



Oral Traditions of the Road: Survival of Medieval Historical Echoes Among Modern Tramps

Donny Syofyan

Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFORMATION

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25077/lingolitera.v2.i2.2026.83-90>
Correspondence :
donnysyofyan@hum.unand.ac.id

SUBMISSION TRACK

Submission : January 12, 2026
Final Review : March 17, 2026
Accepted : April 26, 2026
Available online : Mei 30, 2026

KEYWORDS

oral tradition, medieval echoes, linguistic fossils, george orwell, poverty, vagrancy laws, narrative revisionism

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistence of medieval oral traditions among the destitute as recorded in George Orwell's 1933 memoir, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The primary objective is to analyze how these faint echoes from the Middle Ages function as a subterranean culture that preserves historical memory and communal identity outside of formal education. The methodology employs a Qualitative Textual Analysis grounded in New Historicism and Folkloristics. This approach treats the text as an ethnographic record, categorizing scraps of history, linguistic cant, and narrative revisions to understand their role in social survival. The main outcomes reveal that the tramp community acts as a living archaeological site. Linguistic fossils like *deaner* and *kip* indicate a direct lineage from medieval sources. Furthermore, results show that tramps engage in narrative revisionism—such as amending the Gilderoy legend to include a happy ending—and utilize historical myths like the “one bite law” to frame their suffering as part of an ancient struggle against aristocratic oppression. The conclusions indicate that these oral traditions are a byproduct of poverty's annihilation of the future. Deprived of the written word, the marginalized mind reverts to a communal chain of speech that maintains human dignity through intellectual liberty. Ultimately, these echoes prove that the destitute are not a resourceless mob, but the reluctant guardians of a rich, epic tradition that modern industrial civilization has discarded as nonsense.

INTRODUCTION

In George Orwell's 1933 memoir, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the narrator's descent into the “suburbs of poverty” reveals more than just the physical toll of hunger and the “peculiar lowness” of the slum. Beneath the squalor of Parisian kitchens and the institutional coldness of English “spikes,” Orwell uncovers a living archaeological site: a subterranean culture maintained not by books or formal education, but by a persistent and evolving oral tradition. This tradition, shared by a tribe of men “marching up and down England like so many Wandering Jews”, acts as a repository for historical memory, communal myths, and a specific linguistic “cant” that stretches back through the centuries. The author notes that these “scraps of history” have been passed from generation to generation of tramps, surviving the industrial age to remain vital in the minds of the modern destitute. As Orwell (1933) observes, this is “oral tradition lingering on, like a faint echo from the Middle Ages”.

The existence of this oral tradition is born from necessity. For the tramp, poverty annihilates the future, trapping the individual in a rhythm between exhausting work and a desperate need for sleep. In

this state, an illiterate man with the work habit in his bones is often left with a blank, resourceless mind when employment is stripped away. Deprived of the written word—which some tramps find so repellent that the sight of all that bloody print makes them sick—the community relies on the chain of speech. While resting in a plantation near Cromley, Orwell (1933) listens as tramps begin telling stories, noting that these are not repetitions of newspaper articles but a parallel history serving as a cultural anchor for a class of people degraded to the rank of a cripple or a lunatic by society.

One of the most striking aspects of this tradition is the tramps' preservation of antiquated legal and historical concepts, often filtered through a lens of class resistance. The author describes an old man's firm belief in the "one bite law" as a survival from an era when nobles hunted men instead of deer. The tramps also maintain a warped but persistent understanding of the *jus primae noctis* and the Corn Laws. While these accounts may be factually wrong by academic standards—such as the tramps' version of the Great Rebellion as a simple revolt of poor against rich—their survival highlights a selective memory. Marginalized groups often amend history to mirror their own desires for justice. Orwell (1933) highlights this in the retelling of the Gilderoy legend, where tramps claim the robber escaped to America rather than facing the recapture and death recorded in official history. These echoes provide the tramp with a narrative framework where they are not merely scum, but participants in a long-standing struggle.

Furthermore, these medieval echoes are encoded within the very language of the road. Orwell (1933) provides a glossary of London "cant" that reveals linguistic fossils, such as the word *deaner* for a shilling, which likely descends from the medieval *denier*. This slang, much like the stories of haunted cells in the Cromley spike where tramps believe sleeping will lead to death, serves as a magical character that sets the community apart. Swearing and insults also operate on an irrational, quasi-magical level where words lose their dictionary meaning to become tools for shocking the respectable world. These linguistic survivals are not mere atavisms; they are active tools used by the docile, broken-spirited to reclaim a sense of identity in a world that sees them as a "disgusting sight".

Ultimately, Orwell (1933) suggests that the faint echoes he recorded were the remnants of a communal storytelling heritage that prioritized the spoken word over individualistic, written history. In the hot and drowsy kitchens of Pennyfields or the limewashed, stone-floored rooms of the spike, the modern tramp preserved a heritage that the educated man, blinded by a superstitious fear of the mob, had long forgotten. These stories were more than entertainment; they were a form of survival. As the character Bozo argues, as long as a man can "keep on with your books and your ideas"—or in the case of the illiterate, your stories—he remains a free man in here. This article will explore how these medieval echoes provided a necessary, if fragile, intellectual liberty for those otherwise enslaved by modern civilization.

METHOD

To investigate the persistence of medieval oral traditions among the destitute in George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), this study employs a qualitative textual Analysis grounded in New Historicism and Folkloristics. The methodology focuses on decoding the faint echoes from the Middle Ages that Orwell identifies within the tramp community. By treating the memoir as both a literary text and a primary ethnographic record, this research systematically categorizes oral data—slang, myths, and historical revisions—to understand how they function as tools of social survival.

Data Selection and Categorization

The primary source for this analysis is the 1933 narrative of George Orwell's experiences among the poor in Paris and London. The method involves a close reading of the text to isolate instances where the author describes communal storytelling or linguistic patterns. These instances are categorized into three analytical streams:

1. Linguistic Fossils: Words identified in the London "cant" with etymological roots in medieval or archaic French and Latin.
2. Historical Myth-Making: Scraps of history, such as the one bite law or the Great Rebellion, which the tramps interpret through a class-conscious lens.
3. Narrative Revisionism: Folk stories, like the legend of Gilderoy, where the community has deliberately altered historical outcomes to provide happy endings.

Theoretical Framework: New Historicism

The study adopts a New Historicist approach, which argues that history is not a singular, official narrative but a collection of competing voices. Orwell observes that the tramps' stories are passed from generation to generation... for centuries in some cases. The methodology involves comparing these oral traditions against the official historical record of 1933. For example, while academia records Gilderoy's execution, the tramps' oral history records his escape to America. This discrepancy is not treated as a mistake but as a meaningful cultural artefact that reflects the tramps' desire for justice and liberty.

Ethnographic Observation as Narrative Tool

Orwell functions as a participant-observer, a method common in social anthropology. He enters the spikes and lodging-houses not as an academic researcher but as a fellow tramp. This study analyzes how Orwell's immersive method allows him to capture data that a traditional historian would miss—specifically the hot and drowsy kitchen conversations and the whimpering, self-pitying monologues of men like Paddy. The research evaluates these scenes as living archaeological sites where oral tradition replaces the missing written records of the illiterate.

Linguistic Archaeology

A significant portion of the methodology is dedicated to linguistic archaeology. The study examines Orwell's glossary of slang (Chapter XXXII) to find *cant* words that act as historical markers. The analysis specifically investigates the word *deaner* (shilling), tracing its presumed derivation from the medieval *denier*. By mapping these words, the research demonstrates how the tramps' vocabulary preserves a medieval economic reality that has vanished from modern English. This method treats language as a "species of magic" that defines the social boundaries of the road.

Comparative Analysis of "Poverty vs. Future"

The research also employs a comparative labor analysis to understand why these oral traditions survive. Orwell notes that poverty annihilates the future, leaving men with no leisure to think or read. The study analyzes the correlation between the enforced idleness of the spike and the rise of storytelling. In the absence of books, which tramps find physically sickening, the mind reverts to the chain of speech. The methodology explores how the stifling cellars and limewashed rooms of the institutions actually serve as incubators for these medieval echoes.

Ethical Considerations and Class Bias

Finally, the methodology acknowledges the superstitious fear of the mob that Orwell critiques. The analysis accounts for Orwell's own position as an educated man recording the lives of the scum. The study filters Orwell's observations through a Marxist literary lens to ensure that the tramps' stories are seen as acts of intellectual resistance against a society that has degraded them to the status of animals.

By combining these techniques—textual close-reading, etymological tracing, and comparative historical analysis—this study provides a comprehensive look at how the modern road serves as a final sanctuary for the medieval spoken word. The goal is to prove that the tramp is not a monster of atavism, but a reluctant guardian of a discarded historical heritage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) reveals a complex, resilient oral tradition that functions as a parallel historical and cultural record for the marginalized. The results of this study demonstrate that the tramps and *plongeurs* encountered by Orwell are not merely atavisms or monsters, but are participants in a specific communal heritage characterized by linguistic fossils, historical myth-making, and narrative resistance.

Results: The Anatomy of an Oral Tradition

1. Linguistic Fossils and Archaic Etymologies

To broaden the analysis of Oral Traditions of the Road: Survival of Medieval Historical Echoes

Among Modern Tramps, we can integrate other authors and scholars who have studied the intersection of marginalized speech, historical memory, and the “underworld” of poverty.

The following analysis adds perspectives from Victor Hugo, Mikhail Bakhtin, and linguistic scholars to provide a more comprehensive academic framework.

Linguistic Fossils and the “Chain of Speech”

While George Orwell (1933) identifies the *deaner* as a descendant of the medieval *denier*, this phenomenon of linguistic survival among the poor is a long-recognized literary theme. Victor Hugo, in his extensive study of the Parisian underworld in *Les Misérables* (1862), describes *Argot* (slang) not merely as vulgarity, but as a living creature that lives in the lowest depths. Hugo argues that this secret language is the word made convict, preserving ancient roots that the mainstream has discarded in its quest for refinement. Just as the tramp’s vocabulary acts as a repository for archaic terms, Hugo asserts that these words are the final refuge of a persecuted past.

The preservation of the word *kip* (Danish in origin) to describe a night’s lodging mirrors what ethnographers call *Relic Dialect*. Scholars of the linguistic anthropology tradition argue that marginalized groups—isolated from the homogenizing force of public schools and mass media—often become the accidental curators of older linguistic forms. This linguistic continuity noted by Orwell is what Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) refers to as the *Carnavalesque* language of the marketplace. Bakhtin posits that the speech of the lower strata intentionally preserves archaic, earthy, and “unofficial” forms as a way to resist the rigid, “official” history imposed by the ruling class.

The “One Bite Law” and Folkloric Resistance

The tramps’ belief in a one bite law surviving from an era when nobles hunted men instead of deer is a prime example of what historian E.P. Thompson (1963) calls the Moral Economy of the Crowd. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, argues that the poor often maintain a collective memory of traditional rights and ancient laws that they believe have been stolen by modern capitalism.

The tramps’ oral history—including the myth of *jus primae noctis* and the revised legend of the outlaw Gilderoy—functions exactly as Thompson describes: it is a customary culture used to validate their existence against a state that views them as scum. When the tramps amend Gilderoy’s story to give it a happy ending, they are engaging in social myth-making, a concept later explored by Eric Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels* (1959). Hobsbawm notes that social bandits like Gilderoy live on in oral tradition specifically because they embody the “esire for justice of the oppressed, regardless of the academic record.

Specialized Vocabulary and the “Patina of Filth”

The use of terms like *hard up* (salvaged tobacco) and *fuhkum* (perfume used as a legal front) creates what sociologists call an In-Group/Out-Group boundary. Jack London, in his 1903 ethnographic work *The People of the Abyss*, described a similar phenomenon in the East End of London. London noted that the speech of the abyss was a vital tool for survival, allowing the men on the road to identify one another and share secret attachments to poverty.

Like Orwell, Jack London found that when a man’s collar is gone, he enters a world governed by ancient rituals of the road. This transition into a new world is facilitated by a language that has—as Orwell puts it—a *patina of antique filth*. This echoes Walter Benjamin’s theory of the Ragpicker (1940), where the marginalized person is seen as a collector of the refuse of history. The tramp does not just collect cigarette ends; he collects discarded words and medieval echoes, turning the nonsense of civilization into a functional philosophy of freedom.

By integrating Orwell’s observations with the theories of Hugo, Bakhtin, Thompson, and Hobsbawm, we see that oral traditions of the road are not isolated quirks. They are part of a global, historical pattern where the tribe of men maintains a chain of speech to protect their intellectual liberty. In the stifling, low-ceilinged infernos of modern labor, these ancient words and revised myths are the only things that remain truly free.

2. Historical Myth-Making and Folkloric Resistance

The oral tradition recorded by Orwell (1933) shows that tramps possess a body of scraps of history that are passed down orally for generations. These stories are often inaccurate by academic standards but

are rich in symbolic meaning for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This phenomenon aligns with what E.P. Thompson (1963) describes in *The Making of the English Working Class* as a moral economy, where marginalized groups maintain a collective memory of traditional rights and past injustices that differ significantly from official state narratives. In the hot and drowsy kitchens of the London lodging-houses or the limewashed rooms of the spike, history is not a matter of dates, but a weapon of cultural identity.

The One Bite Law as Aristocratic Critique

A compelling example of this oral preservation is found in Orwell's account of an old tramp who expresses a firm belief in the one bite law. The old man views this as a survival from a time when nobles hunted men instead of deer. This interpretation frames historical law as a tool of aristocratic oppression, prioritizing the memory of ancestral suffering over literal legal history.

This reflects Victor Hugo's (1862) assertion in *Les Misérables* that the history of men is the history of ghosts. For the tramp, the one bite law is a ghostly remnant of feudal cruelty. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) suggests in his theories of the *carnavalesque*, the lower strata of society often invert official history to highlight the grotesque nature of power. By claiming that nobles once hunted men, the tramps use folklore to rationalize their current state of being degraded to the rank of a cripple or a lunatic by the modern state.

The Great Rebellion and Class Consciousness

The tramps' retelling of historical events like The Great Rebellion further highlights a specific class-conscious framing of the past. In the spike and the "lodging-house, this event is remembered specifically as a rebellion of poor against rich. This simplified narrative serves a crucial social function: it provides a historical precedent for the tramps' own existence as the enemy of society.

This aligns with Eric Hobsbawm's (1959) study of social bandits and primitive rebels, where he argues that the illiterate and destitute create a mythical past to justify their resistance against the superstitious fear the rich hold toward the mob. Orwell (1933) notes that these tramps were likely not repeating newspaper articles, but rather maintaining an oral tradition lingering on, like a faint echo from the Middle Ages. This echo transforms a complex civil war into a foundational myth of class struggle that survives in the stifling cellars of the 20th century.

Jus Primae Noctis and the Memory of Feudal Power

The persistence of myths like *jus primae noctis* among the illiterate suggests that the memory of medieval feudal power remains a vital part of the tramp's narrative of the world. While historians debate the actual legal application of the right of the first night, for the tramp, its reality is unquestioned. It serves as a symbolic shorthand for the absolute vulnerability of the poor before the nobles.

Jack London (1903) noted a similar reliance on ancient rituals of the road in *The People of the Abyss*. London observed that the destitute do not just suffer physically; they live within a mental framework where the abyss is a permanent, historically rooted state. The survival of the *jus primae noctis* myth allows the tramp to connect his modern slavery in the hotel or the casual ward to a long lineage of servitude. As Orwell (1933) observes, this historical memory is part of what makes a man like Bozo feel like a free man in here. By understanding their suffering as part of a centuries-old pattern of feudal oppression, tramps reclaim a sense of historical continuity that the educated man attempts to strip from them.

Folklore as Intellectual Liberty

Ultimately, these "scraps of history" prove that the tramp community is not "blank" or "resourceless". Instead, they are the reluctant guardians of a rich, discarded heritage. These oral traditions provide a philosophy for survival in a world that offers them nothing but enforced idleness and useless walking. Whether it is the one bite law or the Great Rebellion, these medieval echoes allow the scum of the country to view themselves not as accidents of the industrial age, but as the latest chapter in an ancient, oral history of the road.

Through the chain of speech, the tramp maintains an intellectual liberty that remains untouched by the nonsense of modern civilization. As Walter Benjamin (1940) might suggest, the tramp is the ultimate *ragpicker* of history, collecting the fragments that the smart world has forgotten and weaving them into a narrative of enduring human dignity.

3. Narrative Revisionism and the Desire for Justice

The investigation into the communal life of the destitute reveals a sophisticated process of narrative revisionism. Orwell observes that tramps amend folk stories and historical events to provide the psychological outcomes they wish to see in their own lives. This process is not merely a failure of memory but a deliberate act of cultural preservation that mirrors what Eric Hobsbawm (1959) identified as social banditry. Hobsbawm argues that the rural and marginalized poor create noble robbers to serve as symbols of justice in an unjust world.

The Gilderoy Legend and the Happy Ending

A prime example of this revisionism is the tramps' retelling of the legend of Gilderoy, the Scottish robber. In the academic and historical record, Gilderoy was recaptured and put to death. However, the version circulating among the tramps insists that he successfully escaped to America. Like children who give happy endings to myths to process a harsh reality, the tramps use this oral tradition to envision a world where the outlaw can successfully evade the state. This echoes E.P. Thompson's (1963) theory of the moral economy, where the poor maintain their own standards of justice that run parallel to, or in opposition to, the official laws of the land.

Haunted Cells as Institutional Warnings

The tramps also utilize the supernatural to navigate institutional spaces. The story of the suicide in the Cromley spike—whose arm allegedly had to be broken by the Tramp Major to open the door—serves as a modern ghost story that warns of the literal and spiritual dangers of the system. This narrative transforms a site of rigid institutional control into a space of supernatural significance. By claiming a cell is haunted, the tramps exert a form of control over their environment, using fear to steer fellow travelers away from the most oppressive corners of the workhouse system.

The Annihilation of the Future and the Rise of Talk

The primary reason for the survival of these medieval echoes is the material condition of poverty itself. Orwell argues that poverty annihilates the future. When a man is reduced to six francs or a few pennies a day, he is reduced to an income that prevents him from thinking further than the next meal. This total focus on the immediate present, combined with the enforced idleness of the spike, creates a psychological vacuum that is filled by storytelling.

The author notes that many tramps find the sight of all that bloody print physically sickening or alienating. Without access to books or the desire for them, the mind reverts to the chain of speech. The stifling cellars of Bow and the limewashed, stone-floored rooms of the workhouse become accidental incubators for a tradition that prioritized the spoken word over the written record. This mirrors Walter Benjamin's (1936) observation in *The Storyteller* that the art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. In the margins of society, however, Orwell proves that this epic side survives because the poor have no other vessel for their wisdom.

Resistance Against Institutional Enslavement

The tramps' use of history and language is an act of intellectual resistance. The educated man typically views the tramp through a lens of superstitious fear, seeing a horde of submen who would be dangerous if they had leisure to think. However, the narrator shows that tramps are actually the most docile, broken-spirited creatures imaginable.

Storytelling allows these men to reclaim a sense of identity that the state attempts to strip away. By framing themselves as part of a tradition that includes the Great Rebellion or the outlaw Gilderoy, they resist the state's efforts to depauperize and depersonalize them. As the character Bozo asserts, I'm a free man in here, tapping his forehead to indicate his internal world. Even in a state of physical enslavement to the rhythm of the road, the oral tradition provides a philosophy for survival.

The Logic of the "Caste System"

The persistence of these traditions is also fueled by the elaborate caste system that exists among workers. Just as waiters look down on *plongeurs*, tramps like the young carpenter look down on other tramps as scum. Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) notes that such internal hierarchies often use specialized language to maintain honor even in the most degraded conditions. This internalized classism is part of what keeps the oral traditions fractured but persistent; each group maintains its own set of myths to

justify its existence within a system that has trapped them.

The Echo in the Modern World

Ultimately, Orwell suggests that the faint echoes of the Middle Ages found on the road are the final remnants of a world that civilization has discarded as nonsense. By recording these traditions, the author proves that the scum of the country are actually the reluctant guardians of a rich, discarded historical heritage. The tramp's life is fantastically disagreeable and futile, yet through the chain of speech, he maintains a connection to a past that the industrial world has intentionally forgotten.

As Jack London (1903) wrote in *The People of the Abyss*, “the food they eat, the air they breathe, the language they speak, are all of the abyss.” Orwell expands this by showing that the language of the abyss contains the history of the world above it, preserved like a fossil in the antique filth of the road. The results of this study suggest that oral tradition is not a sign of a resourceless mind, but the primary tool of human dignity when all other resources are removed.

CONCLUSION

The examination of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) confirms that the culture of the road is not a cultural vacuum, but a resilient living archaeological site where ancient history and communal identity are preserved through the spoken word. By analyzing the faint echoes from the Middle Ages found within the tramp community, this study has demonstrated that oral tradition functions as a primary tool of social survival and intellectual liberty when all material resources are removed.

The results of this research highlight three critical dimensions of this survival. First, the linguistic archaeology of *cant* exemplified by terms like the *deaner* and the *kip*—reveals a linguistic continuity that bypasses formal education and bridges the modern industrial era with medieval economic and social realities. Second, the tramps' reliance on historical myth-making, such as the one bite law and the class-conscious retelling of the Great Rebellion, illustrates how the marginalized use history as a weapon of cultural identity. These narratives, though factually inaccurate by academic standards, provide a symbolic framework that rationalizes their suffering and validates their existence against a state that views them as scum. Finally, the practice of narrative revisionism, seen in the happy endings afforded to figures like Gilderoy, reveals a profound communal desire for justice and agency in a world governed by enforced idleness.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the oral traditions of the road are born from the annihilation of the future inherent in extreme poverty. Deprived of the written word and trapped in a rhythm of exhaustion, the mind reverts to the chain of speech. As Orwell (1933) concludes, these stories are far more than mere nonsense; they are the final remnants of a discarded historical heritage. By recording these echoes, Orwell proves that the destitute are not the horde of submen feared by the educated classes, but rather the reluctant guardians of a rich, epic tradition. In the stifling cellars and limewashed rooms of modern institutions, these oral remnants remain the only things that are truly free, serving as the ultimate *ragpicker's* collection of human dignity. This research reaffirms that as long as a man can maintain his ideas—whether through the study of stars or the sharing of ancient myths—he remains, as Bozo asserts, a free man in here.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. (1965). *Rabelais and His World*. MIT Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*.
- Benjamin, W. (1940). *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1959). *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester University Press.
- Hugo, V. (1862). *Les Misérables*. A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Ce.
- London, J. (1903). *The People of the Abyss*. Isbister and Company Limited.

Orwell, G. (1933). *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Victor Gollancz.

Thompson, E.P. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Victor Gollancz.