

Port na bPucaí: Representations of solitude, isolation and otherworldly encounters in Irish poetry and folk theatre

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Abstract

Port na bPucaí or the tune of the fairies is a well-known piece in Irish traditional music that is reputed to have been heard by a musician during a period of solitude. It reflects a common motif in Irish folklore whereby individuals are inspired by or develop their craft and skills in solitude with suggestions of spiritual otherworldly assistance. The tale and tune are represented in Irish poetry and folk theatre. In this paper, I critically consider how the work of Irish poet Séamus Heaney and the theatre company Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland incorporates or is inspired by folklore and music related to solitude, isolation and encounters with an otherworld or spiritual dimension. Although there is no connection between the poet and the theatre company, I draw on three examples in which Heaney and Siamsa Tíre draw on similar points of inspiration from folklife and lore, reflecting the link between literature, art and folk culture. The examples reflect themes of solitude and isolation, both in relation to individuals and communities, and the creativity, wisdom and understanding attributed to moments of isolation. The article also reflects on the creative process and the importance of solitude for the artists.

Keywords: *Irish poetry; folk theatre; folklore; traditional music*

1. Introduction

In Irish folklore and literature, it is often in moments of solitude that characters are inspired. The story of their sometimes otherworldly inspiration becomes the foundations for further creativity when artists adapt and rework these stories. In this paper, I critically consider the representation of these moments of solitude in the poetry and folk theatre of artists who reflect engagement with local and folk culture in different parts of Ireland. I focus on the work of poet Séamus Heaney (1939-2013), and theatre directors Pat Ahern (b.1932) and Oliver Hurley (b.1964). Although contemporaries, Heaney and Ahern did not work together but demonstrate similar approaches that echo their respective rural backgrounds and localities in Co. Derry and Co. Kerry in the north and south of the island respectively. Growing up in the town of Tralee, Co. Kerry, and performing with Siamsa Tíre, Hurley is directly influenced by Ahern from childhood and continues his legacy in one part of his artistic career, incorporating an urban perspective in his approach to representing folklore and folk culture while Artistic Director of the company.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how artists explore and represent solitude in their poetry and theatrical productions and how, in these artistic representations, solitude

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becomes an opportunity for creativity and inspiration, often with mystical connotations. Although a predominantly Roman Catholic society, a strong belief in fairies and the otherworld was observable in Ireland until at least the last quarter of the twentieth century and is evident in the poetic and theatrical creations of the artists. All of the examples reflect an interest in a spiritual or otherworldly dimension, the source of inspiration for creativity, and the mysteriousness of solitude.

While the examples focus on characters who experience moments of solitude, they do so in a broader context that places an emphasis on community. The Irish terms *muintearas*, referring to community, and *meitheal*, referring to situations where the community come together to help each other with tasks are relevant. Both concepts would have been familiar to Heaney and Ahern and are evident in the poetry and theatrical productions. Both reflect aspects of agrarian society that are familiar in other cultures and while there are many individual characters who work in solitude, such as the blacksmith and thatcher, they, along with the musician in this paper, contribute to and are integral to their society and community. Despite the close interrelations in Irish rural communities, these communities could also exist in solitude, particularly if on an island. The sense of being 'cut off' or separated may also be identified in feelings of isolation caused by the creation of a border in Ireland in 1921 and the ensuing political unrest, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Nobel laureate Séamus Heaney is one of Ireland's best-known poets. He often engages with themes of the local in his writings, drawing on local characters and settings in his native Derry in the north of Ireland (O'Driscoll, 2009; Foster, 2020). There are many influences of folklore also evident in his poetry. His first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), provides an autobiographically inspired collection that provides insight into Irish rural life. In this paper, I draw in particular on three poems: *Thatcher*, *The Forge*, and *The Given Note* from his second collection of poetry, *Door Into the Dark* (1969) as well as his sixth collection, *Station Island* (1984). While Heaney was influenced by and made reference to Irish politics in his poetry, in this paper I avoid interpretations of his poetry that focus on the period known as the Troubles, a time of political and civil unrest in Northern Ireland.

Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland was developed by Fr Pat Ahern as a result of community choral and theatre activities in the 1960s (Foley 2013; Kearney 2013a; 2013b; 2015; Phelan 2014). Early projects and productions engaged with liturgical themes but subsequently focused on local folk culture inspired by his own life experiences growing up in rural Ireland. Now established with a theatre building in Tralee, Co. Kerry in the southwest of Ireland, Siamsa Tíre includes a number of productions in its repertoire, which have been devised by the company. Like Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*, Ahern's original Siamsa production, *Fadó Fadó* (1968), provides autobiographical insights into Ahern's experiences in rural Ireland. In this paper, I consider scenes from three productions that parallel the themes in the selected poems by Heaney: *Fadó Fadó* (1968), *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991), and *Oileán* (2003). While *Fadó Fadó* and *Ding Dong Dederó* were directed by Ahern and based on his concepts, *Oileán* was directed by later artistic director Oliver Hurley, who also directed two productions on the theme of Halloween, both entitled *Samhain* (Kearney, 2016). Hurley joined Siamsa Tíre as a young boy and, under the tutelage of Ahern performed and assisted in devising in many productions. He became a member of the professional company in 1985 and later the Artistic Director from 2001-2007. All three productions were devised with the members of the company with the involvement of external collaborators, notably choreographers in *Ding Dong Dederó* and *Oileán*.

The three examples in this paper centre on encounters by lone individuals engaged in a craft or skill, often with implied encounters with creatures or spirits of the

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otherworld. In the first example, the central character is a thatcher, engaged in fixing the roof of a thatched cottage with hay or straw. In the second example, the central character is the blacksmith but, allied to this, the focus is the forge as a mystical space. In the third instance, the central character is a musician who performs a piece of music inspired by nature or, as represented, that he inherits from a magical source. In all three instances, fairies encountered during a moment of solitude are represented as the source of artistic inspiration. There is a mix of both pre-Christian and Christian references, which reflect the Irish Catholic upbringing of the artists and the society they are representing in their poems and productions. It is noteworthy that Ahern pursued his vocation as a Roman Catholic priest in addition to his work in theatre and *Siamsa Tíre* is preceded by a number of community-based productions based on Christian religious themes. There is recurring engagement with the sacred in the poetry of Heaney and a search for both origins and the self (Tobin, 1999) and the individuals' connection to community.

All three artists provide, through their poetry and theatrical productions, insights into Irish life, culture and the psyche of Irish people but there is relevance in the themes, motifs and stories across other cultures. Within their output are motifs of or characters who experience solitude. Solitude provides an opportunity to engage with nature and a spiritual world, as well as the self. The expression of solitude as an opportunity to develop creative instinctiveness or inherit artistry from a mystical source is encapsulated here in the dreaming thatcher, the mystical blacksmith and the wandering musician.

2. The Dreaming Thatcher

Heaney and Ahern came from rural agrarian backgrounds where the thatched cottage would have been a familiar sight on the landscape. Both men's rural background and the skills and practices of rural life are evident in their work. In *Digging*, from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Heaney reflects on his father digging potatoes or turf. In the poem *Follower*, from the same collection, Heaney describes his father ploughing, a solitary exercise, aside from the team horses or, in this instance, the child stumbling 'in his hobnailed wake'. Similar scenes are presented in *Fadó Fadó*, for which Ahern worked with the original performers with *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* to represent his childhood memories in a farming community. Tasks such as making the butter are a communal activity and are represented with reference to *piseogs* or folk beliefs – the churn was blessed before the process began and visitors to the home took a turn at the dash of the churn, both in an effort to ward off evil spirits.

While many of the tasks represented are communal tasks and involve the members of the community working together, some tasks are undertaken by skilled and experienced individuals who may work in solitude. One of the characters presented in *Fadó Fadó* is the thatcher. He inspects the roof and sets about making scallops from small sticks, which he will use to knit in the new straw. He sets about repairing the roof of the cottage on the stage, clearing the old straw and, after a brief time, when other characters have left the stage, he makes himself comfortable and falls asleep while atop the ladder. The cottage was a pivotal part of the set in *Fadó Fadó* and represented the home. Indeed, the window in the set was salvaged from the Ahern family home. In a dream sequence, the thatcher is surrounded by the Strawboys and sings a traditional song, 'An Poc Ar Buile', made popular in Ireland during the 1960s by Seán Ó Riada and Ceoltóirí Chualann and the singer Seán Ó Sé. In *Fadó Fadó*, the scene is theatricalised. Rather than telling the story of the song, which refers to a puck goat that attacks a man on his way to work in the fields, the goat is replaced by figures clad in straw costumes. Appearing first like haystacks or mounds of straw, they dance around the thatcher before disappearing, allowing the thatcher to return to his sleeping position atop the ladder.

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Writing about Irish folk drama, Alan Gailey makes a connection between mummers, wrenboys and strawboys. In relation to the latter, he states: 'Taking their name from their disguise, individuals who were known as 'strawmen' or 'strawboys' used to visit the parties held after the solemnizing of marriages in many parts of Ireland' (91). While wrenboys and mummers typically sought money, Gailey notes that the intention of the strawboys was 'to bring luck and happiness to the newly-weds, to wish them health and prosperity' and '[u]sually their visitation take place after darkness has fallen' (ibid). Despite their well-meaning, sometimes these occasions resulted in arguments and even arrest on rare occasion. Reflecting on Ireland's performative culture, Bernadette Sweeney notes the traditions, such as the Strawboys, 'affect notions of performance' and how many folk rituals, superstitions, and traditions 'have often featured in canonical Irish dramas by J.M. Synge, Brian Friel, and Marina Carr, among others' (21). Unlike the largely benevolent strawboys presented by Gailey, Sweeney notes the potential menace of costumed folk performers, which is evident in the scene in *Fadó Fadó*. The straw costumes and anonymity of the characters adds to the mysteriousness of their identity and suggests an otherworldly connection.

Thatching, for Heaney, is a metaphor for making poems (Heaney, 1982) and in the poem *Thatcher* he ascribes skill and knowledge to the thatcher, despite an initial underwhelming and almost comedic characterisation. Indeed, the characterisation is similar to that employed by Ahern (and performed by Ahern's brother Seán for over forty years). Whereas Ahern's thatcher is part of the community represented on the stage, Heaney's thatcher is a visitor. A lone traveller on the road who turns up unexpectedly. He works with a natural material, straw, and turns it into something that protects those who dwell in the house. The task takes several days to complete and the thatcher is absorbed in his task. Comparing the finished thatch to 'sloped honeycomb' created with a Midas, there is a sense that the thatcher has some magical skill, perhaps gained from some otherworldly source. He works alone and ultimately his craft falls victim to modernisation.

3. The Forge

The forge had an important role in Irish towns and villages up to the mid-twentieth century and the blacksmith was often viewed as a mystical character (Jennings, 2014). Indeed, Irish folklore ascribes great skill, wisdom and power to the blacksmith or *gabha*. While the thatcher works outside, connected with the natural world and the brightness of the day, the blacksmith works inside the forge, a dark space illuminated by the fire and the glow or sparks from heated iron. The forge is an elemental space where the blacksmith uses wind (the bellows), fire, water and earth (iron),

The Blacksmith is the central character in Heaney's poem *The Forge* and the space is given mystical qualities. The poet presents the blacksmith as an individual engaged in a spiritual ritual. With the anvil presented as an altar, there are echoes of a priest's routine and preparations. Like the thatcher, the blacksmith engages in his craft alone but he and his work are integral to the life of the community. There is rhythm and music in the work of the blacksmith, from 'the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring' and 'hiss when a new shoe toughens in water'. There is a reference to an otherworldly creature, the unicorn, another metaphor for the 'altar' that is the anvil. The 'door into the dark' is an opportunity for the poet and reader to glance into the blacksmith's solitude and in this magic space he creates.

The development of creativity in the solitude of the forge is represented again in Siamsa Tíre's production *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991). The production, devised by Ahern and the core company of Siamsa Tíre, focuses on the life of North Kerry dancing-master Jeremiah Molyneaux, otherwise known as Jerry Munnix (Phelan, 2014). Munnix taught

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Ahern and is a significant influence on the development of a regional dance style, identified by ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley (2014, 226) as a kinaesthetic identity marker of the Siamsa Tíre company. This dance style continues to be central to the work of the company to the present and the production creates a narrative for its origins and development, effectively creating an origin myth for the company itself. The subtitle, *Forging the Dance*, reflects the portrayal of creating and crafting the dance, mirroring the blacksmiths craft by creating with the body through a pattern of bangs, twists and turns in a rhythmic performance.

There are a number of instances in the production where solitude leads to encounters that inspire the development of the dance. While the audience first experience the dance as a communal activity, a basic form derived from an Irish dance style known as sean nós or old style, Munnix develops an individual solo step dance style that he teaches to the community. Beyond the stage, individual dancers in the community value the variations and individuality in different steps. They are like the ‘real iron’ creations in Heaney’s forge or Heaney’s own poetry.

In *Ding Dong Dederó*, the young Munnix first experiences dance through the play of other children. It is when he is alone that he encounters a travelling dancing master² who teaches the boy a hornpipe step before leaving him alone again to practice. Munnix struggles to remember the steps learned from this mysterious character but is inspired by the shapes of the tools in his father’s forge to embody these shapes. Later, while everybody else attends mass, the boy dances alone in his father's forge, tapping out the dance steps to the rhythm of the *Ár nAthair*, the Irish language translation of the Lord’s Prayer. As with Heaney’s poem *The Forge*, the anvil becomes an altar, this time for the boy to beat out the steps of the dance. The forge is again a magical space of solitude, central to but somehow disconnected from the everyday life beyond.

The connection between the dance and the spirit world, is further developed and complicated through the fire dance, a dream sequence during which spirit dancers emerge from the fire in the forge and dance around the young Munnix. These masked dancers frighten and inspire the young Munnix, reflecting the paradoxical gift and burden of responsibility on the artist. In *Ding Dong Dederó*, a spiritual source for the dance – both Christian and pagan – is implied as the young boy dances to the prayers and chants of the community attending mass and encounters spirits from the fire in a dream-like sequence.

4. Music and the Lone Wanderer

A recurring trope in Irish folklore is the encounter between a lone individual and characters from the Otherworld. Heaney captures this folk tale trope and the mystification of music in his poem *The Given Note*. In the work of Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, there are several scenes across many of the company's productions that represent such a moment. In some instances, this also represents a moment of inspiration and creativity, reflecting a link between solitude, the creative mind and the Otherworld. The example examined in this paper is that of *Oileán*, a production depicting life on the Blasket Islands in the early part of the twentieth century directed by Oliver Hurley. Two aspects of solitude are noted – the solitude of the island community and the experience of a lone musician who performs music inspired by the environment. The depiction of the island and, in particular, the impact of storms on an isolated island community is reflected in Heaney’s poem *Storm on the Island* from the collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

² It is worth noting that this narrative of the dance is extended backwards historically in the production *Tearmann*, which is inspired in part by the story of Moreen, an earlier dancing master (Foley, 2015). *Tearmann* also has a scene, set in the workhouse, where the dancing master passes on his steps to a younger character (see also, Phelan, 2014).

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The reference to a folk tale and tune from the Blasket Islands, a formerly inhabited group of islands located approximately two kilometres from the mainland, directly links *Oileán* and *The Given Note*. These islands have occupied a prominent place in the Irish cultural imagination, largely due to the literature produced by some of its former inhabitants (Kearney, 2017). Geographer David Lowenthal (2007) notes that the human fascination with islands has existed since antiquity and society's preoccupation with islands today 'is fuelled by yearning for seclusion from modernity' (203). Another geographer, John Gillis states that remoteness in the context of islands can imply physical distance but also "travel through time" (2001: 40). There is an opportunity to encounter remnants of the past, which are sometimes idealised in contrast to modern life. Islands feature in Irish theatre and literature, not just as physical places but a metaphor for remoteness, both in space and time, and as a counterpoint to modernity (Morash and Richards, 2013). Islands provide opportunities for solitude, engagement with the soul or spiritual experiences (such as on pilgrimage), and inspiration for creativity.

Heaney's poem *The Given Note* is explicitly located on 'the most westerly Blasket' where the character 'got this air out of the night'. Although the tale is usually associated with Inishvickallane, there is some ambiguity as to which island Heaney is referring – Tearaght being an uninhabited, rocky island further west. Heaney places the character in 'a dry-stone hut', perhaps a reference to or suggestive of monks in solitude. On the nearby mainland and further south on the island of Skellig Mhicíl are located clusters of beehive huts created by the most westerly congregation in Europe during the Middle Ages. Critically here, Heaney states that the character 'had gone alone into the island'. He suggests that others had heard parts of the melody but it was this fiddle player who brings it back complete. The melody is a reference to understanding brought about by engagement with nature and the self. This is a quest that many embark on but, like periods of pilgrimage or planned escapes from everyday life, many do not sustain solitude long enough to develop a full understanding.

Reflecting on Heaney's poem, Sean Crossan states: 'traditional music is portrayed as mystical and almost otherworldly, idealized, romanticized and fulfilling a primarily aesthetic function' (90). Crucially, he goes on to state: 'What is notable in the poem, however, is Heaney's focus on the individual. It is an individual man who gets this "air out of the night" after going "alone into the island" and taking it, he suggests, "from nowhere"' (91). Although the modern imagination of Irish traditional music is as a communal activity, solo music making was more prevalent prior to the twentieth century. However, the musician, like the thatcher and the blacksmith performed an important role in the community, particularly in an age before radio and television.

In *Oileán*, a folk theatre production interpreted as "island", Siamsa Tíre engages with the traditions, customs, narratives, tunes and sayings of the Blasket Islands and nearby mainland. The production is heavily influenced by books written by members of the Blasket Island community in the early part of the twentieth century such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's Irish-language autobiographical novel *An tOileánach (The Islandman)* (1929). Ó Criomhthain (1856–1937), Peig Sayers (1873–1958), Muiris Ó Suilleabháin (1904–1950) and others encapsulate a way of life on the island and incorporate folklore and tales. In *Oileán*, one scene presents a man leaving a gathering to walk home alone. The waves, represented by three dancers, come to life and the strains of a tune are heard. The man takes his fiddle and repeats the phrases, which become a unified melody, known in the tradition as Port na bPucaí or the song of the fairies, an air sourced to islander Seán Cheaist Ó Catháin (d. 1972) but popularised by Seán Ó Riada and subsequent musicians. The Pooka is a very particular fairy in the Irish tradition and Ó hÓgáin (2006) notes that there is a specific body of folklore related to this character.

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The inclusion of *Port na bPúcaí*, also known as ‘*Caoineadh na BhFairies*’ or ‘*Caoineadh na Síóg*’ (The Fairies Lament) (Uí Ógáin, 2012, 27), represents a direct reference to the musical life and lore of the Blasket Islands but also reflects a common trope in Irish folklore whereby an individual hears or is gifted music from the fairies while wandering home alone at night. The story of receiving the tune is included by Robin Flower in *The Western Island* (1944, 116), highlighting the importance of music in the intersection of the fairy world with the mortal world (Uí Ógáin 2012). In later productions, a decision was made to use a recording of *Port na bPúcaí* without an enactment and removing the narrative of the legend. Critically, while the folklore, poem and theatrical production point to the fiddle player receiving the tune in a moment of solitude, the tune becomes part of a tradition and representative of a place and community.

The fiddle player is in nature and at one with his environment, reproducing the sound of his environment as if by magic on the fiddle, communicating nature to those who do not experience it in the same way. He reflects philosopher John Moriarty's description of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, ancient and mythical inhabitants of Ireland, who became ‘harmonised to all things [they] were of one mind with the wind and rain. Now again, you could walk through the land and not know they are in it’ (28). It may be read that the fiddler is inheriting or learning the ancient music of Ireland from nature and the wind. The story is neither Heaney's nor Hurley's own creation but they retell it through poetry and dramatisation. Like the fiddler, they too draw inspiration from the wind in moments of solitude and shape it using their instruments, the pen and stage replacing the fiddle as their instruments of choice.

There is a broader relationship between Heaney's poetry and Siamsa Tíre's production, reflecting a juxtaposition between solitude and community. Reflecting on the inspiration for the *Oileán*, Hurley states:

The idea in *Oileán* was very simple. We were going through the whole process of the Celtic Tiger, busy busy, and that was really informed by Máire Begley saying one day she went out to the Blasket Islands ... In one of our sessions, she said ‘I set out to the island to get away from the humdrum of everyday life’ and I said sitting there ‘that's the show’. When you go out there you are just removed from the everyday troubles and woes. It's a different feeling out there so that kind of informed the idea of how one could get into bringing the Blaskets back to life. (Interview, 25 June 2013)

The Blasket Islands today are no longer inhabited but prior to their evacuation in 1953 there was a thriving community that struggled with the harsh conditions. Prompted by visitors, a number of islanders documented their lives and experiences in a number of books, many of which were used as inspiration for scenes in *Oileán*. Thus, there is a paradox whereby the inspiration is to get away to an abandoned island but, in doing so, encountering a community or rediscovering through literature a way of life that provides messages for living in the contemporary world. The character in the opening scene who moves alone in a crowd of dancers all dressed in black, is an individual who experiences solitude despite being surrounded by people, all going about their daily business. There are moments when the dancers all perform the same rhythmic motif or gather, as if for a bus or a train, before dispersing again, reflective of Lefebvre's theories of rhythm analysis (2004). Eventually the first character, who demonstrates arrhythmic through dance, is left alone on stage. The mechanical and percussive soundtrack that represents modern life replaced by a melodic and free flowing piece on piano, whistle and fiddle.

The transition in the scene reveals the set, representative of the island. When this character reaches the lonely island, she experiences community as characters based on

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historical accounts emerge. They are ghost like characters who emerge behind a gauze, evoking the names of places on the island in the Irish language. It is chant like, with the voices coming with short bursts from different locations on the stage. As the gauze lifts and the lights changes, the characters loosen up and go about their tasks. It is a community and together the women gather seaweed, the men mend fishing gear and the children play. This is a community out of time with the world that we, the audience and the character, have left behind.

Islands typically represent solitude but, in *Oileán*, the central character and audience encounter community. The experience inspires a change to the way that the character dances, a metaphor for how we might live our lives. Heaney's sixth volume of poetry, *Station Island (1984)*, also engages with a journey to an island, St Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg. In the title poem, a pilgrimage is implied. Heaney went on pilgrimage to this island several times while at university in Belfast (O'Driscoll, 2008: 232). Like the Blasket Islands, Station Island occupies a particular place in Irish folk memory; an almost mythical place to where people go to escape contemporary life. Heaney's collection includes a narrative autobiographical sequence in which Heaney meets with ghosts from the past. It is an opportunity for the poet to engage with history and his own consciousness. The characters that Heaney meets in the poem in *Section V* provide him with inspiration. They are ghosts who occupy his mind when he is in solitude.

In the manner of the 'fun in the village motiff' utilised by international folk groups (Shay, 2002) and prominent in *Fadó Fadó* (Kearney, 2013a), the Blasket Island community is romanticised and idealised but the challenges of island life are also represented. Critically, this is a community that exists in solitude. There are other visitors, represented by the stranger who comes and writes down notes about what he experiences and reflective of individual scholars such as the aforementioned Robin Flower. The remoteness of the island, however, is emphasised at the opening of the second act when the women gather at the cliff to say prayers, hearing the church bell from the mainland. The climax of the production is a storm during which a young boy loses his life. Historically, this was a key episode in the decision to leave the island. Many of the islanders maintained a sense of community, which was integral to surviving life on the island, and an example of this persisted in Boston, USA.

The challenge of surviving on a remote island is also presented in Heaney's *Storm on the Island*. The community that is represented in *Oileán* is also evident in Heaney's poem. Although an unspecified island, which may be interpreted as Stormont,³ the challenges faced by the inhabitants of this treeless island mirror the narratives of the Blasket Islanders. There is a sense of confidence in the opening lines when the speakers state "We are prepared", preempting the harsh conditions that manifest in a storm. While the storm in Heaney's poem is physically devastating for the landscape, it is the loss of life in *Oileán*, not directly connected with the storm itself but rather the isolation of the island, that is notable. Unlike Heaney's islanders who develop their architecture and farming methods to cope with the harsh conditions of the weather and island life, the Blasket Islanders were also confronted with adversarial government policies and faced little choice but to leave. Even though they were, in themselves a community, they existed in solitude, cut off and effectively abandoned by the state.

In the stage production *Oileán*, as the islanders leave the island for the last time with their meagre belongings, walking out into the auditorium to represent their journey overseas, we are left with the character from the opening alone again on stage, dressed again

³ Stormont is the Northern Island seat of Government. The first eight letters of the title spell 'Stormont' and the storm may refer to the Troubles. Here, I pursue a more literal interpretation.

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in black. The soundtrack changes again to the metallic rhythms and individual dancers dressed in black re-emerge on stage, representing a return to contemporary life and society but the character remains in solitude. Gradually these individuals come together to dance in commune, no longer individuals but connected in their movements, albeit with slight arrhythmias. A subtle costuming effect, which reveals a little element of colour reminiscent of the island costumes in the black contemporary costumes, evokes a sense of connection to a past community and that we all share something that connects us.

5. Solitude and the Creative Self

Heaney, Ahern and Hurley perform important roles as artists in, responding to and reflecting society and their own communities. As artists they both create in solitude and through participation with others. Heaney provided a voice for his community through his poetry while Ahern created a space for communities to express themselves. Hurley led the community of artists established by Ahern but expanded the repertoire to explore more themes beyond their direct experience. All three artists rely on their participation in a community but also opportunities to develop their thoughts in solitude. As Dawe notes in the context of Irish poetry:

The see-sawing between 'participation' and 'solitude' is central to the make-up of our literary culture precisely because an equilibrium between them has rarely been struck [...] The writer does not opt for either solitude or participation but claims both as a condition of his work. (Dawe, 105, 107)

Fadó Fadó was developed from a series of vignettes devised by a small group of performers under the direction of Ahern. Various members put forward ideas from their own life experiences and using their individual skills in music, song and dance. For the production *Oileán*, Hurley again engaged in a process of devising theatre with a team of performers from a subsequent generation, many of whom had trained with the company and been inspired by the original cast members of *Fadó Fadó*. The process of devising was informed by research by each of the individuals in solitude, primarily reading about the life experiences of others, before plotting out the structure and elements of the production under Hurley's leadership. Unlike the individual poet who creates primarily alone, Ahern and Hurley create as part of a community of practice but value moments of solitude that allow them to develop his own ideas or gain inspiration. Describing the process of developing shows with *Siamsa Tíre* in conversation with me, Hurley notes the importance of reading at the start of the artistic process, with each member of the creative team working alone before bringing ideas to the table for collaborative development (interview with author, 25 June 2013).

For Ahern and Heaney, solitude has been part of their creative development. Injured in the USA in 1975, Ahern spent time recuperating at home in Kerry, where he experienced solitude and during which time he composed church music and reflected on the development of *Siamsa Tíre*. Ahern was also significantly influenced by the philosopher John Moriarty (1938-2007), who also came from the same part of rural north Kerry. After resigning from his position at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg in June 1971, Moriarty returned to Ireland where he lived largely in solitude, seeking to connect with nature, the natural world and engage with his soul. This quest for a deeper understanding of the human experience influences Ahern's quest to establish a national folk theatre that reflects both the local and universal in what we understand as culture. Moriarty's desire to embrace solitude and his related quest to engage with the self is echoed in the writings of Anthony Storr:

The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. ... His most

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significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone (2005, xiv).

Poetry and the priesthood may both be viewed as individual pursuits, valuing solitude for reflection and both Ahern and Heaney may be read in the characters and situations in their outputs, explicitly and metaphorically. In keeping with Moriarty, Ahern suggests that we have an instinctiveness to our creativity. Hurley also emphasises research in solitude, principally reading as an individual, as part of his methodology for creative development. His articulation of the moment of inspiration that led to the development of *Oileán* highlights the instinctiveness of creativity.

Whilst the influence of Wordsworth on Heaney is well established and acknowledged by the poet himself, Wordsworthian approaches are also evident in the work of Ahern and, albeit more fleetingly, Hurley. Mirroring the philosophies of Ahern and Moriarty, the desire to the artist to search for a greater insight into the human soul is evident in the poetry of Heaney. Like Ahern and Moriarty, periods of solitude lead to creativity that is then shared with others through artistry. Writing about the purchase of a house in 1988, Heaney remarks:

Equally importantly, they were days when I had time to myself – I was just at the beginning of a sabbatical year from Harvard – and when I retreated under the slate roof and behind the stone walls of the cottage, it became a listening post where I could hear down into the very foundations of my sixth-sensed self (Heaney, 2002, np).

The sixth sense reflects Heaney's awareness of the poetic music, and in this essay he reflects on the inspiration of nature and a spiritual awareness that emerged after the deaths of his parents. Heaney's poetry is also intensely political, if sometimes not explicitly so. Echoing the writing of Declan Kiberd, Daniel Tobin states:

On the one hand, he literally stands within the border of the Irish Republic and looks out over the lough to Northern Ireland. On the other, figurally, he stands within the "free state" of his art, seemingly apart from the urgencies of history—a state of "splendid isolation." (1).

Unconcerned with the politics of Northern Ireland, the work of Ahern and Hurley is also political, albeit in the context of memory and social consciousness, representing the lives of people at the margins, ecology and traditional ways of life that are threatened by modernity. Their work is not seeking just to preserve traditions but to translate, rework and find a role for and understanding of folk culture in contemporary life.

6. Conclusion

Through their poetry and theatrical productions, Heaney, Ahern and Hurley present stories of solitude, sometimes reflective of their own artistic journey in moments of solitude. Their representations affirm that solitude is not only relatable to the individual experience but can relate to the experience of a community. Cooperation in community activities was integral to rural Irish life in the twentieth century but these communities also relied on the skills of individuals, whose skills and talents were sometimes accredited mystical origins. The thatcher, blacksmith and musician were individuals who often engaged in their craft in solitude. While the blacksmith occupied the mysterious and elemental world of the forge, the thatcher and musician were often wandering labourers or travelling masters who were

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close to nature and the natural environment. In solitude, they experienced and benefitted from a connection with an otherworld.

The poetry and theatrical work of the three artists demonstrate an engagement with the theme of solitude, allied with a desire to understand the self, nature and the otherworld. While Hurley is arguably taking on and continuing Ahern's artistic vision as Artistic Director of Siamsa Tíre, he brings new perspectives and influences, arguably moving further from a personal lived experience but utilising his own perspective to attempt to engage audiences with folk culture, traditions and stories. Beyond individual characters, all three artists are reflecting on place and community; solitude is normally a momentary experience in their creative practice. In each of the poems and theatrical productions, we encounter representations of the artists themselves, most impressively in a moment of solitude when they or their characters become inspired. Heaney is not only the child looking on at the thatcher and blacksmith but the poet thatching and hammering words. Ahern is not only the child in the village but the thatcher encountering the spiritual world or the pupil of the master whose skills seem inspired by otherworldly beings. Hurley is the visitor to the island, escaping the present by reading the stories of a generation past or the fiddle player inspired or gifted music by the fairies. In their solitude each becomes the author of their solitude. Solitude provides opportunity for self-reflection and an exploration of the self in their environment and society.

Moments of solitude provide artists with time to engage with their creative thoughts and reflect on their own lived experience. In representing the solitude of others, they are also reflecting on their own solitude. In some instances, such as the three characters examined in this paper, the experience of solitude and the creativity of others reflects the artist themselves. The thatcher, blacksmith and musician are engaged in a craft, draw inspiration from nature and their community, and are imbued with a mystical quality.

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