

Chapter Four

Ilinx in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

The dictionary defines vertigo as “the sensation of dizziness or swimming of the head,” “a difficulty in maintaining an erect posture,” and “a reeling sensation; feeling about to fall.” Lucky for me, I didn’t suffer from any of those afflictions when I was standing nearly ninety feet above Manhattan on a twenty-two-inch pillar for almost thirty-five hours. In fact, for the first time in my life, I had a clear understanding of the world. I realized that this world is just a series of sunrises and sunsets. And that’s it. (David Blaine 194)

The exordium above is extracted from David Blaine’s semi-autobiographical book, *Mysterious Stranger*. Blaine is a dare-devil who used to take up a variety of hazardous challenges, one of which is high-pillar-standing. In fact, he does not have to run the risk of losing his life since this stunt would not earn him any fortune. The aspiration for fame cannot altogether account for his behavior, either. It seems that a tendency toward temporary self-destruction lurks in human beings’ innermost

recesses. This kind of tendency develops out a wide range of activities or behaviors, all of which are put under the category of *ilinx* by Caillois:

The last kind of game [*ilinx*] includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. (Caillois 23)

Anything that is able to cause a temporary vertigo and lead to the momentary loss of perception can be categorized as *ilinx*. Dancing, somersault, horseback-riding, tip-toeing, only to name a few, all belong to this category. Frisbee, top, jumping rope, roly-poly, yo-yo, and so on, are *ilinx* taking the form of toy. The modern incarnation of *ilinx* can be exemplified by roller coaster, Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, bungee jump, and so forth. Generally speaking, an *ilinx* is a game that leads to the instability of perception and euphoria of dizziness for a period, be it short or long. Perhaps it is rash to use the term “self-destruction” to describe *ilinx*, but at least human beings have tendencies for the loss of equilibrium and perception every now and then. We may term the experiencing of a vertigo “pleasurable torture” (Caillois 26).

The fact that Caillois puts *ilinx* under the category of game is a quantum leap and a crowning achievement. Without this category, an array of activities that are conspicuously games cannot be anchored. In addition to the dimension of physical sensation, Caillois also interrogates and explores *ilinx* from another perspective: “In parallel fashion, there is a vertigo of a moral order, a transport that suddenly seizes the

individual. This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive which is normally repressed” (Caillois 24). In other words, human beings are repressed in the ordinary days; once they seize the chance to release themselves in special cases, they are inclined to fall into a state of delirium or dizziness and have tendencies toward subversion. If the situation is totally out of control, it is a revolution or revolt. If the situation is within control, it is merely a game of *ilinx* in the aspect of moral order. This sort of desire for disorder and destruction can be viewed as a “centrifugal state of flight” (Caillois). To put it another way, this desire is the one for de-centering. If we rethink the characteristic of *ilinx*, we may find that the nature of *ilinx* bears comparison with Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalization.

In the Middle Ages, the society was strictly demarcated by hierarchy. People were not supposed to overstep their positions. They were discouraged from transgressing the given strata. The official ideology represented by the Church and the feudal hierarchy to a highly degree dominated the whole society. The unofficial voices mainly represented by the lower class longed for being heard. The official authorities also knew that the accumulation of repression would be jeopardous. Consequently, people were allowed to release themselves and reverse the social order during a carnival, which included festivities and rituals of diverse kinds.

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality

among people. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 122-23)

During a carnival, there is no spotlight because everyone is a participant. People drink, eat, dance, and revel to their hearts' content. They indulge themselves with delirious trance. They wear clothes inside out. In Feast of Fools, fools are allowed to mock the king or the pope. A fool is chosen as a king or pope in the festival. He is crowned and later decrowned by the reveling people. Everyone is in a centrifugal state of anarchy. The society as a whole becomes topsy-turvy. The order is abandoned temporarily. All in all, streamlined to the essence, the spirit of carnivalization is upside-down, physically and spiritually alike.

We can see that carnivalization and ilinx bear resemblance to each other. Both of them are in quest of temporary centrifugal force, disorder, and destruction. To take it a step further, we may argue that carnivalization is a kind of game of ilinx. We can find traces in Bakhtin's discourse to support that carnivalization squares with the definition of game. First, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (*PDP*), Bakhtin tells us that “[. . .] a special carnival category goes in to effect: *free and familiar contact among people*” (*PDP* 123, italics original). “The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions” (*PDP* 123). We see that carnival is held free, acted freely. Second, “Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start” (*PDP* 124). This characteristic of ambivalence accounts for the uncertainty of power-shifting. The king who is on the upper position could be drawn down, and people who are situated on the lower positions could be lifted up. Carnival embodies the spirit of uncertainty. Third, “The primary carnivalistic act is *the mock crowning and subsequent*

decrowning of the carnival king” (PDP 124, italics original). The enactment of mockery is a kind of performance, which amounts to saying that carnival is make-believe. Fourth, “Carnival is, so to speak, functional and not substantive. It absolutizes nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything” (PDP 125). All of the particles in the whole structure, or, all of the Beings of the Order, are merely dislocated momentarily rather than altered forever. The order recuperates in the long run. We can see the unproductiveness of carnival. However, we have to bear in mind that unproductiveness is not equal to disinterestedness. Carnival does not produce any substantial stuff, but it helps the society to re-incorporate and re-integrate itself. Last, “Essentially every church holiday in the Middle Ages had its carnivalistic side, the side facing the public square” (PDP 129). “[. . .] the central arena could only be the square” (PDP 128). The “life of the carnival square” is “separated by strict temporal boundaries” (PDP 130). Carnival is separated, held in specific time and space. Since carnivalization epitomizes the same spirit as ilinx and matches with the definition of game, we may have recourse to Bakhtinian concept incorporated with ilinx to analyze the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. The analysis will mainly be carried out from three aspects: genre, the Nun’s Priest himself, and the tale itself.

In terms of genre, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is a parody of epic, a mock-heroic.

Parody, essentially speaking, is carnivalistic:

To the pure genres (epic, tragedy) parody is organically alien; to the carnivalized genres it is, on the contrary, organically inherent. In antiquity, parody was inseparably linked to a carnival sense of the world. Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same “world turned inside

out.” (*PDP* 127; italics original)

Parody is always located on the periphery in contrast to epic, which is generally heralded as the highest genre situated at the center. However, using carnivalistic laughter as its weapon, parody seems to be capable of resisting epic. By treating trivial things seriously and employing the epic formulas, parody deliberately manifests the discrepancy between the grand style and the low style, and thus results in the effect of playfulness.

The protagonist in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a rooster, Chauntecleer. The hero to our acquaintance in an epic is reduced to a beast here. The milieu where a hero is supposed to be shifts from the battle field to the barnyard. To borrow Lisa Perfetti's expression¹, this tale “carnivalizes conventions of chivalry by transferring them to a peasant milieu” (Perfetti 40). In an epic fashion, Chauntecleer's attribute is depicted in detail:

His comb was redder than the fyn coral,
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whiter than the lylve flour,
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour. (VII. 2859-64)

Chauntecleer strikes an epic figure from crista to claw. The description of him goes in parallel with the hero in epic. It is highly incongruous that a rooster bears comparison

¹ Lisa Perfetti originally uses this expression to describe the carnivalization of *Helmbrecht*, not the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

with a hero. The degradation of epic makes the stereotyped viewpoint of genre upside down. Apart from mocking epic, this tale also mocks famous allusions or crucial events in history. Chauntecleer feigns erudite in front of his wife, Pertelote. He more often than not shows off his pseudo-erudition by improper citation or mistranslation. The Latin, “*In principio, / Mulier est hominis confusio*” (VII. 3163) is mistranslated as “Womman is mannes joye and al his blis” (VII. 3166). This abuse of language contributes to one of the spirits of medieval parody, as Bakhtin tells us, “The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque” (*Rabelais and His World* 27). When Chauntecleer is seized by the fox, a far-fetched allusion to epic figures is made. His being seized is compared to the death of King Priam. This analogy is grotesque: “The discrepancy between the death of a king and the seizure of a cock is great, and this creates a first response of laughter at a clever parody.” (Richmond 134). Carnivalistic laughter is carried out by the deliberate exposure of discrepancy between two poles. King Priam is decrowned by the cock, a comic character.

In addition to inept allusions, historical event is mocked as well. The chasing scene near the end is a parody of the renowned Peasant’s Revolt. A significant event officially documented is mocked by a mob of beasts and human chasing one after another. Everyone is in a state of chaos and delirium. The carnivalistic atmosphere here is self-evident and goes without further explanation.

Situated on the margin, parody finds its position of articulation. The characteristics of some classic norms are borrowed as its subversive weapon. Margin becomes a site of resistance. In an analogy, parody is like a subject who is seeking for

temporary disorder. As Thomas Farrell reminds us that Bakhtin “sees in language both centrifugal and centripetal forces. The former gives rise to parodic and other impulses akin to the free play” (Farrell 8). Centering around the classic norms, parody diffuses the centrifugal force, trying to escape from the control of the center. Through mockery and laughter, parody plays with the serious convention. However, it merits notice and emphasis that this kind of aberrance is temporary. In a game of ilinx, order always recuperates eventually. As we can see, after the completion of his mock-heroic tale, the Nun’s Priest immediately readjusts his tone to a sermonic exhortation: “But ye that holden this tale a folye, / As of a fox, or of a cok and hen, / Taketh the moralite, goode men” (VII. 3438-40). He expects his audience to bear in mind the moral of this tale. Everything that derails must be drawn back to the track again. It is also worthwhile to notice that parody is dependent upon classic norms, without which parody will lose its attacking point and thus become meaningless immediately. As Nancy Mason Bradbury states, “A parodist would be unlikely to have composed a drunkards’ or gluttons’ mass in Latin without having first participated fully in the official culture by learning the language of scholarship and officiating at serious masses” (Bradbury 159).

Drawing our attention to the Nun’s Priest himself, we also discover his inclination toward decentering. The hub of this tale is Chauntecleer’s encounter with the fox, but the Nun’s Priest digresses three times. As Saul Nathaniel Brody points out, “There are thus three major digressions in the tale” (Brody 118). The first digression ranges from line 3184 to line 3214, where the Nun’s Priest digresses from the main subject and then “comments on the transience of worldly joy and looks ahead to the

coming disaster” (Brody 117). The second digression follows instantly in line 3224 when he mentions homicides. “The mention of *homicides* leads to another extended digression” (Brody 117). The last digression ranges from line 3325 to 3374, where he “turns to the lords in his audience and warns them against flatterers in the courts” and “offer[s] a series of rhetorically inflated apostrophes (to destiny, Venus, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf)” (Brody 117-18). The structure of this tale breaks loose whenever he diverges toward a discursive narrative. It is common sense that a loosely-organized tale stands little chance to be a good one. The Nun’s Priest is aware of his flaw of digression and tries to reposition his tale to where it should be. “Three times at least (3214, 3251, 3374) the Nun’s Priest says he must get back to the story” (S. S. Hussey 188). Dialectic tension between order and disorder exists in his mind. He is like a pendulum oscillating between two ends. Digression is by no means a good strategy to adopt when he tells a tale, especially in a contest. It apparently does no benefit to the structural stability of a tale, but the Nun’s Priest cannot help but deviate at irregular intervals. We may conjecture that there might be a certain kind of repressed desire to escape from the center hidden in the Nun’s Priest’s mind. Through the way he tells his tale, we see this kind of desire exuding.

In spite of the digressive narration, the tale is ultimately oriented toward the center. Irrelevant and trivial subplots are abolished. The tale itself returns to a state of order again. In regard to the Nun’s Priest’s tendency toward disorder, we may make extra wishful explanation. It stands a great chance that it is not the first time the Nun’s Priest tells the tale. Probably on many other occasions he has practiced the tale for several times. We may surmise that he would feel bored whenever he repeats the same

plot. He would like to seek for some change. However, the basic framework of this tale is fixed and unchangeable. Therefore, he tries to add some new yet insignificant elements to the tale. These new yet insignificant elements compose the digressive parts, making the tale almost the same, but not quite. This attitude toward repetition with difference is imbued with playfulness, as mentioned in the first chapter. To sum up, the Nun's Priest himself also embodies the spirit of *ilinx*. He is not satisfied with the status quo and tries to lose the sense of balance for a while. In the process, he experiences the *jouissance* of stealthy playfulness and completes the game of *ilinx*.

The tale itself is carnivalistic. Animals occupy the stage that in the first place belongs to human beings². The unofficial voices represented by the animals sound loudly, as *Chauntecleer's* name implies, "to sing clearly." On the contrary, the official voice represented by the human society is sidetracked to the margin. Animals become the subjects, endowed with the ability to talk, enunciating their own voices: "For thilke tyme, as I have understode, / Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge" (VII. 2880-81). Human beings are silenced, whereas animals are put under the limelight, speaking as they wish. *Chauntecleer* is the representative. Not merely does he sing, but he sings very well: "His voys was murier than the murie organ / On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon" (VII. 2851-52). Translated to modern English, the above sentence would be "His voice was mellower than the mellow organ / You hear in church on feast-days, sweetly playing" (David Wright 203), which further indicates the carnivalistic atmosphere in festive holidays. In the barnyard, *Chauntecleer* and his

² In Bakhtin's original meaning, the upside-down of carnivalization should happen in the group of the same kind.

wife, Pertelote, do everything that human beings do. They speak, dress, dream, and take medicine as human beings do. They live lives atypical of their positions as animals. To be brief, it is a world of “continual juxtaposition of incongruous elements” (Perfetti 40). This barnyard, to borrow Andrew Taylor’s words, is “a topsy-turvy world, where animals mimic human actions and humans and animals mingle forms” (Taylor 23). Animals in this tale are more than a group of docile pets; they attempt to experience the centrifugal state of flight.

According to Caillois, besides human beings, animals have the tendency toward *ilinx* as well. They also enjoy the pleasure of vertigo, seeking the distortion of perception for the sake of stimulation. Sometimes we can see a dog chasing its own tail in a circle, a bird suddenly swooping down not for the sake of food, or a monkey hanging on the tree. All of these behaviors cause the effect of momentary imbalance and trance. Perception goes instable and distorted. Practically speaking, these behaviors are not beneficial, but animals still enjoy themselves while doing these. At least they can ostensibly get rid of the domination of perception for a while. In this tale, the image of *ilinx* appears many times. Chauntecleer seems to fly up and down the tree all the time: “And with that word he fley doun fro the beam” (VII. 3172); “O Chauntecleer, accursed be that morwe / That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes” (VII. 3230-31); “Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!” (VII. 3339); “And heighe upon a tree he fleigh anon” (VII. 3417). It seems he is busy flying up and down. The recursive image of up and down readily reminds us of the spirit of carnival, upside-down. This image of up and down also suggests the instability of Chauntecleer’s state of mind. It is relatively stable to step on the ground whereas

precarious to stand on the tree. He does not choose to be pinned down on the ground, but flies to-and-fro the ground and the tree. In an analogy, Chauntecleer is like the stunt standing high on the pillar, enjoying himself with the game of ilinx.

Perching himself high on the tree apparently brings the loss of equilibrium, which reinforces the possibility of falling. Falling further brings the sense of dizziness, which causes the illusion of tortuous pleasure. It happens that Chauntecleer's falling, as many critics, like Bernard Levy and George Adams, assert, is "a comic version of the fall of man" (Marc Pelen 329). The fall of man represents human beings' decentering from the Order, God, and exile from Eden. Chauntecleer's falling also suggests his decentering from the stereotyped way of life. We can find other descriptions in this tale to illustrate Chauntecleer's tottery instinct. He seems to prefer tiptoeing to solely standing upright: "And on his toos he rometh up and doun" (VII. 3180); "And stonden on his tiptoon therwithal, / And strecche forth his nekke long and small" (VII. 3307-08); "This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos" (VII. 3331). Tiptoeing is unsteady in comparison with just walking. Chauntecleer's tendency toward instability is unsealed through the subtle gestures.

Strictly speaking, Chauntecleer is not totally out of center. He is in fact a dual character to some degree. On one hand, he represents the unofficial voice, articulating his own songs. Unconcerned about human society, he deploys his own tale. Not interrupted by human beings, he is able to do many things at his disposal, "as a prince is in his halle" (VII. 3184). Uncensored and unprogrammed by human beings, he is able to make love at will, not decided by artificial mating: "This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce / Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce" (VII. 2865-66); "He

fethered Pertelote twenty tyme, / And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme” (VII. 3177-78). On the other hand, he still regards the official voice as the yardstick for his thought. Arguing with Pertelote over the issue of dream, he resorts to “man moore of auctorite” (VII. 2975), which stands for the official ideology. He quotes a great deal of human philosophers and historians in support of his argument. The stories that he takes as examples also exude the viewpoint of official order: In the first tale, a person is murdered by the unruly carter along with the innkeeper, and he appears in his friend’s dream to tell his friend the fact. His friend thus has recourse to the official order. He “crye out on the ministres / That sholden kepe and reulen this citee” (VII. 3043-44). In the second tale, two friends are ready to sail. One of them dreams that they will be drowned if they sail out to the sea. To stay where they are can keep them safe. “As for that day, he preyed hym to byde” (VII. 3085); “But sith I see that thou wolt here abyde” (VII. 3095). Chauntecleer also borrows instance from Greek mythology. He argues that Hector would not die if he believed Andromacha’s dream and took her advice:

She dremed on the same nyght biforn
 How that the lyf of Ector sholde be lorn,
 If thilke day he wente into bataille.
 She warned hym, but it myghte nat availle;
 He wente for to fighte natheles,
 But he was slayn anon of Achilles. (VII. 3143-48)

To venture forth, Hector chooses for himself a route leading to self-destruction. All of the examples Chauntecleer takes seem to stress the significance of staying within the

given order. To be away from the center can be perilous.

Human interpretation of dreams is official, and, generally speaking, the dream is supposed to be unique to human beings. In other words, the dream is official, too. Pertelote sees the dream as emptied of the meaning and thus prescribes laxative for Chauceteer lest he should dream again, but he refuses and quotes many human instances to prove the credibility and validity of his dreams. That is, not only does he live within the official voice, but he also in a sense identifies with the official ideology.

The chaotic scene that a row of animals chasing the fox one after another is the last time when the animals occupy the stage.

Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,

So fered for the berkyng of the dogges

And shoutyng of the men and women eeke

They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.

They yolliden as feendes doon in helle;

The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;

The gees for feere flowen over the trees;

Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees.

So hydous was the noyse—a, benedicitee!— (VII. 3385-93)

The preposterous scene is typical of carnivalization. The situation is totally out of control. All of the animals are participants, joining in the parade, reveling to their hearts' content. They run, bark, shout, cry, fly, and make noises. It seems that the world is totally turned upside down: "It semed as that hevne sholde falle" (VII.

4591). Even the human beings, or, the official representatives, also participate in the feast together: “Of bras they brighten bemes, and of box, / Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped” (VII. 3398-99). However, “carnival is essentially conservative because it is only a temporary respite from the official ideology” (Perfetti 38). The situation of disorder must be drawn to a peaceful end. After the chaos, the fox is deceived so as to let go off Chauntecleer. The barnyard restores to calmness eventually. This denouement, to borrow Perfetti’s phrase, is “an overall carnivalesque pattern, moving from a world upside-down to a restoration of social order at the end” (Perfetti 39). Just like a game, which is unexceptionally temporary and situated in a second reality, the carnivalization in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* does not last for eternity.

Crowning and decrowning, as Bakhtin asserts, epitomize the spirit of annihilation and renewal (*PDP* 124), which echoes the exordium of this chapter: the world is just a series of sunrises and sunsets. “Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (*Rabelais* 21). In short, destruction goes before construction. We may consider carnivalization to be destructive construction, asilinx is a torturous pleasure. Temporary disorder and imbalance provide “a safe vent for the anxiety this ideology [official seriousness] could engender” (Perfetti 39). Perhaps we may justify “the tendency toward vertigo” with some romantic and wishful pretexts: Planets, inclusive of our earth, are formed in high speed of gyration, and the earth has been self-rotating ever since. We live on this planet, and it is for sure that we are influenced by this huge geostrophic momentum. Besides, it is not necessarily harmful to bear a centrifugal

force. A rotating top absorbs the heterogeneous forces circulating, and thus forms a field of force at the center. Timely decentering will paradoxically reincorporate the center. By the same token, timely relief from perception will reconsolidate our individuality, which is toward playfulness by nature.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* can be regarded as a proper decentering force which reconsolidates the center, *The Canterbury Tales*, as a whole. This tale provides us with a timely relief from the previous tale, the *Monk's Tale*, which is tedious, as the Host complains:

Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!

Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye.

Swich talking is nat worth a boterflye,

For therinne is ther no desport ne game. (VII. 2788-91; emphasis added)

The *Monk's Tale* does not conform to what the Host requires: fun or entertainment. Moreover, in terms of genre, the *Monk's Tale* represents obviously the official, a tragic mode, which laments over those who used to stand high. The discrepancy between the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and its previous tale in another aspect results in the centrifugal force from which the playfulness is reinforced. To sum up, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* epitomizes the spirit of ilinx not only when singled out, but also when framed within the context.