I" in the *Wintering Out* and *North* collections:

the poet's 'I' is detached from ordinary social circumstance, withdrawn to solipsistic meditation, ruminatively entranced, the hero of its own imaginative constructions and elaborations. We might think of it, in fact, as 'mythologized'.³²

Desmond Fennell has further suggested that this "self-absorption" has become increasingly characteristic of Heaney's work as he came under the influence of his "powerful champion",³³ at Harvard,³⁴ Professor Helen Vendler:

much of Heaney's poetry in the 70s could be regarded as private musing or meditation with any general views censored out – rather than as public speech which, in the County Derry manner, 'said nothing'. But Heaney, with long Irish and English traditions of poetry as public speech behind him, had hesitated to commit himself to the 'private meditation' concept. Now, in response to Vendler's high valuation of such poetry, he did so, and the result can be noticed in the increased self-absorption and indifference to readers in *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*. Significantly, the first blurb of a Heaney collection to describe his work as 'meditative' is that of *Station Island*. Since then he has been consciously not speaking to us, even to 'say nothing'.³⁵

³⁰ Neil Corcoran, *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 107.

³¹ Eugene O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney, Creating Irelands of the Mind* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002), p. 29.

³² Corcoran, *A Student's Guide to Seamus Heaney*, p. 77.

³³ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 30.

³⁴ Heaney has lectured at Harvard since 1982 and was appointed to the prestigious position of Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory in 1984.

³⁵ Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991), p. 34.

Bernard O'Donoghue has also argued of Heaney's critical writings that "perhaps no critic since Dante in the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova* has made lyric poetry so solely his concern",³⁶ while Stan Smith contends that Heaney was to find a way out from the "Northern Irish deadlock from *Field Work* onwards" in the

'lyric stance', in language as itself a site of displacement, 'the voice from beyond' that the writer can seek the hopeful imaginary resolution of real conflicts. Heaney's poetry has pursued language as political metaphor and metonymy through to its source, to a recognition of language as both place of necessary exile and site of perpetual return home.³⁷

While Heaney's focus has been on establishing and developing his own distinctive and personal lyrical voice, "to use the first person singular" as he has remarked, "to mean *me* and my lifetime",³⁸ he has done so aware of the alternative possibilities the Gaelic tradition offered. In an introduction to a collection of essays dedicated to the Scottish Gaelic poet, Sorley MacLean, Heaney writes of the impression hearing MacLean recite his poetry had on him:

[M]y interest was in hearing the Gaelic. Again, this had the force of revelation: the mesmeric, heightened tone; the weathered voice coming in close from a far place; the swarm of the vowels; the surrender to the otherness of the poem; above all the sense of bardic dignity that was entirely without self-parade but was instead the effect of a proud self-abnegation, as much a submission as a claim to heritage.³⁹

Much as was observed in Chapter Two of William Butler Yeats (a significant influence on Heaney's work), Heaney is not so much interested in such "self-abnegation" as in the articulation of the "personal element alone".⁴⁰

³⁶ Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 144.

³⁷ Stan Smith, "The Distance Between", *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), p. 46.

³⁸ James Randall, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney", *Ploughshares* 5.3 (1979): 20

³⁹ Seamus Heaney, "Introduction", *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. by Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. 2.

⁴⁰ W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 233.

In contrast to Heaney, Ciaran Carson is disapproving of the lyric voice and has criticised poems with a strong "I" remarking,

I don't think that a poem ought to be about how you feel and if by a lyric you mean a poem which says 'I feel' you know 'I feel sad' or 'I feel that I'm in love' and 'she's not in love with me but [...] I would hope that the 'I' in my own poetry is always only an 'eye' as it were or a voice or a means or a tool.⁴¹

Carson's work offers none of the certainties of the individual voice. Indeed, this uncertainty is sometimes written into the poems themselves, such as the following lines from "Belfast Confetti":

What is
My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A
fusillade of question-marks.⁴²

Furthermore, his poems often feature several voices, none of which one could definitely attribute to the poet himself. As the poet/persona of "Labunter et Imputantur" remarks

I am not who you think I am. For what we used to be
Is gone. The moment's over,
Whatever years you thought we spent together. You don't
Know the story [...] ⁴³

In the work of both Carson, and his younger Belfast contemporary Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, the focus is primarily on the people who occupy the contemporary space and how they themselves interpret its history; it is not enough to engage with the landscape in isolation. As John Kerrigan has noted, drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, "places comes into existence through human activity and language, they are intersections of the mortal and the metaphysical unconcealed by building and dwelling".⁴⁴ However as Kerrigan has contended of poems in Seamus Heaney's *Seeing Things*,

⁴¹ Shine-Thompson, "Interview with Ciaran Carson".

⁴² Ciaran Carson, *The Irish for No* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1987), p. 31.

⁴³ Ciaran Carson, *Opera et Cetera* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1996), p. 47.

⁴⁴ John Kerrigan, "Earth writing: Heaney and Carson", *Essays in Criticism* 48.2 (1998): 145.

there is often an uneasy sense [...] that the verse is achieving weightlessness by despecifying familiar situations rather than inventing new ones or welcoming impurities into the poem. This exacerbates a tendency which has long been familiar in Heaney (and which the early place-name lyrics depend on), for poems to be readable as figuratively and even formally about their own conditions or representation – lyrics about excavating the past in *North* which are long and narrow and shaftlike, or, in *Seeing Things*, poems which build verbal structures that are so much places of writing that they turn locales inside out without developing their human geography.⁴⁵

Kerrigan describes the poems as “less about cottages than like cottages and about themselves” and offers the example of the second poem of the “Lightenings” sequence:

Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in.
 Drink out of tin. Know the scullery cold,
 A latch, a door-bar, forged tongs and a grate.

Touch the cross-beam, drive iron in a wall,
 Hang a line to verify the plumb
 From lintel, coping-stone and chimney-breast.

Relocate the bedrock in the threshold.
 Take squarings from the recessed gable pane.
 Make your study the unregarded floor.

Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure
 The bastion of sensation. Do not waver
 Into language. Do not waver in it.⁴⁶

These works reflect a development within Heaney’s poetry whereby the focus has come to be primarily on the poetry itself, above and beyond the context or community within which, and from which, the poet has emerged. Heaney’s poetry, as Richard Kearney has noted, embodies a tension apparent throughout modern Irish culture between “revivalism and modernism”, between “the pull of tradition” and a desire for artistic freedom.⁴⁷ Heaney has described this himself as “the central preoccupying

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kerrigan, “Earth writing: Heaney and Carson”, p. 157.

⁴⁷ Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988), p. 14.

questions: how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?"⁴⁸ By the time of the publication of *The Government of the Tongue* (1989), Heaney's focus would be on poetry as an independent form:

what I had in mind was this aspect of poetry as its own vindicating force. In this dispensation, the tongue (representing both a poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been granted the right to govern. The poetic art is credited with an authority of its own⁴⁹

Heaney reiterates this point later in this collection of essays:

I do not in fact see how poetry can survive as a category of human consciousness if it does not put poetic considerations first – expressive considerations, that is, based upon its own genetic/laws which spring into operation at the moment of lyric conception.⁵⁰

In a later essay, "The Redress of Poetry", Heaney has defended his adoption of the lyric voice arguing, in words taken from Wallace Stevens, for the "nobility of poetry" as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without".⁵¹ Heaney resists those who would "want poetry to be more than an imagined response to conditions in the world".⁵² It is not, in Heaney's opinion, that poetry does not have force or influence beyond the individual writer. Indeed, for him,

[t]he lyric stance is not an evasion of the actual conditions [...] The purely poetic force of the words is a guarantee of a commitment which need not apologise for not taking up cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating.⁵³

⁴⁸ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 92.

⁵⁰ Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 166.

⁵¹ Seamus Heaney, "The Redress of Poetry", *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³ Quoted in Christopher Penna, "Seamus Heaney", *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, Revised and Expanded Edition A-L, ed. by Robert Hogan (Editor-in-chief) (London: Aldwych Press, 1979, 1996), p. 537. Eugene O'Brien has suggested yet another development that encouraged Heaney in his increasing focus on the personal lyric voice. For O'Brien, this focus reflected the changing nature of Irish society itself in the 1980s, a decade characterised, as discussed in the previous

For Carson, however, the euphony and mythological allusions which characterise Heaney's lyrics seemed inappropriate to engage with the everyday life of Northern Ireland, particularly when writing at the height of the Troubles as both poets did in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, Carson's work reveals both a frustration with current poetic forms and a wish to find a poetics amenable to the social and political realities of life in Northern Ireland. As a traditional musician himself, it is not surprising to find that traditional music and song have influenced Carson in his quest for appropriate forms. His criticism of Heaney is indicative of the Belfast poet's frustrations with lyric poetry. Carson has criticised the Derry poet's mythologizing of violence in his collection *North* and the suggestion that, through Heaney's use of the motif of the bog, Northern Irish violence was somehow a natural and inevitable condition:⁵⁴

In 'Punishment' he seems to be offering his 'understanding' of the situation almost as a consolation [...] It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution. It is as if there never were and never will be any political consequences of such acts; they have been removed to the realm of sex, death and inevitability. So, when he writes 'Act of Union' Ireland's relationship with England is sentimentalized into something as natural as a good fuck – being something that always happened, everywhere, there is no longer any need to explain; it is like a mystery of the Catholic church, ritualized and mystified into a willing ignorance.⁵⁵

While Heaney left Northern Ireland in the early 1970s to spend much of his time in the Republic and abroad, Carson remained, working from 1977 to 1998 as Traditional Arts Officer with the Northern Ireland Arts Council. His poetry would reveal the often chaotic reality of day to day life in that region, sometimes filtered through pub conversations:

Bombing at about ninety miles an hour with the exhaust
Skittering

chapter, by considerable change, division and violence in Northern Ireland and growing uncertainty regarding what had previously been considered central tenets of Irishness. O'Brien posits that while "the twin pillars of a communal sense of Irishness – Republicanism and Catholicism – were in decline [...] Heaney's increased focus on the personal is a significant index of this situation" [O'Brien, *Seamus Heaney, Creating Irelands of the Mind*, p. 96].

⁵⁴ Ciaran Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?" *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975): 183-86.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

The skid-marked pitted tarmac of Kennedy Way, they hit the
 Ramp and sailed
 Clean over the red-and-white guillotine of the check-point
 And landed
 On the M1 flyover, then disappeared before the Brits knew
 what hit them. So
 The story went: we were in the Whip and Saddle bar of the
 Europa.

There was talk of someone who was shot nine times and lived
 And someone else
 Had the inside info. on the Romper Room. We were trying to
 Remember the facts
 Behind the Black & Decker case, when someone ordered
 Another drink and we entered
 The realm of jabberwocks and Angels' Wings, Widows
 Kisses, Corpse Revivers.⁵⁶

Carson's words, like the title of this poem "Cocktails", are loaded with (often literally) explosive potential. "Europa", for example, is a reference to one of the most bombed hotels in the world, while "The Romper Room" was the horrifying title the loyalist terrorist gang the Shankill Butchers gave to the room where their victims were tortured before being killed.

As Edna Longley observes "[b]esides being, as he says, 'of the Troubles', Ciaran Carson's poems function as elegies and replacements for the communal narratives that a seanchie could once command".⁵⁷ Indeed, it is the community as a whole that Carson attempts to incorporate into his poetry and their varied and often contrasting opinions and language, a practice evident in the poem "Dresden":

Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother
 Mule;
 Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody's guess. I
 stayed there once,
 Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that's another story.⁵⁸

It is this "speaking voice", as Alexander Ross Moore notes, "and its prioritisation in his work" which is crucial "to an appreciation of

⁵⁶ Carson, "Cocktails", *The Irish for No*, p. 41.

⁵⁷ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 59.

⁵⁸ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 11.

[Carson's] poetry".⁵⁹ Unlike Heaney's work, which is sometimes characterised by the silence of "the various traders, labourers and craftsmen who fill his first two books",⁶⁰ and more regular metres and precise and often euphonious lines, the lines of most of Carson's collections appear to obey few laws of metre or form, intending instead to accommodate the meanderings of thought and, frequently, of conversation.

Process in Traditional Music and the Poetry of Carson and Mac Lochlainn

There is uncertainty, instability and movement apparent throughout Ciaran Carson's poetry. His work presents a landscape continuously changing, becoming but never complete. For Carson, Belfast is a city in constant process, "a place which is in constant upheaval [undergoing] a constant remaking of itself".⁶¹ It is also a place he describes in his book on traditional music, *Last Night's Fun*, as "a piece of music",⁶² which seems appropriate given the centrality of process, as discussed earlier in this work, to traditional music itself. Indeed, as Ross Moore opines, Carson's involvement with the traditional music scene as a musician led him "to the viewpoint that tradition, rather than being a stagnant or conservative force, has instead the capacity for immediacy and flux".⁶³

Irish traditional music is constantly evolving, responding to the innovations and changes of performers and of the culture from which it has emerged. To Carson, as Edna Longley notes, it is a form that is "improvised in the present on a unique occasion yet transmitted down long, multiple, intricate chains from the past".⁶⁴ For Nicholas Carolan "as traditional culture changes, traditional music changes also, showing varying features at varying times".⁶⁵ In addition, Hammy Hamilton encourages us:

to remember [...] that in fact, like any living tradition, Irish traditional music was changing and evolving [...] (from the late 18th century to the

⁵⁹ Ross Moore, "'Everything is in the ways you say them': Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson", p. 1.

⁶⁰ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 20.

⁶¹ Shine-Thompson, "Interview with Ciaran Carson".

⁶² Carson, *Last Night's Fun*, p. 33.

⁶³ Ross Moore, "'Everything is in the ways you say them': Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson", p. 6.

⁶⁴ Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland*, p. 60.

⁶⁵ Carolan, "'What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics'".

present), and that the tendency to regard it as an unchanging monolith is not only simplistic but demonstrably wrong [...] The perception, popularly held, that traditional music is somehow a remnant of old Gaelic culture, and uncontaminated by later cultural domination [...] ignores the historical fact that Irish music as we see it today, is the result of a long series of innovations, the vast majority of which seem to be borrowings from the dominant English and European culture, rather than anything which had its origin, in either Gaelic, Scots Irish, or Anglo-Irish culture.⁶⁶

Equally, as a "tradition of popular music in which song and instrumental music is created and transmitted in performance and carried and preserved in the memory, a tradition which is essentially independent of writing and print",⁶⁷ it is also through process that traditional music has been, and continues to be, acquired and realised.

Process is also a central concern of Belfast poet and musician Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. His poem "Idircheol" ["Between Music"] examines the "between" place the poet feels he occupies, a space in which there are no certainties, a space constantly "in process":

Idirfhí na gcailíní
 Idir meascán is mearaí
 Idir dhá thine Bhealtaine
 San idirdhomhan idirdhorcha
 Idir Gaeilge is Béarla
 Is Idir dhá chomhairle
 Idir dhá bhruach
 Abhainn na filíochta
 Idir mise tusa is ruball na muice
 Agus an bacach *irlandais*
 Idir na poirt is na ríleanna [...] ⁶⁸

[Between the weaves of girls
 Between confusions
 Between two Bealtaine fires
 In the twilight in-between world
 Between Irish and English

⁶⁶ Hammy Hamilton, "Innovation, Conservatism, and the Aesthetics of Irish Traditional Music", *Crosbhealach an Cheoil – The Crossroads Conference, 1996: Tradition and Change in Irish Traditional Music*, ed. by Fintan Vallely, Hammy Hamilton, Eithne Vallely and Liz Doherty (Cork: Ossian Publications Ltd., 1999), p. 83.

⁶⁷ Carolan, "What Is Irish Traditional Music? Definition And Characteristics".

⁶⁸ Gearóid Mac Lochlainn and John B. Vallely, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, ed. by Kieran Gilmore (Bangor: Open House Traditional Arts Festival Ltd., 2004), p. 85.

And between two pieces of advice
 Between two banks
 River of poetry
 Between me, you and the tail of the pig
 And the Irish cripple
 Between the tunes and the reels [...]]

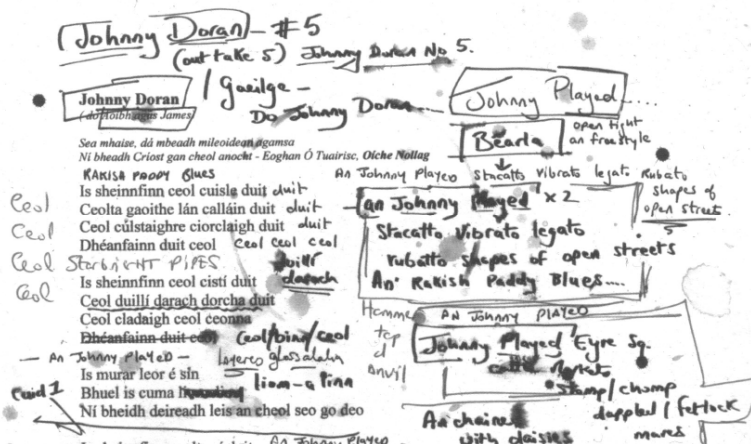
In order to allow as full an engagement as possible with his work, Mac Lochlainn's 2004 collection, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, actually incorporates drafts (including one of this poem) of earlier versions of work, and works in translation, as well as copies with additional handwritten notes suggesting possible additions in performance. Much as traditional music is process, not confined to the page, and only really appreciable in performance, Mac Lochlainn seeks a literary parallel by foregrounding process itself, allowing the reader a more intimate engagement with his work. The poem becomes almost a performance on the page such is the activity that surrounds the drafts. "Port an Phíobaire" ["The Piper's Tune"], for example, offers different possibilities to the reader; words are boxed for emphasis in performance (examples of which are included on the accompanying CD), and possible translations surround the text – indeed the texts also occasionally relate to other texts in the book connecting the poems to each other, much as traditional tunes are connected in sets, with motifs often appearing from one tune to another, forming a continuous chain of sound.

Rakish Paddy Blues is a collaboration (edited by Kieran Gilmore) between Mac Lochlainn and contemporary artist John B. Vallely, but is largely inspired by traditional music and particularly the music and life of the legendary piper from the Travelling community, Johnny Doran. Music and song have been formative influences on Mac Lochlainn's work. As well as being the author of three collections of poetry, he is also a musician with the Belfast reggae group *Bréag*. He has recalled, in interviews, a musical upbringing and remembers his grandmother playing the harmonica and singing until her death in her 80s while "everyone" on his "father's side of the family are still singers and crooners".⁶⁹ Indeed, for Mac Lochlainn "maybe the most important aspect of my background is that I was always exposed to songs and singers and music".⁷⁰ Frequently, he turns to music both for inspiration and to inform his approach to his art as a poet. While *Rakish Paddy Blues* is the most obvious example of this

⁶⁹ Rain Crowe, "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn".

⁷⁰ Ibid.

engagement, a glance through the titles in Mac Lochlainn's 2002 collection *Sruth Teangacha/Stream of Tongues* indicates the importance of music to his work: "Ríl i dTigh an Óil" ["Drink-House Reel"], "Feadóg Mhór" ["Flute"], "Amhrán Chrazy Horse" ["Crazy Horse Sings"] and "Caoineadh na hAislinge" ["Aisling/Lament"]. The accompanying CD also includes numerous musical performances in addition to Mac Lochlainn's reading of his poetry. These readings carry important characteristics associated with the performance of music. Mac Lochlainn has claimed to know his own work off by heart, a necessity for traditional musicians and singers performing pieces, and this is evident during his own performances.⁷¹ Each performance is different and often involves improvisation on the original poem. These improvisations are suggested in the "drafts" provided with *Rakish Paddy Blues* including the instance on the page facing his poem to the piper "Johnny Doran" (a detail from which is featured in Fig. 2 below), which includes extra handwritten words to be added for emphasis in performance:

Fig. 2⁷²

⁷¹ Folk-singer and historian John Moulden has noted that “[e]ven today among those, mainly highly literate, who sing [folk] songs for their recreation it is felt that the most authoritative performances are those where the song is located so naturally in the memory of the singer that there is no appearance of recall; the song emerging fresh and immediate as if the singer was re-living the events” [Moulden, “The Printed Ballad in Ireland”, p. 238].

⁷² Detail from “Johnny Doran” in Lochlainn and Vallely, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, p. 64. I am grateful to Gearóid and Kieran for their permission to include this detail.

Such foregrounding of the creative process itself reflects not just the centrality of music and performance to Mac Lochlainn's work but also his recognition of the importance of process to traditional music itself. In contrast, for Seamus Heaney, this music represents a point of stability and continuity, as reflected in his comments on piper Liam O'Flynn.

Seamus Heaney and Traditional Music

In 2003, Seamus Heaney recorded an album of readings and traditional tunes with uilleann-piper Liam O'Flynn. What began as occasional concerts from the mid 1990s onwards in the UK, the US and Ireland,⁷³ eventually resulted in the recording of the album *The Poet and the Piper*. The album takes the listener through from Heaney's earliest collections to work from the 1996 volume *The Spirit Level*. The choices themselves 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 and the Piper*, "The Given Note", provided the title for one of O'Flynn's albums, for which Heaney contributed some words among the sleeve notes. Heaney describes O'Flynn as "unshakably part of a tradition",⁷⁴ 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 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, including 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

⁷³ 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>, (accessed December 18, 2005).

⁷⁴ Seamus Heaney, sleeve note to *The Given Note*, CD by Liam O'Flynn (Dublin: Tara Music Company Ltd., 1995).

poetry and music, exists to promote in the first place".⁷⁵ 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".⁷⁶ 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:

When they said *Carrickfergus* I could hear
the frosty echo of saltminers' picks.
I imagined it, chambered and glinting,
a township built of light.

What do we say anymore
to conjure the salt of our earth?
So much comes and is gone
that should be crystal and kept [...]

So I say to myself *Gweebarra*
and its music hits off the place
like water hitting off granite.
I see the glittering sound

framed in your window,
knives and forks set on oilcloth,
and the seal's heads, suddenly outlined,
scanning everything.

People here used to believe
that drowned souls lived in the seals.
At spring tides they might change shape.
They love music and swan in for a singer

who might stand at the end of summer
in the mouth of a whitewashed turf-shed,
his shoulder to the jamb, his song
a rowboat far out in evening.

When I came here first you were always singing,
a hint of the clip of the pick
in your winnowing climb and attack.

⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, "The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker", *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. xi.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear.⁷⁷

There is a suggestion in these final two verses 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 the singer's song is a rowboat far out in the 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 verse to the "saltminers picks" of the opening verse (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 the fading traditional belief in the Selkie, 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".

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".⁷⁸ 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'".⁷⁹

"The Singer's House" is followed by Heaney's most direct poem to a traditional musician, "In Memoriam Sean 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

⁷⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Fieldwork* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 27.

⁷⁸ Henry Hart, "What is Heaney Seeing in *Seeing Things*?" *Colby Quarterly* 30.1 (March 1994): 33.

⁷⁹ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 144.

Who marched along the deep [...] ⁸⁰

Catherine Byron has also detected resonances of the *aisling* in Section VI of Heaney's *Station Island* (1984), though she is critical of his feminisation of place and failure to indicate the dark undertones within this tradition:

out here, on the cleared circles, the *genius* of the place materialises for him, and she is unmistakably female – 'girl-child, fairy, play-wife from 'mothers and fathers'. 'Freckle-face, fox-headed, pod of the broom', she arrives as mysteriously as the *aisling* of Ireland's eighteenth century dream-vision poetry, but without the haunting distress that hovers ever over Ó Rathaille's loveliest 'Gile na gile' – 'Brightness of brightness I beheld on the way...' Heaney's 'she' brings affirmation, not distress: the rooted assurance of a land that is not in subjection, and the promise of fertility, of harvest. ⁸¹

Interestingly, Heaney has included his translation of "Gile na gile" (a poem that laments Ireland's oppression by England and anticipates the revival of Gaelic Ireland) in *The Poet and the Piper*. In the context of the album as a whole and with regard to Heaney's poetry generally during the Troubles, there is, as Clair Wills has noted of Heaney's use of the word "Toome" in "The Toome Road", a failure to place the poem "in a significant relation to the present. The problem with the poem is that both word and [Heaney's discovery of his buried history] become museum pieces, mere curiosities to be visited and contemplated in isolation". ⁸²

Nonetheless, Heaney has described poetry as 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 in the mid-1970s, which had to be "urgently renewed". ⁸³ This process is continued 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, ⁸⁴ the legendary leader of Ireland's

⁸⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 30.

⁸¹ Catherine Byron, *Out of Step: Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory* (Bristol: Loxwood Stoneleigh, 1992), p.122.

⁸² Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*, p. 101.

⁸³ Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 60.

⁸⁴ See James Stephens, "The Boyhood of Fionn", Chapter VIII, *Irish Fairy Tales* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1920), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/ift/ift02.htm>, (accessed December 10, 2005).

ancient military force, the Fianna. With the inclusion of this line, Heaney connects the present to the past through a reference to music:

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
Between the by-road and the main road
Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
Stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.⁸⁵

Heaney's work reveals a sustained engagement with Gaelic texts including *Buile Shuibhne* in the 1983 translation *Sweeney Astray*, a character that would return in the "Sweeney Redivivus" section of *Station Island* (1984). Heaney's adoption of Sweeney as a recurring motif in his work in these years reflected the continuing movement in his poetry from a concern with place and his own community 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 their hosting
and fasting, the levies from Scotland
as always, and the people of art
diverting their rhythmical chants

to fend off the onslaught of winds
I would welcome and climb
At the top of my bent.⁸⁶

Heaney's use of Gaelic texts as a means of transcending the present 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

⁸⁵ Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, p. 127.

⁸⁶ Seamus Heaney, "The First Flight", *New Selected Poems*, p. 197.

apparent in the work of Carson (above) and Patricia Coughlan,⁸⁷ 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".⁸⁸ Such a process is also evident in Heaney's allusions to traditional music. An examination of those poems which refer to traditional music reveals the mystification that Lloyd criticised, 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. As noted in Chapter Two, both acquired increasingly political undertones as the colonial project developed in Ireland. Gearóid Mac Lochlainn has articulated the subversive potential of music and song in *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, omens of great white whales,
and the birth pangs of nations.⁸⁹

Music and song had an inspiring role in both nationalist and unionist traditions in Ireland, a fact recognised in the past by the colonial administration, resulting in the oppression of musicians. Indeed, as Mac Lochlainn notes elsewhere in *Rakish Paddy Blues*,

Pipers and harpers in particular had been hunted to the point of extinction in the previous centuries [...] Many had been hung, drawn and quartered, transported and deported, beheaded and butchered, so that playing a tune at all in these times was still risky business and the occupation offered little reward.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. by Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 81-111.

⁸⁸ Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p. 17.

⁸⁹ Mac Lochlainn and Valley, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, p. 34.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Heaney is very aware of this history, as indicated by his reference to Seán Ó Riada in the poem, “In Memoriam Seán Ó Riada”, as “our jacobite” thereby recalling poets such as Ó Rathaille who articulated a politically engaged voice. 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”.⁹¹

Heaney’s references to this tradition itself give only occasional hints of its subversive potential. Indeed, more often than not, traditional music and song are portrayed as mystical and almost otherworldly in Heaney’s work, idealised, romanticised 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”.⁹² 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’”.⁹³

The title of the album Heaney refers to is *The Given Note*, a title taken from Heaney’s poem of the same name. As noted already, this poem is the opening track on *The Poet and the Piper*. I have previously referred to the movement apparent in Heaney’s work which he has described himself as a shift from “burrowing inwards” to pitching “the voice out”,⁹⁴ apparent from *Field Work* onwards. The movement is indicated “in one of Heaney’s favourite tropes, the allegorical victory of the ‘sky-born’ Hercules over the

⁹¹ Heaney, *Fieldwork*, p.30.

⁹² These remarks are included on the Tara music website at <http://www.taramusic.com/biogs/liamobg.htm> (accessed December 18, 2005). This observation reflects a singular understanding of process as it relates to traditional music (particularly when compared to the discussion above regarding process in Mac Lochlainn’s and Carson’s work) in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Heaney’s focus is a personal engagement with process, whereas for Carson and Mac Lochlainn it is a communal practice.

⁹³ Seamus Heaney, Sleeve note to *The Given Note*, CD by Liam O’Flynn (Dublin: Tara Music Company Ltd., 1995).

⁹⁴ James Randall, “An Interview with Seamus Heaney”, *Ploughshares* 5.3 (1979): 21.

native, earth grubbing Antaeus".⁹⁵ However what Seamus Deane has described as the "visions of air"⁹⁶ are apparent as early as "The Given Note", a poem included originally in *Door into the Dark* (1969), where 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".⁹⁷

There is little sense here, however, of the communal activity associated historically with traditional music. Neither is there a sense of its role historically in articulating the voice of an oppressed people. If the music comes apparently out of thin air, one need not concern oneself with its relevance to people for whom traditional music was forbidden and suppressed. It is the subversive potential that music and poetry might offer that Heaney suppresses in *The Poet and the Piper*. This suppression is apparent in the album's second track, the poem "Digging", "the first poem" according to Heaney, "I wrote where I thought my feelings had got into words".⁹⁸ 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 [...]

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

⁹⁵ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 142. Seamus Heaney, "Hercules and Antaeus", *New Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 76

⁹⁶ Seamus Deane, "Powers of Earth and Visions of Air", *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 March 1990, pp. 275-276.

⁹⁷ It was Seán Ó Riada who introduced Heaney to the tune that inspired this poem, "Port na bPúcaí" ["Music of the Spirits"], a tune that is also the subject of the poem "Na Murúcha agus an Ceol" ["The Mermaids and the Music"] by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. 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". [Ciarán MacMathúna, "The Given Note", *Mo Cheol Thú*, RTÉ Radio 1, 27th November 2005. Heaney read a version of "The Given Note" on this programme to the accompaniment of "Port na bPúcaí" played by the traditional fiddler Paddy Glackin.]

⁹⁸ Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words", *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 41.

Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.
 Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.⁹⁹

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".¹⁰⁰ However, whatever subversive potential the opening lines intimate, is deflected in the poem's closing: "The squat pen rests/I'll dig with it".¹⁰¹

Finding Community in the Poetry of Carson and Mac Lochlainn

The criticism in the preceding section of Seamus Heaney's failure to engage either the subversive potential or the political resonance of traditional music has also been made of Ciaran Carson's writings. Both Denis Donoghue and John Banville have questioned why the politics associated with traditional music were not mentioned in Carson's books on the topic with Banville remarking that *Last Night's Fun* was too much concerned with "The Happy Days of Youth", and gave little indication that some "admirers of Irish traditional music hold political views that would frighten Gerry Adams in their ferocity".¹⁰² Such criticisms, however, fail to recognise the manner in which Carson is unwilling to simplistically resolve the political intricacies of Northern Ireland through the type of mythological metaphors apparent in Heaney's work, preferring instead to subvert what Edna Longley has described as the "obvious politics"¹⁰³ of nationalism and unionism, in favour of a focus on the local communities he is familiar with, with all their complexities and contradictions.

⁹⁹ Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 27.

¹⁰¹ See Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p. 21.

¹⁰² John Banville, "Hear my Song", *The Observer*, 5th May, 1996, p. 15. Also see Denis Donoghue, "The Gunman", *London Review of Books*, 27th November, 1997, p. 24.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Ross Moore, "'Everything is in the ways you say them': Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson", pp. 20-21.

Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn share with Heaney, nonetheless, a belief in the role of traditional music in connecting the contemporary moment with the past, remaining "true to a form shaped by tradition while including the spontaneity and uniqueness of the present moment".¹⁰⁴ However, unlike Heaney's focus on the personal lyric voice, it is the community which is a central concern of the work of Carson and Mac Lochlainn. Carson has responded to criticism of his work as "mere pub-talk" by remarking that if "that's the case, I'm very happy with the comparison. Any poetry which confines itself to the merely literary is half-dead. And I enjoy pubs a lot more than poetry readings".¹⁰⁵ It is the community Carson feels in these moments of connection as a musician that seems for him sadly lacking from the literary work. Carson's remarks also indicate the responsibility the poet feels to reflect the natural voice and tones of this community, producing a distinctive work faithful to the people who inspired it.

Mac Lochlainn has also stressed that poetry was "rud a rinne tú don phobal, rud a rinne tú ag labhairt amach ar son daoine nach raibh ábalta labhairt amach – thug tú glór daoibhe"¹⁰⁶ ["something you did for the community, something you did for people that couldn't speak out, you gave them a voice"].¹⁰⁷ *Rakish Paddy Blues*, for example, includes extracts from the memories of Travellers that recall the suffering endured by this group and their discrimination by both the Northern and Southern states in Ireland. His poems are inclusive, bringing Travellers, the forgotten and discriminated, in from the cold and asserting their right to be part of Ireland.¹⁰⁸ In the poem "Blessed", which draws on the ancient and the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰⁵ Rand Brandes, "Ciaran Carson", *Irish Review* 8 (Spring 1990): 89.

¹⁰⁶ Quotations from Mac Lochlainn in this chapter (unless otherwise stated) are translations of comments made during an interview conducted by Louis de Paor with Mac Lochlainn for the Centre for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, Tuesday, November 12, 2002. The translations are by the present author.

¹⁰⁷ Mac Lochlainn's position is in contrast to that of an earlier poet from Northern Ireland, Louis MacNeice, who argued that "[t]he poet is a maker, not a retail trader. The writer today should be not so much the mouthpiece of a community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct". Louis MacNeice, "Preface", *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), quoted in Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 39.

¹⁰⁸ A comparable sensibility is found in Carson's work which, as Alexander Ross Moore notes, "is truly demotic (and democratic)" encompassing "misfits and lone-drinkers, their stories and versions of events" [Ross Moore, "Everything is in the

modern by alluding to both Aimhirgain and Pádraic Pearse, Mac Lochlainn also finds space for the reader to engage with his creative process in the annotated version (similar to the example above for the poem “Johnny Doran”) which includes handwritten pointers for the poem’s performance:

Blessed Mother, I am Ireland too
 Blessed 32 counties of traditional trade routes
 An Ireland of traps, tin cans, milk pails, crucifixion nails an’ holy relics [...]
 An’ my name is...
 torn between every type of stereotype
 tied tight in a bag on the river
 an’ to tide you over an’ for good measure
 let me tell a tall tale Others...

I am from Wexford, Tipperary, Mayo, West-Meath
 Donegal, Cork, Clare, Belfast
 and everywhere you’ve never been
 in a horse drawn barrel topped wagon [...] ¹⁰⁹

Born and bred in Belfast, the turbulent events of the past forty years and his continued uneasiness with the political situation in the North of Ireland are common themes in Mac Lochlainn’s poetry. In poems such as “Na Scéalaithe” [“The Storytellers”] and “Teacht i Méadaíocht” [“Rite of Passage”], we get a sense of the responsibility Mac Lochlainn feels to communicate with, and for, the nationalist community in the North. In “Na Scéalaithe” this includes finding his heroes as a child among the nationalist community, rather than just “Kung Fu Cain” experienced “os comhair doras draíochta na teilifíse” [“before the magic portal of the TV” (Trans. Ciaran Carson)], and writing these nationalist heroes out in verse:

Níos moille
 Fuair muid laochra níos cóngaraí don bhaile,
 Muid ag malartú
 Suaitheantas dubh is bán
 Le haghaidheanna doiléire na stailceoirí ocrais orthu.
 Chuir muid de ghlanmheabhair ár dtáblaí iarscoile –

Bobby Sands, May 5, 66 days
Francis Hughes, May 12, 61 days

ways you say them’: Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson”, p. 36].

¹⁰⁹ Mac Lochlainn and Vallely, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, p. 55.

Raymond McCreesh, May 19, 61 days ...

[Before long
we found more down home heroes.
We swapped black and white badges
Xeroxed with the stark faces
of the men on hunger strike.
We'd recite them like our times tables:

Bobby Sands, May 5, 66 days

Francis Hughes, May 12, 61 days

*Raymond McCreesh, May 19, 61 days ... (Trans. Ciaran Carson)]*¹¹⁰

Performance is an important means through which Mac Lochlainn communicates with his community. He has established a considerable reputation as a "performance poet", performances which he has suggested have been influenced by traditional music as well as Ireland's ancient literature, particularly that of the bardic period. "They had performance skills", he has remarked, and "music was mixed with the poetry [...] and an oral tradition existed which has been somewhat lost today". He is critical of contemporary poets for merely reading poetry from a book neglecting the "many other skills" that are part of poetry, including performance skills such as the use of body language and the manipulation of voice rhythms and intonation. He believes such skills still survive today in the song tradition, "in songs such as the *lúibíní*" and in the *sean-nós* tradition, a tradition he describes as being "transmitted and passed on orally. This Irish tradition still defies to be text-bound and still lives only in performance or person-to-person sharing".¹¹¹

In common with Ó Searcaigh and indeed with Irish poets generally, Mac Lochlainn is subject to a diverse and eclectic range of influences, from Jamaican Reggae, to jazz, blues, hip-hop and rap. While some are alluded to in his poetry ("Mo Chara is na Blues" ["My friend and the Blues"] and "Belfast Blues" in *Sruth Teangacha* for example) and commentary,¹¹² others come through in the performance of his work on the CDs that accompany his collections. As Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has remarked "[y]ou can't read [Mac Lochlainn's] poetry without hearing the

¹¹⁰ Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, *Sruth Teangacha, Stream of Tongues* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), p. 34-35. Italics in original.

¹¹¹ Rain Crowe, "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn".

¹¹² Mac Lochlainn, "Author's Notes", *Sruth Teangacha, Stream of Tongues*, pp. 187-191.

CD as well, it's all about mixes. It's a new generation, and hip-hop is a perfectly acceptable art-form".¹¹³

Indeed, these foreign influences are arguably more significant in his work, despite Mac Lochlainn's suggestion that contemporary *sean-nós* singing has been a major influence, containing what he describes as "some of this country's most beautiful poetry".¹¹⁴ Yet such an assertion is significant as it indicates Mac Lochlainn's concern to influence readings of his poetry, thereby connecting his contemporary work with an older Irish tradition.

Ciaran Carson has also emphasised the importance of human interaction, especially in the traditional Irish music and song sessions in which he has participated as a musician, to the form of his poetry, particularly since his 1987 collection *The Irish for No*. While he published his first collection of poetry, *The New Estate*, in 1976, it would be eleven years before his second collection, *The Irish for No*, appeared. Carson spent the intervening years collecting Irish stories, songs and tunes in the rural areas and backrooms of pubs across the North and developing his art as a musician while working as Traditional Arts Officer with The Northern Ireland Arts Council. He has admitted to being disillusioned with poetry in the years before the publication of *The Irish for No* because it lacked "the urgency of traditional music".¹¹⁵ Indeed, during this period he wrote a short introduction to Irish traditional music¹¹⁶ and in an interview in 1991 remarked that this book "was a kind of blue print for the shape and structure of *The Irish for No*".¹¹⁷ He has given an account of this period in an interview describing "the ethos" of that "whole area of music in rural areas, the stuff that happened in [these] back rooms" as "very much about talk, conversation and the craic that went around the music".¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Liam Carson, "The Fortnight Interview: Dark but funny and transformative", *Fortnight Magazine* 428 (September 2004), <http://www.fortnight.org/carson428.html>, (accessed December 5, 2005).

¹¹⁴ Rain Crowe, "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn".

¹¹⁵ Frank Ormsby, "Interview with Ciaran Carson", *Linen Hall Review* 8.1 (April 1991): 7.

¹¹⁶ Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree, 1985 [reprint 1999]).

¹¹⁷ Frank Ormsby, "Interview with Ciaran Carson", p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*, Programme on Ciaran Carson [including interview] from May 16 2001, <http://www.rnw.nl/culture/html/carson010514.html>, (accessed April 15, 2003).

I do feel that because of [what] that environment of the back room seemed to give you, [it] seemed to offer a world in which art was happening right now, that it was of the split second, of the here and now, of the conversation as you spoke, as you played without putting it forward as a thing on the page which was to be excluded from the world of now and to be mulled over and read on one's own; that sense of art seemed to me to be somehow too aesthetic an idea about the world.¹¹⁹

Craic occurs, according to Henry Glassie "when wit snaps dialogue forward [...] pulsing chat through 'turns,' surprising shifts clearly tied to the group's topic but leading adventuresomely and interestingly into new areas, into engagement and excitement".¹²⁰ Not merely "chat", craic also "broaches genres, spawning music and song, poems and stories, other performances of pleasure that may defy definition".¹²¹ Glassie found a close association among the people of another Ulster community in Ballymenone between their song and poetry. Indeed, for the people he writes of, poetry is but a step on a ladder that leads inevitably to song, the central cultural and entertainment act in the community.¹²² In the social setting of the local "public house", Glassie notes "[w]hen the crowd surges toward unity and orients towards art, its beauty [...] is formed in song and music".¹²³

Through Carson's experiences of traditional sessions he too came to appreciate the centrality of this interaction among musicians, and between musicians and audiences, to the understanding of music itself. In *Last Night's Fun*, for example, he has noted how each session is a new opportunity for communication, where tunes can themselves become "a conversation piece"¹²⁴ while he has elsewhere described the experience of the music as "an ongoing rambling conversation".¹²⁵

When Carson returned to writing in the mid 1980s, he tried to recapture in his poetry some of the spirit of those occasions, and performances, in public houses, to explore "the possibility of getting some orality into the poetry".¹²⁶ This exploration led him to create work that

¹¹⁹ Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*.

¹²⁰ Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and history of An Ulster Community*, p. 36.

¹²¹ Guinn Batten, "Ciaran Carson's Parturient Partition: the 'Crack' in MacNeice's 'More Than Glass'", *Southern Review* 31 (Summer 1995): 537.

¹²² Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, p. 77.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹²⁴ Carson, *Last Night's Fun*, p. 90.

¹²⁵ Ormsby, "Interview with Ciaran Carson", p. 7.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

would “veer between poetry and prose maybe, veer between music and haphazardness, between conversation and form”,¹²⁷ reflected partly in the distinctive long lines that characterized Carson’s poetry until his 2003 collection *Breaking News*,¹²⁸ lines that would enable him to “reinstate speech into poetry” and “facilitate the use of traditional music, balladry, and story-telling techniques”.¹²⁹ This process produces impressive soundscapes throughout Carson’s work, often featuring conversation and music as well as song. These songs further indicate Carson’s own engagement with an older tradition of composition. The poem “Judgement”, for example, while written in a conversational and colloquial style, combines the telling of a story, and descriptions of storytelling, with lines from “Rody McCorley”, an early nineteenth-century street ballad¹³⁰ commemorating a rebel in County Antrim during the 1798 Rising who was eventually captured and hung in the town of Toomebridge:

He rambled on a bit - how this Flynn’s people on his mother’s
side
Were McErleans from county Derry, how you could never
trust
A McErlean. When they hanged young McCorley on the
bridge of Toome
It was a McErlean who set the whole thing up. That was in ’98,
But some things never changed. You could trust a dog but not
a cat.

¹²⁷ Radio Netherlands, *Aural Tapestry*.

¹²⁸ While Carson’s long lines are attributed below partly to the influence of American poet C.K. Williams, the much shorter lines of *Breaking News* recall the work of William Carlos Williams, an influence that is apparent throughout this collection, most explicitly in the poem “The Forgotten City” which takes its title from Williams’s composition of the same name. See the review of *Breaking News*, “Forgotten Cities” by Peter Manson in *Poetry Review* 93.2 (Summer 2003): 85-89, for a discussion of William Carlos Williams’s influence on this collection.

¹²⁹ Ross Moore, “‘Everything is in the ways you say them’: Tradition and Locality in the Works of Ciaran Carson”, p. 32.

¹³⁰ There is a better known version of this song today called “Roddy McCorley” (with two “ds”) written by Ethna Carberry for the centenary celebrations of the 1798 Rising. Carson quotes from the much older version dating from the turn of the nineteenth century. [This information is included with the sleeve notes to the album *The Croppy’s Complaint: Music & Songs of 1798*, Craft Recordings, CRCD03, <http://www.iol.ie/~terrym/1798.htm#track12>, (accessed August 26, 2005)]. McCorley was executed on the 28th of February 1800 [*Belfast Newsletter*, Tuesday, March 4th, 1800, p. 3].

It was something in their nature, and nature, as they say, will
out.
The pot would always call the kettle black. He hummed a few
lines.

*Come tender-hearted Christians all attention pay to me
Till I relate and communicate these verses two or three
Concerning of a gallant youth was cut off in his bloom
And died upon the gallows tree near to the town of Toome.*¹³¹

Songs are featured throughout Carson's poetry, most obviously in the collection *The Twelfth of Never* which includes many references to folk and popular songs, ballads and traditional tunes. While the poems appear ostensibly in sonnet form, utilising the alexandrine line Carson exploited in the previous volume *The Alexandrine Plan* (a collection of translations from Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud), he has remarked that while

The twelve – sometimes fourteen – syllables of the line were initially based on the French alexandrine [...] it seems to me that its cadences are not that far off Irish ballad metre. And the sonnet form itself offers anecdotal, ballad-like possibilities. Writing these poems was partly a homage to the tradition of ballads in Ireland. I'll count myself lucky if a few of them are half as memorable.¹³²

Carson has emphasised his awareness of the origins of the sonnet form as song and his wish that the sonnet might be an Irish song in his poetry.¹³³ Indeed, in one interview he sang a version of the sonnet "1798" included in *The Twelfth of Never*.¹³⁴

Mac Lochlainn has also adapted the rhythms and metre of a popular form of Gaelic poetry in the eighteenth century to describe traditional music in the poem "Piper Astray". This poem is subtitled "*Ochtfhoclach bec to the tune of Preab san Ól*" and is written according to the form of this poetry – "consisting of four quatrains, each comprised of three phrases

¹³¹ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 18.

¹³² Ciaran Carson, "The Poet Ciaran Carson writes on the power of the anonymous authors of folksongs", *Waterstone's Guide to Irish Books*, ed. by Cormac Kinsella (Brentford: Waterstone's Booksellers Ltd., 1998), p. 262.

¹³³ Shine-Thompson, "Interview with Ciaran Carson".

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

of five syllables and one of four syllables”¹³⁵ - which became popular in Gaelic poetry after 1700.¹³⁶

Old Bitch Béal Feirste called for a piper
 Along lank Lagan, lulled by the flow
 But he was gargled, wrung out and rambled
 His mangle scrambled by bush and blow.¹³⁷

The use and allusion to song and music in the work of both poets also reflects an engagement with audience. “Songs”, Carson has noted, “demand a context of being sung, of having listeners and other singers around you [...] Songs are nothing if there is no audience”.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Carson’s poetry reveals how it is the audience, and the performative act which reading involves, that often determines meaning in the text. Referring to Carson’s use of a quote from a book on renaissance towns to describe an aspect of Belfast city in his autobiographical prose text *The Star Factory*, Fiona Stafford argues that,

it demonstrates not only that things apparently unrelated can nevertheless be found swarming with significance, but also that reading is itself an active, creative process, capable of furnishing material for new texts. Just as the urban landscape is in a state of perpetual flux, so the stories that make up the ‘fractious epic’ are constantly being remade as listeners and readers turn into new story-tellers.¹³⁹

Stafford engages in her own virtuoso performance in offering numerous interpretations of Carson’s poem, “The Irish for No”, that uncover many allusions and layers to the work, offering readers lots of points through which to enter the text. Carson’s poetry emphasises over and over again the provisionality and subjectiveness of meaning particularly within a contested landscape such as Northern Ireland. “The Irish for No”, for example, features a debate about “whether yes is no”,¹⁴⁰ and offers no naive commentary on the Troubles but rather a sometimes

¹³⁵ Julie Henigan, “For Want of Education: The Origins of the Hedge Schoolmaster Songs”, *Ulster Folklife* 40 (1994): 34.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* Henigan has also suggested that this form had a considerable influence on verse in English in Ireland from the eighteenth century onwards.

¹³⁷ Mac Lochlainn and Vallely, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, p. 29.

¹³⁸ Carson, *Last Night’s Fun*, p. 161.

¹³⁹ Fiona Stafford, “The Irish for No”, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish and English Poetry: From Burns to Heaney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 272.

¹⁴⁰ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 50.

disorientating series of allusions and images that suggest the uncertainty that marked the period in which the poem was written. Within the collection of the same name even "the independent eye of the chameleon" in the poem "Serial", "sees blue as green".¹⁴¹ In "Hairline Crack", from *Belfast Confetti*, the narrator tells us that "[i]t could have been or might have been. Everything Provisional/[...] The right hand wouldn't even know it was the right hand; some/would claim it/As the left".¹⁴² The sequence, "Letters from the Alphabet", from *Opera Et Cetera*, explores this theme through looking at different interpretations of letters and words. Where the narrator's daughter, in the poem "Q" sees this letter as part of the picture of either a cat or a bat,¹⁴³ the poet/persona tells us in the poem "H" that "the prison that we call Long Kesh/is to the Powers-that-Be The Maze".¹⁴⁴ As Elizabeth Delattre has noted of the collection, *The Irish for No*, as a whole,

language is itself unreliable and words are changeable, just as the map of Belfast is obsolete the moment it has been drawn. This poetic uncertainty is reflected in the very texture of the lines, in the act of reading itself which can be seen as a semiotic circularity.¹⁴⁵

It is this circularity that brings us back to traditional music, an important influence on Carson's work, and to Seán Ó Riada, the central figure in this music's revival in the twentieth century.

Traditional Music and Form in Carson and Mac Lochlainn's Poetry

As noted in Chapter Three, Seán Ó Riada has described Irish art, including traditional music, as "essentially a cyclic form".¹⁴⁶ Frequently in Carson's work, there is a similar sense of returning, a sense of a circular

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 53.

¹⁴² Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 50.

¹⁴³ Carson, *Opera Et Cetera*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Delattre, "'A fusillade of question marks': (re)presenting the present or the poet as a chronicler in *The Irish for No* by Ciaran Carson", Paper presented at the annual conference of the *International Association of Studies of Irish Literatures*: "Writing Ireland - Past, Present, Future", National University of Ireland, Galway, Thursday, July 22nd 2004. I am grateful to Dr. Delattre for passing on a copy of her paper to me after her presentation at the conference.

¹⁴⁶ Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, p. 21.

motion that often brings readers back almost to the point from which they began, or where beginnings are but a returning to, or remembering of, points previously left. *The Irish for No*, for example, features several repetitions of terms from one section to another while the circularity is further suggested by lines such as “tinkling in its endless loop”,¹⁴⁷ and “the loops and spirals of an Irish dancing costume”.¹⁴⁸ Equally, poems in this and subsequent collections end with lines such as “Let me begin again”,¹⁴⁹ “This is not the End”,¹⁵⁰ or “the end is never nigh”,¹⁵¹ and begin with “a feeling I’d been there before”,¹⁵² “Back again”,¹⁵³ or “At last, I remember”.¹⁵⁴ Themes and motifs from earlier poems are often returned to in later work, while a poem from a previous collection, “Belfast Confetti”, reappears as the title of the subsequent collection. Indeed, this collection, *Belfast Confetti*, as Christina Hunt Mahony notes, is,

characterized by reiteration or echoing. This technique might involve a recurring image, like that of confetti, found literally or figuratively, and often in unlikely places, or it might simply take the form of a repeated word.¹⁵⁵

Carson has himself commented on this aspect of his work: “there’s a lot of recurrence in *Confetti*: the idea behind its structure is like a hall of mirrors, in which all the poems are versions of each other. It goes round in circles. And if that’s deliberate, it seems to reflect real life”.¹⁵⁶ As Shane Murphy contends “Carson’s poetry insists on repetition and circularity within the ‘narrow ground’ of Ulster geography and history”.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁷ Carson, “Calvin Klein’s obsession”, *The Irish for No*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ Carson, “Serial”, *The Irish for No*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁹ Carson, “Fear”, *The Twelfth of Never*, (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1998), p. 65.

¹⁵⁰ Carson, “Army”, *The Irish for No*, p. 38.

¹⁵¹ Carson, “Mountain Dew”, *The Twelfth of Never*, p. 42.

¹⁵² Carson, “Serial”, *The Irish for No*, p. 51.

¹⁵³ Carson, “Slate Street School”, *The Irish for No*, p. 46.

¹⁵⁴ Carson, “Zulu”, *Opera Et Cetera*, p. 92.

¹⁵⁵ Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1998), p. 83.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Sarbin, “Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry”, p. 148.

¹⁵⁷ Shane Murphy, “Sonnets, Centos, and Long Lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson”, *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 204.

One such poem is "Asylum" from his collection *The Irish for No*. This poem takes the reader from the poet/persona's Uncle John's apparent mental illness in the first verse to the onset of a similar illness with his Uncle Pat in the fourth. As the narrator tells us "it does repeat itself" and this repetition is evident in the apparent recurrence of the day that begins the poem:

[...] as he lifted off the white cloud of
his cap, it sparked off
The authoritative onset of this other, needle-in-the-haystack
day that I
Began with.¹⁵⁸

This extract includes a further characteristic of Carson's poetry which he has suggested was influenced by traditional Irish music: his distinctive use of enjambment. This is part of Carson's unique voice and style (apparent in "Asylum", "Judgement", "Hamlet" and other poems quoted in this chapter) that leads the reader on with its conversational tone, before pulling him up with surprising twists and turns in the tale. Carson has spoken of what he considers the "connection between the procedures of [Irish traditional] music and those of the poetry",¹⁵⁹ and in the following remarks, the poet indicates the alleged source of some of the distinguishing characteristics of his work:

The skill in traditional music is how you move from the end of one unit to the next - the beat may be withheld, or extended [...] It's all got to do with creating suspense, or little surprises within a form which is very fixed and traditional. So in the poetry, the line-breaks are important: they're meant to draw the reader on, or pull him up short. Often, they're a joke, and traditional music is full of humour too. The line is supposed to upset your expectations [...] but the talky voice is simultaneously lulling you into security. So, in traditional music, it's a beautiful thing when you hear a tune you think you know backwards, and someone gives it a wee personal twist, and it becomes something new and freshly-minted. I'd like to do that in my poems. If the poems have any virtue, I hope it's that kind of humour¹⁶⁰

The collection from which "Asylum" is taken, *The Irish for No*, is dedicated to storyteller John Campbell of Mullaghbawn, whose

¹⁵⁸ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁹ Brandes, "Ciaran Carson", p. 82.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

storytelling, according to the acknowledgements in the book, “suggested some of the narrative procedures of some of these poems”.¹⁶¹ Neil Corcoran has described *The Irish for No* as “playing the oral against the literary”, arguing that

the long lines of his poems have something of the sustained, improvisatory panache of the Irish storyteller or seanchaí, always aping the movement of the speaking voice in self-involved but audience-aware address, repetitive, self-corrective, elliptical¹⁶²

Seán Lucy has argued that the Irish have “the aesthetic sensibility of an oral tradition”, enjoying the way things are said. In Irish or in English, they compose, Lucy claims, “in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome”, borrowing Ezra Pound’s famous expression.¹⁶³ Ciaran Carson has himself admitted that while he writes in English “the ghost of Irish hovers behind it”.¹⁶⁴ The Irish language, for Lucy, is musically organised:

Typical forms of Hiberno-English have a nature that derives directly from [...] accented Gaelic mouth-music. The ‘musical phrases’ are made up of a number of well-defined stresses linked by well controlled ‘runs’ of unaccented syllables.¹⁶⁵

The first powerful and formative influence of Irish on verse in English, according to Lucy, was that of Gaelic song and music at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁶⁶ Lucy argues that it was in the writings of Thomas Moore (a writer whom Carson has referred to on a number of occasions in

¹⁶¹ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 6.

¹⁶² Neil Corcoran, “‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Back’: Ciaran Carson’s *The Irish for No*”, *The Chosen Ground*, ed. by Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), p. 217.

¹⁶³ Seán Lucy, “Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse”, *Irish University Review*, 8.2 (1978): 159. Lucy’s study develops previous work in this area by Thomas MacDonagh [*Literature in Ireland* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1916)] and Patrick C. Power [*The Story of Anglo-Irish Poetry, 1800-1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967)].

¹⁶⁴ Ciaran Carson, “The Other”, *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 235.

¹⁶⁵ Lucy, “Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse”, p. 159.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

his work including "Dresden" which opens *The Irish for No*¹⁶⁷), that the force of the Gaelic metric was first felt. When Moore began to write, the dominant foot in English from Chaucer on had been the iambic. The trisyllabic foot was confined primarily to songs. With the onset of the Romantic age, and a "preoccupation with the past, with the nation, and with the countryside, including its speech and music", this "brought under the eyes of the new writers rhythms of poetry, song and ballad which were to give the models for the new freedom".¹⁶⁸ Lucy argues that:

Moore's contribution to the reform of practice in substitution [of trisyllabic feet] is considerable [...] At the centre of his achievement is [...] the reintroduction of trisyllabic metres to the serious lyric. It was Scottish and Irish melody which brought the trisyllabic rhythms into the work of [...] Moore.¹⁶⁹

Lucy contends that there exists in Gaelic song a spectrum extending from a freedom in the use of the unstressed or decorative syllables, at one end, to an extreme regularity of metrical feet, at the other. "[T]o the ear trained in Irish music and song", Lucy continues, "the following metrical effects are usual and natural":

- (1) A very flexible stressed line often tending towards trisyllabic patterning;
- (2) Very free substitution in more clearly metrical arrangements, including much trisyllabic substitution in essentially disyllabic lines;
- (3) The use of essentially trisyllabic metres not only for fast 'light' effects but also for slow deep 'serious' poetic effect.¹⁷⁰

If we examine Carson's "Asylum", we can find aspects of these effects. While the poem follows an often disyllabic pattern, there is frequent substitution of trisyllabic feet. The use of the trisyllabic, according to Lucy, allows poetry to approach "the freedom of natural speech",¹⁷¹ a characteristic that would be in tune with Carson's stated wish

¹⁶⁷ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 13. A further allusion to Moore in Carson's work is the poem "Let Erin Remember" (the title of one of *Moore's Melodies*) in the collection *The Twelfth of Never*, p. 36.

¹⁶⁸ Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", p. 155.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

bars, occasionally with an introduction. After each group of four bars, there is typically a return to the initial motif of the first bar, with some variation, before the entire section is repeated at the end of the eighth bar, before moving to the next section. Fig. 3 below features an example of the reel "Dowd's No. 9" which Carson discusses in *Last Night's Fun*:



Fig. 3, "Dowd's No. 9"¹⁷⁶

Carson describes the "funny, repetitive, circular structure"¹⁷⁷ of "Dowd's No. 9" in *Last Night's Fun*, and it is not uncommon for such tunes to be repeated several times; as Carson notes, "[s]uch is the bent of Irish traditional music that tunes repeat: they are played at least twice, or maybe three, four or more times".¹⁷⁸ It is this repetitive, cyclical nature of Irish traditional music that Ó Riada referred to and which Carson's poetry would seem to occasionally parallel. Within each bar of a tune, there are usually two groups of four notes each, adding up to an eight-note bar. Reels are typically notated in 4/4 timing though it has been suggested by traditional musician Alan Ng that a more "accurate reflection of the traditional sense of rhythm in a reel", particularly in the live performance setting, would be 2/2 timing (as notated above) as within each group there

¹⁷⁶ As with all traditional tunes, there are many versions available. This particular version of "Dowd's No. 9" is featured on the traditional music website, www.thesession.org, and available at <http://www.thesession.org/tunes/display/761>, (accessed June 6, 2006).

¹⁷⁷ Carson, *Last Night's Fun*, p. 88.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

are two heavy-light pairs of notes.¹⁷⁹ James R. Cowdery has also noted the “feeling of two beats per bar” in a reel and how most “musicians conceive of reels as duple”.¹⁸⁰ With such duple timing, then, in four bars of a reel one would expect to find 8 strong beats.

Fred Lerdahl of the Department of Music at Columbia University has recognised similarities between the grouping structures of music and those developed for language by phonologists. “Grouping Structure, a fundamental component of music theory”, Lerdahl writes, “segments a musical surface hierarchically into motives, phrases, and sections. Phonologists have developed the comparable concept of the prosodic hierarchy”.¹⁸¹ Within this hierarchy, Lerdahl considers “poetic and musical meter [as] [...] formally and cognitively equivalent [...] A poetic or musical meter exists when the perceiver infers conceptually regular levels of beats from the signal”.¹⁸² A further examination of the line from Carson’s “Asylum” above, reveals a metre containing a comparable number of linguistic stresses (eight) to major beats in four bars of a reel:

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^
 — — — — — — — — —
 The first / indica / tion was this / repeat / ed tic, / the latch / jiggling / and
 ^
 — ^
 click/ing [...]

In the poem as a whole, Carson employs a flexibility of metre, identified by Seán Lucy in Irish poetry,¹⁸³ which revolves around eight primary stresses, but often moves between seven and nine, allowing his lines to approach the natural cadence of speech:

— ^ ^ ^ — ^ — — ^ ^ ^ ^ ^
 — ^ ^ ^ — ^ — — ^ ^ ^ ^ ^
 Whispering, the chink of loose change, the unfamiliar voices
 ^ ^
 —
 that are us

¹⁷⁹ Alan Ng, “Frequently Asked Questions: Rhythm Definitions”, *Irish Traditional Music Tune Index. Alan Ng’s Tunography*, <http://www.irishtune.info/rhythm/>, (accessed March 25, 2005).

¹⁸⁰ James R. Cowdery, *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* (Kent: Kent State UP, 1990), p. 18.

¹⁸¹ Fred Lerdahl. “Sounds of Poetry Viewed as Music”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences: Part VI Music and Related Cognitive Abilities*, 930 (2001): 337.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341.

¹⁸³ Lucy, “Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse”, p. 157.

[^] [—] [^] [—] [^] [^] [^] [—] [^] [^] [^] [—] [^] [—] [^] [^]
 And cloud our hearing. The repeated melancholic parp of a
 [—] [—]
 car-horn

[^] [—] [^] [^] [^] [—] [^] [^] [^] [—] [^] [—] [^] [—] [^]
 Eventually has heralded the moment: now we know what's
 [—] [^] [—] [^] [—]
 coming next, the voice [...] ¹⁸⁴

However, as the above extract indicates (as well as the other examples quoted elsewhere in this chapter) identifying a definitive metre in Carson's poetry is a challenging undertaking and Lucy's remarks on the limitations of prosodic systems seem entirely apposite:

It should be stressed that prosodic systems are, at best, clumsy attempts to describe a living movement of words, and the better the poetry the more clumsy such an attempt must be. 'Iamb' or 'trochee' are not real things, and as a way of describing the reality of a poem are just about as limited, if useful, as describing a girl in terms of 'inches' or 'centimetres'. ¹⁸⁵

Furthermore, Carson's remarks in interviews on this issue are not consistent. While he has compared the line length in the interview quoted above to four bars of a reel, in a separate interview he has remarked that it is the "8-bar basic unit of the reel" which "corresponds roughly to the length of, and stresses within, the poetry line". ¹⁸⁶ The inconsistency between these comments may partly reflect the limitations of classical notation itself when applied to traditional music. Irish traditional music rarely follows strictly either the tempo or the divisions (or "barring") such notation suggests. Indeed, as traditional music has been primarily passed on in performance and aurally, musical literacy was not widespread among musicians until recently. ¹⁸⁷ Timothy Rice's remarks regarding Bulgarian

¹⁸⁴ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 55.

¹⁸⁵ Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", p. 151.

¹⁸⁶ Brandes, "Ciaran Carson", p. 82.

¹⁸⁷ Indeed, some of the leading contemporary traditional musicians still profess an inability to read music. A recent example was given by the cellist from the string quartet "Contempo" (The Galway Ensemble-in-Residence), Adrian Mantu, who indicated the particular challenges that performing with the box-player Máirtín O'Connor presented as O'Connor could not read music. [Comments made in the documentary *Contempo Goes West* (2006), directed by Bob Quinn and premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh, July 13th, 2006].

traditional music could also be applied to traditional music in Ireland: “The verbal knowledge about music captured in music terminology, theory and notation allows the corresponding categories to be actively taught in a particular way. However, in aurally transmitted traditions without such terminology and theory, music knowledge and categories are acquired in a different way”.¹⁸⁸ It is also the case that the metre of traditional music varies significantly depending on regional style.

It is more likely that the similarities that may exist between Carson’s poetry and the metre of traditional music occur not through a conscious effort on the poet’s behalf but rather through the unconscious influence of the tunes he remembers or listens to while composing, as well as the particularities of the Irish voice Carson attempts to approximate in his poems. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has made known Carson’s reply to her on being asked how he wrote his distinctive long lines: “dúirt sé gur ceol a thagann isteach ina cheann, líne de jig nó ríl a bhíonn ina cheann agus an líne filíochta á dhéanamh amach aige, is go dtiocfaidh na focail ar ball”¹⁸⁹ [“he said that music comes into his head, a line from a jig or a reel that is in his head as he is writing the line of poetry, and that the words would eventually come”].

For a good overview of the challenges of trying to notate traditional music, see Tomás Ó Canainn, “The Structure of Irish Traditional Music”, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 27-39. Also Alan Ng, “Tips for Learning Irish Traditional Music”, <http://alan-ng.net/irish/learning/>, (accessed June 29, 2006), Mikael Fernström, “Music notation: an issue of purpose and use in traditional music”, <http://www.ul.ie/~idc/library/papersreports/MikaelFernstrom/music01/music01.html>, (accessed June 29, 2006).

The importance of ornamentation and variation in traditional music and song also makes precise notation particularly challenging [See Ó Canainn, “Style”, *Traditional Music in Ireland*, pp. 40-48. Also Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1985 [reprint 1999]), pp. 7-8]. Féilim Mac Donncha, son of the reknowned *sean-nós* singer Seán ‘ac Dhonnacha, has also noted in his study of *sean-nós* singing that “[n]í bhíonn [na frásaí ceoil] teoranta ag barraí ceoil, leanann siad ar aghaidh i frásaí [sic] focail agus ag deireadh an fhocail, stopann an frása ceoil” [“The musical phrases are not limited by musical bars, they follow on in word phrases and at the end of the words, the musical phrase stops”] [Quoted in Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 196].

¹⁸⁸ Timothy Rice, *May it fill your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 66.

¹⁸⁹ Louis de Paor, “Ó Liombó go dtí Sráid Grafton: Comhrá le Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill”, *Innti* 12 (Samhain 1989): 51.

A more productive way to examine Carson's poetry may be to examine it in terms of lines, rather than feet, and this may partly account for the emphasis which the poet himself places on the line in comparing it to traditional music.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, when one does so, Carson's poetry exhibits further characteristics which both Seán Lucy and Brian Devine have identified in Anglo-Irish poetry, that is "a tendency to make the line the effective unit instead of the foot" and the presence of "'spread' or hovering stress".¹⁹¹ Devine has defined the former in contrast to the conventional "foot-unit" rhythms "based on regular metrical feet", in terms recognisable in Carson's poetry:

'line-unit' cadences are largely unpredictable rhythms that are founded on lines so irregular as to sound almost like prose. They are based naturally on rhythmic speech patterns which stretch from line to line and, habitually, have patterns of irregular, unemphasised syllables preceding heavily accented bunches of syllables.¹⁹²

Devine attributes such patterns to the influence of Gaelic *amhrán* metres (metres, he argues, that are still apparent in contemporary *sean-nós* singing) on Irish poetry in English reflected in "the continuance of the yearning for quantity-dominance in Irish speech in the two languages".¹⁹³ This "quantity-dominance" is apparent in the Irish language in the presence of the "síneadh fada" denoting "a long vowel; that is, it increases the duration, or quantity, of a vowel".¹⁹⁴ Rather than metre being defined strictly in terms of stress, Devine suggests that quantities, or duration, is equally important to an understanding of both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish

¹⁹⁰ For more on "the line as unit", see Devine, "The Line as Unit: the Gaelic Mode", *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, pp. 176-228.

¹⁹¹ Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", p. 157. Quoted in Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 176.

¹⁹² Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 178. Devine notes how Yeats's focus on the line rather than foot-unit may also have influenced American poet William Carlos Williams's (a poet, as discussed above, whose influence on Carson is apparent in the *Breaking News* collection) decision, following his attendance at lectures given by Yeats, to follow "in his poetry a Yeats-like system based on lengths of line or phrases" [Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 192].

¹⁹³ Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 176. "Within Irish poetry in English", Devine continues, "that is descended from the *amhrán* of Gaelic – and [...] influenced by *sean-nós* performance – we find runs of short syllables followed by clusters of long syllables, and such a phenomenon is accompanied by a tendency to assert the primacy of the line over the foot as unit" [Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 205].

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

poetry. The challenge of accommodating the long vowels of Irish in the English language led, Devine argues, to the presence of “clusters of long syllables”,¹⁹⁵ making it difficult to divide such lines into regular units of feet. However, when such clusters are examined over a number of lines, one finds the “presence of rhythms which counter-balance and harmonise”.¹⁹⁶ This is apparent in the extract from “Asylum” below in the phrases “loose change” and “car-horn”:

_ ^ ^ ^ _ ^ _ _ ^ _ ^ ^ _ ^
 Whispering, the chink of loose change, the unfamiliar voices

 ^ ^ _
 that are us
 ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^ ^ _ ^ ^ ^ _ ^ _ ^ ^
 And cloud our hearing. The repeated melancholic parp of a

 _ _
 car-horn [...]

These clusters also contribute to the second characteristic noted above: the presence of “‘spread’ or hovering stress”,¹⁹⁷ in poems. “If we try to vocalise, or even scan, the stress groupings of Anglo-Irish verse” Devine continues, “we run into trouble; we have to leave undecided, or ‘hovering’, where we shall put particular stresses”.¹⁹⁸ Such uncertainty is apparent throughout Carson’s poetry including the line below in which the presence of the word “possibility” itself presents a particular challenge to anyone attempting to scan the line:

As he rehearsed the possibility of entering, or opening. Maybe
 It was a knock, a question; Uncle John was not all there.¹⁹⁹

Gearóid Mac Lochlainn’s poetry also occasionally adopts rhythms he attributes to the influence of traditional music. He has remarked of his poem “An Damhsa” [“The Dance”]: “It aims to juggle with sound and sense and hopefully, in places, to imitate or echo, reel, jig and other dance rhythm patterns etc”.²⁰⁰ The poem is a giddy mix of references: “lines and

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

¹⁹⁷ Lucy, “Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse”, p. 157. Quoted in Devine, *Yeats, the Master of Sound*, p. 176.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁹⁹ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 54.

²⁰⁰ Mac Lochlainn and Vallely, *Rakish Paddy Blues*, p. 89.

snippets from the titles of many other tunes and dances as well as many songs, including Belfast street or skipping songs, *sean-nós* songs, Latin American and Guitano folk songs, Traveller's songs, Hebridean Waulking songs and 'popular' songs etc".²⁰¹ Combining alliterative and assonantal effects, the poem comprises alternating rhythms including a sometimes triple metre that approximates the rhythm of a jig, evident in the first line: "With a heel to the toe and a barley ó".²⁰² While a jig encompasses groups of three, rather than four notes as found in the reel, it also includes the repetition of motifs after four bars, a characteristic Mac Lochlainn also attempts to approximate through the repetition of the line "*Is rinneadh damhsa domhsa*" in "An Damhsa".²⁰³

Such an attempt, however, to reproduce aspects of musical metre and rhythm does not necessarily produce good poetry, as the extract below from "An Damhsa" indicates, appearing more like a rudimentary nursery rhyme than an accomplished verse:

With a heel to the toe and a barley ó
Is rinneadh damhsa domhsa,
 And 3, 6, 9, the goose drank wine
Is rinneadh damhsa domhsa,
 And kick the tin and swing the lamp
*Is rinneadh damhsa domhsa,*²⁰⁴

Mac Lochlainn has attempted to deflect such criticism by insisting on the centrality of performance to the poetry:

they are presented in ideal conditions as an oral macaronic piece that flows in an inter-related form between Irish and English [...] Some examples of this style are included on the accompanying CD [...] The two 'versions' read together should sound out a patchwork or pastiche of rhythms and tonal breathing that plays with the jazz scat tradition and mixes loosely lilted *lúibíní* thingymajigs with mantra, *raiméis* and Irish *casfhocail* (tongue twisters).²⁰⁵

There remain dangers, nonetheless, for both poets in attempting to approximate musical metres in their work. Such an attempt may not result in accomplished poetry and, indeed, may detract from whatever theme the

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

poet wishes to consider. Significantly, where there is a conscious attempt by Carson to approximate jig time, in his poem “Bagpipe music”, it results in a series of often nonsensical words that approximate the jig’s triple rhythm while alluding to an earlier poem of the same name by Louis MacNeice:

He came liling down the brae with a blackthorn stick the thick
 Of a shotgun
 In his fist, going *blah dithery dump a doodle scatterly idle fortunoodle* – [...]

[...] The unmarked car came quietly, enquiringly, while in a
 no-go zone
 Three streets away, I heard two taxis crabbing, like Gemini in
 Gethsemane, which
 Of them was black: *honk parp a bullet billet reverup and harp a ballad*
Skrake nithery lou a Mackie nice wee niece ah libralassie ... ²⁰⁶

While Carson and Mac Lochlainn may exaggerate the influence of traditional music and song on their work, and the extent to which their poetry approximates the rhythms of this music, their comments nonetheless suggest an anxiety regarding the relationship of their work to both an historical tradition and to contemporary communities.

Conclusion

Traditional music has influenced Ciaran Carson beyond the page and encouraged his own engagement in performance. Indeed, Carson’s poetry readings have been described as occasions when he “often seeks to combine musical skill with poetry,”²⁰⁷ an example of which is featured in the introduction to this book. Carson gave several critically acclaimed live performances of his work *Last Night’s Fun* at the Belfast Festival in 2002. He was accompanied during the performance by Gearóid Mac Lochlainn,

²⁰⁶ Ciaran Carson, “Bagpipe Music”, *Modern Irish Poetry, An Anthology*, ed. by Patrick Crotty (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1995), p. 320.

²⁰⁷ Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*, p. 80. Lucy Collins has also drawn attention to the importance of the “performative element” to Carson’s poetry [Collins, “Marking Time: The Influence of Irish Traditional Music on the Poetry of Ciaran Carson”, *Back to the Present, Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History*, ed. by Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fischer and Brian Coates (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 241-252].

a poet whose work reveals a writer more concerned to inherit the engagement with community of Carson than the reticence of Heaney. As Mac Lochlainn has remarked of Heaney's poem "Whatever you say, say Nothing":

I remember reading this poem with hope as a teenager, the hope that a poet was going to expose the corruption of the statelet here. I think Heaney shied away from that and sadly heeded his own words too well. He has found a niche in the Anglo-Irish tradition which feeds off the Irish language through many celebrated translations into English that don't even include the original Irish text when published.²⁰⁸

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, connecting his work to an Irish tradition without always acknowledging the communities from which this music has emerged or its political resonances. Conversely, in the work of both Ciaran Carson and Gearóid Mac Lochlainn neither landscape nor music represent points of stability. Rather, both are forms constantly in process. Central to this process are the communities that inhabit landscape, and create, perform and listen to traditional music.

Heaney's preoccupation with traditional music also suggests a concern for a more immediate engagement with an audience, if not a community, a concern apparent in his performances and recordings with the traditional piper Liam O'Flynn. Heaney's poetry, however, unlike that of either Carson or Mac Lochlainn, is characterised by a personal lyrical voice ("If I do write something/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself"²⁰⁹), and, occasionally, an almost mythologized "I". Carson and Mac Lochlainn, on the other hand, offer no such certainties of voice, articulating instead an inclusive poetic alert to colloquial cadences and marginalised communities and informed by their experiences of traditional music, experiences that have also influenced the form of both poets' work.

While a study of Carson's work as a whole reveals that his wish to realise traditional music rhythms in his poetry may often be more aspirational than realised, his suggestion that such comparable rhythms exist indicates the Belfast poet's wish, in common with Mac Lochlainn, to encourage a particular reading of his work. This reading would place the

²⁰⁸ Rain Crowe, "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn".

²⁰⁹ Seamus Heaney, "The Flight Path", *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 25.

work of both poets in relation to the Gaelic tradition and the dynamic energies of traditional music.

CONCLUSION

Aran
(for Tom Mac Intyre)

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.
I close the pub door gently and step out
And a gull creaks off from the tin roof
Of an outhouse, planing over the ocean,
Circling now with a hoarse inchoate
Screaming the boned fields of its vision.
God, that was the way to do it,
Hand-clasping, echo-prolonging poet!

Scorched with a fearful admiration,
Walking over the nacreous sand,
I dream myself to that tradition
Generations off the land -
One hand to an ear for the vibration,
The far wires, the reverberation
Down light-years of the imagination
And a loved hand in the other hand.

The long glow springs from the dark soil, however –
No marsh-light holds a candle to this.
Unearthly still in its white weather
A crack-voiced rock-marauder, scavenger, fierce
Friend to no slant fields or the sea either,
Folds back over the forming waters.¹

From the first line of this poem by Derek Mahon, one is struck by the sense of connection and community the poet discerns in the performance

¹ Derek Mahon, "Aran", *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 31.

of traditional Gaelic, or *sean-nós*, song. The singer is “earthed” to “his girl” – their communion reflects a connection and exchange not just to each other, but also to their place and their tradition. “[T]hat was the way to do it”, the poet remarks “Hand-clasping, echo-prolonging poet!”² This performance, as the subsequent verse and the choice of the word “echo” suggests, reverberates beyond the singer’s voice, is fulfilled through its connection with an older tradition as well as in that moment of communication when the audience, as is usual in the performance of *sean-nós*, responds with their acknowledgement: “Dia leat” [“God be with you”]. “Scorched with a fearful admiration” Mahon attempts to “dream” himself “to that tradition”, so that he too can make this connection with his audience, so that with one “hand to an ear for the vibration” he holds “in the other hand, your hand”.³

However, while he appears to admire the performance and the connection both to the singer’s tradition and contemporary audience, Mahon seems to also identify with the seagull overhead as he closes the door on the performance and walks away to the sound of the bird’s “hoarse inchoate/Screaming”. Much as James Joyce criticised the failure of artists involved in the literary revival to abhor “the multitude”, one senses Mahon’s concern to be “very careful to isolate himself”⁴ despite the nostalgia for community. It is not surprising, therefore, to find him remarking in an interview his wish to “invoke a circle of friends, a reading society”,⁵ or in another interview invoking a “community of imagined readership”,⁶ much as the *sean-nós* singer performs traditionally among a

² Indeed, Mahon has described the good poem as “light to lighten the darkness” much as he describes the effect of this *sean-nós* performance above. Quoted in Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 17.

³ Mahon’s poetry features a recurring engagement with the Gaelic tradition evident in the poems “I am Raftery”, “Achill”, “An Bonnán Buí” as well as the poem above. Indeed, in the 1972 collection *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, Mahon chose “I am Raftery” to represent himself thereby, as Hugh Haughton notes, “aligning himself, if ironically, with the Irish past” and in particular the Gaelic tradition [Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 57].

⁴ James Joyce, “The Day of the Rabblement”, *James Joyce - Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed. by Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 50.

⁵ John Brown, *In the Chair* (Knockeven, Cliffs of Moher, County Clare: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 123.

⁶ Derek Mahon, “Each Poem for me is a New Beginning [Interview with Willie Kelly]”, *Cork Review* 2 (1981): 11.

community of friends (though real rather than imagined) conscious and aware of the tradition and alive to the subtleties of the performer's voice.

As Marshall McLuhan has observed, "it must often have puzzled the scholars and physicists of our time that just in the degree to which we penetrate the lowest layers of non-literate awareness we encounter the most advanced and sophisticated ideas of twentieth-century art and science".⁷ While recent theorists in Word and Music Studies, ethnomusicology, and, increasingly, literary theory, see the interaction between the performer and audience, or text and reader, as crucial to meaning and understanding, the audience has always played a central role in traditional music. The striking description of the performance of *sean-nós* above indicates a concern shared by many of Mahon's contemporaries. This concern incorporates themes examined already in this work: the recognition by poets of the distance the Irish poet has moved from the communal event, combining poetry and music, that characterised the performance and reception of poetry in traditional Gaelic society; an attempt by poets to reconnect to this tradition while building a new community, often inspired or aided by music, through performance. These performances may, as in the case of Thomas Kinsella's work, be internalised within the poetry itself as he seeks an intensity of engagement he feels is not possible today through public performance.

Irish poetry continues to reveal an ongoing engagement with music. While this book has considered at length some leading contemporary poets and their relationship with traditional music and song, other poets for whom music is important include Moya Cannon, apparent in her poem "Between the Jigs and Reels"; Paula Meehan, who describes the poet/persona in the poem "Home" as "a blind woman finding her way home by a map of a tune",⁸ and Michael Coady, also a musician, and writer of a memoir on seminal traditional musicians Packie and Micho Russell (*The Well of Spring Water* (1996)), and for whom music provides an important resource for his work.⁹ A notable development is the

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 26. Lucy Collins has also recalled similar sentiments - "what seems most avant-garde in art may in fact be most traditional" - from Paul Durcan ["Marking Time: The Influence of Irish Traditional Music on the Poetry of Ciaran Carson", p. 244].

⁸ Paula Meehan, "Home", *Mysteries of the Home* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe 1996, p. 76.

⁹ As noted in the citation read on the occasion of the presentation of the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry in 2004, Coady's poetry, reminiscent of the work of Ciaran Carson, reveals a "love of passing things, of pub talk and small-

frequency with which we find Irish poets collaborating with singer/songwriters and musicians including Mary O'Malley (Tony MacMahon and Sean Tyrell), Louis de Paor (John Spillane), Michael Longley (Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin), Vincent Woods (Máirtín O'Connor and Mary McPartlan), Derek Mahon (Philip Martin, who also has set poems by Moya Cannon to music) and Paul Durcan (Van Morrison).

A further contemporary poet for whom music has become increasingly important is Paul Muldoon. While Muldoon's poetry reveals a recurring engagement with the Irish song and musical traditions (apparent, for example, in the poems "Keen", a translation of an extract from Eibhlín Dhubbh Ní Chonaill's "Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire", "Aisling", and the evocative title of his collection, *Kerry Slides* (1996)), in late 2007 he completed an Irish tour with his rock band, Rackett. In interviews completed at the time of the tour, Muldoon indicated his awareness, and the importance, of the historical relationship between poetry and music. As Belinda McKeon remarked in an interview with Muldoon during the tour published in *The Irish Times*:

The line between poetry and song lyrics is a fluid one for Muldoon, who sees the song, in any case, as belonging to the world of poetry; the old Irish tradition made no distinction between the two, he says, so nor will he.¹⁰

The relationship of Irish poetry to traditional music and song, and indeed to music generally, is one that is continually evolving. How this relationship will develop in the future remains to be seen, but if the past offers us any guide to future developments, Irish poetry, music and song will continue to have a rich and varied association.

town gossip, and especially of music [...] [Centre for Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas, "Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry", <http://www.stthomas.edu/irishstudies/poetryaward.htm> (accessed January 7, 2008)].

¹⁰ Belina McKeon, "Rackett, rhyme and reason", *The Irish Times*, Wed, Aug 22, 2007, <http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/features/2007/0822/1187332287314.html>, (accessed January 10, 2008).

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