

**‘Gardens All Wet With Rain’:
Pastoralism in the Music of Van Morrison**

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*Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehr,
nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;
Gesang ist Dasein.*

(True singing, as you teach it, does not concern desire,
nor pursuing anything that can be attained;
Singing is Being).

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* Number 3¹

I

The study of sound in all its manifestations grows apace: sounds of the past and of the present, of the here and of the not-here; sounds small and big, sweet and challenging, personal and public. As the field grows, it encounters a discourse in which the relationship between space and a particular phenomenon – one that is both *sonic* and *temporal* in nature – has proved to be of enduring significance. Performers, audiences, and philosopher-critics have always appreciated the ability of music to invoke a range of spatial effects along a continuum from intimacy to vastness. At the same time, we know that music functions, and therefore ‘means’, differently in relation to different spatial contexts – such indeed is perhaps its defining characteristic. The manipulation of these effects, and their organisation with reference to a range of instrumental, textural, and technological discourses, interfaces with

our wider experience of sound as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. For this reason, music – the most subtle response to the species capacity to generate and to hear sound – has a lot to teach Sound Studies.

These ideas have been taken up by another emerging field: Ecomusicology is concerned in the first instance with the various ways in which music, in all its forms and all its modes (production, distribution, consumption, and so forth), engages with environmental sustainability in the present. Part of that remit concerns a consideration of space – everything from the politics of the global economy in which music represents a variant (though enduring) form of cultural capital, to the phenomenology of the listening body. The concomitant of this is the concretisation of abstract ‘space’ into particular ‘places’ – a process that is, apparently, both inevitable and ideological. As Mark Pedelty writes: “‘Place’ is space made meaningful ... places do not exist independent of our actions but are instead constructed through meaning-making processes and articulations within larger histories, language, texts, myths, and ideologies.”² In the world of twenty-first-century digital capitalism, a world in which every action (even the touch of finger on computer keyboard) has environmental consequences, it behoves us to develop a useable map of the places wherein music ‘happens’: the multi-city rock tour and the bedroom, the festival and the shopping mall, the concert hall and the pub.

But if music ‘happens’ in particular places, it’s also the case that particular places ‘happen’ in music. Once again, Sound Studies, psychogeography, traditional musicology and ecomusicology conjoin in their emphasis on the ability of (musical) sound to generate particular place associations – in effect, to *create* the places with which we engage politically, socially, culturally, and emotionally.³ And again, this process occurs along a continuum from effects which are large, public, and ‘imagined’ (national anthems, for example) to ones which are small, personal, and concrete (the use of personal digital devices, for example). This

primordial and ubiquitous phenomenon has in turn had a fundamental impact upon the way in which the idea of place has operated in human history.

II

Scholarly engagement with these ideas is anticipated, and then exemplified, in Irish cultural history. The study of Ireland's sonic history is in its infancy, but when that field is fully enjoined it's likely to discover an array of soundscapes which are deeply sensitized to the island's unfolding political, social, and cultural experience. A key theoretical strategy in that process will be an assumption of the role that music has played in the construction, the expression and, perhaps most impactfully, the *contention* of Irish identity. Commencing with the amateur antiquarians of the First Celtic Revival (latter eighteenth century), music came to feature as a key resource for the articulation of a peculiar Irish way of being in the modern world. This 'way', moreover, remains both highly mobile (you don't have to be *in* Ireland in order to *be* Irish) and highly relatable (you don't have to *be* Irish in order to *feel* Irish). Such an array of effects bespeaks an ideology that has proved highly effective throughout the modern era in generating a particularly compelling version 'Irish' identity at home and around the world.

Part of that success, and part of Irish music's enduring attraction amongst a dispersed audience, concerns its engagement with ideas of space and place. Setting aside popular and art music for the moment, in the broad field of traditional music we encounter the phenomenon of regional style (Donegal fiddling, for example), of place name tunes ('The Galway Rambler'), and of songs naming and describing particular places (Dublin street ballads). Space is enjoined at a micro level if one considers the disposition of particular tunes and tune clusters – the ways in which they modulate away from and back to a specific home key, for example, or the ways in which different instruments (the conjunction of fiddle, banjo,

and bodhrán, for example) create textural space within a particular performance. But it's also enjoined at a macro, extra-musical level, in a consideration of the kinds of place (kitchen, hall, pub) where music takes place, or the ways in which music mutates as it travels away from 'home' and encounters new socio-cultural (and new musical) contexts.

Ciaran Carson's book *Last Night's Fun* (from which many of the examples in the previous paragraph are culled) claims (in its subtitle) to be 'a book about music, food and time', but it's also an intimate examination of the places, big and small, near and far, wherein traditional Irish music is made, unmade, and then remade again. When trying to describe the distinctive style of fiddling associated with Donegal, for example, Carson writes of a visit to one of the county's famous natural features on the morning after a session:

The bits and pieces of the landscape sidle into place, accommodated by the loops and spirals of the road, its mediated salient and inclines: and now, as at other times, I wonder if the disciplined wildness of Donegal music has anything to do with this terrain. For nature, here, is never wholly pristine, lost and rediscovered; it is under constant dispute; even in its dereliction, it implies a human history ... In Donegal fiddle music, this unconscious irony is transformed into purposeful energy. It is a music of driving, relentless rhythm that teeters on the edge of falling over itself; it seems to almost overtake itself, yet reins in at the brink. A jagged melodic line is nagging at me as we arrive at a high promontory. The sea appears from nowhere. On the right, the immense absurd precipice of Slieve League falls into a tiny silent line of foam, some rocks. How far away is it? The eye has nothing to scale: a human figure, if you could imagine it against this, would be lost; that seagull hovering over there is either miles away, or just within reach. Turning back to the sea again, you can hear it,

if you listen very closely: a vast lonesome whispering that stretches all the way to North America.⁴

Carson broaches an homology here between a particular sound and the natural landscape from whence that sound has emerged; this is ‘applied’ psychogeography. The ‘bits and pieces of the landscape ... loops and spirals of the road’ are directly linked to ‘the disciplined wildness of Donegal music’; the drive to the edge of the sea is linked to that sound’s ‘driving, relentless rhythm’. And it is of course an ineluctably humanized landscape – one that comes (literally) into focus only in relation to the seer who sees, just as its sonic counterpart is implicitly linked to the hearer who hears.

Carson makes no explicit reference here, but the inference is clear: famine, dispossession, poverty, and exile are the bases of that ‘lonesome whispering’ introduced in the final sentence. Such an allusion (and its particular sonic idiom) is linked with ‘the sound of the past’ inferred by cartographer and folklorist Tim Robinson when he writes that ‘[history] has rhythms, tunes, and even harmonies.’⁵ Just as certain sounds are generated by the shape of the landscape, so history generates its own soundtrack – an ‘agonistic multiplicity’⁶ of voices audible (for those willing and able to hear) beyond the cacophony of the present. Robinson’s extended project to ‘listen to the wind’ in (certain parts of) Connemara represents an attempt to retrieve those voices, or at least to bear witness to their historical presence, however faint, however transient.

Music is implicated in both spatial and temporal discourses of Irish identity, then – linked to the landscape from whence it comes (and which it tries in some measure and in some form to embody), and to a past which it claims as valued progenitor. Transposing these discourses into a spectrum of musical tendencies or styles (and retaining Carson’s emphasis on Donegal), we might hear the example of Clannad towards one end: a lush, studio-honed

sound, based in some respects on the Donegal landscape but indelibly linked with the phenomenon of ‘Celtic music’ which provided the soundtrack for the emergence of a virtual global community during the late twentieth century. Towards the other end we might encounter Altan, an ensemble attempting to keep faith with a unique regional tradition while negotiating the demands (touring, recording, etc.) of a modern professional group. If the former claim the morphology of the Donegal landscape as a key component of their peculiar style, the latter are concerned to hear and to preserve a range of ‘voices’ (such as those of the Doherty family) deeply associated with the county’s musical traditions.⁷

III

Van Morrison was born in in Belfast in 1945, three years before Ciaran Carson. The two boys were evidently ‘into the music’ from an early age – albeit very different forms of music, reflecting the different socio-cultural milieu subsisting within the one, precariously peaceful, city. Carson’s muse took him in the direction of Irish traditional music, where he discovered an incredibly rich repository of styles and techniques, practices and personalities – a living tradition which both interfaced with and underpinned his developing literary consciousness. Morrison encountered an alternative set of practices – some (American acoustic blues, skiffle) retaining tentative links with the same folk aesthetic which infused Irish traditional music; some (jazz, rhythm ‘n’ blues, rock) emphasizing a range of alternative values including (amongst other things) novelty, expression, originality, rhythm, etc.

It’s not difficult to hear how Carson’s career connects with a range of ecomusicological concerns. His musical discourse is informed at every level by identifiable issues and practices – space and place, belonging and memory, gesture and the emplaced body, care and preservation – which resonate also in relation to the developing environmental imagination. Such values run counter to (even as they are embedded within) a contemporary

politico-economic system whose response to music (in particular, music-making that is self-consciously spatialized) oscillates – like the same system’s response to environmental despoliation – between exploitation and erosion.⁸ Carson’s ‘Irish music’ is in fact fraught with all manner of risks and dangers – the most pressing of which relate to the tradition’s authenticity.

The characteristic elements of Irish traditional music were formulated in a particular geohistorical context (roughly speaking, Ireland since the eighteenth century); its forms, its very contours, reflected a particular Irish variation on what Mark Pedelty has described as ‘a species-defining trait’ – the need to make music.⁹ Even as it was coming to prominence ‘at home’, however, the music (and the culture which supported it) began to come under increasing pressure as it encountered new practices and new geo-social environments. One need only consider the impact of American recording technology on ‘Irish’ fiddle technique since the 1920s, for example, to appreciate that traditional music instantiates a particularly sensitive example of the divide between tradition and modernity – which is to say: the attempt to care for and preserve a set of valued practices as they are exposed to new environments.

Such an account speaks directly to the ‘eco’ turn in the modern humanities. As currently constituted, ecomusicology is a *field* rather than a *discipline*; it connotes a broad range of approaches and methods which coalesce in relation to a central issue: the function of music in an age of environmental crisis. Its central problematic is the stand-off between received musical systems (what we believe music to be; how it has traditionally worked) and an array of contemporary practices (giant summer festivals, for example) and developments (the replacement of hard formats with streaming, for example) which have combined to implicate those musical systems, however tangentially, in that global crisis.

The issue I would like to broach here concerns, firstly, the extent to which the music of Van Morrison may be approached in ecomusicological terms; and secondly, the different aspects of the musical process which might be adduced in support of any tentative inquiry. With regard to this latter point, it's not possible here (given the constraints of this intervention and of my own critical training) to consider, say, the carbon footprint of Morrison's sixty-year career – all those tours, all that vinyl. My focus, rather, is on an array of issues emerging directly from the music and from the listener's encounter with the music – issues concerning lyrics, arrangement, and genre, as well as Morrison's voice and his unique singing style. Most significantly, I am concerned to delineate three issues which recur across the entirety of his canon: i) the ability of music to invoke, to create and to encapsulate meaningful places; ii) the ability of music to function analogically in relation to a wide range of human concerns, including the ideas of care, preservation, and love which inform modern environmentalism; and iii) the troubled status of pastoralism within the various national traditions (American, British and Irish) which Morrison has encountered during his musical journey.

IV

As an artist Morrison has proved himself adept in a number of different styles and forms over the course of an extended career; he is, as the title of a late album suggests, 'versatile'.¹⁰ His professional career commenced with The Monarchs, a band which, besides ploughing the showband furrow at home, also undertook stints in the UK and Germany.¹¹ Morrison's breakthrough came as blues shouter with Belfast band Them, however – marketed by their label Decca as part of the mid-1960s 'British invasion' of North America.¹² Soon alienated from the relentlessly commercial aspects of the industry, he recorded and released *Astral Weeks* in 1968. Although he has consistently disdained the designation, this album

established Morrison as one of the most important ‘rock’ musicians of the period, and introduced many of the elements that would come to be regarded as part of his signature style: rambling allusive lyrics; predominantly live recording; employment of brilliant musical collaborators; relatively long songs; and a unique singing style which featured extensive repetition and ‘jazz’ phrasing.

The recording sessions for *Astral Weeks* are the stuff of rock legend; for the majority of the tracks, Morrison apparently hired the personnel, ran through the songs briefly, refrained from discussing with the assembled musicians what their contributions should be, and then instructed the engineer to record the ensemble live.¹³ Although Morrison’s remains the presiding ‘voice’ on *Astral Weeks*, there’s a sense throughout of ‘participative democracy and individual self-development’¹⁴ which seems to signal the presence of a less calculating, less authoritative aesthetic. In terms of production and performance, then, *Astral Weeks* seems more disposed towards the basic ecological values of interconnectedness, mutual support, and care (in the dual senses of ‘caring’ and ‘careful’) for the (musical) environment.

Astral Weeks also introduced a number of themes which Morrison would continue to explore on subsequent recordings, and which (alongside the musical attributes listed above) would come to constitute his standing as a modern popular music artist. ‘Themes’ is perhaps misleading; ‘moods’ might be more accurate, as in the case of the longer tracks on the album – ‘Astral Weeks’ (7.04), ‘Cyprus Avenue’ (6.57), ‘Madame George’ (9.42) and ‘Ballerina’ (7.00) – vocal, lyrics, and music combine to produce an ambience that is calm and restrained, with overtones of mystery and nostalgia.¹⁵ The opening track establishes the prevailing mood, insofar as it is relatively slow in tempo and deploys a predominantly acoustic texture – acoustic rhythm and lead guitars, shaker, vibraphone, double bass, flute, occasional strings – that is nuanced yet restrained. A simple two-chord structure (A major to D major), played in a bouncy 6/8 time signature, is repeated throughout, with an occasional modulation to the

relative (F#) minor during the ‘chorus’. The playing is loose, Morrison having apparently ceded control of each part to the contributing musicians; Richard Davis’s bass, for example, is much more melodic (and much more audible in the mix) than would be usual for contemporary popular music.

Morrison’s vocals are located at the centre of the mix, and are highly dynamic in terms of phrasing, range, and volume – moving from full-throated ‘rock’ singing (‘There you go’, 2.08-10) to a whisper (‘in another time, in another place’ (6.37-42). His enunciation is frequently imprecise, militating against the notion of a specific ‘message’ which the listener can hear and process straightforwardly. The lyrics likewise resist the notion of a recognisable character with whom the listener can identify, or a narrative within which such a character might operate. A relationship of sorts between ‘I’ and ‘You’ is broached, but we do not appear to be operating in the realm of the typical love song; instead we encounter oblique imagery and obscure phrases:

If I venture in the slipstream
Between the viaducts of your dream
Where immobile steel rims crack
And the ditch in the back roads stop
Could you find me?
Would you kiss my eyes?
And lay me down in silence easy
To be born again.

Two of the songs on *Astral Weeks* (‘Cyprus Avenue’ and ‘Madame George’) make specific reference to Belfast; although this was not the first time the city had featured in Morrison’s

writing, it was an important early statement in what would become a recurring theme within his music – the need (forlorn and frustrated though it be) to recover the lost landscapes of childhood. Just as his contemporary Seamus Heaney, in one of the most potent opening statements of any poetic career, was promising ‘to dig’ with his pen, Morrison had seemingly made the decision to dig with his guitar. These early songs capture a sense of Belfast just before ‘the Troubles’ and the almost complete militarization of the urban landscape. This was a city (as described by Gerald Dawe) that was industrialized and precisely zoned in terms of class and religion, full of music of different kinds, battered during the Second World War but hopeful for the future.¹⁶ It was an evocative, ambivalent landscape for the growth of any artistic imagination; and as suggested earlier, Morrison’s musical invocation of Belfast, here and throughout his career, is part of the process whereby the city is imaginatively mapped, for the artist himself, certainly, but also for the countless number of listeners who have engaged with his music over more than half a century.

Morrison’s landscape of the mind is a place where love, nature and enchantment (of a kind that can only be truly experienced in childhood) enter into a mutually informing relationship.¹⁷ The song on *Astral Weeks* which sings most resonantly to this theme is ‘Sweet Thing’. It’s a love song, a song promising healing after pain, and a song in which nature is both backdrop and contributor to a kind of mystical experience associated with childhood and a rejection of adult rationality. Here also we encounter a familiar emphasis on *the thing* itself rather than *the image* of the thing; ‘feeling it’ – in his case, feeling the music – rather than worrying about technique or tradition or anything else which distracts from the experience. As such, Morrison aligns with a pastoral aesthetic tradition stretching (in its most modern iteration) back to Wordsworth, and subject to all manner of modulation and nuance in the intervening years: *Symbolism*, phenomenology, existentialism, or the Beat movement which provided such an immediate influence on the emergence of his own creative imagination.¹⁸

V

The lyric of 'Sweet Thing' refers to 'hedges', 'clear clean water' and 'a bluer ocean'; its primary setting is 'gardens all misty wet with rain'.¹⁹ Although there are references to 'streets' and 'ferry boats', this is predominantly a pastoral environment; and the garden is an imagined space that Morrison would continue to husband and harvest throughout his career. Before examining some of those later instances, it's worth acknowledging the extent of garden imagery in the popular music of the 1960s, and noting its provenance in various musical and ideological discourses.

Reference to the Beats at the end of the previous section alerts us to the emergence during the 1960s of a counter-cultural impulse, registered across a wide range of lifestyle and institutional contexts. One such context was the hippy movement which set itself against a socio-political formation (including popular culture) widely perceived as restricted and restrictive. The popular music favoured by the 'flower power' generation (which Morrison was, at least in terms of age, a part of) provided a space for directed collective action, for individual expression, and for the insistence of a utopianism operating against the grain of Cold War fear and loathing.²⁰ Drawing on African American blues on the one hand and a much modified European ballad tradition on the other, rock music instantiated patterns of repetition and textural eclecticism which opposed the hegemony of traditional western tonality. In lyrical terms, neo-pastoralism was widespread; in music by artists as diverse as Neil Young and John Denver, Captain Beefheart and the Beach Boys, the idea of a return to nature frequently featured as an alternative to a way of life that had left the world on the brink (on the eve) of destruction.²¹

A related tradition, also influencing the musical imagination of the 1960s, was the transatlantic folk movement. In the United Kingdom, the folk 'revival' of the twentieth

century represented a response to the depredations of the modern world – the industrial revolution, wars of unprecedented destruction, and the loss of a mode of life perceived to be more valuable and more authentic. This impulse, moreover, outgrew its ‘folk’ origins and made itself felt across the entire spectrum of Anglo-American musical activity (including the art and popular traditions) where it continued to inform a particular attitude or intention on the part of music-makers and listeners. ‘Neither Nick Drake nor Kate Bush nor Talk Talk sang old folk songs,’ wrote British music critic Rob Young in his book *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain’s Visionary Music*, ‘but their music resonates with Romantic yearning for an intense communion with nature and a desire to reclaim a stolen innocence.’²² This latter description, as well as the repeated trope of ‘retreat to a secret garden’,²³ will be familiar to anyone with Van Morrison’s extended canon.

Generations of left-leaning critics have attacked Cecil Sharp, the doyen of the English folk movement, for what they regard as his blatant, patently bourgeois invention of a pastoral tradition that had limited basis in reality, and his wilful ignorance of urban proletarian culture.²⁴ In the same vein, in his book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) Leo Marx looked to expose a pernicious pastoralism abroad within American cultural history – a simplistic impulse born of ‘infantile wish-fulfilment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia, and a naïve, anarchic primitivism’, in thrall to the processes of industrialization and environmental despoliation that it ostensibly opposed.²⁵ In light of these critiques, it’s important to acknowledge that the garden is not a straightforwardly positive space in ecological terms; it is, rather, an ambivalent place where an *idea* of nature is produced as a function of competing regimes of human desire. As it evolved into the modern era, the image of the garden has tended to be produced within a continuum of natural spaces – somewhere between ‘true’ wilderness (however defined) and the highly managed spaces (urban parks, for example) of the modern city. ‘A garden is vegetation under control,’ as Paul

Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts put it, 'plant life held in various stages of ecological arrest.'²⁶ And it's this element (human control of the 'natural' environment) that haunted the image of the garden produced in the discourses of both the hippy and the English folk movements.

The movements shared a sense of music as a utopian art form whose forms symbolically prefigured a better future. The abiding anxiety of each was a recognition that their shared constituent image – the garden – was in fact based on an irretrievable (because idealized) past. We hear this conjoined anxiety on two songs recorded by Canadian / Californian artist Joni Mitchell for her album *Ladies of the Canyon*, and released as A- and B-sides of a seven-inch single in April 1970.²⁷ 'Big Yellow Taxi' offers an image of nature helpless before remorseless urbanisation. 'Paradise', the Garden of Eden, has been paved to make way for a parking lot; all the trees have been moved to 'a tree museum'; modern agricultural practices have created tainted food products ('spots on my apples') whilst endangering the very life forms ('the birds and the bees') on which those products depend. The warning to the listener is clear, and reverberates throughout modern environmentalist discourse: 'you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone'.

The B-side is widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful statements on the aspirations of the hippy movement. Mitchell's song refers to the Woodstock Festival which took place before 400,000 people in upstate New York over three days in August 1969. That festival became in many ways the defining event of the decade's countercultural movement – an image of chaos and decadence for some, a message of love and hope for others. In Mitchell's song, the 'child of God' encountered in the first verse wants to 'live out on the land' in order to try to 'get [his] soul free'; wishing to free herself from 'the smog' of the city, the singer-protagonist joins him. Like him, she feels to be part of something bigger and older than herself, 'a cog in something turning'. Different temporalities are at work: 'the time of

year’ and ‘the time of man’. The task at hand, insofar as it can be defined, is ‘to get ourselves back to the garden’ – which is to say: to resist the cultural energies of the military-industrial complex, and to displace ‘man’ from his self-appointed position at the centre of planetary life.

The music for ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ emanates from the ‘folk’ persona which attached itself to Mitchell during the earliest phase of her career. It’s guitar-led, featuring one of those modal tunings which allowed Mitchell to create the enriched harmonic effects which characterize many of her early recordings. The simplicity of its three-chord pattern is matched by a simple verse /chorus structure, repeated four times. The final verse brings it all back home, linking the fragility of the environment to the vulnerability of the private sphere. The song has an eminently hummable melody sung in the bright key of E major, and a ‘pop’ hook (‘don’t it always seem to go’) that attaches itself to the ear. The discrepancy between the seriousness of the lyric and the chirpiness of the music traps the listener in an invidious position – singing along with planetary destruction.

If ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ is somewhat conflicted – caught between the optimism of the summer of love and its disintegration in the face of establishment re-action – there’s no such ambiguity about its B-side. The music for ‘Woodstock’ is played on electric piano (on which Mitchell was an equally idiosyncratic adept), and represents an important staging post on the journey that she was making away from her acoustic folk persona to the jazz experiments of the 1970s. The hesitant opening resolves into a restless E Flat minor, an unfriendly key for folk musicians. In musical terms, however, the most striking thing is Mitchell’s voice which, heretofore widely celebrated for its control and sensitivity, seems harsh and occasionally discordant. Brooding multi-tracked backing vocals (sung by Mitchell herself) haunt the spaces between chorus and verse, preparing the listener for a coda in which the voice, improvising repetitions of the traditional pop ‘doo doo’ refrain, seems constantly on the brink

of collapse. It's a challenging listen – a dark, fretful rejoinder to the breeziness of 'Big Yellow Taxi'. Each song adumbrates one recurring strand within contemporary ecological thinking; and each features garden imagery as both metaphor and metonym for an ecology considered by many contemporary cultural creatives to be under attack.

Morrison was to share a stage with Mitchell in 1976 as part of the famous concert filmed by Martin Scorsese and released as *The Last Waltz*, and he was familiar with both the east and the west coast milieu broached in Mitchell's record.²⁸ Although the image of the garden in 'Sweet Thing' is related to those invoked in 'Big Yellow Taxi' and 'Woodstock', it is at the same time (and for reasons partially explored during the earlier sections of this essay) a significantly different prospect – both musically and lyrically – and imagines the subject in a significantly different relationship with the natural environment.

VI

Morrison continued to develop his signature style in a series of albums released during the 1970s and early 1980s. Many of these recordings explore ideas broached on *Astral Weeks* – ideas concerning the spaces of childhood, the possibility of spirituality in a material world, and the role of music as in some senses a special resource enabling access to these spaces and possibilities. As Northern Ireland descended into war, hatred and alienation, Morrison continued to sing about peace, love and understanding – as well as the various ways in which, and places where, one could encounter these elusive experiences: in Ireland and England, in literature and music, in body and mind. During this period Morrison's restive (and resolutely unsystematic) research exposed him to a range of influences (Cyril Scott, Alice Bailey, William Blake, Seamus Heaney) which he attempted to channel through his work.

The garden remained a recurring trope, symbolising a place of peace, a place where the persistent antinomies of modern life might be reconciled. Perhaps the most powerful

articulation of this trope is the track ‘In the Garden’, included on the album *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher* (1986). As with ‘Sweet Thing’, the song envisages reconciliation after sundering, with the garden (once again ‘wet with rain’) providing the setting for both. Natural imagery vies with mystical language as the predominant discourse, until they are integrated in an extended coda:

No guru, no method, no teacher,
Just you and I and nature and the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost
In the garden, in the garden, wet with rain.²⁹

In fact, the lyrics don’t bear close scrutiny, as the ‘guru, method and teacher’ decried in the first line are reinstated in the overt Christian imagery of the second. What else is ‘the Father’ if not a ‘guru’? What else is ‘the Son’ if not a teacher? And what else is Christianity if not a method? More significant in this instance is the return to the garden as in every sense the ‘natural’ location for the kind of spiritual experience pursued by Morrison as part of an ongoing mission to integrate his own memories and predilections.

The album version of ‘In the Garden’ clocks in at 5.47, but it was in its extended live renditions that it really came into its own. Morrison was increasingly aware (under the influence of his reading) of the power of music to enact physiological and psychological changes in the listening subject.³⁰ And so, the live version of the song (which was a staple of his concerts after 1986) became an attempt to produce a range of specific salutary effects in his audience – as he told a journalist at the time:

I take you through a definite meditation process which is a form of transcendental meditation ... You should have some degree of tranquillity by the time you get to the

end. It only takes about ten minutes to do this process ... I used to do this quite a bit. For instance, when I did this in the sixties, we'd get to a place where there's a meditative part, say at the end of 'Cyprus Avenue'. The whole of 'Cyprus Avenue' was just a build-up to bring it to a point where we could go into meditation.³¹

Music is the route, the garden is the destination – offering the rewards (rest, peace, harmony) that modern life works to deny. This musical quest was then augmented by Morrison's return to the questions of civic (Belfast), provincial (Ulster) and national (Irish) identity which he had broached on earlier recordings such as *Astral Weeks* (1968) and *Veedon Fleece* (1974),³² and which had never entirely disappeared from his imagination in the intervening years. Songs such as 'Cleaning Windows', 'Northern Muse (Solid Ground)' and 'Celtic Ray' from the album *Beautiful Vision* (1982)³³ signalled a self-conscious turn that culminated in the *Irish Heartbeat* album, recorded with traditional group the Chieftains in 1988.³⁴

There are no gardens as such on *Irish Heartbeat*; instead the lyrics broach a variety of 'Irish' spaces – country roads and city streets, counties and towns, woods and mountains, lakes and rivers, fairs and markets. It's as if the concept of the garden belongs to a different dimension of his persona – the American one broached in hippy rhetoric, perhaps, or the one encountered in the English pastoral tradition which flows from the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge through the folk revival of the twentieth century.

We hear all these different influences and energies integrated, however, on the track entitled 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' from *The Healing Game* (1997).³⁵ This song stands as part of Morrison's ongoing response to the English folk mystique, involving poets such as Blake and Wordsworth, and encapsulated in imagined locations such as Avalon. It's based on Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, a novel published in 1908 at the highpoint of a renaissance in English occultism. Grahame's story is in part a 'childish' riposte to the

depiction of the spiritual world – frequently symbolized in the figure of the Greek god Pan – as an inimical power operating just beyond the apprehension of our material senses. In the chapter entitled ‘The Piper at the Gates of Dawn’ the Rat and the Mole encounter Pan after a night searching the Thames waterways for a lost child; and as dawn approaches, the threshold between worlds is signalled by the sound of magical music:

‘It’s gone!’ sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. ‘So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has aroused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever ...’.³⁶

The searchers find the missing otter nestled between the piper’s hooves, at which point dawn breaks, Pan disappears, and the ‘holy’³⁷ music transforms into the wind whispering through the river reeds.

On an album that is ambitious in instrumental and orchestral terms, ‘Piper at the Gates of Dawn’ is actually quite restrained, featuring only acoustic guitar (played by Morrison in the loose style familiar from *Astral Weeks*), dobro guitar (Peter O’Hanlon), piano (Phil Coulter), tin whistle and uilleann pipes (Paddy Maloney), and a single harmonised backing vocal (Brian Kennedy). Harking back to the performative freedom of *Astral Weeks*, the arrangement resonates closely with a narrative that sets the simple everyday pleasures of friendship against a numinous power residing just beyond the senses. Morrison’s words follows the literary contours of Grahame’s narrative very closely, including the latter’s focus on the reverberation of Pan’s ‘heavenly music’³⁸ in the sounds of the everyday world (wind-song and birdsong). Morrison thus discovers in Grahame’s text confirmation of an intuition that had been implicit in his own work since *Astral Weeks* – namely, that music resonates in

some mysterious sense to our condition as material beings who are nonetheless possessed of a defining spiritual dimension.

The Wind in the Willows is of course a very English meditation on this condition, rendered in this instance by an artist who would go on to embrace the imperial honour bestowed upon him by his sovereign leader (here comes the knight, indeed). It's all the more interesting, then, that the music for 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' should be provided by an all-Irish band – three of whom (Coulter, Maloney and Kennedy) were already established artists; and more interesting still that the musical representation of 'the piper' chosen by Morrison on this particular recording should be played by an iconic musician producing one of the most distinctively 'Irish' sounds to be heard in the modern acoustic soundscape.

Morrison had worked closely with Paddy Maloney during the recording of *Irish Heartbeat* (1988) – an album heard by many as part of an attempt to harmonise the different 'Irish' elements of his cultural inheritance. Dubliner Maloney is a master of the uilleann pipes – an instrument which, despite its name, is signally unrelated to the Pan Pipes; the sound, playing technique, and iconography of the two instruments are in fact very different. On 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn', however, the entry of uilleann pipes (2.27) signals an accommodation between the English pastoral tradition to which Morrison was so attracted and a particular 'Irish' sound which, although not part of his own natural musical inheritance, he had come to regard as deeply enmeshed with the spiritual questing that has characterised his career.³⁹ In such a moment, the mystical music of the 'willows',⁴⁰ is linked, for example, to the 'tall ranks of reeds that bow and scrape and whisper among themselves',⁴¹ heard by Tim Robinson as he walks the hill near his home in the Connemara village of Roundstone, insofar as each signals a relation of reciprocal care between the listening human subject and the environment.

VII

Since the late 1950s Van Morrison has been using music to channel various energies and impulses that are abroad within the modern world. The discretely musical aspect of these energies and impulses (his strong response to twentieth-century American music, for example, or his later discovery of Irish music) is linked to a cultural tradition that is longer, deeper, and wider, and which concerns (amongst other things) the ability to transpose space into place; the negotiation of a mind / body divide; a repressed yet inalienable need to care for the past and for the future; the role and status of technology; the strangeness of language; and the economy of love and fear.

Perhaps Morrison's greatest contribution, however, has been his insistent confirmation of *the gift* of music – not in the sense of being a 'gifted' musician (although he certainly is that), but in the much more complex and risky sense of accepting the gift of music from wherever or whomever it comes – the past, the Other, or the unknown; of being willing to convert that music into meaning; and of being willing to relate the meanings thus generated to the situations in which 'we' find ourselves as well as the experiences which 'we' undergo. Music is much more than an enlightening factor in an ongoing and deepening sense of ecological crisis. As perhaps the most human of the cultural forms to have emerged during the Anthropocene, it's a fundamental aspect of our production of, and response to, the environments in which we do our thinking, our fearing, our loving, and our dying.

NOTES

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), trans. Martyn Crucefix (London: Enitharmon Press, 2012), Number 3, pp.18-19.
2. Mark Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), pp.20-1.

3. In the 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' (*Les Livres Nues*, No. 6, 1955), Guy Debord defined psychogeography as 'the study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (n.p.).
4. Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun: A Book about Music, Food and Time* (1996; London: Pimlico, 1997), pp.169-70.
5. Tim Robinson, *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (2006; London: Penguin, 2007), p.2.
6. Robinson 2007, p.2.
7. See the entries on Altan (pp.7-8), Clannad (p.73), and John Doherty (pp.106-7) in *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, ed. by Fintan Vallely (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999).
8. The further delineation of such a system (which I'm happy to refer to as 'neoliberalism') in relation to ideas of music and space is beyond the scope of this article.
9. Pedelty 2012, p.11.
10. Van Morrison, *Versatile* (Caroline, 2017).
11. See David Burke, *A Sense of Wonder: Van Morrison's Ireland* (London: Jawbone, 2013), pp.57-9.
12. Brian Hinton, 'The Story of Them', in *Celtic Crossroads: The Art of Van Morrison* (London: Sanctuary, 1997), pp.39-74.
13. Hinton 1997, pp.88-9.
14. David Ingram, *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960* (MS, 2009), p.33.
15. Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks* (Warner Bros., 1968).

16. In his essay 'The Burning Ground: Van Morrison and Belfast', in *The Rest is History* (Newry: Abbey Press, 1998, pp.11-58), Dawe wrote: 'From a very early age, Belfast children learned their place in this scheme of things based largely upon their physical surroundings; assimilating architectural and civic barriers of class as much as absorbing, and sometimes rejecting, or transcending as best they could, the discreet signs of religious – and hence, political identity' (p.20). On the role of folk music in the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland during the 1960s see Stephen R. Miller, *Sounding Dissent: Music, Resistance, and Irish Republicanism* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming).
17. In his book *Landmarks* (London: Penguin, 2016), Robert Macfarlane writes of the ability of language to 'restore a measure of wonder to our relations with nature' (p.26). In terms which conjoin Morrison and Gaston Bachelard, he also describes 'Childish' (pp.315-28) as both a language and a particular attitude – enchanted and astonished in equal measure – towards place.
18. See the numerous references to Jack Kerouac and the American Beat movement throughout Peter Mills' *Hymns to the Silence: Inside the Words and Music of Van Morrison* (New York: Continuum, 2010).
19. Brian Hinton refers to the garden as Morrison's favourite image (*Celtic Crossroads: The Art of Van Morrison* [London: Sanctuary, 1997], p.13), while Peter Mills describes 'In the Garden' as one of the singer's 'summative songs', in which certain recurring phrases or images are fully foregrounded (2010, p.107).
20. See the introduction, 'Fabled Foursome, Disappearing Decade' in Ian MacDonald's *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (London: Continuum, 1994), pp.1-34.
21. Ingram 2009, *passim*.

22. Rob Young, *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p.7.
23. Young 2010, p.5.
24. See Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (1993; Leeds: No Masters Co-Operative Ltd, 2010). For an ecocritical variation on this critique see David Ingram, 'Ecocriticism and Traditional English Folk Music' in Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe (eds), *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture Nature* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.221-32.
25. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.11. Marx compared this model with the 'complex' pastoralism (p.6) he discerned in the work of writers such as Hawthorne and Thoreau.
26. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2011), p.132.
27. Joni Mitchell, *Ladies of the Canyon* (Reprise, 1970).
28. Having resided in Woodstock for a number of years, Morrison moved to San Francisco in April 1971.
29. Van Morrison, *No Guru, No Method, No Teacher* (Mercury, 1986).
30. The idea of music's affective power, and in particular its ability to induce sympathetic emotional states in the listening subject, has its roots in Plato, but has been inflected in many directions – from the mysticism of Cyril Scott (*Music and its Secret Influence* [1933; Toronto: Inner Traditions, 2013]) to the popular neuro-science of Oliver Sachs, as evidenced in books such as *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage, 2008).
31. Quoted in Hinton 1997, p.255.

32. Van Morrison, *Veedon Fleece* (Warner Bros., 1974).
33. Van Morrison, *Beautiful Vision* (Mercury / Warner Bros., 1982).
34. Van Morrison and the Chieftains, *Irish Heartbeat* (Mercury, 1988).
35. Van Morrison, *The Healing Game* (Polydor, 1997).
36. Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908; London: HarperCollins, 1995), p.143.
37. Grahame 1995, p.145.
38. Grahame 1995, p.144.
39. In *The Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1998), Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin describes the uilleann pipes as 'one of the world's most distinctive multi-reed instruments' (p.74).
40. According to Annie Gauger, Grahame chose the rare 'willow' to avoid a clash with *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published by W.B. Yeats in 1899. In fact, Methuen were advertising Grahame's novel as *The Wind in the Reeds* until the week before it went to press. See *The Annotated Wind in the Willows* (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), p.29.
41. Robinson 2007, p.6.