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Ortha an Ghreama as a Lesser-known Irish Traveller Narrative: Symbolic Inversion and Resistance

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Abstract:

Irish folk tradition includes a long-established discourse whereby the formerly nomadic or semi-nomadic group known as Irish Travellers, who comprise a tiny minority within Irish society are depicted not only as quintessential “outsiders” but also as a projective mechanism for the hates and fears of the settled (non-Traveller) community. This essay examines a counter-tradition in Irish oral tradition that rejects these essentialist and reductionist representations and constructs Travellers very differently. This alternative portrayal sets Travellers within a very different discourse, one where they serve as a counter-hegemonic undercurrent in Irish society that remains symbolically central despite attempts at its suppression. This more radical and nuanced discourse, one whereby that which is initially deemed lowly or subordinate is inverted and becomes paramount, is circumscribed within the traditions of symbolic inversion and holy wisdom as long-established in other European countries. This counter-hegemonic discourse is linked to a discussion concerning the philosophical possibilities for a movement beyond the politics of difference that is constitutive of Traveller Otherness or alterity and the potential for a more nuanced or postmodernist theorisation of Self/Other relations.

Keywords: cultural images, Irish Traveller minority, postmodernist, Self/Other relations, symbolic resistance,

Irish Travellers are an ethnic minority who have traditionally lived on the margins of mainstream Irish society. It is estimated that there are about 30,000 Travellers living in the Republic of Ireland with a further 2000 in Northern Ireland. There are also significant communities of Travellers who claim Irish descent living in Britain and the United States. They are distinct from the surrounding population due to a range of differing cultural attributes including family structure, language, employment patterns and a preference for mobility that is inherent in the very ascription they attach to themselves. Recent decades have frequently seen a deterioration in relations between the Irish

Traveller and non-Traveller (“Settled” communities). Irish oral history from the earliest times is replete with references to “fir siúil”¹ and “mná siúil”². Some of these people were bards, musicians or herbalists. Others were tradesmen such as travelling metalworkers, tinsmiths, horse dealers, sieve-makers, journeymen labourers, stonemasons, rope-makers, animal doctors, tailors, circus people and fairground entertainers – to name but a few categories of people. Some people travelled alone while many others travelled with their immediate family or in larger extended family groups. At least some of these people were the antecedents of the group known until recently in Ireland as “tinkers”, now called Travellers. The one element which united all of these different groups was the fact that they were nomadic for all or part of the year. Ireland was a British colonial outpost for 800 years and British chroniclers and historians didn’t make any distinction between Irish Travelling groups (with specific occupations and languages) and other Irish who travelled for a living, tending to assign them under generic headings such as “wild Irish” “masterless men” and “women,” “roving beggars” etc. As a consequence the history of Irish Travellers that has come down to us in the English language is primarily from the “elite” or the “establishment” (British sources) and includes little in the way of information about who the different nomadic groups were in Ireland and how they relate to the people classified under the ascription “Irish Travellers” today. There is a strong likelihood that the group known as “Irish Travellers” today are an amalgam of a range of differing groups that existed in previous centuries. Of the various travelling cultures that did exist prior to this, we know of just a handful where there are references to a separate group culture and language, references which survived in the minority Irish language down to around the 1940s. These include travelling tinkers who spoke Cant or Gammon, travelling stonemasons who spoke Béarlagar and Saor (Stonemason’s Cant), travelling tailors who spoke Tailor’s Cant and fairground and circus people who spoke Parlari and sometimes Romanes (Romani). The harsh truth is that we still know very little about the history or cultures of the various travelling groups in Ireland prior to the twentieth century.

One thing we do know however is that there has been a long history of anti-Traveller prejudice and a range of negative discourses with respect to Travellers in Ireland and abroad and that this discourse infused the Irish storytelling tradition as much as it did other aspects of Irish culture. Narratives that reinforced an anti-Traveller mindset amongst the settled community were common until the 1950s and 1960s and the pre-television and pre-urbanized Ireland, and survived longer in more remote and Irish-speaking areas. These folktales including the “Nail” and the “Pin” folktales – which have been explored by Ó Héalaí (1977 [1974-1976], 1985) and Hayes (2006) amongst others - assigned to Travellers the status of “negative Other” and acted as a justification or validation for their marginalisation from mainstream society. The negative stereotyping, and the reductionist views of Travellers that accompanied these folktales undoubtedly had a significant effect on both the settled and Travelling communities and the fact that storytellers from both communities related the stories (e.g. the Traveller storyteller telling stories that denigrated his own community) only reinforces the fact that these narratives bolstered popular beliefs, influenced a public discourse with an increasingly assimilationist bent and validated the exclusion of Travellers from “mainstream” society. Perhaps the most damaging belief articulated by these narratives is that the alleged wretchedness and poverty of Travellers’ lives was justified because of their alleged misconduct. They “deserve” their punishment because they brought it upon themselves. The marginalization of Travellers from the majority society was “justified” and the assignation of Travellers to the role of “negative Other” bolstered. Trav-

¹ fir siúil (Travelling men, wanderers, lit: “walking men”).

² mná siúil (Travelling women, wanderers, lit: “walking women”).

ellers are portrayed as a negative “Other” because they have disturbed the social order of things. These folktales are seen to serve a similar function to mythic stories of monsters, foreigners or “the stranger [...]” that “frequently operates as a limit-experience for humans trying to identify themselves over and against others” (Kearney 2003, 3). While strong prejudices already existed against Travellers within public discourse for many decades anyway, many would argue that these have been exacerbated further in recent years with increased “tension” between both the Traveller and settled communities (often congruent with societal changes, in a fast-urbanizing society) – as relating to land usage, schooling, housing amongst a range of other issues.

Travellers have resisted attempts at their “mythic” demonization however and unsurprisingly, they helped to propagate narratives which portray themselves in a non-prejudicial light. Irish folk narratives also include a countervailing “mythic” tradition, one that is far lesser-known, which countenance that charity and hospitality be displayed towards Travellers. In this tradition Travellers are frequently seen as “Others” who maintain a certain balance in the majority society by virtue of their “Other” or outsider status as moral arbiters on the actions (e.g. generosity or otherwise) of the majority society. They are also the instigators of a powerful form of symbolic inversion where their “Other” status is shown to be a disguise for their function as “holy people” or shamans. This countervailing narrative tradition is the subject of this essay.

This counter-tradition manifests itself in a story entitled *Ortha an Ghreama* (The Stitch Charm) where Jesus and Mary act as shamans or healers, “outsiders” who morally arbitrate on the actions of the settled community. There are many different variants of this charm/prayer, which is preserved in the form of a story³. Amongst the most common settings for this story is one whereby the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus, in the guise of Travellers, are travelling through the countryside and seeking lodgings for night. Occasionally they are in exile in Egypt or running for their lives from King Herod. They seek lodgings for the night and find “hospitality” refused to them, in most cases by the woman of the house. The man of the house meets them as they are about to take to the road again and he makes a bed of flax for them in the corner of the house or in an outhouse. During the night a terrible pain afflicts the man, and the woman of the house asks the Travellers if they can do anything to save him. Jesus or more often the Virgin Mary provide the cure while reciting the moral-laden “*déilín*”⁴:

A rude wife with a gentle husband
She put the Son of God lying in the flax,
Mary’s Mantle and the Five Fingers of Jesus
to be placed on the site of the stitch when
it is at its most painful. (IFC, Iml. 459: 233)⁵

In some variants of this narrative the backdrop for healing is the Nativity, a cataclysmic event which shapes the future history of the very world itself. The fact that the Travellers in the guise of holy people are refused hospitality when the Saviour of the world is about to be born emphasizes the churlishness of their would-be hosts and is itself indicative of the impor-

³ *Ortha an Ghreama* is one of the most common charms/prayers in the popular traditions of both Ireland and Scotland.

⁴ *déilín* – (Irish: literally “rigmarole”, “sing-song” or “litany”). The *déilíní* uttered in narrative-charms.

⁵ Note on Abbreviations: IFC = Irish Folklore Commission; Iml. = volume (refers to volume number in the Irish Folklore Commission Archive). For example (Iml. 97: 51) refers to volume 97, page 51. These volumes were accessed by hand on the microfiche reels of the IFC Collection as available to students and researchers in the James Hardiman Library, NUIG, Galway.

tance of the virtue of charity. In other variants the context of the Travellers plight is equally profound and urgent. They are the Holy Family in flight from King Herod and in fear of their lives, a situation which makes the refusal of their request for lodgings all the more serious. The charm-story known as *Ortha an Ghreama* can be linked to the “Nail/Pin” stories because in each tale either Jesus or the Virgin Mary act as a moral arbiter who assign a negative “recompense” or punishment – sometimes in the form of a troublesome spouse – to those who are ungenerous towards them when they seek hospitality. It can also be linked to a very old discourse in the Irish folk tradition where the Traveller/beggar is a holy personage in disguise. *Ortha an Ghreama* also directly elucidates the central role that Travelling people played in the healing tradition of Ireland over many centuries. It also links with older ideas of good luck/bad luck and what is often defined as “karma” in other cultural contexts and traditions of symbolic inversion on a cultural and societal level. I also agree that these narratives echo or encompass traits that can be found in a wide range of spiritual traditions, with reference to the “holy fool” – be these traditions Christian, Orthodox, Jewish etc.

An important element of the Russian Orthodox tradition of the “holy fool” or *jurodstvo* in its earliest forms was that the fool purposely does crazy, bizarre, illogical or even (apparently) immoral things so as to somehow acquire thereby greater humility in the eyes of the spectators or followers once unmasked. As evidenced in this discussion of *Ortha an Ghreama*, one of the fundamental tenets of “holy wisdom” as encompassed through symbolic inversion, is the notion of contradiction and paradox as expressed in a para-normal or supernatural context and often through contradictions incorporating wisdom vs. foolishness, purity vs. impurity, veneration vs. derision (on the part of the spectators), humility vs. aggression and tradition vs. wandering or nomadism.) Interestingly, with respect to twentieth-century literature, the theatrical work of Italian playwright Dario Fo – where what is initially deemed lowly or subordinate is inverted and becomes paramount – is probably one of the best modern referents to the tradition of symbolic inversion and holy wisdom, as elucidated in these apparently simple or straightforward folk tales or narratives.

In the following example of *Ortha an Ghreama* there is a slight twist to the normal pattern because the “woman of the house,” in addition to being churlish, is also the recipient of the “punishment” in the form of physical sickness:

Prayer against the Stitch

It was a cold wet night in the depths of winter and heavy snow was beating down... Such a night of cold and rain had never been seen even within the memory of the oldest people. It was an exceptional night without doubt, the kind of night that you wouldn't want the worst of your animals to be out in, never mind a Christian... In the body of the tumult and the wind there was a poor Travelling woman walking slowly along the rough road, a young child by her side... “God's help is always at hand, Mother. I see a light a close to us now. Let's go towards it.” “We must get lodging and a bed from the people of the house”, said the child. There were only two people in the house... The man of the house was a quiet and honest man but that wasn't true of his wife. She was a rough, hard-hearted person. When a knock came on the door, she got up from where she was sitting and opened the door to the Traveller woman. She had no idea beforehand that it would be a Traveller woman at the door. If she had known beforehand, there's no fear that she would have opened the door for her. The Traveller woman greeted her and asked her in the name of the Lord – whether she and the child could come in out of the storm. “We have no place here for Travellers”, said the woman of the house sarcastically. “We have neither a space nor a bed for you. Indeed but it's funny time that you come looking for lodgings. Hit the road now and go somewhere else.”... She was setting off again when the good-hearted man of the house called out to her. “Maybe we can find you a place here somewhere. ...Stretch back there on the flax there in the corner and it will be a sort of a bed for the two of you until morning. She blessed him and thanked him and she came in. He

put on a blazing fire and gave them a good supper... When he had the poor woman and her small child settled in the corner he recommenced with his work but his wife stopped suddenly and announced that she wasn't feeling very well. She said that she suddenly felt very sick. ...She was feeling worse as each moment went by. The poor man was in distress. What would he do? He woke up the Travelling woman and told her the story. The child was awake also and he took great pity on the poor man.

"Mother", he says, "would you not do something for her".

"You do it son", says she, "because you have the power".

The child didn't say anymore. The woman was in a very bad way now and she was screaming and in fits of pain.

"Mother", "would you not do some good for her?" says he.

"You do it son", says she again, "because you have the power".

The child got up then and he went over to the bed where the woman was sick. He put his hand on the spot where the stitch was and he spoke as follows:

"A charm that was worked by Saint Brigid of the Mantle,
A charm that was worked by Michael of the shield
A charm that was worked by God in Heaven
A charm that worked by the twelve apostles
A rude wife with a gentle husband
That put the Body of Christ lying in the flax,
Mary's Mantle against the stitch
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen".

No sooner had He said the words but the woman started getting better and the sickness started easing off. She knew well then who their visitors were, that it was our Saviour, a hundred praises be to Him, and his Holy Mother, and that they were in the guise of Travelling people. She was ashamed and repented then for having been so cruel to them when they asked her for lodgings. She rose and threw herself on her knees in the presence of Our Saviour and his Mother and she asked them for forgiveness. And they forgave her and Our Saviour told her to be good-hearted and free with alms from then on. He told her to always come to the help of the poor when they came calling. She promised Him that she would and she kept that promise until her dying day. (IFC Iml. 26: 147)

Ortha an Ghreama garners much of its subversive narrative power from the "ambivalent" characters who are "holy people" in disguise. The Travellers are representative of a counter-hegemonic undercurrent in Irish society that remains symbolically central despite constant attempts at its suppression. In these narratives, Travellers – in the guise of holy people – rebel against their marginalisation from the dominant discourse through their role in a countercultural healing process that incorporates both the physical and psychic healing of society as a whole. I link this counter-hegemonic discourse with the discourse of a countercultural or subversive rebellion against the exclusion of the "Other" in the form of satirical invective and carnivalesque parody. The hidden or "masked" nature of the Travellers in *Ortha an Ghreama* is indicative of their subversive and counterhegemonic potential.

They are not what they seem and "the ambivalence regarding their 'true' natures is the instigation for a form of subversive resistance, a resistance that insinuates itself exactly at those 'capillary points' of social interaction where Foucault (1970) theorized resistance to take place" (Hayes 2007, 71). This subversive ambivalence can be linked with the concept of "symbolic inversion" as theorised by critics, literary theorists and anthropologists etc. "Symbolic inversion" as defined by Babcock (1978) includes as a central tenet the "surprise" inversion of the "mainstream's" "norms" that is characteristic of the folktale *Ortha an Ghreama*:

“Symbolic inversion” may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political. (15)

“Symbolic inversion”, both derives from and conflates a wide range of cultural analytics today. Consequently, the manner in which I discuss the term here can be read as straddling a range of disciplines and incorporating both past and present uses of the term “inversion” including concepts that are similar or analogous. “Inversion” as defined in cultural studies today intimates a reversal of worldview or the concept of the “world upside down”. This definition appears to have remained constant since the era of the early Renaissance at least, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) citing the meaning of “inversion” as that which is “a turning upside down” or “a reversal of position, order, sequence, or relation” (OED 1978, 1477). In literary culture this reversal of position was often associated with the negation of particular position or argument as explained by T. Wilson in his *Logike* of 1567, “You may confute the same by inversion, that is to saie, tournying his taile cleane contrary” (1567, 20). From the earliest times therefore, inversion has had an intimate link with the concept of negation. Every human experience encompassing a cultural dynamic is imbued with an element of negation as indicated by historian Kenneth Burke (1968):

the study of man as the specifically word-using animal requires special attention to this distinctive marvel, the negative. (419)

Since symbol-using is a central feature of the way in which human beings order the universe, Burke argued it was necessary for us to introduce symbolic elements into our every experience. As a consequence, humans beings find that “every experience will be imbued with negativity” (469). Discussions of symbolic inversion such as David Kunzle’s essay “World Upside Down” (1978), a study of “upside-down” iconography in European broadsheets, demonstrate that the concept of inversion is a very old one. It is a history which dates back to the Greek paradox as written by writers such as Homer, a history which Donaldson describes as “an ancient and widespread one, found very extensively in popular art and literature throughout Europe from classical times” (1970, 21-22). Rosalie Colie (1966), who undertook research into the use of paradox during the Renaissance era, described symbolic inversion or the “world upside down” as one of a range of paradoxical techniques whereby what is “not” may be discussed, though in its strictest logical sense it cannot. Linking symbolic inversion with techniques of paradox she saw inversion as a major convention of paradox, namely that which is actually “impossible” or utopian. Paradox and irony as informed by inversion are seen to play on the margins of meaning, a play that inhabits a free space incorporating the negative. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1968), who theorized the concept of irony, saw those techniques incorporating symbolic inversion such as paradox, as operating at the limits of discourse. Like Foucault’s “capillary point”, he saw the margin as the locus of a particular energy, a gap between saying and meaning wherein the ironist was negatively free. Colie’s (1966) theorization also located inversion within a position of liminality, a locale where paradoxes could play back and forth across those boundaries that are considered terminal or categorical. Inversion incorporating parody always involves the dialectic according to her theorization. It is by nature self-critical and creative and is always “challenging some orthodoxy, the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgement or absolute convention”, “at once its own subject and its own object, turning in and upon itself” (10, 518). Henri Bergson’s *Le Rire* (1956) theorized inversion as a literary device and identified it as the ancient principle of comedy. Inversion as comedy incorporated surprise and the switching of social roles so that they became “upside-down”. It involved:

a sudden comic switching of expected roles: prisoner reprimands judge, child rebukes parent, wife rules husband, pupil instructs teacher, master obeys servant. (Donaldson 1970, 5-6)

The comic as incorporated in the world of “upside down” appears somewhat frivolous, the “topsy-turvy” coalescing with the slightly anarchic. However, the moral essence of the “upside-down” world incorporates a serious attack on control, on hierarchies that appear irreducible and on those systems that are closed off to the marginal elements in society. Bergson defines this attack as an assault on “the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series” (1956 [1900], 118). Bergson discussed the serious aspect to negation in his essay *The Idea of Nothing* published in 1911. He pointed to the absence of negatives in nature and linked this argument to what later became known as “negative theology”⁶. Bergson’s exploration of negation was taken further by Kenneth Burke who linked symbolic inversion with negation and the negative theology he adduced in the symbolism of religious systems. Burke (1968) identified negation as a function peculiar to religious systems. In his view, God is generally defined in terms of what he is not and religions are often built in antithesis to other persuasions. As symbolic systems go, religions are amongst the most explicitly negativistic of all symbolic systems⁷. Expressions of the deity or the transcendent encompass negative affirmations whose core is paradoxical (e.g. God is infinite, God is incomprehensible etc.) As argued by Burke, the concept of a transcendent realm is an example of a “positive-seeming word for what is really the function of the negative” (1968, 437). Negation as the function of symbolic systems has been theorized extensively by Burke (1961, 1968) and is analogous to the process of symbolic inversion under discussion here. Symbolic inversion as outlined in the folktales and folk-anecdotes under review here encompasses an extension of negation because what takes place is in fact a negation of negative on the part of he/they who is/are marginalized. Burke (1968) refers to this type of inversion or negation as a kind of “aesthetic negative”, “whereby any moralistic thou-shalt not provides material for our entertainment, as we pay to follow imaginary accounts of ‘deviants’ who in all sorts of ingenious ways are represented as violating those very Don’ts” (13). Prior to Burke, Freud had used psychoanalysis as a framework to theories of the concept of negation and came to similar conclusions as Burke as to the indispensable function of symbolic negation in the formation of the human psyche:

By the help of the symbol of negation, the thinking-process frees itself from the limitations of repression and enriches itself with the subject-matter without which it could not work efficiently... the achievement of the function of judgement only becomes feasible... after the symbol of negation has endowed thought with a first degree of independence from the results of repression and at the same time from the sway of the pleasure principle... (1950, 182-185)

The ambivalent and sometime dangerous aura that encircles the concept of negation has meant that studies of symbolic processes, whether undertaken by philosophers, social scientists

⁶ The concept of “negative theology” was once confined to the traditions of mysticism and hermeticism. It is today a fairly common subject of discussion in what is commonly referred to as radical (or the new) theology. Negation as a creative symbolic has been discussed by Cox (1970) who has criticized the tendency of radical theologians to ignore the playful and festive aspects of negation. Cox’s discussion of negation proposed a “theology of juxtaposition”, a discourse which has much in common with Burke’s theorisation of symbolic inversion and its relation to the notion of “aesthetic negation”.

⁷ Burke follows Hegel and Nietzsche in arguing a negativistic nature of religion as a symbolic system. One of the core definitions of man as a moral being encompasses the negativistic according to Burke, citing the prescription “thou shalt not” (1968, 12-13).

or literary critics, have tended to ignore the importance of the concept of negation within cultural systems and the importance of questions such as that posed by Derrida:

what is the relation between the self-eliminating generation of metaphor and concepts of negative form? (1974, 9)

A reluctance to engage with negation is understandable to a certain degree. Any focus on the negative inevitably runs counter to the psychological habits and cultural conditioning we experience in conjunction with the strongly positivist emphases of today's social sciences. An engagement with the negative or that which is considered counteractive is necessary however if we wish to come to a full understanding of the subversive undercurrent within cultural patterns or what Geertz calls those "elements of a culture's own negation which in ordinary, quite un-Hegelian fashion are included within it" (1966, 65). Theorists of the "Other" have identified the process of inversion as linked with those binary divisions which characterize symbolic ordering between "self" and "Other" and between differing peoples and places in a range of political contexts. The "low" "Other" that is the catalyst of symbolic inversion is always a site of contradiction, the site for mutually incompatible representation and conflicting desires. Representations of the "low" "Other" or those lower strata (whether of the body, of literature, of society or of place) are a *loci* of ambivalence, an ambivalence which gives the "Other" its particular subversive energy. The negated "Other" is both desired and reviled, and the subject of debasement and longing. This recurrent pattern whereby the "top" or "self" tries to reject or eliminate the "bottom" or "Other" was constitutive of the evolution of Western society as delineated by Said. The mythical Orient as "constructed" by a Europe intent on the legitimization of colonialism was the locus of a profound ambivalence. The Orientalist strategy depended on "[a] flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand" (1978, 2). Said also made the observation however that:

European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of [...] underground self. (3)

The same ambivalence whereby "top" endeavours to eliminate the "bottom"/"Other" for reasons of status or prestige only to find that it is in some way dependent on this "Other" recurs within different symbolic domains of (especially) bourgeois society, particularly from the period of the Renaissance onwards. Stallybrass and White outline the development of this dynamic of the "low" "Other" as follows:

We find the same constitutive ambivalence around the slum and the domestic servant in the nineteenth century; around the disposal of "waste" products in the city (though not in pre-Renaissance rural culture); around the carnival festivity of popular culture; around the symbolically base and abject animals like the pig and the rat [...]. (1986, 5)

Not alone does the "top" in the symbolic domain attempt to eliminate or reject the "low" "Other". The "top" also actually seeks to centrally include what is symbolically "low" as a constituent within its own (often eroticized) fantasy life. This psychological dependence on those "Others", who opposed and excluded, at the social level has as its end result the construction of a subjectivity that is ambivalent, one where power, fear and desire are fused in a conflictual and elusive fashion. What appears peripheral socially often comes to assume a central dynamic in the symbolic sphere as outlined by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of the Mind* (1964) where he discussed the dialectic of the master and the servant. His classic inversion of the master-servant relationship was the catalyst for a process of self-enfranchisement and the genesis of that form

of negation which he termed the “unhappy consciousness”. The concept of inversion and the symbolic centrality of the “excluded” “Other” has assumed a role of some prominence in anthropological studies in more recent decades, particularly those studies which have analysed so-called “primitive” or “traditional” societies. The earliest of these studies have linked inversion with the classificatory nature of humankind’s systems of symbolic ordering:

For the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its negation, its inverse. (Stallybrass 1997, 300)

All symbolic inversions define a culture’s lineaments at the same time as they question the usefulness and absoluteness of its ordering. (Babcock 1978, 29)

The *Année sociologique* school of writing encompassing scholars such as Durkheim, Van Gennep and Mauss and Hertz all located inversion within a classificatory framework that incorporated ritualized behaviour or “rites of passage”. Leach (1953) who developed some of Van Gennep’s ideas on symbolic representation associates symbolic inversion with “liminal” events that signal “rites of passage” or “rites of rebellion” such as seasonal or end of year festivities, funerals and other occasions that include rituals or events incorporating symbolic “reversals” (see Gluckman 1965).

Bakhtin has been the primary advocate of the “carnavalesque” concept as a mobile set of symbolic practices and discourses which underpinned social revolt and conflict before the nineteenth century. While Bakhtin championed the “carnavalesque” as a utopian model for social change, some social theorists have remained unconvinced as to its power to impose societal change⁸. Eagleton saw the symbolic inversion that was symptomatic of “carnival” as a relatively⁹ ineffective attempt at the counter-hegemonic:

[...] carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool. (1991, 148)

Marx however, identifies ritual rebellion as a positive and significant step towards the development of a revolutionary class consciousness. The argument as to whether the symbolic inversion of the “carnavalesque” is intrinsically radical or conservative will continue amid a necessity for increased historical research into those structural explanations that have been put forward for ritual and/or symbolic rebellion. It is an unnecessary argument in a sense since attempting to classify the carnivalesque along these lines falls into the trap of essentializing the process that is carnivalesque transgression. Stallybrass and White provide a *via media* between both points of view which eschews the modern tendency to essentialize the carnivalesque and politics:

⁸ Sales cites two reasons as to why he considers carnivalesque subversion to be a controlled form of social transgression: “[...] First of all, it was licensed or sanctioned by the authorities themselves. They removed the stopper to stop the bottle being smashed altogether. The release of emotions and grievances made them easier to police in the long term. Second, although the world might appear to be turned upside down during the carnival season, the fact that Kings and Queens were chosen and crowned actually reaffirmed the status quo. Carnival was, however, Janus-faced. Falstaff is both the merry old mimic of Eastcheap and the old corruptible who tries to undermine the authority, or rule, of the Lord Chief Justice. The carnival spirit in early-nineteenth century England as well as in sixteenth century, could therefore be a vehicle for social protest and the method for disciplining that protest” (1983, 169).

⁹ Eagleton is ambivalent about the liberating potential of the “carnavalesque”, describing it as follows: “Carnival laughter is incorporating as well as liberating, its lifting of inhibitions politically enervating as well as disruptive. Indeed from one viewpoint carnival may figure as a prime example of the mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become the dominant theme of contemporary post-marxist pessimism” (1991, 149).

[...] the most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeably transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalyst and site of actual¹⁰ and symbolic struggle. (1986, 14)

Irrespective of these various arguments, it is the altering potential of symbolic inversion as incorporating elements of the grotesque and the carnivalesque which I wish to focus attention on here. Symbolic inversion as outlined in *Ortha an Ghreama* can be seen as a form of “negative feedback” (Bateson 1958 [1936], 288), as one of the means by which the cultural system corrects itself. Symbolic inversion as instanced in *Ortha an Ghreama* challenges the classificatory¹¹ worldview and defines a culture’s lineaments at the same time as it questions¹² the usefulness and the rigidity¹³ of the way the world is ordered. It can be seen as a creative form of negation, an important reminder of the potentiality of the *mundus inversus*. It reminds us:

[...] of the need to reinvest the clean with the filthy, the rational with the animalistic, the ceremonial with the carnivalesque in order to maintain cultural vitality [...] the *mundus inversus* does more than simply mock our desire to live according to our usual orders and norms; it reinvests life with a vigor and a *Spielraum* attainable (it would seem) in no other way. (Babcock 1978, 32)

In Irish culture the folktale *Ortha an Ghreama* has at its core a symbolic inversion which carries a profound meaning. The powerful nature of this inversion includes a robust attack on closed systems of control and categorisation, what Bergson referred to as “the irreversibility of the order of phenomena” (1956 [1900], 118). The “marginal” Travelling person is actually a holy personage in disguise. He or she who is denigrated or perceived to live in a “liminal” state is actually central to the symbolic reconstitution of societal structure and meaning.

The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture. (Stallybrass, White 1986, 5-6)

The symbolic inversion evident in *Ortha an Ghreama* can be linked with a wider and very wide-ranging discourse in Irish popular tradition where the liminal figure of the Travelling tradesman, poet, shaman or jester, fool acts to “transgress” the normal “categories” of social life and thereby criticise and subvert official hierarchies. This symbolic discourse as evidenced in Irish

¹⁰ It is striking how carnival and carnivalesque transgression coincided with violent social classes (see Thomson 1972; Davis 1975; Burke 1978).

¹¹ Hamnett points out the dangers that accompany the classificatory worldview: “Classification is a pre-requisite of the intelligible ordering of experience, but if conceptual categories are reified, they become obstacles rather than means to the understanding and control of both physical and social reality” (1967, 387).

¹² The Travellers as depicted in *Ortha an Ghreama* are not seen to reject totally the order of the sociocultural world. Instead, they work to remind the story’s audience of the arbitrary condition that is the imposition of order on the audience’s environment and experience. In doing this, they enable the audience to view certain aspects of that order more clearly by virtue of the fact that they have turned this order upside-down or inside-out. In doing so, they echo Nietzsche’s statement: “Objections, digressions, gay mistrust, the delight in mockery are signs of health: everything unconditional belongs in pathology”.

¹³ Marcel Détiénne links his questioning of the classificatory with the cultural vitality of our philosophical systems of thought: “A system of thought [...] is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their possible transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit. To discover the complete horizon of a society’s symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, its deviants” (1979 [1977], ix).

tradition has strong affinities with the concept of the carnivalesque as outlined by Bakhtin and encompasses imagery and social satire that is often topsy-turvy, grotesque and excessive. The topsy-turvy discourse of the carnivalesque also has much in common with the elusive figure known as the fool, poet-shaman or trickster as defined by Alan Harrison in his study *The Irish Trickster*:

He [the fool] [...] is sometimes nearly divine, sometimes positively subhuman. He can be the one who emphasizes wrongs through his satire of the social order and he can be the scapegoat who is sacrificed on behalf of that same social order [...] he exists in human society but also in the unknown world outside and by his passage between the two he can help to establish the boundaries between them and increase the area of human knowledge and behaviour. (1989, 21)

This discussion with respect to symbolic inversion, resistance and the Irish folktale *Ortha an Ghreama* serves to highlight the ambivalence that circumvents the figure of the Traveller as representative of a counter-hegemonic undercurrent in society, many aspects of which are rooted in the “philosophical” and subversive laughter of the Renaissance. The “low-Other” in the figure of the Traveller poet-shaman instigates a rupture of the hierarchical and the hegemonic in Irish society, a rupture which serves to regenerate and renew the cosmic and the social into an indivisible whole. This regenerative function takes the form of a subversive rebellion against the exclusion of the “Other” by means of symbolic inversion and an irreverent laughter that dismantles hierarchies, a grotesque and carnivalesque laughter that manages disorder through the comic. In *Ortha an Ghreama* the figure of Jesus plays with a number of roles, a fact which links his character with the archetype of the shaman, “holy fool” or “fool for Christ:”

[...] the shaman becomes the child, whether playfully or seriously, and is able to address people with whom he would normally have avoidance relationships. (Jennings 1995, 109)

His role taking involves a duality and thereby “represents a dialectic between the person and the event or object, whereby each is synthesised within a single expressive form” (Peacock 1968, 172). This new and temporary dramatization of the “betwixt and between” show role inversion as the key to a new process of definition. Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnivalesque” directs attention to the marginal as a locus for transformation, counter-production and the interrogation of established “truths”:

In the world of the carnival the awareness of people’ immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative. (Bakhtin 1968, 10)

Bakhtin’s (1981) theorisation of the carnivalesque incorporated the central concepts of “dialogism” and “heteroglossia” whereby multiple perspectives are presented through a range of contrasting voices, thereby resisting the regularising and totalising tendencies of monologic forces, whether they be literary or linguistic. Bakhtin’s definition of the term “heteroglossia” is particularly appropriate to what happens in the role inversion of *Ortha an Ghreama*, an inversion that reinforces the importance of the polysemous and the necessity for dialogue between worldviews that appear diametrically opposed to one another. Heteroglossia is described as another’s speech in another’s language. Its function is the expression of two diverse viewpoints simultaneously i.e. the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author or narrator. Bakhtin links his concept of “heteroglossia” to the dialogic nature of a Dostoevsky novel in a manner that is analogous to the dual and dramatic nature of the Traveller/Jesus described in *Ortha an Ghreama*:

[The novel] is constructed not as a whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousness as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other. (1984, 18)

The dramatic and reinterpetative power of the heteroglossic is due to its enactment of a multiplicity of voices. The paradoxical nature of the dialogic as incorporated in *Ortha an Ghreama* evidences the polysemous nature of symbolic inversion and the potential for a range of dialogues. The ambivalence that accompanies the perversion of order or values is a generic feature of the “marginal” character who disturbs symbolic hierarchies as described by anthropologists who have studied the roles of trickster/clown figures in “primitive” societies. Arden who studied the role of ritual clowns in South American pueblos describes the fear generated by this symbolic ambivalence:

Clowns make us aware through purposeful action that the most dangerous condition of being human is one in which there is no order. Clowns flirt with that most dangerous condition, that which has no precedent or predictable issue. The ultimate immanence is non-order, not disorder or chaos. For all human groups the ultimate taboo is non-order, and the clown plays his proper role when he stands outside of order. (1979, 56)

It is through embracing the ambivalence that a greater understanding ensues between the self and the “other”. Norbeck (1979) theorised the dialogic nature of the relationship between self and others and the dialectic that is framed within the process of symbolic inversion. Role inversions as incorporated in the dramatization of cultural and social values are considered aberrations of everyday behaviour. Norbeck suggests that the opposite ought to be true and periodic role inversions should instead be accommodated within the norms of behaviour. The inversion of normally accepted behaviour through dramatization or the use of narrative makes such events more memorable by “framing them off” from an everyday context (51). The inversions or ritual clowns, trickster and other marginals embody the central paradox of individual role-play and the collective drama. These “rites of reversal” make clear that nothing is as it appears and the society is not as it seems. The pueblo ritual clown works to define the human condition by presenting opposite yet complementary possibilities for human action as outlined by Arden:

It is not that humour and outrageous behaviour as entertainment are unimportant, but the constant potential for the elicitation of non-order – the creation of another way of human being – appears to be unique to their role. (1979, 57)

The symbolic archetype that is the “marginal” works to re-create meaning through role taking or enactment that is the central defining activity of drama itself. The archetype is a “bricoleur” or myth-maker who takes, and develops the things at hand by imaginatively recombining them. He generates “structure” through creating or re-creating the dramatic metaphor and thereby endowing it with personal meaning. His role can, of itself, be seen as a dramatic metaphor since it is a mediating device that connects the unconnected. Louis Hieb succinctly describes the function of the archetype as incorporated in the figure of the ritual clown as follows:

[...] the figure of the ritual clown mediates the oppositions of time and space versus liminality, social structure versus communitas, and reality and seriousness versus inversion and humour. (1972, 165-166)

The power of narratives such as *Ortha an Ghreama* lies in the fact that the symbolic action instituted by the archetype/shaman uses the same features as everyday life but transforms and inverts them. Socially inverted behaviour as evidenced in the dramatic action is understood within the context of sympathetic (or homeopathic) medicine and magic where balance is the “cure” or the state that is desired. The archetype works towards this balance by reproducing those features that are causing imbalance. In the case of ritual clowns, the everyday vices of greed and selfishness are symbolically and vicariously treated by the gluttony and selfishness of the ritual clowns as evidenced in their dramatic roles. In *Ortha an Ghreama* Jesus and Mary in the guise of Travellers are refused lodgings by the hard-hearted “woman of the house”. Although he is often depicted as an “innocent” newborn, Jesus is often reluctant to perform the healing as a consequence of their inhospitable treatment by the “settled” community:

She woke up the child and she said to Jesus,
 “Wouldn’t it be a pity not to heal him.
 “Oh Mother”, says he “if we can let us not to cure him”.
 Herself and Saint Joseph carried the child over so that he was above the sick man. She held the right hand of the child and said the words:

A rude woman with a courteous woman,
 Mary’s Mantle and her Son (the healer of sickness),
 The Body of Christ lying in the flax”,
 And then with the sign of the Cross saying:
 “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. (IFC Iml. 46: 162)

The ambivalent attitude exhibited by Jesus embodies the paradoxical nature of his role as a liminal figure with power who acts not only as a catalyst for symbolic inversion but who also questions the nature of humanity and its shared values and norms¹⁴. Jesus as shaman/trickster is seen to define the human condition by presenting opposite yet complementary possibilities for human action. His reluctance to perform the healing smacks of ambivalence, an ambivalence that emphasises the reflexive aspect of his actions. Norbeck and Farrer (1979) suggest that the human mind functions best when it is operating in a dialectic mode as it is this mode that gives rise to the creative and the spontaneous. Rubenstein (1975) sees play incorporating an ambivalence between “subjective” and “objective” reality as that which is emotionally analogous to aesthetic expression and the formation of a new level of understanding. Turner sees play as a major aspect of liminality. It invigorates the quality of recombining behaviour that occurs in non-ritual situations, strange or bizarre patterns. What was known previously now becomes the unknown and the ordinary becomes exotic. The rules of so-called normal and acceptable behaviour are shattered as outlined by Victor Turner:

¹⁴ Although some variants of *Ortha an Ghreama* suggest that Jesus’ reluctance to utilise his healing powers is a direct consequence of his shabby treatment by his would-be hosts, in others we are told that this is not always the central reason for his reluctant attitude. His reluctance is sometimes tied to the role of the spiritual in his healing. He says that he is in fact not yet ready to perform miracles in the public sphere thereby echoing the *Wedding Feast of Cana* story in the Gospel (“My time has not come yet”, John 2:5): “Out in the night the husband got a colic and at length and at last the mother said to the Son to do some good for the man that left them inside for the night. / ‘My hour didn’t come yet.’ says He, ‘Let you do it.’ / ‘Ah, no’ says she, ‘I’ll not take the rod out of your hand’ / So ‘tis then He started His prayer [...]” (IFC respondent from Kilrush, Co. Clare Iml. 1371: 245).

When elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and recombined in totally unique configurations [...] those exposed to them are startled into thinking anew about persons, objects, relationships, social roles and features of their environment hitherto taken for granted. Previous habits of thought, feeling and action are disrupted. They are thus forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos and the powers that generated and sustain these [...]. (1982, 205)

Rites of reversal incorporating symbolic inversion and role transformation such as that which takes place in *Ortha an Ghreama* present a mediation taking place between two realities, a mediation that is likely to result in a form of humour, a humour that is both ambivalent and frightening. Kealiinohamoku (1980), who studied the social function of ritual clowns amongst the Zuni people, described the humour of the clowns as an essential feature in their creation of a form of “communitas”. Communitas was a consequence of the creation of fresh and new relationships between people who might previously have had little contact. The creativity necessary for the development of this communitas was one which was inextricably linked with humour. Both Kealiinohamoku (1980) and Koestler (1964) saw humour as a necessary consequence of the tension generated by the juxtaposition of two previously unrelated experiences. This tension is resolved through the emotional response of humour which establishes balance and resolves any dissonance. The reflexive humour of inversion or topsy-turvydom is a consequence of a number of situations incorporating the inversion or expectations. These include the most basic individual role transformation (i.e. someone taking on a role and becoming someone else) and the collective inversion of cultural norms generated by shamans and ritual clowns. Mary Douglas defines this humour as a form of drama:

The joke merely affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Through drama, licence is given to “play with” accepted modes of behaviour and action, changing them slightly, inverting them totally or even perverting their purpose. (Douglas in Hieb 1972, 191)

In *Ortha an Ghreama* the humour lies in the fact that the audience listening to the story can see/imagine the mistake the churlish settled community is making by refusing hospitality to the travelling holy people. This humour is a form of playfulness that contributes to the establishment of meaning and has strong analogies with Neelands’ and Goode’s categorisation of the notion of playfulness as it occurs in the realm of the symbolic:

We use the term playfulness to describe the basic human instinct to play with the relationships between symbols and their orthodox meanings in order to express or create new possibilities of meaning. Playing with symbol systems, loosening ties between sign and signified, transforming meanings by creating new and fresh symbolic relationships [...] helps us to consider the meaning of our lived experience. (1995, 16)

The response of Jesus to their rejection is sometimes ambivalent¹⁵, an ambivalent and grotesque form playfulness which is designed to drive the moral message of the story home to the audience. Turner sees ambivalence within ritual as crucial to the power of ritual as a function within symbolic systems. In his view – “when ritual loses the capacity to play with ideas, symbols and meanings, and thus loses its “cultural resilience”, it ceases to be a shared agency for collective reflexivity” (1978, 72). Its playful and grotesque aspects are bolstered by the fact that it is the “man of the house” who suffers despite the fact that he has exhibited more kindness towards the Travellers than has his wife:

¹⁵ In a very occasional variant of the narrative-charm *Ortha an Ghreama*, it is actually stated in the narrative that Jesus has deliberately inflicted the pain on the “man of the house” so as to teach his wife a lesson.

“Do something for him”, the Virgin Mother said to Our Saviour, praise be to her always.
 “I won’t”, says he. “The man is alright”, says he.
 She asked him again to do something for him.
 “I won’t”, says he. “The man is alright and his wife doesn’t deserve it. You do it”, says he to the mother,
 great praise be to her forever [...]. (IFC Iml. 1150: 24)

Jesus and Mary as depicted in *Ortha an Ghreama* use both inversion and a form of ritual healing to mediate between their own reality as Travellers and the reality of the world from which they have been excluded. Their role has a dramatic potential analogous to that of a range of other archetypes incorporating the figure of the shaman/trickster/clown who function in an environment incorporating the use of ritual. Their use of a ritual process has a unitary function since it involves not only a “physical” healing but also a psychic healing, i.e. a cultural transformation of the dramatic structure of knowledge. The healing depicted in *Ortha an Ghreama* situates the moral commentary/balance provided by the outsiders/Travellers process within an intersubjective and communal context. Its aim is analogous to that of ritual drama as outlined by Charlotte Frisbie:

Ritual drama, in dealing with life itself, is a process which serves to unite humans with other humans, as well as humans with other-than-humans, the revealed with the unrevealed worlds, the visible with the invisible. (1980, 24-25)

Hieb identifies ritual behaviour as evidenced in the role of the ritual clown as the prerequisite for a sense of “communitas” or a dialogue between the “acceptable and unacceptable, that which is familiar and that which is considered strange” (1982, 185-186). Ritual behaviour imbues many aspects of the healing tradition in Ireland including the healing traditions of those who are considered “marginal” or “outside the norms” of the community, such as Travellers.

In *Ortha an Ghreama* the duality that fuses the temporal and the divine is emphasized through the role of Travellers in “religious” healing and the spiritual iconography that imbues these healing rituals. In many variants on this narrative the Holy Family do more than just function as the “Other” who act as a moral arbiter on the actions of their hosts in the “settled” community. They are also the enforcer of certain Christian tenets including that of punishment for evil that is committed. The Child Jesus is depicted as the enforcer of a moral “retribution” that is both harsh and immediate – i.e. the terrible pain which afflicts the “man of the house”. This links with the popular belief that it is not only in the afterlife that our behaviour will be “balanced”. Whatever measure the giver gives to others in this life is that which they in turn receive either in the afterlife or more immediately in this life. The “recompense” or *gúi* (prayer/wish) of the holy personage in *Ortha an Ghreama* is one that is designed to make the audience think very carefully about the consequences of their actions towards those who seek hospitality.

Ortha an Ghreama

Our Saviour and His mother were going around and they went in to a house and the house was full of flax and the bed they got to lie on was the bales of flax and when they were leaving in the morning Our Saviour put the pain on the father.

“Oh”, says His mother to him, “why did you put a pain on him, wasn’t he very good to us.” “Oh, it will hurt her too,” says Our Saviour, “when she sees him and you can cure him and He said: “Fear séimh ag bean bhorb [...]. (IFC respondent from Bantry, Co. Cork Iml. 809: 403)

That it is the “kinder”¹⁶ of the “settled people” who suffers the physical punishment is part of the “ambiguous” power of the narrative:

[...] “Oh indeed”, said the Son of God. “I’ll give her a fright before daylight comes.” “What will you do with her?” said the Mother.

“I’ll put a pain in the side of the man of the house”, he said.

“Wouldn’t that be a big pity to do that to such a nice courteous man who gave us lodgings?” said the Mother. “You’ll see him jumping all over the house in a minute”, said He. (IFC Iml. 48: 275)

Or

The bed the woman of the house gave them was on the tow that they extract from the flax. The Mother and child didn’t like this as a bed. He [the child] put a searing pain on the man of the house and the man was very sick. (IFC Iml. 1038: 141)

The inversion evident in Jesus’s “strange” behaviour also has strong affinities with the “ordering” function of other shaman-types such as ritual-clowns whose inversions are initially indicative of institutionalized chaos. The “inverted” behaviour of Jesus in his apparently “selfish” allocation of punishment echoes the selfish manner in which the Travellers have been treated. Fyfe describes the strong association between socially inverted behaviour (on the part of the ritual clown) and the context and use of sympathetic or homeopathic medicine and magic:

Balance is the desired state; and imbalance is treated by reproducing those features that are causing imbalance. For example, greed and selfishness within everyday life will be symbolically and vicariously treated by the gluttony and selfishness of the ritual clowns. (1998, 220)

In some variants of *Ortha an Ghreama* Jesus goes further than simply “applying” the punishment and explains the moral reasoning behind his actions:

The Stitch Prayer

“A prayer worked by Mary and her Son,
A prayer worked by Brigid of the mantle
A prayer worked by Michael of the shield,
A prayer that God worked with power,
A rude woman with a kind gentle husband,
That put the Body of Christ lying on the flax last night,
Mary’s Mantle to the stitch.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

When the Virgin and her Son went looking for lodgings they didn’t get it. That is the story. The man said to let her in and the woman of the house said she wouldn’t unless they were prepared to sleep on the flax, and that is what they did to the Virgin in the end. Our Lord inflicted the pain on the man and the Virgin Mary said to Our Lord that they should go back and heal the man, that the man was a good man and why had he inflicted a sickness on him. Our Lord said he had done it to make the woman think carefully about things. (IFC respondent from Caherdaniel, Co. Kerry Iml. 148: 427)

¹⁶ In most variants of *Ortha an Ghreama* it is the “man of the house” who suffers the pain although he has been kinder to the Travellers.

The use of symbolic inversion in order to impart a more profound message also operated as a form of protection for a wide range of Travellers including tinkers, healers, “poor scholars” and other nomadic craftsmen when attempts were made to marginalise them. The inversion of “official” hierarchies which culminates in an ironic dependence on the “excluded” Other has parallels in a much wider and subversive “top-down” discourse in Irish folklore as indicated by the following anecdote:

The Priest and the Travelling Man

There was a Travelling man and one day he was walking along the road and he was passing a church and the parish priest and three men were lifting a big heavy rock near the church. The Travelling man said to them.

“I will give you a hand”,

He did not have a good suit of clothes on him and the priest said to him,

“Off with you, you’re not going to join any company of men”.

“O”, said the Travelling man walking on, and he looked back at the priest, and he said to him, “The One who composed is better than the one who criticised”.

That was to say that it was the Son of God who composed it.

That was when the priest understood what he meant and he said,

“O, that is true”. The priest thanked him (for his words) and asked him for forgiveness and admitted that what he said was wrong. (IFC Iml. 1862: 70)

Some versions of *Ortha an Ghreama* serve as a brief “sermon”¹⁷. In addition to defending those who are considered outside the “norms” of society they often function to impart a specific moral message directly to the story’s audience. At times this moral “tenet” as contained in the narrative is a simple observation on the nature of human existence such as the following:

“A rude husband with a gentle wife, but the Son of God left lying on the flax,

A gentle man with a rude wife, but the Son of God left lying on the flax.”

You never saw a couple – you never saw any pair – that could “get on”

with one another and never have the slightest disagreement”. (*Ar Aghaidh*, 28 Nollag 1938, 6)

On other occasions, the moral precept extols the benefits of those stati in life which appear on first glance to be unattractive, unwanted or “topsy-turvy”.

¹⁷ That the “shabby” treatment given to the Holy Family in *Ortha an Ghreama* was incorporated into the discourse of Travellers and used as a form of symbolic inversion with a certain satirical intent is indicated by the following “reminder” issued by the blind west of Ireland Traveller-poet Anthony Raftery which survived in Irish popular tradition: “When Raftery was going around and looking for lodgings wherever he could find it he called one night into a certain man. And he was the type of man who didn’t have much room in his house. There was a fistful of ferns in the corner of the house – probably for burning – for using in the fire. This man had three young sons. They went to bed and Raftery came in seeking lodgings. Well I don’t have any good place to put you but I don’t want to put you out. You can stay until morning. Raftery said that he didn’t mind so long as he could stay in the shelter of the house. When the three boys were gone to sleep the old man arranged a bed for him on the pile of the ferns. He arranged the bed of ferns so that it was as neat as possible. And when he was getting ready for bed himself, one of his sons spoke in the back of the room. He spoke in a low voice so that Raftery would not hear him. ‘Well’, he says. ‘You’ll hear talk about this bed of ferns yet’, says the son. Raftery overheard him. When the man of the house was asleep Raftery says: “I am fairly well-travelled, / I am always going, walking the country, / I am going through the country and meeting the poor and the naked, / Many’s the place that I have bedded down, / Throughout the breadth of this country and me miserably poor, / And although I’ve walked the whole country / I was never a fern-hen until tonight!” (IFC Iml. 368: 375-377).

The clear implication of the charm-story is that Travellers people are holy personages or that saintly people like Jesus and Mary can be found travelling in the guise of those who may appear poor or downtrodden. While many variants on the charm-story simply end with the punishment of inhospitality, there are others where the “settled” community are seen to realize the consequences of their misbehavior and react with humility and a firm purpose of amendment:

Do bhíos aici go maith ansin cé bhí aici gur bé Ár Slanuighthóir é féin, céad moladh go deó leis agus a Mháthair Naomhtha do bhí ann éide locht siúbhal. Do tháinig náire agus aithreachas uirri i dtaobh bheith có cruaidh leó nuair d’iarradar lóistín uirr. (IFC respondent from Co. Kerry Iml. 26: 147)

(She knew then exactly who they were - that it was Our Saviour himself, a thousand praises forever to him, and his Holy Mother who were there - and that they were in the guise of Travellers. She was ashamed and repentant then because of her cruelty to them when they came seeking lodgings).

Do chuaidh an tinneas ar gcúl agus sin é an am nuair a ainithnuigheadar cé bhí aca. As sin amach do bhí grásta Dé ar bhean an tighé agus a rath ortha [...] (IFC respondent from Dingle Co. Kerry Iml. 1533: 161)

(The pain went away and it was then that they recognized who was there. From then on, the grace of God was in the woman of the house and she benefited from its gifts [...]).

D’éirigh sí aniar as a leabaidh is do chaith sí féin ar a glúinibh i bhfiadhnis a’ t-Slanuightheora agus a Mháthair agus d’iarr párdún air na go h-aithríghtheadh orrtha agus chomh maith do fuair agus dubhairt a’ t-Slanuightheoir léi go brách arís an fhaid mhairfeadh sí gan aoinne d’éiteach fé óstaideacht na h-oidhche ná fé deire a loirgeochadh é ar son Dé is bheith go maith i gcómhnuidhe dá bochtaibh féin is bheith is fóirithint ortha nuair a casfaí chuici iad. Gheall sí dó go ndéanfadh agus do coingibh sí an geallamhaint sin go dtí lá a báis. (IFC Iml. 27: 280)

(She got up out of the bed and she threw herself on her knees in the presence of the Saviour and his Mother and she asked them for forgiveness and they forgave her and the Saviour said to her never to refuse anybody ever again who would seek lodgings for the night or anyone who would seek lodgings in the name of the Lord – and that they should always be generous to the poor in their midst and to look after them when they came across them. She promised him that she would do as he asked and she kept that promise until the day of her death).

Some variants even build on this moral imperative and explain the Christian necessity to exhibit kindness and hospitality towards those deemed poorer or who are without lodgings of their own. The following example recorded from the well-known County Kerry storyteller Peig Sayers indicates that the medieval idea whereby poverty was equated with holiness survived in Ireland well into the modern era:

The Stitch-Prayer

We should never be dishearted or ashamed of poverty. It is a very good thing to be poor, especially for the person who can carry the burden of poverty in a dignified manner. Our holy master was poor and his poor saintly mother, and they are merciful and glorious, and they will help us from the place that they are in now because they were themselves on this earth once. (Flower 1957, 71; my translation)

That the moral imperative of hospitality should be applied to all Travellers and not just those who reveal themselves to be saints or members of the Holy Family is indicated by the following:

A gentle woman with a rude husband,
A prayer for the burning stomach
that the Son of God left lying on the flax.

A man who came looking for lodgings on the night that Our Saviour was born in the stable. The man of the house put him out, even though the woman of the house didn't want that. The (travelling) man was only gone when the man got a terrible pain in his stomach. His wife went after the poor man and this is the cure he gave her. (IFC Iml. 355: 377)

In *Ortha an Ghreama* Travellers, in the guise of holy people are seen as agents of subversion who provide a temporary challenge to the “normal” social order. The Travellers are seen to assume a role which mediates between the story's narrator/audience and their world, one based on the dual process of imaginatively projecting into, and creating a representation of, the world. As a shaman-figure the Traveller takes on an intermediary role incorporating two realities – the Traveller world and the settled world – at once. This role-play on the part of the figure of the Traveller is indicative of a commonality of experience which is real or imagined, a commonality which mediates between people. The ritual drama that is *Ortha an Ghreama* serves to emphasise the commonality of human experience and endeavour, within a framework of differentiated behaviour. It is what Erikson refers to as “separateness transcended and [...] distinctiveness confirmed” (1979, 141). Courtney (1982) echoes Erikson's description of communal drama, a drama which is based on acknowledgement and respect. Courtney argues that ritual drama can function as a meaningful metaphor for the notion of community, rather than of society. While society is predicated on power and status, ritual behaviour as a reflection of community is based on acknowledgement and reciprocity. The topsy-turvy and paradoxical nature of the Traveller- shaman generates an attitude of mind which is reflexive, interpretative and self-conscious. The story's audience is forced to think hard on the symbolic dilemma inherent in the tale and the moral choices which the story's protagonists decide upon. The Traveller-shaman thus echoes Bakhtin's fundamental questioning of the assumption that there is a distinction between the social and the individual. In Bakhtin's (1984) view, the very nature of reality is dialogic and polysemous. It is not possible to separate the “self” from the “other”. From birth to death, – who we are, how we think, what we understand and how we act are all dependent on our present or past relationships with people. Since the human consciousness is social as opposed to individual, it is always imbued with ambivalence. This ambivalence, inherent in the dialogic, generates a tension which strives towards a deeper understanding between “self” and “other”. This tension strives for resolution through the symbolic incorporation of both viewpoints that are both the spiritual and the profane. By symbolically dramatising the societal conflict that takes place between the Traveller and the settled person's worldview the shaman goes some way towards resolving this conflict. The symbolic action which occurs is “the microcosm which irreducibly implies, recalls and reflects upon the social macrocosm.” (Geertz 1986, 13). The Travellers are depicted as ritual figures whose role is seen to incorporate a new reality, one that stresses unity and harmony and mediation between opposites. The symbolic duality inhabited by the Travellers allows society's values to be transformed and endowed with a new meaning, a meaning the imposition of which, Geertz defines as “the primary condition of human existence” (1972, 509). The dual-role of the Traveller figures in *Ortha an Ghreama* has strong analogies with an anthropological definition of role-taking in the rituals of non-Western societies as defined by Courtney where the self is identified with the “other”:

It [...] [the role-play] allows the individual to embody the experience of the “other” within the form of the role; thus the role mediates the subjectively felt experience and the objectively perceived “other”. (1982, 52)

In *Ortha an Ghreama* the Irish travelling and settled communities are depicted in an oppositional framework, an opposition which is reconciled through the ritual figure of the shaman. The depiction of the Travellers is analogous with that of other shaman or ritual-clown figures who “dissolve” their environment and represent a powerful statement of “process”. This statement is predicated on a kind of ritual of rebellion whereby strongly countercultural feelings and ideas are expressed, albeit within a frame of reference which is ritualized and culturally permitted. The liminal phase encompassed in the ritual of the Ortha allows the figure of the Traveller, a figure who is permeated with cultural ambiguity to move from one social position to another. The dramatic metaphor that is the Traveller becomes a shared agent for cultural reflexivity. It incorporates the participants’ (storyteller/audience) felt experience and serves to re-create the categories through which they perceive reality – what Turner refers to as those “axioms underlying the structure of society and the laws of the natural and moral orders” (1968, 7). The ambiguous and reflexive nature of the boundary that the Travellers inhabit is central to the paradoxical role they are seen to play in *Ortha an Ghreama* and is analogous with other similar shaman-type figures. This reflexivity demands that the audience reflect upon both the contrary and complementary sides of the cultural interaction between “settled” and Traveller, a reflexivity which needs unearthing from what appears to be ordinary or commonplace. Handleman, discussing the ritual/boundary role of the ritual-clown in “primitive” society describes this reflexivity which culminates in revelation as follows:

Such boundaries or frames are compatible only with ritual phases which evoke a sense of the sacred that is buried ordinarily within the routine and the commonplace. Such frames, by evoking both the sacred and its contrary, heighten the consciousness of participants to sentiments of holiness. Such frames may be termed “boundaries of transition”, for their concern is less with belief than it is with preparing participants to believe [...] they erase distinctions between the sacred and the secular, and they prepare the way for the advent of the deity. (1981, 338-339)

When the Travellers of *Ortha an Ghreama* are “unmasked” as the holy people they really are, they, like the ritual clowns known as the *capakobam* bring the boundary to the sacred centre thereby erasing societal distinctions. They open the way to the reaffirmation of the world as a unity of interdependent parts by introducing a meta-message that overrides paradox. Leach (1976) links this metacommunicative function with the regenerative power that resides in the limen or those ambiguous interfaces that he sometimes refers to as “dirt”. Handleman defines such power¹⁸ as “the changing of the shape and meaning of the cosmos: if boundaries are altered, then so is the relationship between those parts which these borders order” (1981, 342).

Turner sees the dissolving of boundaries as a primary attribute of liminality. In his view liminality is a medium which functions to shape archetypes or root metaphors into “radically simplified” and “generic” models of the ordinary social order (1974, 202). The interaction between generalised cultural meaning and individual consciousness serves to “validate a conceptual world view by conforming and re-creating extant myths” (Schechner 1981, 103). This re-creation is a function of the anti-structural within the liminal:

The anti-structural model of the social order not only arises within the medium of liminality – it is also an “essential” version of social structure. In other words, its premises are composed of essential values, beliefs, and precepts, about how the world should be constituted [...] Within liminal boundaries,

¹⁸ Willeford who studied the role of the fool in “primitive” society identifies a similarly reflexive function in the “fluid” social role of the fool – “the fool as a borderline figure holds the social world open to values that transcend it” (1969, 137).

the ordinary social order is taken-apart and put-together in an essential version of social structure, viz., anti-structure. (Handleman 1981, 351-352)

While anti-structure includes certain strong sentiments (e.g those of “*communitas*”) which critique the social structure, Turner (1974) argues that it is the re-amalgamation of anti-structure with social structure that re-invigorates the latter and ensures the regeneration of cosmic (and hence) social order¹⁹. The ritualised²⁰ nature of this renewal validates certain working paradigms for action as outlined by Turner:

In ritual [...] primitive society, reappraises its ideology and structural form, and finds them good. Refractory behaviour and the expression of conflict are allowed, even in some instances prescribed, to release energies by which social cohesion is recognised to be the outcome of the struggle [...] [it is] often a struggle to overcome the cleavages caused by contradictions in the structural principles of the society itself. A struggle may also arise from the resistances of human nature to social conditioning. Or both kinds of struggle may provoke and exacerbate one another. In any case the structure of each kind of ritual betrays marks of the struggle in its symbolisms and enjoined behaviour. (1968, 237-238)

The narrative power of *Ortha an Ghreama* lies in its reflexivity, a reflexivity which is particularly pertinent in a society as traditionally “homogenous” as Ireland. The ritual drama²¹ that is the Ortha is generative of new meaning thereby contributing to the reinvention of culture for the narrator/audience and the healer practitioners who used the Ortha. The Travellers in *Ortha an Ghreama* embody the role of cosmic messengers who attempt to instigate changes of perception and attitude, changes which can transform by means of their collective²² or uni-

¹⁹The rejuvenation of the cosmic order in *Ortha an Ghreama* is as consequence of the Travellers critique of social structure, a critique that incorporates ritual healing. Handleman (1981) has pointed out to the central role of this renewal in the positing of anti-structural sentiment as applied to “primitive” or tribal societies: “[...] the rejoining of anti-structure to social structure [...] renews the latter. This emphasis on the renewal, the rejuvenation, or the regeneration, of cosmic (and hence social) order, often is striking in the calendrical rites of tribal societies, particularly those associated with the solstices and the equinoxes. Anti-structure, in such rites (and in others as well), calls forth the imagery of enduring and valid truths, of a unity of interdependent parts that is monumental in what it subsumes, and of the punctum indifferens, the point(s) of rest which stabilizes and anchors sacred structures in space and out-of-time” (1981, 352).

²⁰It is worth noting the evidence for the resurgence of ritual behaviour in modern times, a resurgence which is often representative of oppositional social and political stances. The women’s movement, movements incorporating various forms of civil protest and the “New Age” Movement, including different groups of New Age Travellers have all deliberately created formalized ritual behaviour as a response to dominant cultural ideologies. A good example of the latter grouping is the Dongas “tribe” of New Age Travellers in Britain which has led the opposition to road-building schemes in various areas of Britain during the 1990s. John Fox, a ceremonial artist and founder of the Welfare State Theatre Company in Britain expresses this new cultural dynamic whereby people in the West wish to emulate the ritual behaviour of many in non-Western societies, rituals which invert and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary: “We are looking for a culture which may well be less materially-based but where people will actively participate and gain power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant in their lives. Be this building their own houses, naming their children, burying their dead, announcing new partnerships, marking anniversaries, creating new sacred spaces and producing whatever drama, stories, songs, rituals, ceremonies, pageants and jokes that are relevant to the new values and new iconography” (Fox in Fyfe 1998, 149).

²¹It is generally acknowledged that the Western European tradition has separated drama from other activities in life. The power of involvement whereby personal concerns and social ones are inked with dramatic involvement has tended to diminish or disappear entirely within the cultures of the West. The opposite remains the case in many non-Western or so-called primitive societies. In these societies art (culture), religion and daily life fuse together in drama so that cultural meanings are renewed and recreated “on a stage as wide as society itself” (Diamond n.d., 31).

²²Walens describes the ceremonial rituals of Northwest Coast Native Americans as an attempt to achieve a new and collective awareness that has significance far beyond the confines of the social group: “Through the display of crests

versal significance. Such folk narratives form a discourse where Travellers are seen to subvert their assignation of “outcast” or “negative Other” as incorporated in “anti-Traveller” folktales like the “Nail” and “Pin” legends. At its most basic, the moral imperative of a narrative-charm such as *Ortha an Ghreama* and associated folk narratives is the necessity to exhibit “hospitality” towards all Travellers or those regarded as less well-off or without lodgings of their own. That the *lucht siúil* (Travellers) are often travelling in the guise of holy personages and are in a sense God’s representatives on earth is the sub-text of the narrative. The idea that it is dangerous or unlucky to refuse hospitality to those who request it amalgamates both “medieval” Christian and traditional Gaelic ideas regarding the necessity for charity. Given the narrative and moral thrust of these tales and the central role played by Travellers in the Irish healing and storytelling traditions it is very likely that Travellers themselves had a large role in the promulgation and preservation of this counter-tradition as encompassed in *Ortha an Ghreama*. The extent to which this “subversive tradition”, countering the “negative Other” depiction of Travellers suffused the iconography of both the religious/prayer and traditional healing traditions in Ireland is testament to the strength of these narratives and the importance these “counter-tradition” once held. *Ortha an Ghreama* as promulgated by storytellers in both the Travelling and “settled” communities can be seen as a direct inversion of Traveller ostracisation as incorporated in narratives like the “Nail” and “Pin” legends. In this case, the Traveller is portrayed as a shaman-type figure who incorporates a duality fusing the temporal and the divine. The liminal position inhabited by the Traveller is transformed so that his marginal societal position dissolves. This transformation of the liminal position is indicative of an erosion of the societal distinctions that exist between different groups within Irish society. The Travellers of *Ortha an Ghreama* represent an other-worldly form of order that transforms the temporal and erases distinctions between the sacred and the secular so that the fullness of a new “truth” can be revealed. The transformative dualism evident in *Ortha an Ghreama* is also indicative of one of the folktale’s major functions in the twentieth century as outlined by Marina Warner (1995):

[...] in conditions of radical change on the one hand, and stagnation on the other, with ever increasing fragmentation and widening polarities, with national borders disappearing in some places and returning with a bloody vengeance in others [...] the need to belong grows ever more rampant as it becomes more frustrated, there has been a strongly marked shift towards fantasy as a mode of understanding, an ingredient in survival, as a lever against the worst aspects of the status quo and the direction it is taking. (1995, 415)

Instead of being perceived as sinners/outcasts whose marginalisation is a deserved form of punishment, the Travellers in *Ortha an Ghreama* are indicative of a profound symbolic reversal. They are agents of subversion in the guise of holy people who provide a temporary challenge to the “normal” social order. The Travellers assume a role which mediates between the story’s narrator/audience and their world, a role encompassing the dual process of imaginatively projecting into, and creating a representation of, the world. As a shaman-figure the Traveller takes on an intermediary role incorporating two realities – the Traveller world and the “settled” world – at once. The Traveller emphasises the dialogic essence that is the self, as theorised by Bakhtin:

Northwest Coast ceremonies provided for the expansion of the self and the group beyond the social boundaries and in doing so linked human beings with each other and to the vital forces of the cosmos. Rituals make opposites equivalent: a local house becomes the entire universe, a human being becomes a cosmic being, the past of myth becomes manifest in the rituals of the present. The expansion of the self and the group to equivalence with the cosmos is achieved by the close identification of individuals with the spirit-beings whom they portray in dance and embody in this world” (1982, 23).

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and thoroughly throughout his life. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (1984, 293)

The Traveller as depicted in *Ortha an Ghreama* is a figure indicative of an attitude of creative disrespect. The symbolic inversion which the Traveller invokes is representative of a subtle yet radical opposition to the hegemonic, the monologic and that which is illegitimately powerful. It is indicative of the fact that the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its inverse, its negation. It reminds us that culture's most powerful symbolic repertoires are often located at its borders or margins. It echoes Babcock's comments on the centrality of symbolic process in the regeneration of culture:

[...] far from being a residual category of experience, it is its very opposite. What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally. (1978, 32)

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