

## **The Right Words: Conflict and Resolution in an Oral Gaelic Song Text** [\**E-companion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)*]

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### *Introduction*

Although songs and singing are major genres of Irish oral tradition that have been studied from various points of view (Ó Tuama 1960, Partridge 1983, Ó Madagáin 1985, Uí Ógáin 1988, and Mac Aodha 1996), investigative studies regarding the terms in which texts are constructed in an oral context have been rare. Little knowledge is available regarding the dynamics of the interplay enacted between performers, texts, and receivers at a practical level in a living community. I will try to address here the question of what constitutes a correct text among one contemporary community of singers, based on an encounter in which such questions were highlighted.

Albert Lord's theory of oral composition in performance in *The Singer of Tales* (1960) has been subjected to critique and subsequent modification, particularly in the writings of Ruth Finnegan (1977, 1988). In her work she has drawn on studies from widely differing regions of the world to show that the theory of composition in oral performance describes but one of a number of ways that oral poetry can be created, performed, and transmitted. In a culture where variation occurs to a greater or lesser degree, the question of how orally performed items can be judged to be correct or wrong is important for such discussion.

### *Specifics of the Community*

The community in question is that of Tory Island, a predominantly Gaelic-speaking island off the northwest coast of Ireland, where a lively song tradition has been maintained down to the present. It is three miles long and one and a half miles wide at its widest point and remains one of the

most strongly Gaelic-speaking parts of Donegal, with a strong tradition of narrative, music, and dance as well as song. In the late 1970s the islanders were under severe threat of evacuation, but this threat was resisted by some and the island still supports a population of about 160, although this is much reduced from former times. Those who left during the crisis period reside in various locations on the mainland, particularly in local authority housing estates in Falcarragh, the nearest large village on the mainland.

I have been visiting the island and working with some of the community's singers since about 1984, researching their rich tradition with a particular emphasis on Irish language songs. The material examined here gives an important insight into the mechanics and the aesthetics of the community and the individuals in question.

### *Oral Transmission—Evidence from the Field*

In an early reaction to theories of oral-formulaic composition, James Ross (1959) proposed that Gaelic tradition, differing from South Slavic norms, emphasized accuracy and word-for-word repetition as the desirable requisites of transmission in orally recited tales, and that, consequently, the composition-in-performance paradigm did not hold for this culture area. Breandán Ó Buachalla (1998), citing Ross, has recently reiterated this position in his closely argued monograph proposing the acceptance of a purely literary origin for the renowned “*Caoine Airt Uí Laoghaire*,” or “The Lament for Art O’ Leary,” long supposed to have been extemporized over the body of her husband by his young widow, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. This argument critiques what it considers to be an overemphasis on oral performance when hard evidence of the performance of texts surviving now only in manuscript traditions is singularly lacking.

On first consideration, Ross’s claim seems to obtain in Tory island, where great care was taken to ensure that song texts were correctly performed in regard to the words themselves and the order of the verses (Ó Laoire 2002). After dances, people who had transgressed these conventions were roundly criticized, sometimes to their faces, with the words “*chuaigh siad fríd an amhrán*” (“they went through the song”), had got it *ciotach* (“wrong”), and so on, or even perhaps “*rinne siad an mhuc den amhrán*” (“they made a pig of the song”). Such criticism is known as *loscadh*, “scorching,” and is not confined to music alone. Today’s singers clearly remember the severe correction of their elders in these matters. Singers who were considered to be good always sang the verses in the right order, their diction was precise, and their lyrics clearly audible, so that the verbal

component of the song and its “story” were comprehensible. Such performances were considered to be *ceart* (“right”) and to have *cuma agus craiceann* (“the proper appearance and finish”). One person reminisced about her favorite singer saying “phronouncálfadh sé na focla go maith” (“he would pronounce the words well”), indicating by her appropriation of an English loan word exactly what she believed was pleasing in his singing.

What this behavior points to is evidence of a highly developed and attentively maintained aesthetic, which obtained in all areas of life in regard to both art and work (Ó Laoire 1999, 2002, forthcoming). John Miles Foley has referred to the dynamics of oral poetry as a performance tradition in particular communities as “traditional referentiality” that “entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems to the individual performance or text” (1991:7). My exploration in this paper will highlight one small example of such referentiality and its dynamics, revealing how one context is implicitly linked both to the existence of an ideal notion of the text in the present and to past and future engagements with and performances of it. By studying “how a song means” (Foley 2002:10) in terms of traditional referentiality, we gain insight into the complex, multilayered world of oral poetics that encompasses much more than what can be gained from an individual, alone, silently reading a reduced textual representation.

### *Orality and Literacy in Tory Island*

Tory ideals of what is “right” and “wrong” with particular performances would seem to self-evidently preclude variation as a characteristic of this tradition. Yet variation exists, and consequently it seems to me that a claim for the supremacy of verbatim repetition in Gaelic tradition calls for closer examination, in order to discover exactly what its implications are for those who maintain oral texts within the community in question, and by extension perhaps in the wider Gaelic world. It is also fitting to give some account of literacy and its role in Tory society. Although Irish is the dominant vernacular in Tory, in modern times literacy has been predominantly in English. There was a monastery in Tory from early times until it was destroyed by the English in 1595 (Ó Colm 1995), and the scribe of “*Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*” (Walsh 1920) and perhaps of some of “*Betha Colaim Cille*” (O’ Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918), one Ciothruad MacFindghail, was a native of Tory. Subsequently, after the fall of the Gaelic order, this tradition went into decline. Under the National

Education Board a school was established in Tory in 1839, but the Irish language was excluded from the curriculum until the late nineteenth century. According to Inspector Patrick Keenan (1857-58), very little was being learned by the pupils who attended; he comments on their lack of comprehension of and fluency in English. However, by 1883 (O' Donnell et al.), when a letter written by the resident priest to some English newspapers asking for aid on the islanders' behalf in averting a humanitarian crisis was sourly and aggressively answered by their landlord, St. John the Baptist Joule, they themselves wrote a letter answering what they considered to be his false charges against them. Fox (1995/1978) speculates that this letter may also have been written by Fr. O' Donnell on behalf of his flock, but it is also possible that an islander may have written it. The Gaelic League had established literacy classes in the Irish language by 1899 (Anonymous 1899), and the Bilingual Programme that came into Irish National Schools in 1904 established the teaching of Irish on a firm footing. Some achieved high levels of literacy in Irish after this period and songs were written down by some islanders (Ó Laoire 2002), although many more islanders still relied on oral transmission to acquire or "lift" the songs.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that "lifting" (*tógáil*) and "learning" (*foghlaim*) are considered to be somewhat different processes, with some singers favoring the former as more effective and lasting. All important dealings with the state and even personal letter writing, however, continued to be predominantly in English, even for those who were relatively unfamiliar with the language. It is clear that a "mixed mode of literary distribution" prevailed in Tory for a considerable time (Finnegan 1977:160). It is safe to speculate that a wide range of ability existed with regard to literacy, with some individuals achieving a high standard in both English and Irish in reading and writing, while others, for various reasons, did not. Tory is a small-scale society, where as Glassie puts it, "all human interaction takes place face to face with the body in motion" and writing does not enter much into day-to-day communication. It would be wrong however, to state, as Glassie does, that literacy is "only a marginal convenience" (1982:57). This conclusion would deny the high value that islanders place upon literacy and the pride felt by individuals who excelled in this regard. The value ascribed to literacy has not displaced admiration for those who were able to absorb (to lift) texts without the aid of writing, and at least one singer commented that she remembered songs acquired in this way while she had forgotten those learned from written texts (Ó Laoire 2002:78-85). Regardless of how songs are acquired, performance is always oral. The "expressive strategy" (Foley 2002: 26) invoked in the acquisition and performance of the song discussed below was almost certainly

predominantly oral initially, although writing may have been used at different times to record it for other ends.

*Variation and Stability: A Practical Example from Performance*

For the purposes of my examination I am fortunate to be able to draw on an incident that occurred during a visit to Tory to collect songs there. In 1987, almost inadvertently, I documented a phenomenon that largely happened because of my own arrangement of a recording session with an island family, some of whom were acclaimed singers within their own community and beyond, while others rarely or never sang in public, confining their performance by choice and custom to informal house gatherings. However, all of those present, young and old, had an intimate familiarity with Irish (Gaelic) and English songs, gained through repeated exposure to their performance, both within the family context and at more formal island dances.

It was early August and some friends and I had gone to Tory for a weekend festival that was being held on the island. I brought a tape recorder, since it was my intention to record some songs from Séamus Ó Dúgáin (or Jimmy Duggan, 1928-2000), one of the island's leading experts on traditional song. I was also aware that his wife Gráinne was well versed in song lore and that her mother, Mrs. Hannah Duggan (1892-1988), then 95, resided in their home and was also regarded as someone who knew many songs. I visited the house in *Ceann Thoir*, the East End, the smaller of the two island settlements, on a Sunday afternoon, and after some initial conversation proceeded to record songs from Séamus and Gráinne, and from a teenage niece of theirs, Anne Teresa Nic Ruairí, who was also present on that occasion.

Eventually, as things seemed to be going rather well, I ventured to ask the old lady, Hannah, if she would be willing to record for me. Initially, I had been hesitant about making such a request because of her age. She was, however, extremely lucid and knew exactly who I was, and laughed and joked during the course of my visit, which had encouraged me. She consented, and I recorded the song "*Seán Bán Mo Ghrá*" ("Fair Seán My Love") from her. This is a love song taking the point of view of a young girl who has been deserted by her lover, classified by Seán Ó Tuama as a "*Chanson de Jeune Fille*" (1960:76-102, 1995). At that time it was quite a popular song, as it had been used on the island in the two years previously as the basis for a play composed by the islanders themselves and acted at a number of local drama festivals (Tóibín 1990, Ó Péicín 1997:51-55). This category of love songs, where a deserted girl both celebrates her passion for

her lover and laments his ill treatment of her, forms an important part of the love song tradition in Irish folklore. This tradition touches on the harsh economic conditions prevailing until relatively recently, where arranged marriages were often the norm and parental disapproval could harm chances of love matches. Moreover, these songs also deal with the double standards that allowed males to escape scot free from any consequences of their actions, although women could often be left with compromised reputations and sometimes literally holding the baby. As such, it is a genre that centers on unspoken gender and social relations fundamental in this society (Nic Eoin 2000). In addition, its specialized language, its *caint mhaith* (“good speech”), is relished by its hearers for its aesthetic pleasure, so that it functions on many levels, from social commentary to entertainment. It is a prime example of an oral poem that does not “divorce entertainment from instruction, artistic craft from cultural work,” that emerges from the active repertoire of “a people’s poetry serving a wide spectrum of people’s needs” (Foley 2002:28).

As her performance progressed, Hannah grew hesitant on a few occasions and had to be prompted by her son-in-law in order to get her started again. When she had finished, despite her occasional hesitation, I had what I considered to be a relatively creditable performance of the song from the old lady, considering her advanced age and frailty. However, this assumption was immediately dispelled by her daughter Gráinne, who became rather agitated and warned me that under no circumstances was I to learn the song from her mother's performance, since it was, according to her, *ciotach* ("wrong"). She persisted in this vein, vehemently asking that I erase the song from the tape completely. Aware as I was that this was probably the only recording of Mrs. Duggan's voice in existence, I politely refused. I did suggest, however, that I would ask her husband to sing the song for me a second time and that I would then have the correct version. I recorded some other songs then, and shortly afterwards asked Séamus to sing me the song again, which he duly did. When he had finished, Gráinne seemed satisfied that I had the correct version of the song in hand and let the matter drop.

Subsequently, I transcribed both versions and upon comparing the two texts immediately understood what Gráinne's point had been and why she had become so concerned about her mother's performance. The versions differ in significant ways in light of the question I have raised, namely, what is the correct text of an orally transmitted song, and, arising from it, when are the limits of variation transgressed?

There are many differences between the two performances of the song. Hannah's amounts to the testimony of a sharp intellect besieged by the weight of years, but willing, nevertheless, to accept the challenge of performing with what are in Tory's terms considered to be *brí* ("life, force, energy, meaning") and *misneach* ("courage, confidence") despite the difficulties presented by her great age (Ó Laoire 2002). The recording also shows the process of *cuidiú* ("helping") in operation, with her son-in-law supporting her when she requested it and even prompting her when she unwittingly erred. Of course, this was quite an artificial and no doubt an uncomfortable situation, since I was sitting there as a stranger with a microphone in my hand, recording. Séamus seemed concerned about spoiling the recording by interrupting, although he also felt compelled to intervene through a desire to assist his mother-in-law.

### *Two Orally Performed Texts*

I give below, then, as a preliminary to analysis, Hannah's rendition of the song with Séamus' additions, prompts, and interpolations, as he became

aware of her straying from the correct lyrics. The (a) written between words represents a non-lexical sound often inserted by traditional singers for musical but not for semantic reasons. The original is followed by an English translation. Subsequently, Séamus' version is given, also with a translation.

To listen to the following performances visit *Oral Tradition's* e-companion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

### Hannah's Version (VH):<sup>1</sup>

*Mo chosa mo lámha mo chnámha' gus (a) tá mé 'lig (a) tinn  
'S (a) níl a' n osna dá ndéanfainn nach ag gáirí bheadh an rógaire liom  
Nach trua mé a chairde mar a fágadh mé i gceartlár na dtonn  
'S gan (a) coite long ná bád agam ach amháin do Seán Bán a bheith liom*

*Nach beag a shíl (a) mé 'Sheáin Bháin, go bhfuígeá thusa mise liom féin  
I ndiaidh gach oíche is gach lá is gach gáire dá raibh eadrainn ariamh  
Mo sheacht m' anam déag ar an dá lámh a bhí tharam 's nach mbíonn*

*Cá bhfuil an cheathrú eile anois a Jimí?*

*Jimí: Sé Seán Bán mo ghrá*

*Sé Seán Bán mo ghrá 's nach bhfuil áit nach n-insíonn sé scéal  
D'fhág sé osna in mo lár agus (a) leon sé mo bhuillí go léir  
Agus mí cha bhím beo má phósann sé 'n bhean dubh den tsiabh*

*'S nach iomaí sin áit álainn dá dtear mé is tú féin tamallt (a) grinn  
I gcúl claidhe chois garraí ná i lár na machaireacha lom  
Nach trua libh mé a chairde...*

*Jimí: Níor mhilse liom do phóg*

*Nár mhilse liom do phóg ná 'n bhróg atá ar (a) caitheamh le bliain  
'S tá cumhaidh orm i ndiaidh mo stóirín 's ní mó ná go bhfuil mo chroí  
slán*

*Cá bhfuil?...*

*Jimí: Ag geaftaí an tí móir*

*Ag geaftaí an tí móir a chónaíos agus chodlaíos mo ghrá*

*'S tá mo shúile ar an réalt eolais atá 'na cónaí ar mhalaidh an tsléibh  
ruaidh*

*Tá long ar an Éirne agus bhéarfaidh sí mise 'na Spáinn'*

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah and Seamus were recorded between 2:30 and 5:30 on Sunday August 2, 1987.



*'S cha phillimse go deo deo go raibh féirín ó liom 'soir Sheán Bhán*

*Suigh síos a ghrá díleas 'gus gheobh' tusa duais  
Gheobh' tusa féirín lá aonaigh agus margaidh uaim*

*'S beidh tú a' siúl in do bhróga éadaí go haerach ar mhalaidh an tsléibh  
ruaidh*

H: My feet, my hands, my bones, and I am all sick  
And with every sigh I make the rogue is laughing at me still  
Don't you pity me, my relations, how I have been left in the very center of  
the waves  
With no vessel, neither ship nor boat, and not even to have Seán Bán by my  
side?

It was little I thought, Seán Bán, that you would leave me by myself  
Despite every night and day and all the laughter that passed between us.  
How dearly I love the two hands that no longer surround me.

Where's the next verse now Jimmy?

J: Seán Bán is my love

H: Seán Bán is my love and there is nowhere that he doesn't tell a story,  
He left my being sighing and has blighted all my intentions,  
And I'll not live a month, if he marries the dark woman from the mountain.

Many a beautiful spot where yourself and I enjoyed some fun  
Behind the hedge, in a garden, even on the exposed plains,  
Don't you pity me, my relations...

J: Your kiss to me was no sweeter

H: Your kiss to me was no sweeter than the shoe that has been worn for  
a year,  
I grieve with longing for my treasure, and my heart is all but overcome.

H: Where . . . ?

J: At the gates of the mansion

H: At the gates of the mansion my love lives and sleeps,  
And my eyes are fixed on the guiding star who lives on the brow of Sliabh  
Rua [the Red Mountain].  
There's a ship on the Erne that will carry me over to Spain,  
And I will not return until I bring a gift back with me for Seán Bán.

Sit down my love and you will get the reward,  
 You will get a gift from me on fair and market days,  
 And you'll be walking joyfully in your cloth shoes on the brow of Sliabh  
 Bán [the Fair or White Mountain].

Séamus and Gráinne Duggan at Traditional Singing Festival, Dublin 1995.  
 Photograph by Colm Ó Torna.

### Séamus' Version (VS)

*Mo chosa mo lámha mo chnámha ' gus tá mé ' lig tinn  
 'S níl a' n osna dá ndéanfainn nach ag gáirí bheadh an rógaire liom  
 Nach trua libh a chairde mar a fágadh mé i gceartlár na dtonn  
 Gan coite long ná bád agam ach amháin do Sheán Bán a bheith liom  
 Nach beag a shíl mé 'Sheáin Bháin ó go ndéanfá thusa m' athrach go*

*deo*

*Go n-éalófá le Mailí Bhán is go bhfuígeá thusa mise liom féin  
I ndiaidh gach oíche 's gach lá 's gach gáire dá raibh eadrainn ariamh  
'S mo sheacht mh' anam déag ar an dá lámh a bhí tharam is nach  
mbíonn*

*Nach iomaí áit álainn dá dtear mé 'gus tú tamall grinn  
I gcúl (a) claidhe chois garraí ná i lár na machaireacha lom  
Níor mhilse liom do phóig ná 'n rós a dtig míl ar a bláth  
'S tá cumhaidh orm i ndiaidh mo stóirín 's ní mó ná go bhfuil mo chroí  
slán*

*'Sé Seán Bán mo ghrá 's gach áit dá n-insíonn sé a scéal  
D'fhág sé osna in mo lár agus leon sé mo bhuillí go léir  
Agus bliain cha bhím beo má phósann sé an bhean úd ón tsiabh*

*'S ag geaftaí an tí móir ó a chónaíos agus chodlaíos mo ghrá  
'S tá a shúile ar an réalt eolais atá 'na cónaí ar mhalaidh 'n tSléibh  
Báin*

*Ach tá long ar an Éirne agus bhéarfaidh sí mise 'na Spáinn  
'S cha phillimse go deo deo go raibh féirín ó liom 'soir Sheán Bán*

*Suigh síos a ghrá dílis agus gheobhaidh tusa an duais  
Nuair a thiocthas na daoine agus dhéanfar an t-airgead suas  
Ó gheobhaidh tusa féirín lá aonaigh agus margaidh uaim  
'S beidh tú a' siúl in do bhróga éadaí go haerach ar mhalaidh an tSléibh  
Báin*

*H: An tSléibh Ruaidh a ba cheart duit a rá.*

My feet, my hands, my bones, and I am all sick  
And with every sigh I emit the rogue is still laughing at me.  
Isn't it pitiful to you my friends, how I was left in the very center of the  
waves  
With no vessel, neither ship nor boat, and not even to have Seán Bán by  
my side?

It was little I thought, Seán Bán, that you would ever change from me,  
That you would elope with Mailí Bhán [Fair Molly] and that you would  
leave me by myself  
Despite every day and every night and all the laughter that ever passed  
between us.  
How dearly I love the two hands that no longer surround me.

Many a beautiful spot where you and I enjoyed some fun

Behind the hedge, in a garden or in the middle of the exposed plains,  
 Your kiss to me was no sweeter than the rose whose blossom yields  
 honey,  
 And I grieve with longing for my treasure and my heart is all but  
 overcome.

Seán Bán is my love, and everywhere he tells a story,  
 He has left my being sighing and has blighted all my intentions,  
 And I'll not live a year, if he marries yonder woman from the mountain.

At the gates of the mansion is where my love lives and sleeps,  
 And his eyes are fixed on the guiding star who lives on slope of Sliabh  
 Bán [the Fair or White Mountain],  
 But there's a ship on the Erne that will carry me over to Spain,  
 And I'll never, never return until I have a gift with me for Seán Bán.

Sit down faithful love and you will get the reward  
 When the people assemble and the money is counted up,  
 You will receive a gift from me on fair and market days,  
 And you'll be walking joyfully in your cloth shoes on the slope of Sliabh  
 Bán [the Fair Mountain].

H: "An tSléibh Ruaidh" [of the Red Mountain], you should have said.

### *Shared Assumptions Regarding Songs and Textual Analysis*

Before analyzing the texts themselves, it is worth drawing attention to the manner in which the old lady asked her son-in-law for assistance. She asked, significantly, I believe, "*Where* is the other verse now, Jimí?" almost as if the missing verse were actually stored in a particular *place*, where he might actually find it.<sup>2</sup> I surmise that this is possibly related to the idea of *ceapadh* ("stopping"), a term used in Tory to convey the idea of acquiring songs orally by means of hearing them, without the aid of writing. Séamus Ó Dúgáin used this term when referring to his own early experiences of learning songs declaring "nuair a bhí an ceann óg, bhí sé ag ceapadh achán rud" ("when the head was young it was stopping/capturing everything"). It is arguable that he perceived these creations, which after all existed fully only when performed, to be truly physical things. If my interpretation is correct, then it reveals that the old woman's metaphorical conception of songs as entities stored in a particular location is closely related to her son-

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, *cá bhfuil sé?* might also be translated as "show it to me," since the phrase is sometimes used in this way in the Irish of northwest Donegal.

in-law's. Moreover, a shared understanding of *ceart*, the correct manner of performing and presenting songs, can be seen to be operating between mother, daughter, and son-in-law.

The way in which I resolved the difficulty of the *ciotach*, the “wrong” text, seemed to satisfy Gráinne, who agreed that her husband's realization of the song was streamlined and accurate with no errors. His fourth verse has only three lines instead of the normal four. This characteristic is often found in oral cultures when transmission of songs occurs without the aid of writing (O' Boyle 1976:87). Nevertheless, it gives a fair idea of the island standard of *ceart* (“right” or “correct”), a term also used among Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton (Shaw 1992-93:42). It must be said that I was not aware of any of this when the song was being sung. In fact, I was quite perplexed by Gráinne's reaction to the song, since I did not know the song well, and consequently had no clear idea of how it ought to progress. My awareness of this only came afterwards as I transcribed both versions with Gráinne's caveats ringing in my ears.

As Séamus' version can be seen to represent *ceart*, a correct text, Hannah's rendition gives a reasonable impression of a *ciotach*, a wrong or unacceptable one. Certainly these two variants collectively represent a distinct phenomenon because the second was given explicitly, at my request, as a correction of the first. Consequently, a detailed comparison will prove useful in that it will reveal each of their strong and weak points respectively. In this way we will gain a clearer perspective of how the first transgresses the concept of “multiformity” (Lord 1960, Nagy 1996), which refers to the ability of oral texts to encompass disparate configurations and yet be considered variants of the same text, a principle held by theorists to be a fundamental precept of oral poetry. In this regard the evidence from South Slavic *guslari* consulted about the meaning of the term *reč* or “word” (Foley 2002:12-20), bears striking similarities to Irish ideas on the same topic. *Focal* in Irish can mean a single lexical unit, but it may also mean more than that. *Seanfhocal* (literally “old word”), for example, is the usual term for proverb, clearly always more than a single lexical unit. As Foley remarks, “a word in oral poetry is a unit of utterance, an irreducible atom of performance, a speech-act” (2002:13). By adapting this idea to the present case, it is possible to state that the variant readings discussed below fulfill the conventions for the correct realization of *caint mhaith* (“good speech”). These variations thus cannot be considered wrong, because they work within the limits of acceptable variation and in some cases can be potentially regarded as enhancing the performance.

*Variant Readings That Are Not Mistakes*

At first, then, I will highlight the variant readings in both texts that I do not consider actual errors, but rather integral components of the multiformity characteristic of most oral poetry. Perhaps the most convenient way to do this is to list the differences as they occur in each corresponding verse of the two renditions above.

Verse 1: This verse is almost identical in both VH and VS except that Hannah says “nach trua mé a chairde,” “don’t you pity me, my friends/relations,” where Séamus has “nach trua libh a chairde” (“isn’t it pitiful to you, my friends/relations”). From a semantic point of view there is very little between them, except perhaps that VH is slightly more poignant. It is conceivably due to a closer, more personal identification by the female performer with the distressed state of the female speaker in the song. I have also noted this tendency among other female performers, so that this variation cannot be regarded as a mistake, but part of a practice of “personalization” or first-person association, previously noted for Gaelic oral poetry in Ireland and Scotland (Dubois 1996:238-39).

Verse 3 (VH) and Verse 4 (VS):

(1) VH “nach bhfuil áit nach n-insíonn sé [a] scéal” (“there is nowhere that he doesn’t tell a story”); VS “gach áit dá n-insíonn sé [a] scéal” (“everywhere he tells a story”). Again these are slightly different ways to express the same intention. Both could also read “his story” since the possessive particle (in square brackets) may be present in both texts, but due to its elision in the spoken language it is unclear whether or not this is the case.

(2) VH “mí cha bhím beo” (“I’ll not live a month”); VS “bliain cha bhím beo” (“I’ll not live a year”). There is a difference of semantic sense here, though the referential intention is very close. Both of these variants would arguably be acceptable in performance. Prosodically also they are both suitable and reasonably equivalent in the use of the [ia] diphthong in *bliain* and the [i:] vowel in *mí*. The difference in gender may again be a factor here, since the idea of living for less than a month after the former lover’s marriage to another is again more intense than living for less than a year. Such passionate expression is entirely consistent with the mood of the song, in which a woman is the speaker. More passionate emotional expression among women is also an approved feature in this culture.

(3) VH “an bhean dubh den tsiabh” (“the dark [haired] woman from the mountain”); VS “an bhean úd ón tsiabh” (“yonder woman from the

mountain”). The [u] vowel is identical in both words but there is a significant difference in the words. In this case I think VH is more acceptable according to island tradition, since in the composition of the play based upon the text and accompanying narrative of this song, a dark-skinned woman played an important character role. Usually in Irish, color epithets refer to the hair, as I have indicated, but the playwright interpreted the phrase *an bhean dubh* as referring to a woman with black skin. It is likely, however, that both variants are current, with one being selected for the purposes of the play because it answered the dramatic requirements more closely.

Verse 5: There are two small but important differences in the two performances of this verse.

(1) VH “mo shúile” (“my eyes”); VS “a shúile” (“his eyes”). Although this is a small change from a phonological perspective, it is quite significant from a referential point of view, in that it represents two disparate perspectives: one, presumably, the first person voice of the lamenting girl referring to her lover as *an réalt eolais* (“the guiding star”); the other, also in a female persona’s voice, referring to *a shúile* (“his eyes upon the guiding star”), perhaps to her replacement who lives on the *Sliabh Bán*. The more passionate female gender perspective is again inherent in this change of pronoun, once again displaying “personalization” and closer identification with the song’s female speaker. In fact, this instance may approach the interpretive strategy Dubois labels “invocation,” which he notes is particularly linked with keening or funeral laments. Keening was especially associated with women, and it seems apposite to mention here that Mrs. Duggan was proficient in this moribund skill and practiced it on occasion.<sup>3</sup> The custom has now become stigmatized to the extent that the few who know how to perform it are rarely willing to do so publicly.

(2) VH “ar mhalaidh an tsléibh ruaidh” (“on the slope of the red mountain”); VS “ar mhalaidh an tsléibh báin” (“on the slope of the white mountain”). Metrically, the long [a:] sound of *báin* is the required one here, rather than the [ua] diphthong of *ruaidh*. This substitution is probably due to the fact that *malaidh an tsléibh báin* is also mentioned in another verse of the song, as discussed below.

Verse 6: VH “malaidh an tsléibh ruaidh” (“the slope of the red mountain”); VS “malaidh an tsléibh báin” (“the slope of the white mountain”). This is

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<sup>3</sup> One of these was her twenty-year-old granddaughter’s tragic drowning by a freak wave in 1975.

the same variation that we have just dealt with in verse five regarding the color of the mountains and the metrical requirements. Here, however, the requirements are reversed; it is the [ua] of *ruaidh* that is prosodically correct. Interestingly, Hannah's correction of Séamus after he has finished confirms this; as she observes, “an tsléibh ruaidh a ba cheart duit a rá” (“*an tsléibh ruaidh* you should have said”). Although in one sense this is a throwaway remark, it draws attention to the care taken with correct realization of song texts and underscores the dialogical process involved in observing *ceart*, the “right” or “correct” way of doing a thing. Although Séamus' performance was acknowledged as being more accurate and therefore more desirable than his mother-in-law's, this status did not preclude him from being corrected, even if the correction was a minor one.

#### Mouvance—*Acceptable Variation*

The differences I have highlighted, then, can be considered to constitute the kind of variance that theorists call *mouvance*, a term originating in French Provence that refers specifically to the variational nature of medieval poetry in that tradition (Zumthor 1992, Nagy 1996:9-11). Gregory Nagy defines the concept in the following way (25): “I propose, then, that *mouvance* is the process of recomposition-in-performance as actually recognized by a living oral tradition, where the recognition implies the paradox of immediate change without ultimate change.” *Mouvance*, the troubadours' term for permissible textual changes in song lyrics, derives from the verb *mover*; its negative equivalent, signifying unacceptable variation was the verb *franhar*, “to break” (Nagy 1996:23). In this context, it is striking that another singer referred to the occurrence of variants as *bogtha* (“moved” or “changed”) in a critical way. By invoking these terms of the troubadours, however, I am not suggesting that the conditions for the stability and change of texts that obtained in their poetry were in any way identical to those in Tory. It is rather that the terms provide useful labels that may be attached to broadly similar processes. In this case the terms are being adapted to the particular context. Having first examined *mouvance* or “acceptable variation” in these two song texts, the question of what can be regarded as “broken” in VH may now be addressed, in the sense that it departs from the norms of acceptability that function in the community of singers in Tory. In this particular case the norm or standard may be regarded as VS.



*Discontinuities in VH—Unacceptable Variations*

Apart from the acceptable variations discussed above, verse 1 and verse 6 are quite fully realized in VH. What can be regarded as the most serious errors then, occur in the other verses 2, 3, 4, and 5. The first change is that the order of the verses differs in both performances. The verse beginning “sé Seán Bán mo ghrá” was sung as verse 3 in VH and verse 4 in VS and, apart from the omission of a line, it is substantially the same in both performances. However, the order of verses is an important part of realizing *ceart* in Tory. Some singers observed the correct verse order according to pre-ordained island norms, while others departed from this standard and sang the verses in the order that they thought of them, or as they came to them. Those who observed the set pattern were accorded more respect as singers than those who sang the verses randomly.

In verse 2 it is clear that two half-lines have been omitted in the first two lines of the quatrain—the second half of the first line and the first half of the second line. From the point of view of the plot and the narrative (usually related before or sometimes after the performance), these two units are important because they reveal the reason why the speaker in the song is sorrowful, namely, that Seán Bán has eloped with the other woman, Mailí Bhán. In this truncation, the quatrain becomes a three-line verse, with the first section of the first line joining the second part of the second to form a complete semantic unit. Because it conveys the essential message it still makes sense, of course, although it has omitted an important part of the plot of the song’s associated narrative, and in this aesthetic the proper realization of *scéal* or *brí an amhráin*, “the story or the meaning of the song,” is essential (Shields 1993). In Foley’s terms, the communicative economy (2002:121-22) of the *athrach* (“change”) that overtook the male lover, leading him to escape with another, Mailí Bhán, has been breached, leaving unacceptable gaps in crucial narrative detail. Hence the metonymic conventions favored by many songs in this genre have been attenuated to the point where meaning has been compromised. The story becomes poorer when we are not told that the lover’s departure is a public betrayal, directly linked to his new romantic alliance with another. Although the song is a lyric, its associated story will draw on such details in the telling of the extratextual narrative (Dubois 1996:243).

VH becomes confused in the verse beginning “s nach iomaí áit álainn dá dtear mé is tú féin tamall grinn” (“many a lovely spot where yourself and I enjoyed some fun”). In the third line the singer repeats a line from verse 1: “nach trua libh mé a chairde” (“don’t you pity me my friends/relations”). Séamus tries to “help” her by prompting her with the first half of the correct

line: “níor mhilse liom do phóóg” (“your kiss to me was no sweeter”). The singer begins again but gives the second half of the line as “ná’n bhróg atá ar caitheamh le bliain” (“than the shoe that has been worn for a year”). This is a line from a different song often called “*Buachaill Ón Éirne*” (“A Lad from the Erne”) on the basis of its usual first line. The song is in the same meter as the one we are discussing and their tunes are also similar. In that song the line is usually: “ní mó liom do phóóg ná’n bhróg atá ar caitheamh le bliain” (“I care less for your kiss than the shoe that has been worn for a year”), or as recorded from another island singer: “s gur bhinne liom do phóóg ná’n bhróg atá ar caitheamh le bliain” (“your kiss to me was sweeter than the shoe that has been worn for a year”) (Ó Laoire 2002:351). I believe the “logic,” if it may be called that, of the error can be found in the occurrence of the phrase *do phóóg* (“your kiss”) in the same location in both lines, and that the phrase *do phóóg* elicited the incorrect poetic formula or *caint* (“speech”)—*reč* in South Slavic terms—from the old lady’s memory.

Another strategy might have been to make the line positive with “gur mhilse liom do phóóg” (“that your kiss to me was sweeter”), which would have worked in the context. Incorrect as it is, however, it is worth noting that the line still satisfies the prosodic length and the assonantal pattern of the line. The meaning here is, of course, completely at odds with the intention of the song, which becomes clearer in a comparison with VS, where the correct line is seen to be “níor mhilse liom do phóóg ná’n rós a dtig mil ar a bláth” (“your kiss to me was no sweeter than the rose whose blossom yields honey”). I take this to be the most serious lapse in VH, since, as mentioned above, it is completely out of character with the tone of the rest of the song. In this case it is the poetic “register” (Foley 2002:114-16) that has been compromised. One song has a female speaker lamenting the betrayal of a lover. In the song from which the unsuitable half-line has been borrowed, the speaker is the eponymous *buachaill* (“boy” or “lad”) who wears his heart on his sleeve and spends his time “ag imirt is ag ól le hógmhna deasa fá shliabh” (“drinking and sporting with pretty young women in the mountains”) (Ó Laoire 2002:351). The mood of the song is playful and light-hearted, starkly contrasting with the passionate outpouring of the betrayed female speaker in “*Seán Bán mo Ghrá*.”

Verse six also omits some significant phrases and becomes a three-line verse in VH. I must stress again that I was not aware of these errors as they were being performed, since I was concentrating on my microphone and tape recorder for most of the time. Apart from the prompts and hesitations, I believed that I had captured a reasonably satisfactory performance and was only advised of the contrary due to Gráinne’s concern

about it.<sup>4</sup> In carrying out such a minute and detailed analysis here, I am also affected by a certain unease due to the fact that the singer is deceased and that this performance of hers is not one that she herself would consider ideal.<sup>5</sup> I remain convinced, however, that it is a performance of immense value because of its revelatory potential in regard to the idea of *ceart* (“correctness”) and *cuma* (“the proper appearance”).

### *Implications of the Analysis for Ceart and Cuma*

VH, then, because of its discontinuities, can be viewed as not having attained the island’s standards of performance represented here by VS. The examination reveals the cause of Gráinne’s misgivings about her mother’s performance and her wish to have it erased from the record. When her husband provided VS, he succeeded in calming her fears and she stopped asking me to erase her mother’s song. Having examined the differences between the two performances in detail, one may also observe similarities between them, a significant one being that they both have a three-line verse in common, the one beginning “sé Seán Bán mo ghrá” (“Seán Bán is my love”). Consequently, it is clear that lapses in memory did not begin with VH, but form an integral part of the challenges confronted by orally transmitted songs. Gráinne’s strong reaction to her mother’s memory lapses, which caused her to give a rendering that was *ciotach* (“wrong”) reveals the care taken to achieve the proper *ceart* and *cuma* in this culture. Because Gráinne believed that there was a chance that I would learn the song as I had recorded it from her mother, she felt bound to attempt to stop the process of faulty transmission. When a better rendering of the song was provided, her fears subsided. The old lady’s lapses of memory may be accounted for by the debilitating effects of her advanced age, and, of course, the discomfort caused by having a stranger set a microphone in front of her. Nevertheless, her mistakes are not vastly different from those committed by singers in the prime of their lives and health, as evidenced by her son-in-law’s three-line

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<sup>4</sup> During preparation of the CD that accompanies Ó Laoire 2002 the sound engineer, Harry Bradshaw, removed what he viewed as the “interruptions” in the song, viewing them as unnecessary and an impediment to the aesthetic effect of the overall song. During our editing session I told him that the inclusion of the additional commentary and interpolation was crucial to my analysis of textuality, so he put them back in again.

<sup>5</sup> See Ó Laoire 2003 for a discussion of the challenges of negotiating an ethical relationship with the Tory community.

verse. For that reason, I do not consider such errors exceptional—except perhaps in their frequency—in this case. On the contrary, they represent examples of aberrations that anyone studying oral performance may encounter from time to time. Thus the respect and high prestige that accrue to those who both maintain the knowledge of songs and achieve the high performance standards necessary for their correct realization and transmission time and again should not be surprising.

### *In Search of the “Work”*

Paul Zumthor observes that in orally transmitted material there is no such entity as “the authentic text,” since constant performance of oral poetry entails constant change (1990:203): “From one performance to the next, we glide from nuance to nuance or to sudden mutation; where is there, in this deteriorated state, the demarcation between what is still the ‘work’ and what is no longer the ‘work’?” It seems to me that a textual analysis of both the differences and the similarities of both these performances of the same song delivered on the same occasion can and do reveal what is “the work” and what is not. Comparison of both also reveals a middle ground of minor variations that are part of the work, perhaps crucially in that they contribute to an ongoing debate about correct form, structure, register, and communicative economy. As I have described the encounter, I was not aware that the first performance had transgressed the boundaries of *ceart* or “correctness” until I was alerted to this transgression by the performer’s daughter, herself skilled in her family’s repertoire of songs. Because of her concern for the correct transmission of the song, she was worried that the performance I had was faulty and that I would learn it and in turn transmit an incorrect variant. My strategy in allaying her fears by recording a second performance deemed to be acceptable was the deciding factor that alleviated her misgivings. However, I also tried to show that some small differences in the performance were not to be considered errors, but variants that existed in oral performance and were consistent with “rule-governed variability” (Foley 2002:116) characteristic of this tradition, which includes practice of personalization, that is, invocation directly related to disparate expressive modalities predicated upon a performer’s gender. Such variations may certainly be considered to lie well within the boundary of the work. By likening this variability to the concept of *mouvance*, or acceptable change, it becomes possible to recognize that even in a tradition where oral performance predominates, the ideal of composition-in-performance, as described by Lord, is not present. The ideal of exact repetition of texts,

however, in such a society, does not always mean verbatim reproduction, but something that closely resembles it. As Foley has shown, the term “word” in oral tradition is not to be unproblematically regarded as “a string of black letters bounded by white spaces” (2002:17) but as anything from single “units of utterance” to phrases, to half-lines or whole lines of poetry and beyond.

I would hesitate to extend the idea of *focal*, “word,” further than this for the Irish case at this point. However, in this context it is worth relating the story told of the famous collector and Irish language activist Lorcán Ó Muireadhaigh, who founded the renowned Gaelic college in Rannafast, Co. Donegal in the early part of the twentieth century (Ó Baoill 1977).<sup>6</sup> Trying to transcribe a song from Méabha Tharlaigh Mhóir, he encountered a problem in that he could not understand the word *eilagus* in the song “*Mal Dubh an Ghleanna*” (“Dark Moll of the Glen”). When he asked her to pronounce each word (in his literate, text-bound sense) separately, she was unable to do so. “*Bean eile agus dhá mhíle bó léi*” (“another woman and two thousand cows with her”) was the line that caused him the trouble. When vowels from two words meet in Irish, one is usually elided. This is what the singer did in the combination *eile* (“other”) and *agus* (“and”), producing the combination *eilagus*. The collector took this composite to be one word since it was pronounced in this way and was unable to recognize the two constituent lexical units. His singer was unable to help him separate them.

### *Frequency of Performance and Textual Stability*

It may be observed in Tory that some songs remain substantially unchanged over time, while with others there seems to be little agreement as to their correct order (Ó Laoire 2002:130-35). I consider this phenomenon to be related to frequency of performance. Some songs, because they were highly regarded, were performed at almost every public occasion of entertainment and indeed during informal evening visiting. They were also performed by prestigious singers, those who were admired not only for their skill in musical performance but precisely because they could repeat the songs in the correct format. Those who confused the order were not considered to be excellent performers and were criticized afterwards. Through such discussions, reminiscent of “oral literary criticism” (Dundes

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<sup>6</sup> See Lambert 1985 for an ethnography of speech and storytelling genres from Rannafast, Co. Donegal, Ireland.

1966, Narayan 1995), a standard was laid down that was clearly a more achievable goal for frequently heard items than for those more rarely sung. Thus, on one level James Ross' assertion that verbatim repetition (as opposed to composition-in-performance) is the ideal of Gaelic tradition can be viewed as correct. The example discussed above, however, indicates that the picture is more complex and that some variation occurs even with frequently performed items. Although such minor variation is itself the subject of argument among singers, it may be used deliberately by singers to put an individual stamp on their performances and is not condemned outright; it can consequently be understood as acceptable change.

Where, however, serious memory lapses, such as the one discussed above, occur, when verse order is changed unnecessarily and other serious alterations are made, this is considered to be *ciotach* ("wrong"). Post-performance criticism re-emphasizes the correct format and encourages conformity to the normative standard. *Ceart*, then, may be considered a dialectically achieved position where individual performances and subsequent critique of them refer to idealized performances in the past as models to which present shortcomings may be compared. Furthermore, they hold up a standard to which future performances and performers should aspire. This attempt at the ideal performance might indeed, then, be described as composition-in-performance, in the restricted sense that a song is realized fully only in the heat of performance and that it must be realized with the proper configuration in order to achieve *ceart* ("correctness") and *cuma* ("the proper appearance"). Recitation without the music is frequently used as a mnemonic or illustrative strategy in Tory and may be considered another way of maintaining songs in correct order. However, when the song is performed at an occasion such as an island dance, the margin of error is considerably narrowed. The singer is attempting to achieve the high critical standards outlined above by standing usually alone in front of his or her peers in order to deliver a complete and satisfactory rendition of a particular song.

### *Reception and Judgment*

Understood in this way as an "exacting test of verbal, musical and dancing abilities" (Glassie 1975:107), the creative element becomes more important, since a singer creates the song according to shared conventions for an "implied audience" (Foley 1995:45), who in the event are no longer implied but present in the performance space during the limited period of the formal ritual of public performance. One slip will result in a loss of face in

front of community arbiters, many of whom are singers themselves, since the performer has failed to meet the challenge of correct performance and will be sharply criticized. On the other hand, when a singer achieves *ceart* the performance is praised and discussed minutely in positive terms as a model for others to emulate. As Zumthor remarks (1990:186), “the listener contributes to the production of the work in performance. The listener is author scarcely less than the performer is author. Whence the specificity of reception in oral poetry.” Consequently, although singers are not composing new texts in performance, in an oral tradition it is through their performance that they realize the text by means of their understanding and their physical, mental, and musical skill. Through their embodied practical mastery of their own cultural norms they compose the text in an acceptable, intelligible form—“i ndiaidh a chéile i gceart” (“arranged in the proper sequence”)—in a satisfying fulfillment of the “unifying rules of performance” (Foley 1995:45). It is worth remembering that composition also retains the sense of “configuration,” and that it is in this sense that performers compose according to their best estimate of their culture’s ideals in order to achieve an excellent performance that is pleasing to all and enhances the festivity of which it usually forms an integral part. If the performance is not good and the text is considered faulty by listeners, the celebration is not enhanced. Furthermore, the danger arises that such a version will be transmitted, so that it becomes important to halt such faulty versions. Singers are often aware of this potential problem. Teresa McClafferty, a sister of Gráinne Duggan, told me that she often ceased trying to “lift” songs from other singers when it became apparent to her that they were not performing the song correctly.

However, such judicious insight is not always guaranteed, since the maintenance of the correct text represents an ideal to which many aspire but few attain. This is what is meant by Foley’s dictum “composition and reception are two sides of the same coin” upon which both intelligibility and art depend (2002:138-39). Changes in verse order and variations in words were and are common, giving rising to the oral literary criticism that attempts to reinforce norms associated with *ceart* or “correct” texts. This was a matter decided by dialogue and argument and, in fact, the argument itself was crucial to the dynamic since it might lead to an increase in individual prestige and authority in such matters. Variation then contributes to a continuing debate within the community regarding what is acceptable and what is not. Minor changes from person to person, part of “rule-governed variability” (*ibid.*:116), also contribute to this debate. Although they may be considered unimportant and merely inconvenient from a narrowly textual point of view, in the dialogic setting of competing community participants they are central to the vibrancy of poetic debate.

Through their enactment and discussion at “the intersection of the traditional and the particular” (*ibid.*:144), they form a part of the cultural uniqueness that gives the community a persistent sense of identity, further reinforcing strong ties between individuals, their place, and their means of oral expression.

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