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# **THE FAILURE OF REASON**

Experience and Language in Chaucer

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## INTRODUCTION

That Chaucer is a serious poet is no longer a matter of dispute; neither do we doubt his essential adherence to the basic tenets of his age and society. These facts, once agreed upon, have been eagerly embraced by scholars who feel that to prove a poet's serious intentions equals proof that the poet is a good poet and that the labours of scholarship are more easily justifiable when they are spent on "deep", not on frivolous literature.<sup>1</sup>

Why philosophical poetry should be considered more worthy of the term of "art" than less grave works is a problem I can only mention in passing. But it is most certain that the conclusion, solutions, or answer to philosophical problems found in Chaucer — or most other poetry — are not specially elevated or original and are better studied — undisturbed by "art" — in philosophical tracts or commentaries by the poet's contemporaries. Indeed, one critic has correctly, if bluntly, asserted that

"the ideas of poetry are usually stale and often false and no one older than sixteen would find it worth his while to read poetry merely for what it says."<sup>2</sup>

Having quoted this, Wellek and Warren continue,

"If we analyze many famous poems admired for their philosophy, we frequently discover mere commonplaces concerning man's mortality or the uncertainty of fate. The oracular sayings of Victorian poets such as Browning, which have struck many readers as revelatory, often turn out mere portable versions of primeval truths... The reduction of a work of art to a doctrinal statement ... is disastrous to understanding the uniqueness of a work: it disintegrates its structure and imposes alien criteria of value."<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the relative insignificance of a poet's "basic philosophy" has become staple fare of modern criticism and has led to a healthy tendency to study poetry for how it says things rather than for what it says. On the other hand, it has resulted in great scorn for the importance of studying the poet's idea in a more general sense. It is doubtful that we would be interested in poetry *only* for its methods, its purity

of technique <sup>4</sup>. Certainly Chaucer appears to be full of serious flaws if we view him only from this angle. But most of us would agree that his vision as it appears from his poetry has more than merely historical interest <sup>5</sup>, has something to do with us and with the poetry itself.

In defence of the study of ideas in poetry we must, first, call to mind an old critical platitude, the inseparable unity between form and content, and remember its implications. The *way* Chaucer wrote was, of course, determined by *what* he thought about his subject, and the technical "flaws" I mentioned can, on observing the back and forward movement between manner and matter, be seen to be the very medium for his ideas, departures from adherence to "purity" of diction bringing out the complexity of such ideas. Thus the study of Chaucer's "meaning" is adequately conducted only through the study of his poetry as "poetry".

Secondly, it is obvious that Chaucer's constant ability to spell-bind successive audiences has a great deal to do with his interest in questions of permanent validity — in his imaginative investigation of ancient beliefs about man's possibilities of mastering his environment, his whole context of social, erotic, and religious obligations. While *answers* to the questions inevitably raised in the course of such explorations stale with changing ages, Chaucer's strength lies in his conscious evasion of such answers. Whatever his "final" philosophy may have been, his questioning spirit, his reticence about moralizing, and his curiosity about the validity of accepted truths, make his readers ask exactly the same questions and experience the same doubts as those which his poetry contains. If my attempt to show the affinity between this fourteenth-century poet and ourselves makes Chaucer sound too "modern", I must answer, first, that he was that, if to be modern is to be curious about established truths, and, secondly, that this aspect of Chaucer has been the focus of critical attention for so short a period as to justify a counterbalance to the historical critics' deposition of Chaucer to the past: the virtues of his poetry have largely been determined by their appeal to the peculiar medieval sensibility <sup>6</sup>, but such findings in no way explain why Chaucer remains capable of stirring ours. When the poet's ideas are thus intimately connected with both his poetic techniques and our present interest in him, the study of them can hardly be thought superfluous.

My conviction that Chaucer's permanent restlessness about the answers of his time is at the very core of his impulse to write is especially deep because I am myself a convert from the idea that Chaucer was, in every important respect, satisfied with orthodox "solutions". The present study springs from an analysis of his views of mutability and transience, a subject whose interplay between accepted tradition and Chaucerian variation has frequently tempted critics into centering on the former to the neglect of the latter. It is, however, impossible to get round the fact that orthodox as Chaucer's answers seem to be, they never come easy: either the preceding discussion is so disturbing as to modify the conclusion, or unquestioning acceptance of an easy solution is expressed by characters on whose reliability the poet takes care to throw doubt. Chaucer's recognition of the true difficulty of our human acceptance of unseen powers whose worldly operation can only be experienced as cruel can, indeed, be reconciled with the belief in a benign godhead, but only at the cost of a conscious renunciation of our most spontaneous reactions to life, death, and suffering. Gradually Chaucer sees a gap opening between man and God which threatens to destroy the basis of all traditional beliefs. Can the belief in God's goodness be sustained, when His intentions can be interpreted by the intermediary and fickle power of Fortune, and when man is never given any sign that the evil he suffers has a deeper significance? For Chaucer the problem of human suffering becomes deeper than that of learning resignation, or of accepting God's benignity; it becomes a problem of accepting God's very existence, or, at least, His willingness to act in a human context. This sceptical attitude comes to pervade Chaucer's whole idea of the act of writing poetry, and his choice of form: if God, the traditional basis of all truth, is out of our reach, His presence even in the word — the poet's material — must be questioned, and, linguistically no less than existentially, man is left with relativity, uncertainty, and absurdity. Chaucer's works constitute the search for meaning even on the basis of such uncertainties, and he examines those media of perception which are available for this search: the human property of *feeling* receives his particular attention as a possible channel of higher understanding, while the adherence to *reason* as the arbitrator between right and wrong recedes into the background or is deprecated as worthless in the context of our created nature.

This redefinition of old priorities leads to the reinterpretation of the kind of experience with which they were supposed to deal: the concepts of Fortune, mutability, and transience become less an external cosmic reality than symbols of psychological processes, of the individual's type of response to his experience.

Chaucer's innovative view of the prominent symbols of such response will be the subject of my forthcoming "Licentiat"-dissertation, and the ideas of the present essay constitute the basis of most of my study; analysis of a selection of Chaucerian works will further substantiate the theories set forth here, and new aspects of these will be added.

Meanwhile, I must thank my kind, patient, and extremely helpful supervisors, Julia McGrew and Andreas Haarder, for their guidance in preparing this essay, whose ideas tend to be of the elusive kind, difficult to define and set down with clarity. My supervisors' unfailing eye for the distinction between true perceptive complexity and alluring nonsense has been invaluable at every stage of the work.

Last, but not least, I wish to thank Connie Beck of Humanistisk Skrivestue for typing out my essay for publication.

Marianne Børch, 1981.

1. In Chaucer's case, I have no doubt that the zeal with which critics cling to his preoccupation with philosophy is accentuated by the wish to exorcize the ghost raised by that great, but "period piece" of a critic, Matthew Arnold, who deplored Chaucer's lack of "high seriousness".
2. George Boas quoted by Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature*, Harms., 1970, p. 110.
3. Ibid., pp. 110-1.
4. This assumption does not go down well with most theorists of criticism, and few critics have had the courage to assert, with W. C. Booth, that it is impossible to "dismiss moral questions as irrelevant to technique". *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 378.
5. Actually Chaucer's views have immense importance as documents for the historian of ideas. The ideas I analyze in my essay seem to constitute the first signs in secular English literature of a spiritual upheaval which was to topple a world picture which had gone unchallenged for centuries. Philosophers and theologians discussed the change, and the social and religious movements among the common people were symptoms of the change, but Chaucer analyzes it in terms of ordinary man's experience and with the high level of consciousness of the philosophers and theologians.
6. D. W. Robertson, Jr. devotes a whole chapter of his *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton UP, 1969) to defining the differences between a modern and a medieval audience in order to explain that our ideas of Chaucer are totally mistaken. His definition of a modern audience, however, is based on nineteenth-century evidence from writers and philosophers like Blake, Tennyson, Hegel, and Goethe. This definition will naturally have to be discarded, as we must rather take into account the formative minds of this century, e.g. Freud, Beckett, or Sartre. A redefinition bearing these names in mind will, indeed, make the twentieth century seem to be in greater spiritual harmony with the medieval ethos as Robertson defines it than with that of the preceding century.

*The Failure of Reason:  
Experience and Language in Chaucer.*

... There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by "glory", " Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"."

"But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument", " Alice objected.

"When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Which is to be master, says Humpty Dumpty, the word or the speaker? Humpty Dumpty is certain that he masters his words, but at Chaucer's time there was a real struggle to understand the nature of language, its relation to the truth, its application in the communication of such truth, and the justification of its possible use in less elevated contexts.

The status of language was seen to depend on its relation to the Truth<sup>1</sup>. Speech itself was God's gift to man and was the necessary companion gift of Reason, the faculty which distinguishes man from beast:

... eorum que sunt omnium soli homini datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit. Non angelis, non inferioribus animalibus necessarium fuit loqui, sed nequicquam datum fuisset eis: quod nempe facere natura aborret.



[. . . to man alone of all existing beings was speech given, because for him alone was it necessary. Speech was not necessary for the angels or the lower animals, but would have been given to them in vain, which nature, as we know, shrinks from doing." ]<sup>2</sup>

Despite universal agreement on the divine origin of language, the central crux to philosophers of language — and to poets — lay in the discussion of its nature as either "natural" or "conventional"; The problem was exactly whether the word or the speaker was the master, and Chaucer was highly conscious of the difference.

Platonism taught that a word has a direct, natural link with its meaning, i.e. the thing or act it denotes. Just as the world is the book of God, so there is also a causal connection between the word and its God-given meaning, the word is absolute and independent of human creation.

Lo nome d'Amore è sí dolce a udire, che impossibile mi pare che la sua propria operazione sia ne le più cose altro che dolce, non ciò sia cosa che li nome seguitino le nominate cose, sí come è scritto: "Nomina sunt consequentia rerum".

[The name of Love is so sweet in the hearing that it would not seem possible for its effects to be other than sweet; seeing that the name must needs be like unto the thing named: as it is written: "Names are the consequents of things." ]<sup>3</sup>

If God created both word and world as intelligible media of truth and established a direct connection between word and meaning, it must clearly be a highly responsible thing to speak: words can — possibly should — be used in the service of Truth as Reason's tools, while simplicity of style ought — at least theoretically — to be the proper goal of the writer.

Chaucer was familiar with Plato's ideas on language and translated two works in which they were quoted:

"Tout ne soit il semblable gloire  
de celui qui la chose fet  
et de l'escrivein qui le fet  
veust metre proprement en livre  
por mieuz la verité descrivre,  
si n'est ce pas chose legiere,

ainz est mout fort de grant maniere  
 metre bien le fez en escrit;  
 car quiconques la chose escrit,  
 se du voir ne nous velt ambler,  
 li diz doit le fet resambler;  
 car le voiz aus choses voisines  
 doivent estre a leur fez cousines."

[Although the glory cannot be the same  
 Of him who did the deeds and him who wrote  
 Descriptions of the deeds within a book  
 As best he could to chronicle the truth,  
 Yet is the latter of no light renown,  
 for 'tis no easy thing to write things well.  
 If he who writes would neither maim the truth  
 Nor puzzle you, then he must make his tale  
 Have likeness to the facts; the neighbor words  
 Should be at least the cousins of the deeds.]<sup>4</sup>

But natheles, yif I have styred resouns that ne ben nat taken from  
 withouten the compas of the thing of which we treten, but re-  
 souns that ben bystowyd withinne that compas, ther nys nat why  
 that thou shuldest merveillen, sith thow hast lernyd by the sen-  
 tence of Plato that nedes the wordis moot be cosyne to the  
 thinges of whiche thei speken. *Boece*, III, p.12, 200-1.

In his own works, Chaucer quotes the "cousin" image twice (and there are many echoes): In the *Manciple's Tale* the identical nature of word and act is firmly laid down:

Hir lemman? Certes, this is a knavyssh spechel  
 Foryeveth it me, and that I yow biseche.  
 The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,  
 The word moot nede accorde with the dede.  
 If men shal telle proprely a thyng,  
 The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.  
 I am a boystous man, right thus seye I,  
 Ther nys no difference, trewely,  
 Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,  
 If of hir body dishonest she bee,

And a povre wenche, oother than this —  
 If it so be they werke bothe amys —  
 But that the gentile, in estaat above,  
 She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;  
 And for that oother is a povre womman,  
 She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.  
 And, God it woot, myn owene deere brother.  
 Men leyn that oon as lowe as lith that oother.

205-22.

Here one act deserves one name, the truth is simple, modifying circumstances do not exist. But this view, coming from a character out of the *Canterbury Tales*, may not be Chaucer's. Chaucer "himself", however, in a passage very central to the interpretation of his art, apologizes for his work by referring to Plato:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,  
 That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,  
 thogh that I playnly speke in this mateere,  
 Ne thogh I speeke hir wordes proprely.  
 For this ye knowen al so wel as I,  
 Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,  
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

.....

Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,  
 The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

GP, 725-36, 741-2.

That is, he must tell everything exactly as it is, that will be the truth, and the truth is what the poet should convey<sup>5</sup>.

Chaucer's own works, however, are unable to confirm this view. Chaucer sees that words can never be direct mirrors of things, acts, or ideas.

In the *Troilus*, Pandarus is uneasy at his role as "go-between" and is reluctant to name his activity:

... for the I am bicomen,  
 Bitwixen game and ernest, swich a meene

As maken wommen unto men to comen;  
 Al sey I nought, thow wost wel what I meene. *TC*, III, 253-5.

But Troilus answers both Pandarus and the Manciple by calling attention to the intention behind words:

...me thoughte by thi speche  
 That this which thow me dost for compaignie,  
 I sholde wene it were a bauderye.  
 I am nought wood, al if I lewed be!  
 It is nought so, that woot I wel, parde!  
 "But he that gooth, for gold or for richesse,  
 On swich message, calle hym what the list;  
 And this that thow doost, calle it gentilesse,

A word, says Troilus, is a complex of meanings, it is a reflection of more than one possible response to a given situation.

This view is developed in the *Friar's Tale*. When the carter curses his horse, the fiend cannot carry off what the literal-minded summoner believes to be his rightful property, for

The carl spak oo thing, but he thoghte another. 1568.

The widow's curse, however, is effective: she both curses *and means it*. Thus in the *Friar's Tale*, we find

1 curse (word) — 2 intentions — 2 different effects on  
 action,

and in the *Troilus*, we find

1 act — 2 intentions — 2 different categories  
 of word.

Two different words may cover identical acts, as in the *Troilus*, where the same act can be called "bauderye" or "gentilesse", and in the *Friar's Tale*, two different moral intentions may be expressed through the same words.

What is obvious from this is that the meaning of words is not stable, that words can therefore give no unambiguous account of the truth, and that Reason cannot be held responsible for every verbal utterance. Language is shown to be conventional, i.e. shaped by an immense number of man-made circumstances. This seems to show Chaucer adhering to a non-Platonic theory of language which held that this is *not* God-given and *God-made*, but God-given and *man-made*: language

is shaped by Reason "ad placitum" [arbitrarily], as Dante has it<sup>6</sup>: In *Paradiso* Adam expounds the nature of language:

Opera naturale è che uom favella;  
 ma così o così, natura lascia  
 poi fare a voi, secondo v'abella.

[It is a natural act that man should speak;  
 But this or that way Nature leaves to you,  
 As pleases most, whatever end you seek.]<sup>7</sup> XXVI 130-2.

Here man is master of the word, but with the freedom of the word follows a drawback: the word cannot now be considered stable, it must be subject to the usual fate of creation: mutability and transience.

Chaucer is conscious of the factors which shape language. There is, of course, time:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge  
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
 That hadden pris, and wonder nyce and straunge  
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so. TC, II, 22-6.

But language is also of a complex nature within a given period: Chaucer knows the difficulties which the geographical factor will cause (*Reeve's Tale* and "ther is so gret diversite/ In Englishsh" (TC, V, 1793-4)), and he is aware of the importance of a "jargon", the specialized selection of words which will unify a group and keep others out. The refined usage of court is as important a means of social distinction as money and position, perhaps even more important, as people of the nobility might here express their special "sensibility", by which they were presumably different from, and superior to, other rising classes of equal wealth and power. Throughout his works, Chaucer's pose as the round tax-collector of little eloquence and insight is one reflection of his consciousness of social inferiority (its many subtle and useful poetic functions are not my present subject). A courtly code of expression serves to shape reality, and much of Chaucer's writing springs from the accepted linguistic conventions and literary tradition of the nobility (directly or as conscious deviation from these).

Changes in time and place are independent of human influence. The courtly vocabulary is, at least to some degree, the result of a conscious choice of words. But the situation quoted above from the

*Troilus*, where one is startled to find Pandarus, the realist, so "Platonic" in his choice of words, Troilus, the idealist, so "Aristotelian", hints at unconscious processes at work in people's choice of vocabulary: Troilus' idea of "gentillesse" has here clearly acquired a meaning very different from that of "gentillesse" as this is described in the poem of that name:

The firste stok, fader of gentillesse —  
 What man that claymeth gentil for to be  
 Must folwe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse  
 Vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee.

1-4.

The connection with the act of "bauderye" has rubbed off on "gentillesse" somehow, and in fact the *Troilus* shows the whole set of words signifying moral worth (honour, worthinesse, manhod, trouthe, gentillesse) to go through a process of semantic degeneration<sup>8</sup>. "So long as Troilus' love remains theoretical, the idea is preserved"<sup>9</sup>, but as soon as the ideal is transferred from the vacuum of theory to real life, the content of the word is impaired.

What happens to words, happens to more complex ideas. Accepted philosophy is put to the acid test of experience, and it doesn't pass; rather philosophy and experience form a compound, philosophy serving as a means of justifying the characters' completely individual desires. The Wife of Bath is merely "the *locus classicus* of Chaucer's exploration of the way in which private whim can transform "authority" into a mere excuse for following one's own interests"<sup>10</sup>, and when January (*Merchant's Tale*) quotes the Song of Songs he *is*, in a way, using "olde lewed wordes" (2149). From this point of view, the *Troilus* may, indeed, be called "Boethius misunderstood": Criseyde's perfectly "correct" and "objective" speeches on transience spring from her fear of final commitment, Pandarus' exhortations to follow and expect the changes of Fortune reflect his *choice* of non-commitment, and Troilus' sense of doom, not only at the end of, but also before, his love affair, accords well with that introspective propensity in him which leads to passive self-analysis rather than action. The characters' "rational" philosophies function as props of their personal, emotional, and irrational versions of the truth.

Writers on language had, of course, long realized that the idea of language as the product of reason reflected an ideal rather than a fact.

These writers accounted for language's impurity by referring to humanity's limitations:

The limitations of mankind were traditionally believed to have two origins, created and self-inflicted, respectively. Certain of them were created to define man's proper position in the divine hierarchy, below angels — who had intelligence not granted to man — and above animals, who had no Reason. The gift of Reason was intimately connected with speech, for which neither angels nor beasts were thought to be in need — the former communicate by intuition, and the latter, not having Reason, did not have to speak at all. Man's distinguishing features are thus *Reason* and *Speech*. The partly irrational nature of language might, however, be ascribed to the physical circumstances of its transmission — the dictates of Reason had to be transformed to sound:

Hoc eiquem signum est ipsum subiectum nobile de quo loquimur: nam sensuale quid est in quantum sonus est: rationale vero in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum.

[It is this very sign [i.e. language] which is the noble subject of my discourse: partly sensible in so far as it consists of sound, and partly rational in so far as it is seen to signify something arbitrarily.]

*De Vulgari Eloquentia*, III, 3.

The rational sign is modified by its mode of transmission, and although Dante does not here argue along these lines, I think one can see the germ of a view of language as more (or less) than rational, a source of possible confusion, degeneration, and change.

Other human limitations grow out of man's choice of sin and evil. Our natural property, Reason, is hereby further impaired: man becomes not only unable to distinguish good from bad, but also incapable of perceiving things objectively. This gives rise to a problem of verification, not only of transcendental matters, for this stems from the *natural* limitation of man, but also of *empirical evidence*: the loss of Reason leads to a subjective interpretation of reality which in the following will be seen to lie at the very centre of Chaucer's interest.

Moreover, Reason's necessary concreation, *speech*, suffers similar degeneration:

The Tower of Babel is the crucial Biblical event to show how sin, the abuse of Reason, leads to fragmentation of language, and Dante

places the instigator of the crime, Nimrod, among the giants guarding the ninth and lowest circle of Hell, his punishment consisting in a deprivation of both understanding (reason) and expression (speech). He lacks the distinguishing features of mankind: the power to communicate with his surroundings by means of sensible speech:

"Raphel may amech zabi almi"  
cominciò a gridar la fiera bocca,  
cui non si convenien più dolci salmi.

...

Poi disse Virgil a me: "Elli stesso s'accusa;  
questi è Nembròt, per lo cui mal coto  
pur un linguaggio nel mondo non s'usa.  
Lasciamlo stare e non parliamo a voto;  
che così è a lui ciascun linguaggio  
come 'l suo ad altrui, ch'a nullo e noto.

[ *Raphel may amech zabi almi*, throat  
And brutish mouth incontinently cried;  
And they were fitted for no sweeter note.

...

Then to me speaking [Virgil]: "He hath himself accused.  
This is that Nimrod, through whose ill design  
One language through the world is no more used.  
Leave we him standing, nor waste words of thine;  
For every tongue to him is as to all  
Others is his, which no one can divine.]

*Inferno*, XXXI, 67-9, 76-81.

Thus the severest punishment of sin is the *total achievement of individuality, the loss of unity with man's common nature, a loneliness which excludes man from God and from man*. This is the logical result of a view which sees man's destination as a submergence of the self in God and the necessity of simple expression: "let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil!" (Mat. 5, 37).

Communication is thus one of the hallmarks of humanity, but both "natural" and "unnatural" limitations preclude the direct transmission of reason. Speech, rather than being the simple correspondent



of reason, becomes complex, as a non-rational element, which we may call *feeling*, necessarily modifies the impulses of reason. That is why the lover of the *Roman de la Rose* is outraged when Reason (who at least ought to speak reasonably) refers to coillons by their "proper" name, and that is why Troilus cannot call Pandarus' "gentillesse" by its presumably appropriate name, "bauderye".

Naturally an artist who shows such mechanisms in operation must be highly conscious of a problem concerning his own mode of expression: for if the unity between world and word, between word and God, between intention and act, is broken down, what becomes of the hallowed authority of books and the word as reason's expression in man? What are the effects on the poet's art?

Chaucer frequently takes up the most momentous questions raised by the view of language as arbitrary:

1. Can we know the truth, is it available to us? Can we distinguish the true from the false?
2. If the truth is available, can the poet transmit it truthfully, words being subject to degeneration? Is the poet's material to be trusted, when this is usually transmitted by means of such unstable words, written or reported?
3. If the truth is not available, what is poetry's function?
4. Will the poet be understood at all? Can we understand each other, when language is arbitrary?

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It is natural for Chaucer to question the value of books as transmitters of truths, and in doing so he compares their authority to that of experience. Where can man find reliable truth, and are his accepted sources to be trusted?

There is no doubt that Chaucer loved books and considered them a point of stability indispensable to human existence.

And yf that bokes were awaye,

Yloren were of remembraunce the keye.

LGW, F, 25-6.

He continually refers his own books to their place in a fine tradition:

Glorye and honour, Virgil Mantoan,  
 Be to thy name! and I shal, as I kan,  
 Folwe thy lanterne, as thow gost byforn,  
 How Eneas to Dido was forsworn.  
 In Naso and Eneydos wol I take  
 The tenor, and the grete effectes make. *LGW, "Dido", 924-9.*

He points to books as trustworthy sources of certain truths:

Redeth the grete poete of Ytaille  
 That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse  
 Fro point to point, nat o word wol he faille.  
*Monk's Tale, 2460-2.*

His reverence for books is certain. But it is equally certain that Chaucer's conception of the nature of their worth was not a simple one. Against his affirmation of the lore of books we see him frequently replacing authority with experience: in the *Legend* his praise of books serves to underscore the worth of the month of May, the love of which will tear him from his studies, and as for belief in books, he prefers to test a bookish truth by his own senses. In the *House of Fame*, "rumour" — the reported rather than written word — is far more delightful to the Dreamer than the book-derived lore of Fame's abode: only at Rumour's house does he begin to show an interest and starts asking questions:

"Certys", quod y, "in al myn age,  
 Ne saugh y such an hous as this."  
 And as I wondred me, ywys,  
 Upon this hous, tho war was y  
 How that myn egle, faste by,  
 Was perched hye upon a stoon;  
 And I gan streghte to hym gon,  
 And seyde thus: " Y preye the  
 That thou a while abide me,  
 For Goddis love, and lete me *seen*  
 What wondres in this place been;  
 For yit, paraunter, y may *lere*  
 Som god thereon, or sumwhat *here*  
 That leef me were, or that y wente. *HF, 1986-99.*

He hates to be told about things, he wants to hear and see:

And than thoughte y on Marcian,  
 And eke on Antecaudian,  
 That sooth was her descripcioun  
 Of alle the hevenes region,  
 As fer as that y sey the preve;  
 Therefore y kan hem now beleve.

*HF*, 985-90.

The credibility of authority is often questioned. Dido's love of Eneas is seen from various angles: that of Virgil, that of Ovid, and that of Chaucer. The Aeneas of "auctoritee" is a hero fated with the momentous responsibility of founding Rome. When he is tempted to stay with Dido, a dream is sent by Jove himself, renewing his "divine command"<sup>11</sup>. Chaucer, preferring to see things from Dido's point of view, calls this a bad excuse! Who says Ovid and Virgil are right? Perhaps Aeneas just tired of Dido and said he dreamed, as he certainly does in the *LGW*-version: Eneas

Is wery of his craft withinne a throwe;

...

... shapeth hym to stele away by nyghte

...

"Certes", quod he, "this nyght my fadres gost  
 Hath in my slep so sore me tormented,

...

My destine is sone for to sayle;

*LGW*, "Dido", 1286-99.

Dido becomes one of Chaucer's "test cases" for furnishing the reader with a multiplicity of view-points.

"Geffrey" of the *House of Fame* expresses his entire satisfaction with books: given a chance to see the stars for himself, he declines the honour:

"I leve as wel, so God my soule spede,  
 Hem that write of this matere,  
 As though I knew her places here;  
 And eke they shynen here so bryghte,  
 Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte,  
 To loken on hem."

*HF*, 1012-7.

But are we to trust "Geffrey"? – I think there is here a fine ironic twist of the traditional imagery of understanding as literal *enlightenment* of the soul. In Dante's journey, his progress is at every stage signified by his ability to endure ever greater measures of light: he cannot at first look into Beatrice's eyes, then later he can, and in the sphere of the Sun, her eyes, in turn, are eclipsed by the even greater light of the symbol of divine intelligence. "Geffrey", on his part, prefers books, they are the comfortable veils of truth which *he* can endure, no visions, no stellification for him, thank you! The best comment here is furnished by Antigone's Song from *Troilus and Criseyde*:

"What is the sonne wers, of kynde right,  
 Though that a man, for feblesse of his yen,  
 May nought endure on it to see for bright? II, 862-4.

After "Geffrey's" dubious declaration of trust, authority is shown to be little or no better in kind than the humble minstrels surrounding Fame's court, and the mistress of them all is certainly not a devotee of any kind of truth.

After these hits at authority one hopes for some affirmation of the *spoken* word as reliable, but, although far more exiting, rumour – the raw material of Fame – is as devious as Fame herself:

Thus saugh I fals and soth compounded  
 Togeder fle for oo tydyngge. HF, 2108-09.

The Prologue to the *LGW* offers us one of Chaucer's most crucial debates on the authority/experience question, and the changes which occur between the F and G versions are significant<sup>12</sup>:

F: On bokes for to rede I me delyte,  
 And to hem yive I *feyth and ful credence*,  
 And in myn herte have hem in reverence  
 So hertely that *ther is game noon*  
 That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,  
 But yt be seldom on a holyday,  
 Save certeynly, whan that the month of May. . . 30-6.

G: On bokes for to rede I me delyte  
 And in myn herte have hem in reverence  
 And to hem yive *swich lust and swich credence*  
 That there is wel *unnethe game non*

That fro my bokes make me to gon.  
 But it be other upon a halyday,  
 Or ellis in the joli tyme of May. 30-6.

G. is just a bit less faithful to books than is F., and I think Raymond Preston is right when he discerns in "swich lust and swich credence" "what Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief" "13.

This suspension is necessary, for books are apparently *not* to be trusted as absolutely truthful. Chaucer continually throws doubt upon his beloved sources, in fact makes it impossible to accept them as final. Here are two examples from "Dido":

I can nat seyn if that it be possible,  
 But Venus hadde hym maked invysible —  
 Thus seyth the bok, withouten any ies. 1027-2.

But natheles,oure auctor telleth us,  
 That Cupido, that is the god of love,  
 At preyere of his moder hye above,  
 Hadde the likeness of the child ytake,  
 This noble queen enamored to make  
 On Eneas; but, as of that scripture,  
 Be as be may, I take of it no cure.  
*But soth is this*, the queen . . . 1139-46.

Moreover, authorities quarrel among themselves:

. . . the puzzling thing seems to be that the authorities contradict one another; however many are produced on one side of an argument, an equal number seem capable of being produced on the other side. And nothing . . . can tell us how to arbitrate between the rival authorities. They fill the pages of Chaucer's tales, these classical and patristic writers, they stumble over each other in a riot of profusion; but, unlike the Virgil and St. Bernhard of Dante and the Holy Church of Langland, they only add to the confusion.<sup>14</sup>

However, Chaucer seems to think that the sources themselves may not be at fault. The trouble lies rather in our inability *to verify written statements*. The descriptions of Heaven and Hell handed over to us may be right, but they can be trusted no more than the abovementioned authorities:

... ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,  
 That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,  
 Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen,  
 But as he hath herd seyde, or founde it writen;  
 For by assay ther may no man it preve.

*LGW, 5-9.*

The crux of the matter, then, is the problem of verifying authority, and Chaucer is fond of creating fictional (!) contexts in which verification *is* possible and where contradictions are shown to exist between authority and "experience". When confronted with the God of Love, "Chaucer" says,

And al be that men seyn that blynd ys he,  
 Algate me thoghte that he myghte se;  
 For sternely on me he gan byholde.

*LGW, Prol. F., 237-9.*

At times Chaucer extends his treatment of this contradiction between recorded tradition and observed reality so as to make it the centre of a whole poem's meaning. Much of the effect of the *Knight's Tale* hinges on the discrepancy between man's traditional belief in a rational world order and the simultaneously demonstrated arbitrariness of the supernatural. Chaucer shows that our most central beliefs may be devoid of meaning and that their possible meaning can never be ascertained.

In the *Knight's Tale*, the fictional frame makes it possible to incorporate a double view of reality. But there was another kind of literature which claimed an *actual* insight into transcendental reality: some writers have tried to endow their views with special authority by setting them in *forms* in which real truth has traditionally been thought to be obtainable. The *dream* and the *vision* (often combined) described situations when the soul, liberated from the body, which weighs man down towards the earth, was relatively free: in this state the soul could respond to the truth and receive it unadulterated by the individual body's degenerative influences. It is characteristic that Chaucer should wish to explore these fields of literature and see with what kind of awesome halo the dream vision might invest his views!

Unfortunately, the authority of dream and vision doesn't survive Chaucer's treatment. His discussion of dream-lore is inclusive and correct, but, as usual, out of the heap of knowledge, exposition, and debate comes — nothing!

The Proem to the *House of Fame* gives an exhaustive summary of ideas on the nature of dreams<sup>15</sup>, but then the poet refuses to take a stand. At times he appears to abide by the rules of the tradition: in the *Troilus* a morning dream – believed by tradition to be reliable – does turn out to be prophetic; but in the *House of Fame*, "Geffrey's" journey takes place in an evening dream – which tradition considered false – and then, hilariously, Chaucer conjures us to understand and believe this dream as the absolute truth!

The Dream of the *Book of the Duchess* seems to be the reflection of the Dreamer's personal grief; similarly, the *Parlement's* dream vision may be the result of the Dreamer's search for the "certeyn" thing when awake:

The very hunttere, slepyng in his bed,  
 To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon;  
 The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;  
 etc., etc.,

PF, 99-101.

Thus the Narrator wants to find a "certeyn thing", reads, falls asleep, and then dreams of Scipio: the vision is probably born in his own mind! Troilus, Eneas, Criseyde, and Chauntecleer all dream dreams of this kind, or do they? Chaucer does not say, but what he does say is that with so many possible interpretations, there's no knowing when a dream should be trusted and when it is *a reflection of the self, or is understood in the light of the ego*. The visions? Nicolas 'uses' one in the *Miller's Tale*; how can we be sure when reported visions are true and when they are mere "amphibologies"? Scipio has a vision, but clearly Chaucer doesn't believe this vision to contain the whole truth, and is a half-truth truth at all? "Geffrey" of the *House of Fame* does not want to get himself mixed up in a vision, he would rather stay down on the ground. When he is carried heavenwards by his eagle, he is presented with a mere reflection of earthly things; the bodies he sees may be incorporeal, but they behave in the usual manner:

Whan any speche ycomen ys  
 Up to the paleys, anon-ryght  
 Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight  
 Which that the word in erthe spak,  
 Be hyt clothed red or blak;  
 And hath so verray hys lyknesse

That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse  
That it the same body be,<sup>16</sup>

HF, 1047-81.

The Narrator's sight cannot be spiritual — he can only see what his own limited nature allows him to see: any revelation granted to us would seem to have to pass through the filter of human perception. So however true certain dreams and visions may be, there is no way for us to distinguish between true and false.

But if fields of experience which are outside normal human perception cannot be investigated with any successful result, what about that empirical evidence to which Chaucer so often refers us — that, at least, is available to us all?

Even on this point does Chaucer refuse to offer us any certainty; indeed, he shows that verification is equally problematic in the world of the senses. In the *Franklin's Tale*, the natural order cannot be changed, but illusion is all it takes to set things in motion, despite the Franklin's ironic comment:

... hooly chirches feith in oure bileve  
Ne suffreth noon illusion to greve.

1133-4.

Not only such communal deception blurs the vision: *subjectivity* also prevents people from experiencing things in the same manner. The obvious example is Troilus' mistake when *he* sees Criseyde, while Pandarus sees a "fare-carte". But the recognition that experience is subjective is put to subtler use elsewhere: it is somewhat of a shock, I think, to find the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess* telling the Black Knight that "goode, faire White" may be *his* good, but happiness is this for me and that for you!<sup>17</sup> The Black Knight virtually has to quarrel with the Dreamer to try to convince him that White was, objectively seen, the best:

"By oure Lord," quod I, "y trowe you wel!  
Hardely, youre love was wel beset;  
I not how ye myghte have do bet;"  
"Bet? ne *no wyght so wel*," quod he.  
"Y trowe hyt, sir," quod I, "parde!"  
"Nay, leve hyt wel!" "Sire, so do I;  
I leve yow wel, that trewely  
*Yow thoghte that she was the beste,*



And to beholde the alderfayreste,  
*Whoso had loked hir with your eyen."*  
*"With myn? nay, alle . . . .*

*BD, 1042-52.*

The Black Knight and the Dreamer can never agree, for neither can determine which is right. The factor of reception is as unstable as the truths conveyed by experience, because subjectivity distorts the object experienced.

This raises a question relevant to the discussion of literature. The individual bias may disturb a man's understanding not only of his experience, but also of his reading.

Chaucer was not the first to recognize this mechanism. Dante understands it, and it is part of the sin of Paolo and Francesca, not that they *read* the romance of Lancelot, but that they turn it into a mirror of their rising passion. Being unable to watch the action from apart, they indulge in a proces of identification:

Ma s'a conoscer la prima radice  
 del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,  
 dirò come colui che piange e dice.  
 Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto  
 di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse:  
 soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto.  
 Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse  
 quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
 ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.  
 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
 esser baciato de cotanto amante,  
 questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
 La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante.  
 Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse:  
 Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante".

[ But if thou so desire to know how fell  
 The seed whose first root in our bosoms fed,  
 I'll tell, as one who can but weep and tell.  
 One day together, for pastime, we read  
 Of Launcelot, and how Love held him in thrall.  
 We were alone, and without any dread.

Sometimes our eyes, at the word's secret call,  
 Met, and our cheeks a changing colour wore.  
 But it was one page only that did it all.  
 When we read how that smile, so thirsted for,  
 Was kissed by such a lover, he that may  
 Never from me be separated more  
 All trembling kissed my mouth. The book I say  
 Was a Galahalt to us, and he beside  
 That wrote the book. We read no more that day." ]

*Inferno*, V, 124-38.

Such subjective reading is a sin — to Dante. To Chaucer, it may be a sin, but what interests him more, it is virtually unavoidable, it is a consequence of the way man is created: how can man be unnatural to himself? Chaucer portrays people's biased use of authority again and again, not only in *Criseyde*, *Troilus*, *Pandarus*, and the *Wife of Bath*, but also in contexts which show that he knows what may happen to his own art if people see only what they want to see. In the *Book of the Duchess*, verbal echoes abound between the Narrator-Dreamer, Alcyone, and the Black Knight<sup>18</sup>. These verbal links seem to stress the idea that Alcyone and the Black Knight are interesting to the Dreamer precisely because they share a common lot; however, this subjective interest, besides building up sympathy, at the same time blocks the understanding of the Knight's true loss (the unique nature of White and the fact of her death), by which he is presumably *different from* the Dreamer, whose imagination is not easily stretched beyond his own preconceptions. After an immense lot of conversation follows this much discussed exchange:

"Sir," quod I, "Wher is she now?"

...

That was the los that here-before

I tolde the that I hadde lorn.

Bethenke how I seyde here-beforn,

"Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;

I have lost more than thow wenest' —

God wot, alas! ryght that was she!"

"Alas, sir, how? what may that be?"

"She is ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"

"Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhel!"

*BD*, 1298-1310.

Here the kindness of the speaker *and* the impossibility of true communication are shown in poetic terms, the basic situation being that of Criseyde among the women deploring her departure: they are kind, they do not understand. The limitations of the *BD*-narrator are comic and tragic; he shows the difficulty people have trying to get through to each other by means of language.

Chaucer knew, of course, that his own art — story-telling — might fare little better as a process of communication. In the *Canterbury Tales* one of his main concerns is precisely the way people misunderstand even the conscious constructions of art. The pilgrims tell each other tales, but the listeners never seem to grasp the narrators' intentions — they interpret the tales in the light of their own situation. The Host is "consistently blind to the *sentence* of what he hears"<sup>19</sup>, the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Tale of Melibee* extract from him only a few wry comments on the ideal properties of a wife — *there* is the chink in *his* armour; The Knight interrupts the *Monk's Tale* because he feels its implications to reinforce the doubts his own tale tries to keep at bay; the Reeve is incapable of laughing at a tale whose protagonist is a carpenter; and so on and so forth. And Chaucer reading to his audience is exactly in the position of these tale-tellers<sup>20</sup>.

An episode from the *LGW* constitutes an intricate joke about the difficulty of clarifying one's intentions. "Chaucer" is blamed because certain of the works he has written *against* the service of the God of Love have nevertheless taught some to *enjoy* the very target of his criticism. Alceste tries to excuse him:

... wel I wot, with that he kan endyte

He hath maked lewed folk delyte

To serven you, in preysing of youre name.

G, 402-4.

The word "lewed" indicates that an element of *misunderstanding* is required to understand Chaucer's writings as unqualified praise of love. His proper intentions may well be the opposite, as wise people will discern, but "lewed folk" won't. Chaucer here demonstrates the dangers of St. Augustine's famous ideas about poetry as a pleasant veil of the truth<sup>21</sup>: he is acutely aware that his version of the truth is not a simple one and that its very complexity may easily disguise his basic intention. The problem is not just that only a few wise people will understand, but also that "lewed folk" may be directly misled!

That Chaucer realized the dangers of this is clear from his *Retraction*. The *Retraction* has been thought to be Chaucer's death-bed statement. Although this is presumably a mistake, its unusually sombre note and content do seem to be born from some "moment of truth" of "hour of reckoning". Here Chaucer revokes *Troilus and Criseyde* as one of his "enditynges of wordly vanitees" (1083-4). This may seem surprising, for in the *Legend* the God of Love actually wants to punish the poet for this "heresy e ayeins my lawe" (F, 330), and the *Troilus* itself ends in an exhortation which enjoins us to remember that God's love is man's proper choice. Chaucer, however, understands that the complexities of the *Troilus* may support people's tendency to hear what they want to hear (cf. the Lancelot romance of the Paolo/Francesca episode). In a passage which directs itself to God as *Truth*, he can recommend only those works which have an unambiguous message. From this angle poetry and truth seem to be incompatible.

Altogether, Chaucer concludes that the authority of received tradition is unreliable, and so is experience. But, even more importantly, our response to both is shaped by our own preconceptions. Hence the affirmation which Chaucer grants to books is, I think, of a negative order<sup>22</sup>. Because there is no better way, Chaucer chooses to search for his "certeyn" thing in books. The *Parlement of Foules* shows what the *Legend* preaches: the poet starts out with books, and — the certain thing not found — he ends by resorting to other books. If we choose to believe them, a "profitable" reading of them depends on our realization that our belief is a "willing suspension of disbelief". The books command our love, not our belief.

The same applies to experience. We have to trust it, but we cannot be sure that it is confirmed by objective reality. In this way both books and experience claim from us the decision to believe or not, and neither has any ascertainable relation to absolute truth<sup>23</sup>.

This, in a way, is a pessimistic view of things: generally man seems to be limited to the world through his created nature, and if he ever reaches higher, he has no way of distinguishing real insight from illusion. Moreover, even that part of reality which *is* placed inside his vision is so distorted that real mutual contact between men seems precluded. This philosophy might result in a lot of depressive poetry, and the image of Chaucer as the happy buffoon oblivious to human evil has happily long been exorcised. But Chaucer did choose

to laugh at life and shows how it is, after all, humorous to observe how people misunderstand books, each other, themselves, and their place in life.

However, it is undoubtedly easier to laugh if there is something against which this comical confusion can be measured, something true, something beyond the instability, individuality, and complexity of human experience.

It is, indeed, clear that Chaucer's poetry constitutes a continual search for evidence that there is — or rather that we can know of<sup>24</sup> — a transcendental reality which corresponds to that human longing for subjection of the self to the whole, the loss of individuality, the attainment of stability foreign to human experience, which religion calls the longing for God. Whatever insight he is granted on his search always fails to satisfy him. The poet, unable to *know* from the world's phenomena and unable to go beyond them, continually stumbles on the reflection of himself, the world may be a mirror, but it is the fool's mirror in which he sees his own image, not the mirror of God.

Two serious questions arise out of this recognition: does the truth *ever* shine through to us? and do human activities — including poetry — make sense if we are debarred from access to transcendental truth? What is left to the poet and what he has in common with his audience (therefore may be understood) is only the intuition of something which endows earthly existence with a meaning. Dante has made his choice and writes a poem in which intuition is confirmed:

Poscia che 'ncontro a la vita presente  
 de' miseri mortali aperse 'l vero  
 quella che 'mimparadisa la mia mente,  
 come in lo specchio fiamma si doppiero  
 vede colui che se n'alluma retro,  
 prima che l'abbia in vista o in pensiero,  
 e sé rivolge, per veder se 'l vetro  
 li dice il vero, e vede ch'el s'accorda  
 con esso come nota con suo metro;  
 così la mia memoria si ricorda  
 ch'io feci, riguardando ne' belli occhi  
 onde a pigliarmi fece Amor la corda.

[When she who hath imparadised my mind  
 Had stript the truth bare, and its contraries  
 In the present life of wretched mortal-kind,  
 As one who, looking in the mirror, sees  
 A torch's flame that is behind him lit  
 Ere in his sight, or in his thought, it is,  
 And turns to see if the glass opposite  
 Have told him truth, and findeth it agree  
 Therewith, as truly as note and measure fit;  
 So is recorded in my memory  
 That I turned, looking on those eyes of light  
 Whence Love had made the noose to capture me.]

*Paradiso*, XXVIII, 1-12.

Dante describes this inkling of the truth as "pre-rational", as something akin to intuition, a feeling of wonder. Chaucer also has his "moments of feeling": the Rondel of the *Parliament*, the "epiphany" of the Parson's Prologue, the desert scene of the *House of Fame* are such moments, and Chaucer's love of diversity itself may reflect a "protracted moment" – an intuition that there must be a meaning behind such inventiveness as Nature displays. We shall see if there are other moments to which Chaucer might ascribe a similar validity.

Such moments may be crucial for the poet's interpretation of the world: faced with absolute isolation from transcendental reality, he has two alternatives: he may attribute his isolation to the non-existence of the transcendental; or he may accept that his own limitations as a human being constitute the factor which places the transcendental outside his normal experience. Naturally, the occurrence of moments of intuitive insight supports the latter alternative and so enables the poet to choose to believe in the probable, if unproven, existence of God.

We saw above (p. 8 ff) how man's limitations were seen as partly *natural* (his distinguishing features being ordained by God) and partly *unnatural* (being the punishment for man's choice of evil). Both kinds of limitation modified the rational element in man, but while Nimrod's sin led to isolation through the loss of reason and language, there also appeared to be a positive aspect of the restriction of reason implanted in human nature: if *feeling* is connected with our limitations, it also

seems to be responsible for those moments when men *can* get into mutual contact, as the "irrational" rapport between the Black Knight and the Dreamer shows. Moreover, feeling is felt to be the medium through which, occasionally, the world's density becomes transparent veils on a higher reality<sup>25</sup>.

The element of feeling had traditionally, presumably because it is not subject to definition and division, been considered the province of less responsible writers. But for Chaucer, the description of ordinary multiple perception, of the importance of feeling in human action and ability to believe becomes a very crucial subject, it may even constitute a search for whatever truth man *can* reach. And this is Chaucer's field: he analyzes man's communication with his surroundings as the complex result of both reason and feeling. We have seen how Chaucer, in addition to his discussion of authority and direct experience, also analyzes states of being in which man might be assumed to reach beyond his ordinary powers of understanding and his limitations as an individual — dreams and visions. These do not seem to be capable of fulfilling the wish for a "certeyn thing".

But there is another situation in which man seems to search for something outside himself and which usually calls forth the best and highest aspirations, namely *love*. Can the feeling of being in love bring any glimmering of the truth and form, as Dante confirms, a Platonic ladder towards God? Or is love, like dreams, authority and the rest, just another mirror of the self, a well of Narcissus? Does love make a man see, or does it make him blind? Can love be used rather than abused? Is love the sign through which man's affinity with something other than himself can be discerned?<sup>26</sup> All these questions are asked by Chaucer in connection with his treatment of love as a somehow "anomalous" state. Love, as the kind of emotion which best corresponds to that intuitive feeling of unity with something external to the individual becomes one of the poet's finest subjects. And the writer, having no access to absolute authority, must rely on both his reason *and* emotion as reference points to the truth. Chaucer is always pointing to his complete reliance on his sources: he merely translates, follows in the footsteps of others, gleaning the fields of great harvesters. But what he actually does *is not this*: when he says he wants to follow Virgil "as I kan" (LGW, "Dido", 925), the personal bias amounts to a really heavy revision. His subjective interpretations keep intruding, and the more

faithful he claims to be to his sources, the more we should be on our guard: these protestations of literal reproduction are meant as disclaimers of responsibility, but by his personal distrust of his sources Chaucer really shows that the responsibility is all his own: authorities cannot be believed or even accurately reproduced, the new transmitter cannot help colouring his story somehow, the "I not" (*TC*, V, 1050) slips in almost as against his will<sup>27</sup>.

If people misunderstand what they hear and literature is not the truth, the poet is rid of a heavy burden of responsibility. This freedom from absolute responsibility both delights and worries Chaucer.

The delight stems from the independence of continual reference to *the Truth*. When "Geffrey" sees the rock of ice, he thinks,

This were a feble fundament  
To bilden on a place hye.  
He ought him lytel glorifye  
That hereon bilt, so God me save!" *HF*, 1132-5.

The Narrator concludes that this is really a very stupid builder – how impractical of him! He *experiences* the commonplace idea whose impact has been lost in the stiff form of moral comment. If the Middle Ages found it difficult to see a high palace on a rock of ice without thinking of mutability and the sin of pride, "Geffrey" is special exactly because of his ability *not* to think of these moral concepts. He sees what he sees, his sight is not predetermined by intervening interpretations and expectations. There is wonder and excitement here, not only meaning<sup>28</sup>.

If people's reading is subjective anyway, the poet might as well invite them to interpret events for themselves: did Criseyde know this or that? Were Dido and Eneas alone in the cave? Do you think Criseyde was too quick to love? Who is better off, Palamon or Arcite? I have my view, he says, without telling us what that view is, you are free to have yours:

. . . they diden hire other observances  
That longeth onto love and to nature,  
Construeth that as yow lyst, I do no cure. *LGW*, F, 150-2.

The naked text in Englissh to declare  
Of many a story, or ellis many a geste,  
As auctours seyn; levethe hem if you leste! *LGW*, G, 86-8.



If you like what you read, read! If you don't, skip it and choose another tale — and don't blame *me* if you make the wrong choice (Prologue to *Miller's Tale*, 1. 3181). Chaucer is free to include all aspects of life *and* he is free to use language *not* in the simple way of "yea" and "nay", but in a realistic way which allows him to joke about even the words of Christ:

My maister Bukton, whan of Crist our kyng  
 Was axed what is trouthe or sothfastnesse,  
 He nat a word answerde to that axing,  
 As who saith, "No man is al trewe", I gesse.  
 And therefore, though I highte to expresse  
 The sorwe and wo that is in mariage,  
 I dar not writen of it no wikkednesse,  
 Lest I myself falle eft in swich dotage.

*Envoy de Chaucer  
 a Bukton, 1-8.*

This oblique, extremely complex statement is not blasphemy the moment literature and religious truth have parted company. Chaucer can let idea serve art, rather than the other way about. His subtle use of "tonal" differences between identical statements — a good test case being, of course, "pite renneth soone in gentil herte" — is dependent on such poetic liberty. Thus, when Gabriel Josipovici asks that more attention be paid to Chaucer's tone, he is absolutely right; his suggestion that that vexing date, December loth, is significant to Chaucer, and to Chaucer *only* — and there's the joke —, is, I think, very attractive <sup>29</sup>.

Although Chaucer revels in the poetic liberty given him by language's arbitrary nature, his joy, nevertheless, is tempered by a certain anguish: to be even partially understood, you have to write so precisely. People's biased understanding may blur clarity, but Chaucer also sees that misunderstanding may be due to his own incompetence <sup>30</sup>. He always struggles to make intention and expression meet, an impossible task! He may mean one thing and say another:

And if ther be any thing that displese them, I preye hem also that  
 they arrette it to the defaute of myn konnyng, and nat to my  
 wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde bettre if I hadde had kon-  
 nyng.

*Retraction, 1082.*

In the Prologue to the *Legend*, he admits to his own shortcomings as a user of words:

Fayn wolde I preysen, if I coude aryght;  
But wo is me, it lyth nat in my myght! G, 59-60<sup>31</sup>.

Chaucer is always mocking at his own powers as a poet:

Al be hit that he kan nat wel endite . . . LGW, F, 414.

That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly  
On metres and on rymyng craftily,  
Hath seyde hem in swich Englishsh as he kan  
Of olde tyme, . . . Prologue to *Man of Law's Tale*, 47-50.

He often seems to catch himself in using unnecessary imagery:

The dayes honour, and the hevenes ye,  
The nyghtes foo — al this clepe I the sonne — TC, II, 904-5<sup>32</sup>,

and he even experiments with writing consciously "bad poetry" such as the *Squire's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*. Behind all these jokes lies Chaucer's serious preoccupation with the poet's struggle to express himself well, and I think it is significant that his prayers to write well usually strike us as far more sincere than his protestations that he *means* well. Chaucer is forever up against the inexpressible nature of his own conception and asking that this may be adequately conveyed, and in that serious farce, the *House of Fame*, he quotes that other great investigator into language who saw that man's limitations are also language's: when Dante wishes to thank Cacciaguida, he must excuse himself from "doing so in words, because, unlike the spirits in Paradise, he is conscious of a disparity between his feeling and the power to express it"<sup>33</sup>.

Poi cominciai così: L'affetto a 'l senno,  
come la prima equalità v'apparse,  
d'un peso perciascun di voi si fenno;  
però che 'l sol che v'allumò e arse  
col caldo e con la luce, è sì uguali,  
che tutte simiglianze sono scarse.  
Ma voglia ed argomenti ne' mortali,  
per la cagion ch'a voi è manifesta,  
diversamente son pennuti in ali;  
ond'io, che son mortal, mi sento in questa  
disagguaglianza, e però non ringrazio  
se non col core a la paterna festa.

[ I began: "Feeling and Intelligence,  
 When the Prime Equality was to you made known,  
 For you were poised, equal in influence,  
 Because the sun that warmed you and on you shone  
 With heat and light hath such an equal might  
 That it makes beggary of comparison.  
 But reason and feeling in our mortal plight  
 (And well ye know the impediments that thwart)  
 Unequally are feathered for their flight.  
 Hence I, who am mortal, feel that I have part  
 In this disparity, and must thank thee for  
 Thy fatherly welcome only in my heart.]

*Paradiso, XV, 73-84.*

Both Dante and Chaucer are eager to approach as closely as possible their inward vision:

And yif, devyne vertu, thow  
 Wilt helpe me to shewe now  
 That in myn hed ymarked ys —

...

Thou shall se me go as blyve  
 Unto the nexte laure y see,  
 And kysse yt, . . .

*HF, 1101-7, cf. Paradiso, I, 13-27.*

The poet must express himself clearly if he wants to make himself understood, but complexity of diction is imperative, as simple rational statement cannot give an adequate account of man's experience of the world. Chaucer never writes a poet's Credo, but his views of the nature and function of art will, I hope, emerge if we correlate the above-mentioned scattered references to the writer's task with his actual poetry. Happily, we shall find that what he *does* in his works confirms what he *says* about poetry. Considering Chaucer's proneness to saying one thing and doing another, it is a relief to find that his themes, his words, his style, his narrative "stance", and his attitude to his sources do, indeed, serve an attempt to give life to the complex views of experience outlined above.

Chaucer's theme is earthly man and his divided nature: his possible, but unverifiable, connection with something beyond the world and his attempt towards self-transcendence even *in* the world. The poet

himself leads this search in books, experience, love, and he does so in works which frequently confront irreconcilable views of the truth with each other. As his vision is determined by the human mixture of rational and emotional insight, he operates with the simultaneous presentation of contradictory truths; and some resolution seems to grow out of the exploration of their impossible relationship:

Two views of experience are not necessarily better than one, but two related views can provide a third dimension, a perspective, that cannot be encompassed in a single one.<sup>34</sup>

Chaucer "demonstrates" that Free Will *is* compatible with Destiny, although he doesn't *explain* how. But he also shows that there is no easy way of reconciling this world and the next: his whole production shows himself searching for the presumed relationship between the two worlds. His characters are out on the same search. Some are partly successful (Griselda, Troilus?), others remain self-centered and hence, significantly, simultaneously individual *and* fleeting of nature, difficult to know or understand. The critical battles over the character of Criseyde are born from Chaucer's brilliant analysis of the psychology of the egotist. Criseyde's speech is always self-contradictory, we do not know what she felt when Pandarus said this or that, we cannot be sure that she did not know about Troilus' passion, absurdly we are not even allowed to know her age or if she had any children<sup>35</sup>. Because Criseyde doesn't "connect", we cannot know her<sup>36</sup>.

This is basically Troilus' problem, but it gradually becomes the Narrator's and ours. How can this personality, so changeable that it hardly exists at all, be both so individual and so suggestive of something universal?

The Narrator cannot help us. He is as enmeshed in the complexities of the interplay between reason and feeling as the readers. And feeling must be included, for in feeling lie those precious glimpses of true connection with something outside of yourself. Hence the author must be subjective. And he mocks at his picture of himself as the "objective" narrator, who stands apart from the action, comments and points to "significance" and "meaning", standing on the shoulders of authority (!). He even claims to be completely inexperienced in love (e.g. *TC*, I, 15-8; *HF*, 627-8; etc.). This might be supposed to give him an even greater measure of objectivity. But the distance, in fact, invalidates his insight, for, as Antigone says of Love's detractors,

And whoso seith that for to love is vice,  
 Or thraldom, though he feele in it distresse,  
 He outhur is envyous, or right nyce,  
 Or is unmyghty, for his shrewednesse,  
 To loven; for swich manere folk, I gesse,  
 Defamen love, as nothing of him knowe.  
 Thei speken, but thei benten nevere his bowe!

What is the sonne wers, of kynde right,  
 Though that a man, for feblesse of his yen,  
 May nought endure on it to se for bright?  
 Or love the wers, though wrecches on it crien?      *TC, II, 855-65.*

Whatever aspersions are cast on love's happiness by the Narrator are themselves suspect, seen from this point of view. When the Narrator says that his incompetence as a love poet is due to his ignorance of love —

A blynd man kan nat juggen wel in hewis      *TC, II, 21 —*

we cannot believe that he is congratulating himself on his superiority. Isn't he rather once more pulling the carpet away from under his own feet? For the feeling must be explored from the inside, it cannot be conveyed by a spectator, however sympathetic; like the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess*, he can show sympathy or condemnation, but he cannot understand.

The Narrator's inability to share in his protagonists' experience may also lie behind that verbal echo which connects the Narrator of the *Troilus* with the story's "inside" manipulator, Pandarus. The Narrator, "That God of Love's servants serve" (I, 15), says of himself,

... if this may don gladnesse  
 To any lovere, and his cause availle,  
 Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille!      I, 19-21.

Compare what Pandarus, the lovers' servant, says to Troilus,

Adieu! be glad! God spede us bothe two!  
 Yef me this labour and this bisynesse,  
 And of my spede thyn be the swetnesse.      I, 1042-4.

Although the Narrator and Pandarus "shape" the story and its love affair, respectively, their status is that of the outsider, and their posi-

tion illuminates the difficulties which prevent people from understanding each other. Pandarus and the Narrator are fond of serving up static truths which — objectively seen — are sound enough, but which are useless to the subjective and dynamic experience of Troilus and Criseyde; their advice on philosophical and religious matters invariably fails to apply to the lovers' actual situation. The dilemma of Pandarus and the Narrator is that of the philosopher trying to make *his exposition* and *people's lives* come together; advice and truth based on rational argumentation don't work because they see experience with one eye only; Chaucer's poetry of love, on the other hand, strikes the ambiguous note of reason mingled with emotion, and that works — even to the extent of involving the philosophers themselves: the Narrator's emotions respond to the feeling aroused by love rather than to his knowledge that love is sin, just as Pandarus is deeply grieved when his own predictions come true at the reversal of Fortune's wheel. Although the Narrator sets out confidently enough to outline the pattern of events and the exemplary nature of Troilus' changing fate, he continues to break down the universality of the story in order to centre upon Troilus and Criseyde's individual experience, its indescribable bliss, the Narrator's inability to share it, know it, or deal with on a rational basis. The Narrator preaches one thing and feels another, he knows one thing and yet wants to change it — "I not"<sup>37</sup>.

The complexity of Chaucer's approach to his themes is reflected in his comparably subtle use of *words*. Because of the nature of human language, direct expression is impossible. If the poet's attempt to give a precise account of his vision is to be successful, he must be clear and complex at the same time.

To achieve clarity the poet should avoid empty ornamentation:

E acciò che non mi pigli alcuna baldanza persona grossa, dico che ne li poete parlavano così senza ragione, né quelli che rimano deono parlare così senza ragione non avendo alcuno ragionamento in loro di quello che dicono; pero che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di figura o di colore rettorico e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento.

[And lest some of the common sort should be moved to jeering hereat, I will here add, that neither did these ancient poets speak

thus without consideration, nor should they who are makers of rhyme in our day write after the same fashion, having no reason in what they write; for it were a shameful thing if one should rhyme under the semblance of metaphor or rhetorical similitude, and afterwards, being questioned thereof, should be unable to rid his words of such semblance, unto their right understanding.]

*Vita Nuova*, XXV, 10.

Chaucer agrees. We see him deflating his own stilted imagery, leaving both the image and the deflation as signposts (cf. above p. 28). He has his Man of Law mock his poetry written in "swich Englissh/ Of olde tyme", and in the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer makes us suddenly aware of the high element of posturing involved in the Black Knight's presentation of his grief, its "artificial and willed quality"<sup>38</sup>. Such use of metaphor prevents rather than facilitates communication<sup>39</sup>.

Like Dante, Chaucer realizes that it is necessary to renew the convention within which he is working. The Black Knight's eulogy of "goode, faire White" fails to impress the Dreamer as deeply as he had expected. The Dreamer, hearing the whole speech through, says, *you* thought she was the best. The implication seems to be that perhaps the convention shaping the Knight's speech is worn out, its impact is weakened: that's what they all say about their ladies! If White is unique, this is not how the way to convince *us*! Artificiality of expression may veil sincerity of intention.

The *complexity* of diction follows from the failure of the word to be cousin to the deed. When absolute truth as the poet's theme has been replaced by an exploration of the ambiguous relationship between the presumed truth and the distorted image of this, the poet has to avail himself of ambiguous devices like metaphor, simile, irony, and tonal variation. Chaucer at times even goes a good deal further and employs effects unusual in medieval literature. Thus he will occasionally use a consciously *loose sentence structure* to render a mystical truth: it is as if Chaucer feels that at these moments human language, with its God-ordained limitations, breaks down under the weight of the idea to be expressed:

Us from visible and invisible foon  
 Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,  
 So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy digne,  
 For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne. TC, V, 1866-9.

In Chaucer this does not feel like bad language<sup>40</sup>; he simply bows to the incomprehensible, and hence inexpressible, nature of God's intentions by letting these shine through to us only vaguely — and Chaucer manages, I think, to make this sentence completely understandable, if not in an intellectual, then in an intuitive sense.

We reencounter this courageous willingness merely to present ambiguities when we study Chaucer's use of religious *imagery* in his description of love.

In the attempt to describe such times when a man is closest to transcending his own nature, it is natural for the poet to avail himself of religious usage. Such usage accepts the idea that it is necessary to use imagery, allegory, and similar poetic devices to convey things beyond human comprehension, and Christ's parables and the Apocalypse are used to justify the presence of such poetic elements. In *Paradise*, Dante can only experience the eternal light through an image:

Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,  
 però che solo da sensato apprende  
 ciò che fe poscia d'intelletto degno.  
 Per questo la Scrittura condiscende  
 a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano  
 attribuisce a Dio, ed altro intende;

[Speech to your wit must needs be tempered so,  
 Since but from things of sense it apprehends  
 What it makes apt for the intellect to know.  
 Scripture to your capacity condescends  
 For this cause, and a foot and hand will feign  
 For God, yet something other it intends.] *Paradiso*, IV, 40-5.

But not only religious topoi evade human comprehension; and so, in the *Troilus*, we find Chaucer employing the relatively stable and highly evocative religious vocabulary in his depiction of love! The first thing that strikes the critic in this connection is Chaucer's abandonment of the philosophical Boethian imagery which he uses for the rest of the poem; this rational vocabulary, which accords well with the poem's pagan sphere, is rejected when the Narrator deals with the act of love itself. As the *Consolation of Philosophy* does operate with the idea of love as central and furnishes Troilus with its vocabulary for his song, there must be a reason for the deviation in the description of the



lovers' union. I would suggest that Chaucer may have disliked the rational imagery of man's being "suffisant of hymself unto hymself" (*Boece*, III, 94) when he aspires to the love of man or God. This is not the experience of love: the moments of visionary religious experience are generally accompanied by a sensation of opening, of inclusiveness. Therefore religious, emotionally coloured vocabulary must take over in Chaucer's attempt to render the epiphanous nature of the love experience of Troilus and Criseyde. The one moment when Criseyde "opned hire herte" (III, 1239) is a "hevene" (1251), is "hevene blisse . . . / That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle" (1322-3). Chaucer employs religious imagery to describe the love through which Troilus becomes *less* "suffisant of hymself unto hymself".

Most critics, however, have seen in this imagery an indirect attack on love — Chaucerian irony —, and naturally disturbing doctrinal implications are called forth when we read the Narrator's regretful

Why nad I swich oon with my soule ybought,  
Ye, or the leeste joie that was there? TC, III, 1319-20.

But I think Chaucer's intention will be seen more clearly if we remember the true nature of an image. The associations of imagery do not work in only one direction, which is what the above-mentioned criticism implies; in the *allegorical* use of metaphor the independent function of the "sign" is, indeed, secondary to its interpretative role:

"sign" → "meaning".

Chaucer's use of metaphor, on the other hand, reflects the *equal status* of sign and meaning and thus exploits the poetic, not directly functional, nature of the image: here image and "real" meaning throw light on each other, and what I think Chaucer may be doing by his use of religious imagery in a love context is to move love into the area usually kept for religious experience as a mode of heightened understanding. While the priest will place the demarcation line between the normal and the supranormal by means of the distinction between ordinary perception and religious vision, Chaucer seems to suggest that a man's soul may attain to visionary insight through a physical act. The world of poetry is thus different from the world of religion, and that is one of the reasons why "exegetical" criticism fails to describe its impact. Chaucer gives us a double view impossible to the preacher. To the lovers, this is *not* non-bliss and non-"felicitee": it is beautiful



talk about Criseyde as if she were an ordinary woman; please, no similes about her:

... make no comparisoun

To creature yformed here by kynde!

IV, 450-1.

The strange thing is that there is no emphasis on the clash between the Narrator's simile and Troilus' metaphor: the two views of Criseyde are given equal value. By this double characterization Chaucer indicates that Criseyde may be less than perfect and still, to Troilus, be a Beatrice, a "teacher" of improvement in love and virtue. And this is Chaucer's answer to the question about the surprising effect of Criseyde's unstable nature (cf. above p. 29): it is Troilus' *subjective interpretation* of Criseyde rather than the reality behind his experience which is decisive for his development<sup>42</sup>. In this way Chaucer employs metaphor and simile to underscore his thematic concern with the nature of human perception.

It is obvious that Chaucer's use of the poetic devices just analyzed reflects his view of language: words are not independent units, but are changed according to their mutual relationship. Hence it is the relationship which intrigues Chaucer rather than the units themselves. This interest in the back and forward movement between units is also found on a larger scale. It is, for one thing, the basis of Chaucer's much admired achievement within the field of irony.

The understanding of irony depends on the audience's recognition of an incongruity between details. When the Narrator of the *Troilus* nervously anticipates the censorious reader's attack on Criseyde, —

This was a sodeyn love (II, 664) —

his simple words evoke an exceedingly complex response. The first incongruity that strikes us is the very presence of the passage — it is a bad defence to point to something which had probably occurred to no one in the audience. So perhaps this is not a *defence*, but an indirect *attack* on Criseyde? On the other hand, *Troilus and Criseyde* tends to discredit the authority of the *Narrator* rather than Criseyde or the presumed "envious jangle" (II, 666) among the audience. So this passage sends us nowhere in particular but engages us in the exploration of an inescapable labyrinth.

At times, Chaucer uses the audience's recognition of the incongruous relationship between elements to achieve significant changes of *tone*. Here Criseyde protests her ability to remain faithful to Troilus:

For thilke day that I for cherisyng  
 Or drede of fader, or of other wight,  
 Or for estat, or for weddyng,  
 Be fals to yow, my Troilus, my knyght,  
 Saturnes doughter, Juno, thorough hire myght,  
 As wood as Athamante do me dwelle  
 Eternalich in Stix, the put of helle!

And this on every god celestial  
 I swere it yow, and ek on ech goddesse,  
 On every nympe and deite infernal,  
 On satiry and fawny more or lesse,  
 That halwe goddes ben of wilderness;  
 And Attropos my thred of lif tobreste,  
 If I be fals! now trow me if yow leste!

IV, 1534-47.

This doesn't sound like the Criseyde we know. In fact she is trying to speak in Troilus' manner — we can easily imagine Troilus saying these words in a moment of rather meagre poetic inspiration. However, the abrupt, repetitious structure, the exclamatory style, and the sudden drops of stylistic intensity are exposed by the calm, deliberate, and even diction of the Criseyde we know from other contexts.

The above examples show that when Chaucer uses words, he is truthful in a new way: he uses them so as to reveal their flexible nature. Truth is certainly many things, words change their meaning according to context, imagery is complex, tone all-important. Thus the relativity of Chaucer's linguistic usage reflects his analysis of the elusive and unintelligible nature of the world: for in Chaucer, human action, motivation, and expression are depicted as basically unknowable, people cannot and will not know about reality, they cannot transcend their own selves, and they fear it, too. Criseyde has always been seen as a symbol of the world's variability, but this instability penetrates through *all* aspects of Chaucer's art, because it is part and parcel of his world view: there may be stable truth, but it disappears in the multitude of false information. Chaucer's method, notably his choice of Narrator type — the "objective" emotionalist — and his exploitation of ambigu-

ous poetic devices, ensures the reader's response: the objective statement is always qualified by the statement's oblique emotional appeal.

But perhaps this fleeting vision, this almost impressionist conception of character, history, language, and even moral ideas, *is* the truth? Character, including the poet's of persona, is variable<sup>43</sup>, the truth can only be known as relative, there is no point of contact with eternity, there is no revelation, only perhaps the hope to be derived from those "moments".

In his attempt to make words obey his intentions, Chaucer gradually rejects such literary forms as dream poem and allegory, which he shows are breaking down under their own weight. Such solutions as he is granted in dream visions are unsatisfactory, the visions contradict each other or do not answer his needs. Chaucer not only rejects dreams but also shows the *form* of the dream poem to be just another way of disguising the fact that there is no access to the truth<sup>44</sup>. He finally chooses a form in which all claims to absolute authority are absent: the frame device of the *Canterbury Tales* allows the poet to present all view-points — "truths" — as equally important — or unimportant. Chaucer is not "responsible" for people's crazy idiosyncracies. I'm just a spectator, he says, the others may tell their tales exactly as they want to — and he even justifies his poetry by quoting Plato in a manner which would have shocked that philosopher: when *he* talked about the truth he definitely was not thinking about empirical truth! Because the tales reflect the subjective nature of each teller, Chaucer is free to give us all views of dreams, experience, and authority simultaneously, the distance gives freedom, even if it also makes poetry less "important". The characters who are "in charge" of the frame are an inn-keeper and a harmless civil servant of firm and outrageous opinions, and one is amused to find Harry Bailey keeping "Chaucer", the pilgrim, in a securely inferior position to himself<sup>45</sup>. The pilgrims have equal claims to be heard, and we experience their individual view-points vividly, from the inside, while the total picture gives the distance of the spectator, who *may* see orthodox religion as the possible, but not certain, solution to the chaos he sees. And this time Chaucer can let a Parson's message be part of the versions of experience, not apart from real experience as in the *Troilus*.

Naturally, this plurality of views is one of the consequences of the poet's new artistic predicament. Chaucer, conscious that he cannot convey one unambiguous message, knows he is writing fiction:

Unlike Dante and Langland, Chaucer feels himself to be essentially a story-teller, and he is keenly aware of the folly of such an activity for one who is also concerned with the truth.<sup>46</sup>

The *Canterbury Tales* is not only a pilgrimage, it is also a game, and Chaucer emphasizes the freedom of a participant in a game:

... men shal nat maken ernest of game.

Prologue to *Miller's Tale*, 3186.

The question is, however, if this independence from the truth turns art into *just* a game, a "mere commodity" or "luxury"?<sup>47</sup>

If we can agree that Chaucer believed art to be less than the whole truth, I think we can also agree that he was not content with regarding art as a purely decorative activity. But what merit could the fourteenth-century poet is his position set up against the high status which the old view of literature as truth's servant had given it. On what assumptions might he proceed? What is the function of art?

As I have explained, the search for an absolute or Truth seems to be frustrated mainly as a result of our human limitations of comprehension and expression. Perhaps it is not only the inability to reach a transcendental world, but also the near-impossibility of obtaining contact with and knowing other people which makes up the fundamental flaw of human existence? One of the results of sin was the separation of man from his surroundings: Nimrod was precluded from human society because of sin, and in the same way "individuality" seems to be the barrier which prevents true social intercourse: people fail to understand each other!

The longing to understand persists, though. And this longing may be the only "proof" that man is not as local and confined as experience tells him. *Love* was possibly one way of transcending the ego, an attempt to restore the severed connections between people — and this daring view Chaucer finds it worth his while to explore at length, if perhaps not finally to confirm. Moreover, the *Troilus* suggests that working for the common good may be another worldly correlative of divine love<sup>48</sup>. The restoration of social love and harmony in political matters can be seen as another way to fulfill man's proper destiny and overcome Nimrod's isolation.

But also *the poet's endeavours* reflect the struggle to reach others, and so bridge the gap separating people. The act of writing is

in itself an act of love on the part of the poet. That Chaucer felt love and poetry to be similar in nature is felt when the two concepts almost melt into each other in the Proem to Book II of the *Troilus*:

Owt of thise blake waves for to saylle,  
 O wynd, o wynd, the weder gynneth clere;  
 For in this see the boot hath swych travaylle,  
 Of my connyng, that unneth I it steere.  
 This see clepe I the tempestous matere  
 Of disespeir that Troilus was inne;  
 But now of hope the kalendes bygynne. 1-7.

The vision of love is one which leads to greater understanding, or at least the wish to understand. Love partly opens Troilus' eyes: he learns that Criseyde can be loved *as she is*, not as the ideal image he had constructed in his mind. He becomes a better man, spiritually as well as socially, and feels charitable towards people sharing his own experience, lovers. The writer, love's servants' servant, includes *all* in his act of love. All people, saints and sinners, all viewpoints, stupid or clever, and all artistic attempts to communicate something to others are included. Even bad art finds a place, for, as the Narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* shows, the sympathetic attempt to communicate an experience is important in itself, even if it is not completely successful: the intention defeats the failure.

The writer is thus conducting a meaningful, responsible, and difficult investigation, and this brings us back to Chaucer's ambivalent attitude to his own works and to his sources. On the one hand, we have seen his distrust of the source material and language he must build on. He knows *his* poetry will become obsolete, too:

. . . al shal passe that men prose or ryme;  
 Take every man his turn, as for his tyme. *Scogan*, 41-2.

On the other hand, he is also self-conscious about his mission. He participates in *Tradition*, the support of human memory, and tradition forms one of the stable points of human activity; if it is diverse in nature, at least the activity is common. And here may be the reason why Chaucer, for all his deflation of authority, really loves his books. These writers are all out on the same exploration of language, the important medium for human contact. Being so conscious that languages change, Chaucer has to preserve these authorities, not because

we have to believe them, but because they express the continuous search for understanding. He himself is part of this changing tradition, and a renewal of language — and sentiment — is necessary to preserve the tradition, as the poet of the *Book of the Duchess* shows. He doesn't have to be — and isn't — faithful to it; he is conscious of a personal claim to originality even in following them,

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,  
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,  
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. PF. 22-5.

In this way the poet has an important role as a participant in an unbroken line of transmitters of tradition. The feeling that this line must not be interrupted makes him eager to have his own poetry preserved unadulterated, so that he will be understood:

So prey i God that non myswrite the,  
Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge.  
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
That thow be understonde, God i biseche!<sup>49</sup> TC. V, 1795-9.

He asks us to use him as he uses his sources, with reverence and scepticism: *believe me if you want to, but please understand!* To be human is to use language, the feature which distinguishes man from angel and beast. And Chaucer concludes that as contact with the other world is beyond our ken, he has to stay with the world and speak the language of the world<sup>50</sup>. Men cannot know what will bring salvation after death; but Chaucer, helped by those "moments", chooses to believe that there is a connection between this life and transcendental reality: the separation between men reflects the distance between God and man; erotic and social love seems to touch on mechanisms which promise intuitions of a higher kind of reality. Therefore the fulfilment of created man's natural potential must be to love well, in the widest sense of the word, and the poet's task is to write in a way which furthers such love. From a secular angle, man must reach towards the love of other people, and sub specie aeternitatis? Well, at least all will eventually, like the Pardoner and the Friar's Summoner, work towards the good: we are all God's instruments. *If you live and love well, perhaps you will be saved. If you write well, perhaps you will be understood.*



## NOTES

1. I define the Truth as something stable, unified, and good, the origin and end of all things, which is dimly felt to lie beyond the unstable, fragmented, evil, and absurd experience of the individual and which provides this experience with a meaning.
2. Dante Alighieri: *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a cura di P.V. Mengaldo, Padova, 1968, II, 2. Translation from *The Portable Dante*, ed. Paolo Milano, Penguin, 1978.

In this paper I prefer to quote philosophical ideas as these are to be found in "literature" rather than in the original works of the philosophers who first expressed these ideas. I do so for the following reasons: first, Chaucer had access to these philosophers mainly through contemporary literature, and hence Dante, the *Roman de la Rose*, and other imaginative works would constitute his primary sources of philosophical material; secondly, Chaucer's sources frequently mangled the original ideas of even the most venerated of philosophers; his ideas of say, Plato or Aristotle may consequently have very little to do with the actual opinions set forth by these. As our subject is Chaucer, not philosophy, this cannot worry us, — what matters is what *Chaucer* believed Plato and Aristotle to be about and in what way these interpretations, right or wrong, affected his poetry.

3. Dante Alighieri: *Vita Nuova*, a cura di Fredi Chiappelli, Firenze, 1973; XIII, 4. Translation from *The Portable Dante*, see n. 2. cf. n. 26.
4. Lorris & Meun: *Roman de la Rose*, Félix Lecoy, ed., Paris, 1966, 11. 15150-62.

Translation from *Romance of the Rose*, by H.W. Robbins, NY, 1962.

5. Obviously the empirical truth advocated by the poet may clash with a higher kind of truth, but the oblique use of the loan from Plato is not my present concern; see however, p. 38.
6. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, III, 3; see n. 2.
7. Dante Alighieri: *La Divina Commedia*, a cura di Fredi Chiappelli, Milano, 1972. Translation from *The Portable Dante*, see n. 2.
8. A. Lockhart: "Semantic, Moral, and Aesthetic Degeneration in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Chaucer Review* 8, 1974, pp. 100-108.
9. *ibid.* p. 102.
10. G. Josipovici: *The World and the Book*. Hong Kong, 1979, p. 61.
11. *The Aeneid by Virgil*. trans. Rolfe Humphries, NY, 1951, p. 96.
12. I assume G to be later than F. Proper chronology may, however, be relatively unimportant, as the two versions may not reflect a final change of mind on the part of the poet, but may constitute variant versions of his constant contemplation of the idea. Preston even argues "that Chaucer re-wrote the prologue from memory, and that the result is good criticism rather than finished re-creation;" *Chaucer*, NY, 1969, p. 118.
13. Preston, see n. 12, p. 117.
14. Josipovici, see n. 10, pp. 59-60.
15. For Chaucer's use of a scientifically correct dream vocabulary, see F.X. Newman: "Hous of Fame, 7-12", *ELN* 6, 1968-9, pp. 5-15.
16. Perhaps Chaucer is also hitting out at Dante, whose divine poetry is so remarkably physical: ". . . back we come from Hell to Francesca's bedroom, to the Casentino, to the famine-tower at Pisa. The eternal infinity beyond death is timed and spaced. Of course we cannot have it both ways at once: the more real and solid we feel the other world to be, the more like our own it is, and the less we feel its otherness . . . That is why some critics have grumbled at the "homeliness" of Dante's Hereafter". Philip McNair in "The Poetry of the Comedy" from *The Mind of Dante*, ed. U. Limentani, Cambridge UP, 1965, p. 43.
17. The nature of the *BD* has often been discussed in the light of its "occasion"; the poem's style is seen as the result of Chaucer's

attempt to solve the problem of administering consolation to a socially superior person. What Chaucer does here certainly does not suit this humble attitude.

18. There is not room for thorough substantiation of this idea in the present paper, but a few quotations will show how certain key concepts connect the protagonists of the three episodes of the poem. The three mourners are all on the verge of insanity:

Suche fantasie ben in myn hede,	28 (Narrator),
For sorwe ful ny wod she was	104 (Alcyone),
For he had wel nygh lost hys mynde,	511 (Knight),
	cf. also 565 and 610.

They all experience life as death; the spirit of life is weak:  
Alcyone

... fel a-swowne as cold as ston. 123

and eventually dies. The Narrator complains that his grief and sleeplessness

Hath sleyn my spirit of quiknesse. 26

and the Knight's

... sorwful herte gan faste faynte  
And his spirites wexen ded; 488-9.

Similarly, all are associated with sickness imagery, all experience total indifference to their present life and equally protest that their plight is hopeless.

19. D.W. Robertson: *Preface to Chaucer*, London, 1963, p. 275.  
20. Chaucer thus recognizes as a universal tendency what Spurgeon describes as characteristic of most early Chaucerian scholarship:

The characteristic qualities attributed to Chaucer from 1400-1800 are those in which the critics or men of letters were themselves more especially interested.

*Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, Cambridge, 1925, vol I, p. c.

21. "Although we learn things which are said clearly and openly in other places, when these things are dug out of secret places, they

are renewed in our comprehension, and being renewed become more attractive". *Contra Mendacium*, 10, 24.

22. On this point I agree with Josipovici's view rather than with that of R. Payne in *The Key of Remembrance*, Yale UP, 1964.
23. The necessity of choosing to believe in literature finds a significant parallel inside the field of religious belief. Chaucer's contemporaries were beginning to see the separation between man and God as a blow to the absolute authority of the Church, and we find Erasmus choosing to accept Church authority rather than actually believing it to be right, cf. Josipovici, p. 50.
24. The distinction is, of course, crucial: man must choose between atheism and a recognition of his own ignorance. And in this I differ from Josipovici: he emphasizes Chaucer's scepticism and states that the poet seems unable to turn elsewhere for affirmation. Chaucer's solutions do not answer his questions:
 

What does happen is that they are resolved in terms of the very order and hierarchy on whose validity, *or at least availability to man*, grave doubts have been cast. p. 91.

The passage underlined, however, shows that Josipovici is aware of an alternative possibility which would render Chaucer's "solution" meaningful. In my view, Chaucer sees our limitation as consisting in that very subjectivity which Josipovici describes so well:
25. Cf. the increasing emphasis on feeling in contemporary religious movements, Josipovici, p. 42 ff. and Gordon Leff: "The Changing Pattern of Thought in the Earlier Fourteenth Century", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43, 1961, pp. 354-72.
26. It is significant to note that the discussion of the word "Amore" is the one instance where Dante expresses the Platonic view of language, cf. quotation p. 2.
27. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contains numerous examples of unintentional self-revelation on the part of the narrators. Thus there are not only mutual misunderstandings (cf. pp. 20-21), but the tellers themselves

frequently show a blindness to the implications of their own tales so that the tales become subtle comments on their narrators. *Preface*, p. 275.

Even conventional devices like

the final blessing, prayer, or moral, all reflect an individual bias, character trait, or ruling passion. This throws attention back on the pilgrim himself, makes the story contingent upon its teller. D.R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, London, 1978, p. 181.

In this way Chaucer has amply portrayed his own artistic dilemma.

28. It is this enjoyment of the wonder of creation that is usually lost sight of in exegetical criticism. And yet Chaucer's praise of created phenomena cannot possibly be called irreligious, when even St. Augustine can write of creation that

even if we take out of account the necessary functions of the parts, there is a harmonious congruence between them, a beauty in their equality and correspondence, so much so that one would be at a loss to say whether utility or beauty is the major consideration in their creation, etc.

*City of God*, Harms., 1972, p. 1073-4.

29. Josipovici, p. 79-80.

30. *LGW*, F:

Al be hit that he kan nat wel endite,  
 Yet hath he maked lewed folk delyte  
 To serve yow, in preysinge of youre name. 414-6.

I have quoted the G-text above (p. 20) to show Chaucer joking about the difficulty of making a dim public understand his real intentions. In F the problems of mutual understanding are attributed not only to the audience's distorted reception but also to the poet's imperfection.

31. In F he blames the English language rather than himself. Is the difference between F and G due to Chaucer's increasing humility or is this a case of more or less arbitrary poetic variation? cf. n. 12.

32. This, I know, is an accepted rhetorical figure. But Chaucer's use of it always seems to be rather unfortunate, and we notice how well he can do when he chooses not to use it in similar contexts, e.g. *Merch.T.*, 1795; *TC*, V, 1016-22; *Frankl. T.*, 1245-55.
33. Argument to Canto XV, by Lawrence Binyon, *The Portable Dante*, p. 443.
34. C. Muscatine: *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, London, 1966, p. 7.
35. Boccaccio states that she had none!
36. In the course of the *TC*, Criseyde undergoes in worldly terms the fate of Nimrod: the connection between surface act/expression and hidden motivation breaks down, and as Criseyde's mental isolation increases, her vocabulary becomes so coloured by her individual interpretations as to distort the meaning given to it by her environment. Cf. nn. 8 and 9.
37. Chaucer shows up the Narrator's internal conflict by leaving the audience in doubt on several points which might reasonably affect their interpretation of the poem's events. Thus he is intentionally vague about the time needed to break down Criseyde's resistance to Diomedes — two time schemes reflect the conflict between knowledge and feeling, cf. H.W. Sams: 'The Dual Time-Scheme in Chaucer's *Troilus*', *MLN* LVI, 1941, pp. 94-100.
38. Josipovici, p. 77.
39. Cf. once more Dante's Nimrod: his language is complexity taken to absurd lengths, hence constitutes a barrier rather than a bridge.
40. I am aware, of course, that loose sentence structure can be found all over the pages of medieval literature. But there is a world of difference between unintentional and intentional vagueness.
41. Robertson, nevertheless, takes a different view and reads Chaucer as he reads a homily: he consequently has to lump *Troilus* with Diomedes, or rather, he has to prefer Diomedes because, from a

doctrinal point of view, he is the lesser sinner! "neither Criseyde nor Diomedes is capable of the idolatry of which Troilus is guilty, or the depths to which Troilus descends". "Chaucerian Tragedy", *ELH* XIX, 1952, 1-37.

42. Chaucer's careful observation of the distinction between metaphor and simile seems to strengthen my above argument on Chaucer's views of love (pp. 33 ff.): while the Narrator's simile indicates Criseyde's ambiguous possibilities, he uses straight metaphor in the description of the lovers' union: it *is* "hevene blisse".
43. A fine discussion of Chaucer's description of social relativism in connection with his characters is R.A. Lanham's "Game, Play, and High Seriousness in Chaucer's Poetry", *ES* XVIII, 1967, pp. 1-24.
44. In the *BD*, form and content supplement each other well — even if the result is unusual. In the *PF* the dream is divested of its usual authority as to content: it is subjective and can lead to no satisfactory truth. The *HF* has both the form and content of traditional dream poetry break down: the poem is left suspended in mid-air, there is no solution, no seriousness, not even any real joy, nor even an ending.
45. Chaucer borrows a passage from Dante to describe their mutual relationship: the Host is "Chaucer, the Pilgrim's" Virgill Compare Prol. to *Sir Thopas* with *Purgatorio* XIX, 52.
46. Josipovici, p. 82.
47. *ibid.*, p. 47.
48. This idea is connected with the example of Christ who, tied to his human destiny, showed that the worldly correlative of divine love is to be a social creature. He went out among people, enjoined man to love his neighbour, indeed, his very incarnation is the expression of love, of social inclusion of man, who may well seem expendable or even undesirable to God's plans. Christ's social feeling for man, as demonstrated both in his works and his spiritual significance, points to the failure of that saint ideal of which Troilus has so often been seen as the model. Such saintliness is nothing but egotism disguised. Troilus' final im-

provement consists in a capacity for loving Criseyde irrespective of personal gratification, and Chaucer's final appeal to his audience to follow Christ is the logical conclusion of his portrait of Troilus' education: the ability to suffer all and yet love is the quality of which Christ is the prime example:

Upon a crois, oure soules for beye,  
First starf, . . . V, 1942-3.

49. Naturally the poet who shows the Wife of Bath tearing pages out of "authority" is conscious that words, being committed to paper, are even subject to *physical* decay. And he knows that copyists will change his poetry, too — apart from *TC*, V, 1795 ff. quoted in the text, cf. also *Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn*. His prayer that he be not "mysmetred" has apparently not been heard, if we are to believe James E. Southworth: "Chaucer's Prosody: A Plea for a Reliable Text", from *Chaucer's Mind and Art*, ed. Cawley, London, 1969, pp. 86-96.

50. Chaucer's choice of the secular approach may be illuminated by quoting Dante's view of man's "duo ultima" as set forth in the *Convivio*:

Ineffable Providence, then, has set before man two ends at which he should aim: Happiness in this life, which consists in exercising his own specific capacity and is symbolized in the earthly paradise; and happiness in eternal life, which consists in enjoying the divine beauty, to which enjoyment man's own capacity cannot attain unless it be aided by a divine light; and this happiness is what is meant by the heavenly paradise. III, XVI, 3-7.

It is noteworthy that Chaucer never shows the human soul in its "bliss", but is always strictly impartial about the individual's possibility of salvation. Troilus ascends, but to where? Arcite's

. . . spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,  
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.

*Knight's Tale*, V, 2808-9.

In the *BD*, Ceyx and Alcyone are not resurrected as phoenixes, as they are in the source of the passage. Chaucer refuses to write that kind of fictional consolation and refers us to whatever kind of comfort the world may offer.



## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS:

## Chaucer's works:

- BD* — *The Book of the Duchess.*  
*CT* — *The Canterbury Tales.*  
*GP* — *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.*  
*HF* — *The House of Fame.*  
*LGW* — *The Legend of Good Women.*  
*Legend* — *The Legend of Good Women.*  
*PF* — *The Parliament of Fowls.*  
*TC* — *Troilus and Criseyde.*  
*Troilus* — *Troilus and Criseyde.*
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## Journals:

- ELN* — *English Language Notes.*  
*MLN* — *Modern Language Notes.*  
*ELH* — *Journal of English Literary History.*  
*ES* — *English Studies.*
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