

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

## TOWARDS A CHAUCERIAN POETIC

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IN 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women* (F. 97-100; G. 81-8)<sup>1</sup> Chaucer makes his most extended comments on literature, and emphasizes three main points: the importance of traditional stories; the problem of belief in them; and his presentation of the 'naked text'. Another point is implicit, his own presence in the poem, even though he refuses responsibility. From here we may make a start towards establishing the nature of his poetic.

We are directed first towards stories, narrative, an aspect of literature which has often been curiously despised by literary critics. A recent treatment of narrative by a philosopher<sup>2</sup> uncorrupted by literary prejudice, Professor W. B. Gallie, effectively demonstrates, using the analogy of games-playing, how a reader of a story must know, or learn by playing, the 'rules of the game'; he must get 'some sense of its point and

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, London, Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1957.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1964, pp. 22-50. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Edward Arnold, London, 1927, represents the explicit contempt for story-telling as such. P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1972, maintains that narrative has nothing directly to do with Poetic (p. 177); Dante seems to have regarded *cantio* as the supreme essence of poetry, Zumthor, *ibid.*, p. 189. For helpful analyses of literary narrative, see O. Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in 12th Century England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962; K. H. Jackson, *Welsh Tradition and the International Popular Tale*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1961; R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, 1966; A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, Cambridge, Mass., 1960; D. Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968; W. W. Ryding, *Structure in Medieval Narrative*, Mouton, The Hague and Paris, 1971; E. Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971. Cf. also *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, trans. I. Bywater, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1920, pp. 36-7: 'The most important (element in tragedy) is the combination of the incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery.'

purpose', and a range of concepts that will recognize those contingencies that may arise within the rules, and those that should not. We learn about the rules and point of stories from the story itself, and others like it. The quality of understanding involved, says Gallie, is more like *anticipation* than *imitation* of life.

The long and subtle discussion I have so briefly summarized has no literary axe to grind, but it falls in well with certain modern concepts, deriving from quite other arguments about the nature of signs, that a story, a poem, indeed all arts and sciences, are self-enclosed systems, whose essential subject-matter is themselves, not something other, and which may be said in consequence to have a centre of reference within themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This is a very partial truth, both generally and for Chaucer, but it establishes what was neglected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that poems, and even language itself, have their own ontological status: their validity does not consist only, or primarily, in a *direct* relationship to what is tendentiously opposed to them either as 'real' life or personal expression. They are not only reportage or exhortation, mirror or lamp.<sup>2</sup> We may support the concept of the autonomy of art and language by reference to another philosopher, J. L. Austin, who argues for what lovers of literature feel in their bones, that in some areas of language the very speaking of the word is the doing of the act.<sup>3</sup> There are verbal deeds. Austin refers to this as the performative element in language. He has to struggle hard to release himself from a doctrine of verbal meaning which sees words as essentially labels; a product of a doctrine of 'naïve realism' which seems to have arisen in England in the seventeenth century and is not held consciously by any thinking person, but which still underlies much of our common-sense empiricism and philistinism.<sup>4</sup> The performative element in words which may be seen in such verbal deeds as certain promises and bets, should certainly be extended to include prayers and works of literature, to indicate that the word *is* the deed, and has a certain self-sufficient, self-referring quality. It may be put in

<sup>1</sup> Zumthor, *op. cit.*, e.g. pp. 143, 155, 311; cf. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 22 March 1974, p. 15, on F. Jacob, *The Logic of Living Systems*, trans. B. E. Spillman, Allen Lane, London, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, 1953.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. Emmett, *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*, 1945, corrected reprint of 1966, Macmillan, London, 1966.

Saussurean and semiotic terms by saying that literature is both *signifiant* and *signifié*, both the sign and what it signifies. I believe this to be generally true, but it is particularly true of literature written before the late seventeenth century. The advantage of recognizing this qualified ontological reality of language and literature is that it frees us from the concept of language as derivative, vicarious, secondhand; and therefore of literature as essentially either escapist or propagandist. When language and literature are recognized as autonomous systems we begin to see the true need for and function of rhetoric. We rediscover the justification, which ordinary language has never needed, of self-referring literary and linguistic devices like pun, proverb, and hyperbole, all banished from educated literature from the late seventeenth century till the early twentieth. The autonomy of language and literature, and the sense that they are their own self-referring self-centred systems, release us from now old-fashioned concepts that narrative is intrinsically unpoetic, that literature necessarily imitates 'life' or expresses the poet's own feelings; that it depends for its validity on referring to 'life' or feeling as a centre outside itself, and that 'realism' is the supreme literary virtue, consisting in careful so-called imitation of that non-verbal universe of appearance which is dignified by the term 'reality'.

When language, literature, and that part of literature which consists in narrative, are thus granted their own autonomy, free even from the creator of the poem, we are justified in seeking within each system its patterns, and further inner systems, which exercise controlling power. In the case of narrative, and any particular system of narrative, such as is offered by any given story, we are perfectly well accustomed to seek this inner system, and it is usual to refer to it, as Gallie does, as 'getting the point'. Getting the point of a story is not merely following the narrative sequence, so to speak, linearly and horizontally to find out how it ends, important as that is. As we read a narrative, the operations of memory, anticipation, and discovery construct from the sequential experience a hierarchy of impressions, from the most detailed to the most general, which has elaborate interconnections. The art of the correct connection of detail to generality within a narrative may be said to be the true art of reading. A performative verbal structure is thus created in the mind, which in the case of great literature is of the utmost complexity, but which is not inconsiderable in any story of merit. Indeed, it is precisely that

degree of ability of a story, and a work of literature, to create a complex inter-related structure in the imagination which constitutes its degree of essential value. In the end, literary merit will be found not to consist in its morality, nor its immorality, nor its plausibility, nor insight into human feelings, nor depth of thought, nor revelations of beauty or ugliness, for these are not particularly literary qualities. Any or all of these qualities and others, in that they constitute the referential base of much language, and arouse the sympathies of the imagination, necessarily constitute the subject-matter out of which literature is made; they may determine for an individual reader the attractiveness or otherwise of a work of literature; but the prime *literary* qualities must reside in imaginative verbal structures, and the rhythms with which the act of narration deploys them in order to make them comprehensible.

The multiplicity of connections and significances in a story, which constitute its 'point' or 'points', have been recognized from the earliest commentators on Homer and on the Hebrew Bible. No one knew better than their medieval successors working on classical texts and on the Bible that there are layers of significance in narrative, to be deduced by certain rules. The principles of allegorical exegesis are now well known,<sup>1</sup> and the first question for a purely Chaucerian poetic which considers narrative is whether allegorical meaning is intentionally built into Chaucerian stories. The general answer must be no. First, Chaucer himself, in the passage referred to in 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women*, emphasizes his interest in the 'naked text' of 'approved stories', which you may believe or not as you like. Since allegory is essentially didactic, and emphatically goes beyond the 'naked text', allegory is denied here. Chaucer's own references to 'glosing', by which allegory is deduced, are normally scornful. Next, Chaucer in his 'Retractions' condemns all his secular works as worldly vanities which do not give good doctrine, and these include all his major poems. Finally, internal evidence of the 'naked text' reveals

<sup>1</sup> On the exegesis of classical texts see, e.g., Sir J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, 3 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1903-8; and J. Seznec, *La Survivance des Dieux Antiques*, Warburg Institute Studies, 11, London, 1940, trans. B. F. Sessions, Bollingen Series xxxviii, New York, Pantheon, 1953; R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, pp. 203 ff. For medieval biblical commentary, cf. H. de Lubac, 'Exégèse Médiévale', *Théologie*, 41, 42 (1959); 59 (1964); Aubier, Editions Montaigne.

some traces of allegorization, as at the end of 'The Clerk's Tale' (CT. IV, 1142-55) and in 'The Tale of Malibeus', but not elsewhere. These particular tales were probably classed among 'the books of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralite and devocioun', for which Chaucer in his 'Retracciouns' gives thanks. Chaucer thus gives us a rule which divides secular from devotional narrative. The secular narratives are not allegorical. The devotional narratives have clear traces of allegory, which suggest that were more intended more would be explicit. Another rule is suggested here. Unless there is explicit, internal evidence to the contrary, the face value of a 'naked text' should be accepted, whether secular or devotional.

This does not deny value to recent work, notably by Professor D. W. Robertson,<sup>1</sup> which has argued for the presence of ecclesiastical allegory. The reason lies in the very nature of story. Modern work by Biblical scholars, folklorists, literary historians, and anthropologists<sup>2</sup> has amply demonstrated that stories have significance beyond their face value, without contradicting or invalidating the face value. A story is a system which has its own inner pattern, centre, or point. The better the story the more significant, or complex, its inner sense. Robertson's attempt to reach this inner sense, and to establish a poetic for Chaucer, has been a true response; yet in detail it must be questioned because it places Chaucer in the learned exegetical Latin tradition of the official culture; whereas it seems that the bulk of Chaucer's work must be placed in a different, secular and unofficial tradition, which was in certain respects opposed to the official. One of the reasons for Chaucer's fundamental inconsistency is that he could not in the end, as the 'Retracciouns' show, reconcile the secular with the devotional, the unofficial with the official, as Dante seems to have done.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Biblical work is summarized in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley, Nelson, London, 1962; cf. works by C. Lévi-Strauss, e.g. *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books Inc., New York, 1963 (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1963, original French edition, 1958); *Mythology*, ed. P. Maranda, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. S. Brewer, 'Gothic Chaucer', in *Writers and their Backgrounds: Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. D. S. Brewer, G. Bell and Sons, London, 1974 (henceforward cited as *WBC*); and D. S. Brewer, 'Notes towards a theory of medieval Comedy', *Medieval Comic Tales*, translated by P. Rickard and others, D. S. Brewer Ltd., Cambridge, 1973. For Dante, cf. M. L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language*, Yale Historical Publications Miscellany 88, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1968.

So far what has been said of narrative applies to all, even novels. But the narratives Chaucer uses, whether secular or devotional, have the further specific quality of being traditional, not invented by him, therefore not in any way autobiographical or expressive. Thus he aligns himself with ancient and general human tradition. He seems moreover to have done so progressively, as part of his poetic development. In his earliest poetry, not purely translation, he already reveals his strongly narrative bent, which he uses particularly to embody problems. In *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, which are modelled on French love-visions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,<sup>1</sup> he shows himself in line with a general development of French poetry from lyric to narrative. Yet they are not purely narrative; nor are they full stories, for these love-visions may well be regarded as narratively expanded first-person lyrics, with the special expressivity that lyrics imply. The forms of Dream and Meeting were especially important in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Chaucer approached even these narrative love-visions from the point of view of provincial English romances which, though he later mocked them, seem to have provided his earliest literary pleasure and to have conditioned his poetic diction.<sup>2</sup> His developing preference for impersonal narrative is further illustrated in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The direct source, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, is, so its author claims, and it seems reasonable to believe, a first-person lament of rejected love displaced into a third-person narrative of romanticized history, or historical romance. Chaucer further removed the first-person element already displaced by Boccaccio, though he retained and even enhanced certain elements of lyric commentary, and did indeed also add the different drama of his own personal engagement with the story. Here he realized, perhaps for the first time following the narrative débâcle of *The House of Fame*, the advantage of using a given story. Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* was, however, something of a newly invented story, even if a not very original one, and Chaucer made it in a sense less original by making it more

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love-Poets*, University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature No. 43, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968, and 'Chaucer and French Poetry', *WBC*, pp. 109-36; Zumthor, op. cit., pp. 306 ff., 376; C. B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions*, *De Proprietatibus Litterarum*, Series Practica 2, Mouton, The Hague and Paris, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> D. S. Brewer, 'The relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions', *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer, Nelson, London, 1966.

traditional. From *Troilus and Criseyde* onwards Chaucer turned in his poems increasingly towards given, traditional stories, if we except 'The Squire's Tale', which itself collapses as completely as *The House of Fame*.<sup>1</sup> Just after *Troilus and Criseyde* he wrote 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women* in its earlier form, which mentions the large number of 'old approved stories' to which I have referred. In *The Legend* he retells stories from Ovid on his favourite theme of betrayed women, but when he came to *The Canterbury Tales* the range of sources is much wider. This Gothic manuscript miscellany evades comprehensive generalizations since it includes non-fiction and the 'Retracciouns'. Of itself it challenges the notion of a completely comprehensive poetic. Compared with Chaucer's literary beginnings it contains a high proportion of internationally popular tales, some at least of which were probably current orally. They are placed even more strikingly in a popular setting, not a courtly, let alone an ecclesiastical context. They are an imitation of an episode of popular tale-telling, going on for days, as sometimes happens even in modern times with the Irish *ceilidhe*. A framing device for a series of stories was not uncommon; but this relatively low social level is as unparalleled as the dynamic interplay of character.

Popular may include learned and devotional as well as secular, but the more popular a story is, the nearer it seems to fantasy. The apparently realistic *fabliaux* have plots more fantastic than the romances, and far more so than *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's poetic progress is from treatment of events of reality and personal experience, such as lay just beneath the surface of *The Book of the Duchess*, to the pure fantasy of 'The Miller's Tale', if pure is the word. We must pause a moment to

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis remarked on Chaucer's 'medievalizing' *Il Filostrato* in 'What Chaucer really did to *Il Filostrato*', *Essays and Studies of the English Association*, 1931, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1932, pp. 56-75. Probably 'The Squire's Tale' should be dated before the main *Canterbury Tales* period. In it the teller characterizes himself as a 'dul man' (*CT*. v, 279), in accordance with Chaucer's generally self-mocking presentation, but very dissimilar to the Squire who is supposed to be telling the tale. But unlike Chaucer's principal early poems and 'Palamon and Arcite' which became 'The Knight's Tale', the 'Squire's Tale' is not mentioned in 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women* (cf. *Pro*. F. 420). 'The Squire's Tale' may be in a very special category if it is in part built on a framework of astronomical allusion—a remarkable inner point—as maintained by J. D. North, with much plausibility; 'Kalenderes Enlumyned Ben They: Part II', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., vol. xx (1969), pp. 155-262.

distinguish, within fantasy, the marvellous from the impossibly ingenious, which explains this apparent paradox. In secular tales, specifically romance, Chaucer tends to exclude the marvellous, as far as he can, and even appears to despise it. He always mocks Arthurian romance, that hodge-podge of marvels,<sup>1</sup> and all fairy-tale romance, as in 'The Tale of Sir Thopas'. The romance of *Troilus and Criseyde*, except for the ending, is entirely free of the marvellous. 'The Knight's Tale' has the bare minimum, accepted from the source, *Teseida*. But Chaucer accepts the marvellous in religious tales. This is another general rule. Marvels occur only in religion. When Chaucer brings religious and secular, official and unofficial, cultures together there is always a clash, which is often the source of humour, certainly of ambiguity, perhaps of inconsistency and incompatibility. The outstanding examples are the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the religious element follows a secular story and accompanies the posthumous marvel of Troilus's apotheosis;<sup>2</sup> and the ending of 'The Clerk's Tale' of Patient Griselda, where jesting secular comment follows the serious marvel, presented with religious overtones, of Griselda's patient obedience. There is a characteristic Chaucerian duality here.

Nevertheless, it is a duality within the general class of fantasy, which occurs in the structure of the stories he uses. His stories, taken from so many diverse sources, though he emphasizes their origin in books, have a natural affinity with folktale and fairytale.<sup>3</sup> This may be partly what causes his reserve. Believe them if you like. They arouse an ambivalent fascination in him, which raises the ultimate problem of truth. But for the moment we notice the structural element. The vast majority of narratives available to medieval men shared this affinity, even if they were not actually folktales themselves, and I include here the Biblical narratives. The marvellous is only one aspect of the general appeal of folktale. There are others. Both Chaucer and Boccaccio seem quite consciously to have dipped into the general folkloric tradition, enjoying especially the popular farcical tales, just as Chrétien in the twelfth century seems to have

<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt of the mockery, though there is also some ambivalence: cf. D. S. Brewer, 'Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of R. H. Robbins*, ed. B. Rowland, Allen and Unwin, London, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Steadman, *Disembodied Laughter*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 399; F. L. Utley, 'Some Implications of Chaucer's Folktales', *Laographia* iv, Athens, 1965, pp. 588-99.



sought Arthurian folklore, perhaps with different purpose, but in each case seeking a secular, not an ecclesiastical interest. They were the more able to do this because the difference between medieval literary narrative and folklore narrative was one only of degree, with many qualities shared. Oral delivery was still an influence on Chaucer's highly intellectual poetry, just as it still is in that folklore narrative observed by scholars in modern times, in Ireland, Yugoslavia, and Russia. These narratives reflect the ancient general European and Judaic tradition which extends far back behind the written records.<sup>1</sup> Yet this tradition was largely broken in the seventeenth century and it is now extraordinarily difficult to recreate except by natural sympathy, which is in certain respects beyond argument. In the case of Shakespeare, for example, if a person cannot naturally see that the leaden casket, not the gold, should be chosen, and that the man who chooses the leaden casket is *for that reason* the hero, and a good man, there is not much that argument can do, except recommend a course of reading Grimm's *Fairy Tales* and hope that something will click. The situation is even more complex with Chaucer, who is more rationalistic than Shakespeare. If a person does not see that Dorigen and Griselda are good women, Troilus a good man, the duck in the *Parliament* a coarse fool, then, like the terslet, 'I cannot see that arguments avail'. But short of battle, perhaps a consideration of folktale and a reminder of historical perspective may demonstrate that what I hold as certain may at least be possible. The situation with Chaucer is complex because of his own self-contradictoriness. He gives us a popular tale like that of Griselda, and himself expresses pain and incredulity of a quite modern kind; or relates a romantic tragedy apparently of a modern kind like that of Troilus, and himself expresses at the end a detached derision for earthly suffering. Consideration of the traditional tale may help to show how Chaucer was able to utilize its structure for such contradictory effects.

If traditional tales, including modern folktale, Grimm's fairy tales, popular tales of all kinds, classical legends, some Biblical narratives, are borne in mind, we may abstract some general characteristics. Like all stories, they have a 'point'; but the

<sup>1</sup> R. Crosby, 'Chaucer and the custom of oral delivery', *Speculum* 13 (1938), pp. 413-32; A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 1960; J. H. Delargy, 'The Gaelic story-teller', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xxxi (1945), pp. 177-222; M. Lüthi, 'Parallele Themen in der Volkserzählung und in der Hochliteratur', *Laographia* iv (1965), pp. 248-61.

point is not an imitation of what life is 'like', though in the nature of things it will concern a topic of human interest, not necessarily profoundly. Nor is the point necessarily a developing theme which is followed through. The story imitates not 'life' but an earlier version of itself. This is what it is to be traditional. The story is about 'itself', an impression which the fondness of the traditional tale for repeating incidents, and even phrases, much emphasizes. Its basic structure is a series of events to which characters are secondary, and variable, as Aristotle points out, as does the Russian folklorist, V. Propp.<sup>1</sup> The tale may violate naturalistic standards of possibility and behaviour, but it is self-regulating according to its own 'point' or inner centre. Details of narration may refer either to the surface narrative or to the inner centre, or of course to both. The very concept of a traditional, that is, a repeated, tale is a social concept, which enfolds the actual story in a larger entity. Though not a group-product, it is nevertheless a product formed and sometimes modified by the successive minds that have held it, and of the social and literary conventions dominant in the minds of those who tell and those who receive it. And, incidentally, one version of a story may retain features at first devised to fit special circumstances in an earlier version which have themselves altered or disappeared.

The social element is to be seen most clearly in the oral folktale or folk-epic as reported by scholars. A sympathetic audience is required, who knows the conventions. The highly sympathetic Irish scholar Delargy himself comments on how tedious, that is to him and to the modern reader, are certain long interpolations in the oral tale, which are much relished by the traditional audience. The singer or sayer shares with the audience a common stock of conventional, that is 'self-centred', not naturalistic, motifs and themes, and larger segments of story, down through episodes, stock descriptions of all kinds, to formulaic verbal phrases. The singer or sayer usually has a better command of the traditional repertoire than his audience, or he would not be performing his function, but the traditional repertoire does not originate with him, however creative a bearer of the tradition he may be. Even learned poets in the Middle Ages,

<sup>1</sup> *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, trans. I. Bywater, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1920, p. 38. V. Propp, 'Morphology of the Folktale', edited with an introduction by S. Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. L. Scott, Indiana Research Centre in Anthropology, Folklore and Linguistics Publication 10, 1958. Cf. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, ll. 60-2.

trained in rhetoric, were in a similar position. Rhetoric notoriously does not discuss original invention in our sense, but teaches the conventional rehandling of familiar material.

Both folk-singer and rhetorical poet may vary their material and method, but variations themselves follow rules and use familiar materials. Alternatives are usually available from the traditional stock, whether of formula, proverb, or larger section. What is allowable as a variant depends mainly on the specific tradition of the community and language concerned. In Ireland the modern and ancient traditional tale exists as an outline or summary, governed by its inner point, but it has no fixed form. Its specific realization depends on the skill of the individual teller and the circumstances of that particular telling.<sup>1</sup> Learned poets like Chrétien and Chaucer appear to be in a similar relationship to given material, though unlike the oral singer, they practise a *conscious* choice of change within clear limits. They accept the basic story structure, but re-interpret it in various ways.<sup>2</sup> In Chrétien's phrase, they accept the *matiere*, or matter, but provide the *sen*, which is the way the matter is specifically rendered.<sup>3</sup> The method adopted was frequently the insertion of long digressions, that is, by the technical rhetorical device of amplification, which could be used for explanatory monologue as well as various kinds of descriptions and adornments.<sup>4</sup> This is little different structurally from the way in which modern but traditional Irish or Yugoslav singers or sayers of tales, with the general shape of the story in mind, may insert or omit, as circumstance may suggest or require, the formal description of a journey, a battle, a person, or a decorative alliterative run, a king's boastful speech, or a section of dialogue where direct and indirect speech merge into each other.

<sup>1</sup> Delargy, loc. cit., p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. cit., p. 53. 'The traditional stories, accordingly must be kept as they are. . . . At the same time even with these there is something left to the poet himself.'

<sup>3</sup> Chrétien, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, ed. M. Roques, Les Classiques Français du Moyen Age, 86, Champion, Paris, 1958, ll. 1-29. On the topic generally, and in particular on the development by French courtly poets of an explanatory type of narrative in the light of *grammatica* and *rhetorica*, see *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. E. Vinaver, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, vol. i, Introduction, pp. lxxiii-xciii. Malory, like Chaucer, appears to be much less thoroughgoing in the establishment of a theme than it is claimed French writers were.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, ll. 206 ff., ed. E. Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XII<sup>e</sup> et du XIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, Champion, Paris, 1924; trans. M. F. Nims, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 1967.

The language used may be briefly stated here to be as traditional as the matter. The nearer to oral delivery, the more formulaic it is, but both popular and learned poets make full use, as popular language still does, of hyperbole, proverb, sententious apophthegm, mixed metaphor, puns, and wordplay of all kinds, not necessarily comic. This is the performative, creative element in language, where language itself, like the story, has its own autonomy, its own life, and reference to the non-verbal world is not its only validation. But a major distinguishing mark of a good singer or sayer will of course be the skill of his individual verbal realization of his material.

The traditional tale may thus be described in terms of descending generality, from its most general 'point', to its general shape, down to the detail of a possible specific realization. This is how the rhetorician, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, recommends composition at the beginning of the *Poetria Nova*. The tale may be said metaphorically to have two centres of reference or of validating originality, closely similar in nature; one within itself, and one within the tradition. Such a structure has implications far different from those ideas about the nature of language and literature which, though with their roots in the Middle Ages, first began to become dominant in the seventeenth century and still exert an implicit hold on much of our thought about literature. A brief survey of these later notions may remove some difficulties.

The notions were first introduced into English literary culture by Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (1595), and it is convenient to call them Neoclassical, for the Romantic and Symbolist movements issued from them and altered their balance rather than their quality. A very rough summary of Neoclassical, Romantic, and Symbolist concepts of literature is that the literary text originates in what the writer feels about the world. There are thus two centres of reference for the text: one the poet's subjective feeling, the other, some aspect of 'life'. The text is judged by its personal expressivity, and the accuracy or penetration with which 'life' is described. These notions are still current. The concept of two centres is beautifully illustrated by the modest remark attributed to T. S. Eliot in the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*.

Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the

relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. (T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript*, edited by Valerie Eliot, Faber and Faber, London, 1971, p. 1.)

Expressivity and description in a text not only vary in proportion; they may be dissociated, as Eliot here suggests. Various devices have been used, from Sidney's concept of a second, golden Nature onwards, to unite expression and description. Moral judgement is a favourite one, easily merging into moral propaganda about the state of the world. There is a passionate desire for 'moral realism' with which literary virtue is equated. A Neo-classical reformulation of ancient notions about the superiority of poets to ordinary mortals in moral, realistic, and intellectual terms is equally firmly expressed by Sidney, Milton, Samuel Johnson, Shelley, and, to cut a long story short, D. H. Lawrence.<sup>1</sup>

The development of such concepts of literature and reality, about the subjective and objective worlds, went parallel with, and were perhaps connected to, the new developments in empirical science, which were also connected with new notions about language. Not only scientists and philosophers, but literary critics, deeply influenced by Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, wanted language to be primarily an instrument of accurate description of ideas and material reality. To put it briefly, words ought to be labels of things. This is effectively to deny all the creative, performative, systematic, and self-referring elements in language, leaving only the descriptive. The seventeenth and succeeding centuries saw the beginning of an attack on rhetoric, on metaphorical language itself, let alone mixed metaphors, on hyperbole, puns, proverbs, all the characteristics of traditional literary language and its sententious or witty aspects, which continued until the middle of the twentieth century, and is still implicit in much criticism.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine

<sup>1</sup> Sidney in the *Apology*; for Milton, cf. I. Langdon, *Milton's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Cornell Studies in English 17, New Haven, 1924; Johnson, *Rasselas*, chapter x; Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*; D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. A. Beal, William Heinemann, London, 1955, pp. 102-18.

<sup>2</sup> For the seventeenth century the main picture is drawn by R. F. Jones, *The Seventeenth Century*, Stanford, 1951, who quotes, e.g., Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), and Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (1667); further evidence can be found in Locke, *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1690), Pope, *Peri Bathos* (1727), and in the eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare. Cf. T. S. Eliot on Hamlet's puns, etc., his condemnation of 'the strained and mixed figures of speech in which Shakespeare indulged himself', and condemnation of the rhetorical style, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), pp. 79, 102, 143-4.

was limited until the twentieth century by moral and social inhibitions, including that of class, but is still strong now that it has lost these inhibitions.

The literary forms which naturally express the basic Neo-classical feeling about literature and language are the expressive autobiographical lyric, and the descriptive novel, which is often much more autobiographical than it seems. A brief glance at almost any modern collection of poems will illustrate the dominant first person, the 'personal grouse', even if no longer rhythmical. The novel's claim to be descriptive may be focused in the frequently reiterated claim that the characters are thought of first, and that the story follows on from their interaction as it would in ordinary life, but coherently, within a stable framework and perspective.<sup>1</sup> Both novel and lyric are private experiences, designed for the solitary reader of print in a quiet room. Imitating life they seek originality, avoid repetition, though they are often paradoxically didactic as well. There are nowadays many signs of change from this essentially Neoclassical position: language and literature, like linguistic thought, are rapidly breaking away. But it is still firm enough to influence ideas about, and often to misconceive, the nature of traditional, pre-Neoclassical literature.

The novel and the lyric are in almost every respect the contrary of the traditional tale, whose general rules we may briefly formulate thus: the story is familiar in general shape, and not personally expressive; the series of events is primary, the

<sup>1</sup> L. C. Knights, *How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?*, Gordon Fraser, The Minority Press, Cambridge, 1933, collects statements to this effect from contemporary novelists, and from critics of Shakespeare, pp. 2-5. The doctrine of lyric expressiveness and the primacy of 'life' in combination is illustrated by Ezra Pound's quotation of a late nineteenth-century French critic's condemnation of the Georgian poets because they mastered writing without having 'lived', and sought feelings to fit their vocabulary, rather than words to express their personal passions and ideas: cf. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: a Facsimile and Transcript*, ed. Valerie Eliot, Faber and Faber, London, 1971, pp. 11 and 126. The combination of 'realism' (i.e. a plausible verbal report of commonplace appearances), with autobiography, real or assumed, to create the novel, and oust the prose romance, seems first to begin in Europe under Humanist (i.e. Neoclassical) auspices in Spain in the second half of the sixteenth century. 'The literary ideal of Valdés [a Spanish Renaissance Humanist], in particular, was coherence within a framework of events and characters that could happen and exist in reality; in short, an ideal of realism that was not then, in the 1530's, being exemplified in fiction.' A. A. Parker, *Literature and the Delinquent*, The University Press, Edinburgh, 1967, pp. 5-6, 20.

characters secondary; traditional topics and adornments may be inserted by association, the principle of metonymy, either with the course of events or with reference to the inner point, but they may be omitted. Repetition is optional but agreeable. There is no rule of plausibility. Formal interests determine local subject-matter. Language is often formulaic, self-referring. Wordplay and the sententiousness of conventional wisdom are often present, though instructiveness being the reiteration of commonplaces, it does not confer upon the tale any special status of moral significance or insight, exemplary as the tale may be. The subject-matter is not personal expression. The concept of organic unified development from beginning to end is inapplicable. Rather the form is controlled by a general idea and specific realizations vary according to teller and social circumstance. Hence the multiplicity of narrative, and the wide range of tone, the fluidity of form, which are so surprising, baffling, and indeed offensive to Neoclassical principles of organic unity, decorum, and singleness of tone.

The natural point of entry into a traditional tale seems to be by following the sequence of events which creates the recognizable pattern of the story and which is the ultimate control. Events are the specific realizations of what Propp calls the abstract concept of an event. Two events need not be identical in fact, to be identical in function, as folklorists know, and as practical reading experience shows. The story by the thirteenth-century German, der Stricker, which is called in translation 'The Judge and the Devil', has hardly one detail of narration, except an old woman, in common with Chaucer's 'Friar's Tale', yet they are very obviously in one sense the same story.<sup>1</sup> So we generalize from events to functions and thus to at least part of the general point of the story; or we proceed from events towards greater particularity of story, to the characters associated with events, or to various other attachments to the story which make it more and more specific to that particular telling or version.

The notion that a story has an inner point implies the possibility of symbolic transposition, which is not the same thing as allegory. This possibility will vary according to the story and,

<sup>1</sup> *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1941, pp. 269-74; *Medieval Comic Tales*, trans. P. Rickard, D. Blamires, and others, D. S. Brewer Ltd., Cambridge, 1973, pp. 72-3.

no doubt, to the ingenuity of the receiver.<sup>1</sup> Obvious traditional examples of great symbolic power and great naturalistic implausibility are the story of the Fall in Genesis, and of Oedipus. Popular tales are frequently popular because they symbolize certain states or situations, or generate pregnant, if familiar, propositions. This is part of the richness of story as literature, and part of the value of an improbable, or impossible, series of events, which create such powerful impressions. Symbolizations of this kind can hardly be said to be themes in the ordinary sense of a recurring yet developing statement which the whole tale is designed to illustrate. They generate rather such obvious sententious comments on life's little ironies as, in 'The Reeve's Tale', 'the biter bit'; or in 'The Merchant's Tale', both the incompatibility of youth with crabbed age and also, that 'a woman is never at a loss for an answer'.<sup>2</sup> They can be more profound: 'The Man of Law's Tale' of Constance embodies the obvious message about constancy and shows it in combination with a flow of natural motherly feeling; but it also embodies concepts of the divisiveness of religion, the loneliness of integrity, the benevolent neutrality of nature. 'The Clerk's Tale' of Patient Griselda, apparently so similar, is very different because it shows the obvious lesson about patient suffering as a good through its *conflict* with the flow of natural motherly feeling.<sup>3</sup> Both tales use the device of repetition of event with only slight variation, but 'The Clerk's Tale' in particular needs to be accepted in traditional terms, as established by the structure of events and the happy ending. Griselda is shown to be good through the series of events that repeatedly test her, and which are the centre of the story. Any naturalistic reading, concerned not merely with probability of event, or of motive in her husband Walter, or with his and Griselda's own character and motives as primary and generative of the action, like a novel, turns the story upside down, and not only makes Walter

<sup>1</sup> e.g. C. Lévi-Strauss, op. cit.; E. Herzog, *Psyche and Death*, trans. D. Cox and E. Rolfe, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1966; H. Zimmer, *The King and the Corpse*, ed. J. Campbell, Bollingen Series xi, Pantheon Books Inc., New York, 1948; and generally, G. C. Jung and Kerenyi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Routledge and Kegan Paul; A. H. Krappe, *The Science of Folklore*, Methuen, London, 1930, repr. 1962.

<sup>2</sup> See further, D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, 3rd (supplemented) edn., Longmans, London, 1973, pp. 172-82.

<sup>3</sup> D. S. Brewer, 'Some metonymic relationships in Chaucer's poetry', *Poetica*, Tokyo, i (1974), pp. 1-20. The notion of incompatible good values is unfamiliar in modern thought; less so in earlier poetry.



an incredibly monstrous mixture, but Griselda herself a contemptible coward who will not protect her poor innocent children. Such judgements would be only a beginning of the absurdities and affronts to our sense and sensibilities that any novelistic reading of the tale offers. Here, if ever, is a tale self-centred and tradition-centred, arising from a complex amalgam of traditional stories of testing, traditional concepts of loyalty, promise-keeping, endurance, masculine and feminine roles, and so on, which lie deep in the human consciousness and relate to myth, although Boccaccio's version in the *Decameron* is the first complete one we know. Since then, a hundred later written versions and over fifty oral versions have been traced, almost all derived from Boccaccio, and the tale has been set in the context of numerous analogues.<sup>1</sup> There can be little doubt that until our own day the popularity of this tale far surpassed that of any of those libertine tales for which the *Decameron* is now renowned. Such widespread appeal of a story which violates all the canons of a novel is an index of the power of those other qualities of the traditional tale which I have tried to suggest, and I cannot believe that such great popularity is totally independent of literary merit, any more than it can be totally identified with merit.

The question arises: how legitimate is such interpretation? The nature of the traditional tale frees us from any bondage to simple intentionalism on the part of the teller, because he did not invent the tale, and he is in the same relationship to the inner point as the audience. But he may tell the tale well or ill; or he may attempt to change it; or as in Chaucer's case with the Tale of Griselda, he may by a realistic telling call into question the inner point. Each case must be treated on its merits. What Chaucer does in this case is to build up a painful tension between the non-naturalistic 'point' and the naturalistic telling; but the presence of the tension proves the presence of the traditional point and meaning.

*Troilus and Criseyde* offers another case. Here the story structure is relatively thin in contrast with the wealth of naturalistic detail. Nevertheless an interpretation of the story as such is necessary if we are to grasp the whole and establish a true hierarchy of connections. The poem is subject to almost as many interpretations as *Hamlet*, and this in itself offers a clue. Any

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Betteridge and F. L. Utley, 'New light on the origin of the Griselda story', *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, xiii (1972), pp. 153-208.

general interpretation that does not place a question at the centre of the poem is likely to be too dogmatic. Chaucer tends in his earlier poems to embody a problem in narrative, with his own self as questioning and questing within the poem. That a narrative conveys a problem is a likely rule in Chaucer's poetic. In *Troilus and Criseyde* the named poet is absent from the poem, though many critics put him in as the Narrator, in response to the highly personalized telling, and the quite unusually large number of references to the 'author' or source. The general problem in the earlier poems concerns the deprivation, or even the nature, of love. It comes to a grand climax in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and fades out in *The Legend of Good Women*. More specifically and variously the underlying problem, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, is perhaps how to reconcile the goodness of love with its transience; and beneath it all, there lies that deep sense of loss and betrayal to which Chaucer so often returns in the list of betrayed heroines, which he found in Ovid. Another way of putting the problem at the heart of *Troilus and Criseyde* is that some values are essentially in conflict, as already noted in 'The Clerk's Tale', but occurring in other forms elsewhere; for example in 'The Knight's Tale', and, especially, in 'The Franklin's Tale' where it is found in the clash between *trouthe* and honour.<sup>1</sup> Boethius reflects such problems in the clash between this world and the transcendent world, Fortune and Providence, transience and permanence, and no doubt thus provided Chaucer with the incentive to study and translate the *Consolatio Philosophiae*. It is notable that Chaucer chooses secular, not theological means, to embody this recognition of a common human experience, that sense of fracture between what we know of the world and what we think it ought to be, or indeed was; as Chaucer writes explicitly in a lyric,

The world hath mad a permutacioun  
Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse.  
(Lak of Stedfastnesse.)

It is the subject of The Fall of Man, but the Bible as a sacred text was not available to Chaucer for rehandling as secular literature was.

Such generalizations arise out of contemplation of the series of events. A poet may even, in the light of his perception, then remodel in part his original source, and set up a process of

<sup>1</sup> D. S. Brewer, 'Honour in Chaucer', *Essays and Studies* 1973, John Murray, London, 1973, pp. 1-19.

interactions, which may or may not be complete in the specific verbal realization of the events, and in the rhythm in which they are deployed. It seems likely that a practising traditional writer will devote most of his conscious attention to the practical art of verbal realization. Chaucer reflects on the need to get to what he calls the 'knot' of the story in 'The Squire's Tale' (*CT*. v. 401). In *Troilus and Criseyde* he comments on the impracticality of a full-blown realism, conscious, as always, of a potentially impatient audience or reader (*TC*. III, 491-504). In *The House of Fame* the Eagle prides himself on making reasons to an ignorant man so 'palpable' that he may shake them by the beaks without any subtlety of speech, scientific terms, figures of poetry, colours of rhetoric (*HF*. 855-69). The series of events was probably visually imagined before being verbally realized. Much medieval French poetry was introduced by the words *je vois*.<sup>1</sup> In 'The Knight's Tale' as in *The Parliament of Fowls* stories are painted on walls.<sup>2</sup> But in particular *The House of Fame's* account of the Aeneid, with its non-naturalistic, but quite natural synæsthetic blend of reading and seeing, hearing and remembering, suggests how a story was held in mind. Elsewhere, Chaucer varies casually between 'write' and 'say'. The *Gawain*-poet does not only tell, he will *schawe*.<sup>3</sup> Such pictures may be held with varying degrees of fluidity and precision. To judge from Chaucer's verbal realizations, his mental pictures were animated, highly selective, without perspective or over-all view, but with vivid local detail. Chaucer's narratives tend to proceed in scenes, marked by passages of dialogue, monologue, description, or comment, linked by brief passages of transition. On a larger scale that is the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* itself: the Tales being the 'scenes', the links being the transitions. The links, on large or small scale, are more literal, carry less weight of implication, than the scenes.

The structure of events, with their underlying point and potential realization in scenes, constitute the context in which the details operate.

The importance of context is obvious: a small detail of a

<sup>1</sup> Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> V. A. Kolve, 'Chaucer and the visual arts', *WBC*, pp. 290-319.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Spearing, 'Patience and the *Gawain*-poet', *Anglia* 84 (1966), pp. 305-29 (repr. *The Gawain-Poet*, Cambridge, 1972), comments on visualization in medieval poetry. Aristotle recommends that the poet should keep the actual scenes of his story as far as possible before his eyes while composing (*ed. cit.*, pp. 60-1). He should first simplify and reduce his story to a universal form before proceeding to lengthen it out by the insertion of episodes (p. 61).

painting is infinitely ambiguous if isolated.<sup>1</sup> The same is true for words and the larger verbal units of formulae, set-pieces, topoi. Within fairytales, according to Propp,<sup>2</sup> a function can only be correctly understood when its place in the sequence is established. Even stories themselves may require some sense of context, as in the case of the tale of Patient Griselda, which is why they may be regarded as centred in tradition, and why literary texts and language itself can never be completely self-enclosed, completely self-referring and 'circular'. The context controls the intention of the story, and is important because it limits the potential ambiguity of detail. Unlimited free association, especially after six hundred years, which disregards the poet's intention as revealed by context,<sup>3</sup> is likely to put the critic in the same position as the Summoner in 'The Friar's Tale', which is a story to illustrate the supreme importance of intention in speech. Not understanding this, the Summoner was carried off to hell.

Traditional story may be said to establish two kinds of context in narrative. One is horizontal, referring to the sequence of events. The other, which is multiple, may be described as vertical, cutting across the sequential horizontal line in many ways and referring variously to traditional topoi, to the audience, to the general point of the whole sequence. It is a crude metaphor but may be useful.<sup>4</sup> The horizontal context proceeds in sections delimited by the non-naturalistic course of many stories, the shortness of memory, the tendency to move sharply from one scene to another in narrative. It may also be interrupted by the vertical context. Hence inconsistencies in some time schemes, or between widely spaced passages, such as descriptions in 'The General Prologue' and the same character's presentation as a storyteller. The Monk is a good example. There is no more point in trying to reconcile such inconsistencies in a naturalistic way over a long space of the horizontal

<sup>1</sup> See E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Bollingen Series xxxv 5, Pantheon Books Inc., New York, 1960, *passim*, both for the varieties of ambiguity and the need for establishing a controlling context by empathy with the artist's or speaker's intention, e.g. pp. 232, 313. Cf. also E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, Phaidon, London, 1972, p. 4. Without context one thing may signify various, even contradicting things, says St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. S. Brewer in *Modern Language Review* 68 (1973), pp. 630-4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. W. Trask, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1957, pp. 14-17.

context than in trying to reconcile the two accounts of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2. We have to dive beneath the surface to discover some more general set of concepts or intentions. The principle of limitation of meaning by intention is often a principle of limitation of applicable context. Verbal phrases may be quite strictly limited. In *The Parliament of Fowls* mythological Venus is described with implications of disapproval (260–73), but when the formel four hundred lines later says that she will not, as yet, ‘serve Venus ne Cupide’ (652) we are in a different scene and there is no reason why we should not accept the normal face-value meaning of ‘Venus ne Cupide’ as a synonym for love. Equally, the description of Venus in different poems will have different implications according to how the context establishes her good or bad mythological or planetary qualities.

Formal elements may establish a vertical context, corresponding to the reference to the general tradition. The formal description of a person is an example. Estates literature provided a number of frameworks, on which details might be embroidered.<sup>1</sup> These could be set in a series with a weak horizontal connection and context, such as culminates in the *danse macabre*. In ‘The General Prologue’ Chaucer establishes a somewhat stronger horizontal context, and a stronger one still in the Links between the tales, and it is interesting to note that the stronger horizontal context in the Links, becoming more and more naturalistic, results in a weaker vertical context.

Occasionally the juxtaposition of contexts results in naturalistic confusion. An example of a horizontal context is the cursive confession, which following Jean de Meung’s *Faux Semblant* is three times used by Chaucer as a satirical device, for the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Canon’s Yeoman. It may be considered as partly a grammatical device. Instead of saying ‘He or she did, or was, such and such a bad thing’ the poet substitutes the first person. The words are still to be taken literally within the fiction. But a vertical context has been introduced by the non-naturalistic formal device and psychological probability, though not satirical and comic effect, is upset.

*The Book of the Duchess* offers another example, which does not trouble the hearer but only the literalistic scholar. The poet represents himself, in the poem, as overhearing the Black Knight’s sorrowful song that his lady is dead (475–86), but yet he appears not to realize what the Knight plainly says.

<sup>1</sup> J. Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973; Zumthor, op. cit., p. 135.

There have been many attempts to remove the inconsistency by creating a consistency of the poet's assumed stupidity. In truth the inconsistency is real, but not important, because the poem does not ask for a 'suspension of disbelief' and is not about the dreamer or his character; we look through his eyes at the Black Knight. We forget that the dreamer has overheard the solution to the question he is asking because we are not interested in him, but we identify ourselves with him and accept that he is ignorant if he says so a good many lines later. The reason we can thus interrupt the horizontal context is partly sheer spacing, but also because we accept the strong vertical context, related to the general point of the poem, the death of Blanche the Duchess, which must be unequivocally established early on. The duality of vertical context against horizontal repeats the contrast between death and the progress towards recognition of death, which is part of the greatness of the poem. But a novelistic creation of the consistently behaving distractingly stupid character of the dreamer is not part of that greatness.

Another example of the two contexts in *The Book of the Duchess* is the formal, traditional description of Blanche. This is 'vertical' because it refers to the tradition. The description is the same for all medieval heroines. It is worth noting that there is no attempt to describe an individual woman. The traditional literary formula absorbs life, not imitates it, and may be truly said to be self-referring.

The notion of horizontal and vertical contexts is metaphorical and must not be schematically applied. It is a way of describing the multiplicity of reference beyond naturalism, and the importance yet limitation of context, of elaborate traditional literature, especially in Chaucer. *Troilus and Criseyde* offers many examples, some of which may be briefly noted. Troilus's songs and his Boethian meditation do not show that he was a highly educated young man. Nor are Criseyde's sententiously Boethian remarks about transience evidence that she is philosophically inclined. They are lyrical or sententious adornments relating to non-naturalistic vertical contexts. The wonderful scene of Pandarus's interview with Criseyde at the beginning of Book II is on the other hand naturalistic enough within its own limits. Yet it is equally an adornment, not developing the action but enlivening and commenting on it. The characterization of the agents in *Troilus and Criseyde* is clearly secondary to the action, as we know from their difference from Boccaccio's version. In this sense they too share vertical contexts. The character of

Troilus partakes of the idealized and idealizing lover, independent of his actual seduction of Criseyde. His feebleness from grief in Book v is rapidly succeeded by slaying his thousands. The hyperboles of weakness and valour are markers of the nature of his grief and bravery, acceptable as the ordinary hyperboles of everyday animated language, part of traditional understanding, not plausible descriptions of a character acting in a coherent framework of events that could happen naturally.

Many passages in *Troilus and Criseyde* must have been slotted in just as they occurred to Chaucer while he translated with Boccaccio's text in front of him. Such a process, operating by association, or metonymy, evoking different contexts, with local inconsistencies, is a characteristic of the Yugoslav oral folk-epic singer, *mutatis mutandis*, as it is of the amplification of the rhetorically trained writer, but of course it violates the Neo-classical naturalistic unities. If the reference to Troilus's loss of love and life at the beginning of Book iv (l. 27) means what it seems to mean, Chaucer planned ahead in only the roughest way, very much like a folk-singer, with just the general shape of the story in mind. Hence a number of gaps when the story is considered as a naturalistic structure. Where, it has been asked, did Pandarus sleep when Troilus and Criseyde spent their first night together? The narrative is telescoped. Pandarus laid himself to rest. Are we to imagine he slept on the floor in the same room? We are not told yes or no. There is no mention of the palliasse which is quite prominent on a somewhat similar occasion when Troilus sleeps at Deiphebus's house. Nor is anything made of the possible fact that Pandarus was sleeping without pillow or bedding in the same room in which Troilus and Criseyde were talking and making love in a curtained bed. The following morning we get a strong impression that he comes in from outside, which is marginal to the central concern. Similar gaps exist in *The Book of the Duchess* when the poet apparently represents himself as taking horse direct from his bedchamber, and in the uncertainty whether the Wife of Bath's fifth husband is still alive. The narrative method skips such gaps because they are unimportant to its purposes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gombrich, op. cit., emphasizes how few clues we work on in imagining character and action. Cf. R. Champigny: 'In fiction as opposed to "real life" we cannot make the implicit explicit by applying causal laws. . . . The implicit meaning of tenses changes when we turn from history to fiction. In both cases (causality and temporality) a gain in esthetic resonance can correspond to a loss in cognitive resonance.' *PMLA* 85 (1970), pp. 988-91.

The process of insertion may be seen operating everywhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. A literary instance is Dorigen's formal 'complaint' in the often misunderstood 'Franklin's Tale'. It is an adornment attached to a received story, its formal character clearly marked by its introduction and diction. The length of such a passage is no index of its emphasis in the story. It has some slight horizontal naturalistic context, in that Dorigen expresses distress. Its formality and content establish a vertical context, connected with Chaucer's favourite topic of betrayed women.<sup>1</sup> The passage is not naturalistically expressive nor symbolic; it is a rhetorical marker to elaborate upon Dorigen's situation, generalize it within a long tradition, and also to isolate it. It should be taken at face-value; which is not to say that it is entirely successful. The analogy that springs to mind here is that of grand opera, which also has strong popular associations, and seems often to be regarded by critics as absurdly non-realistic and unintellectual. Dorigen's complaint is an aria and fulfils similar functions. The aria breaks the horizontal narrative context but the vertical context as usual expresses a direct relationship between text and audience governed by a traditional convention. Within the narrative context of opera characters are conversing with each other, while actually they are singing, not talking, and facing the audience, not each other. The singing is the medium which comments on what is supposed to be naturalistically felt but only indirectly evoked. Much the same may be said of Shakespeare's plays. The formal singing corresponds to the rhetoric in Chaucer and Shakespeare; it is part of the medium and the tradition, not part of the fiction, and so must be taken at face value, like Dorigen's complaint, or the Franklin's own self-description, or the rhetorical art of his tale, although in naturalistic terms it is inconsistent with what is supposed to be happening.

Chaucer's rhetoric has been well studied in recent years, and needs no detailed discussion here.<sup>2</sup> I shall merely point to one fundamental aspect, alien to much modern thought about poetry. Rhetoric rests on the ancient concept that there is a clear distinction in words between inner meaning and outer realization, which corresponds to the relationship between the

<sup>1</sup> D. S. Brewer, 'Love and marriage in Chaucer's poetry', *Modern Language Review* 49 (1954), pp. 461-4.

<sup>2</sup> R. O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics*, New Haven, 1963; and in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. B. Rowland, Oxford University Press, Inc., Toronto, 1969, pp. 38-58.



inner point of a story and its possible specific realization. The inner meaning is what Chaucer calls the *sentence*. He explains this in 'The Prologue' to 'The Tale of Melibee', commenting on the different versions of Christ's Passion given in the four Gospels:

But douteles hir sentence is al oon.  
(*CT.* vii, 952.)

Popular feeling and learned medieval doctrine again coincide here, and there is no sense of 'the heresy of paraphrase'. John of Salisbury maintains that the same truth may be conveyed by different words.<sup>1</sup> The *inner* meaning is in control. Words themselves were conceived of as sharing an inner and outer nature, mind and face, in modern terms perhaps *signifié* and *signifiant*. As Gower says, 'The word is tokne of that withinne'. In literature the rhetoricians made use of the same concepts in their remorseless emphasis on variation of language. This is what justifies the fullness, the sententiousness, of rhetorical poetry. Explicitly in 'The Prologue' to 'Melibee' just referred to, and implicitly elsewhere, Chaucer practises the sententious adornment which this non-mimetic use of language encourages. Both popular and learned traditions encouraged proverbs and the sententious style. They survive in ordinary speech even today, like the puns and hyperboles associated with them, though the literalism of Neoclassical principles banished them from polite literature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, Libri IIII, ed. C. C. I. Webb, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1929, IV, cap. 32; trans. D. D. McGarry, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962, p. 253. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, E.E.T.S., 2 vols. E.S. lxxxii-lxxxiii, 1900, vii, l. 1737; cf. v, ll. 1825 ff. For Dante, signs are never identical with their objects, Colish, op. cit., p. 344. The notions that thoughts come first, and that words have an inner mind and an outer face, are remarked by J. Richardson, *Blameth Nat Me*, Mouton, The Hague and Paris, 1970, pp. 29, 35. Once again, T. S. Eliot identifies the contrast with Neoclassical principle. 'A disadvantage of the rhetorical style appears to be, that a dislocation takes place, through the hypertrophy of the auditory imagination at the expense of the visual and tactile, so that the inner meaning is separated from the surface. . . .' (He claims that there is no such dislocation in Shakespeare and Dante.) 'Milton I (1936)', *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber and Faber, London, 1957, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), ch. 28, 'All proverbs are vulgar'. For classical and medieval Latin background, cf. F. di Capua, *Sentenze e Proverbi*, Libreria Scientifica Editrice Napoli, 1946; Curtius, op. cit., pp. 57 ff. Cf. D. McDonald, 'Proverbs, *Sententie*, and *Exempla* in Chaucer's comic tales', *Speculum* 41 (1966), pp. 453-65, for one of the rather rare discussions of this important aspect of Chaucer's style. Pandarus's use of proverbs is a mark of both his common touch and his notable amount of literary expertise.

Chaucer's puns have now been rediscovered. Now we need beware of excess, lest we be misled by the tendency of Neo-classical literalism to disregard intention and context, combined with the modern appetite for sexual obscenity. If we isolate a word or a phrase from its controlling context it is inevitably ambiguous. Traditional poets, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, who use puns and make jesting sexual references are peculiarly vulnerable, if context and intention are disregarded, to perverse modern interpretations. Shakespeare himself identifies and mocks this identical error when he shows Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* taking up Camillo's innocent word *Satisfy* and giving it a totally unwarranted obscene sexual implication. The habit of such misinterpretation should be called 'The Leontes Complex'.

Chaucer's sententiousness, however, still needs rescue. His rhetorical adornment is sometimes taken to be bad poetry, or, to save it, is attributed to that Narrator who is always taken to be a bad poet. The relationship of this Narrator to the poet is sometimes hard to find. Sometimes again the bad poetry is assumed to be ironical. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book v, when Criseyde goes to bed in the Greek camp, a beautiful stanza describes the state of the heavens. This has been seen by Professor Donaldson, the most acute of Chaucer's modern critics, as an ironic cosmic fuss to get a sorry little woman to bed in a tent (v, 1016-22).<sup>1</sup> But a similar passage is applied to Troilus a little later (v, 1107-13) which cannot attract a similar comment. Later still in the poem the poet comments elegiacally that such is this world:

In each estat is litel hertes reste,  
God leve us for to take it for the beste.  
(*TC.* v, 1749-50.)

This comment fits both horizontal and vertical contexts: it is traditional;<sup>2</sup> it is true; it should be taken at face-value. The anti-rhetorical pressure of Neoclassical literalism, and the Neoclassical desire for originality and rejection of popular social linguistic registers all tempt us to regard such conventional wisdom as banal, therefore at its face value unworthy of a great poet; therefore ironical. But there can be no irony here, because there can be no double meaning: that is, nobody can argue

<sup>1</sup> E. T. Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer*, The Athlone Press, London, 1970, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'Thomas de Hales' Love Ron', *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. C. Brown, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1932, no. 43, l. 31.

that the world is really a most enchanting and continuously delightful place, where we are all thoroughly at home. Nor can the banality be regarded as deliberately bad and pompous poetry, because the line does not contain within itself the model of what is being parodied, as the lines of 'Sir Thopas' self-evidently do. The line is not absurd. Parody is important in Chaucer, but its signals are always plain. If this line is bad, then it is accidentally and unintentionally bad. We are meant to take it at face-value. If we fail to recognize the controlling limiting contexts and intentions of the poems, anything and everything may be ambiguous; may be attributed to the Narrator, which means discounting and devaluing it; and chaos is come again.

But there is a contradictory element in Chaucer's poetry which justifies much modernistic criticism, and it is now important to identify its sources. It may be summarized as the establishment by Chaucer of two other centres of validating originality or reference which do indeed correspond to those emphasized by Neoclassical criticism: 'life', and the poet's own self-expression. These have their origin in the Middle Ages too, in our culture, and Chaucer produces a characteristically complex, even inconsistent, combination.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in France new impulses towards making stories intelligible have been detected in both romance and history.<sup>1</sup> Chrétien demonstrates the difference between *sen* and *matiere*, and one way of understanding the *sen* is as an invention of motivation to account for the series of events, which is the *matiere*. A 'varnish' of realism is given to the incomprehensible yet fascinating detritus of Celtic mythology. Succeeding authors of Arthurian romance continue the process, by accepting the ending and main structure of a story, but inventing a beginning to account for it. Boccaccio expands the story of Troilus in the same way. Chaucer continued the process in *Troilus and Criseyde*. 'The end is every tales strengthe' as Pandarus and the rhetoricians say, but the poet has to lead up to the end.<sup>2</sup> In this process we may see part of the root of the novel's imitation of life, though the process is not in itself anti-traditional. It shows the learned secular poet taking more responsibility for his story. In this respect the influence of learned clerical poets, and of the whole Latin tradition, may

<sup>1</sup> Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, vol. i, pp. lxxiv-lxxxv; Zumthor, *op. cit.*, pp. 361-5.

<sup>2</sup> *TC*, II, 260.

be felt. An elaborate theory of the value and the instructiveness of poetry, deriving both from the ancients and from Christian theology, was elaborated in the Middle Ages in association with Latin, and may be found for instance in the work of Alanus de Insulis, known to Chaucer. Variations of this theory flourish in Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others.<sup>1</sup>

There is also in French poetry from early on a steady assertion of a truth claim.<sup>2</sup> It has been said that even in the twentieth century the older tellers of Irish folklore believe the marvel tales. Yet such belief is usually specialized, not part of everyday assumptions, and the Irish fairytales often end with a formula which disclaims responsibility—‘if there be a lie in it, be it so! It is not I who made or invented it!’<sup>3</sup>

The English tale-rhyme romances frequently assert their truth, and Chaucer tells the parody ‘Sir Thopas’ *verrayment*—a word he does not use elsewhere—and follows ‘Sir Thopas’ with the discussion of the relation of variable words to *sooth* in ‘The Prologue’ to ‘Melibee’ already mentioned.

The desire for intelligibility and coherence, the greater sense of responsibility of the learned poet, the ambivalent truth claim, all accompany or cause a greater self-awareness in the poet. Much early narrative is introduced by the first-person pronoun. The history of the first-person poem or similar work can be traced back to the third millennium B.C. It occurs amongst the earliest records of our own culture in Genesis 37, perhaps written down in the fifth century B.C. It is significantly associated with dream and vision, which are incontestably events in our lives, yet incontestably subjective, and always the subject of speculation. Medieval poets personalized the dream-vision and made it an extraordinarily useful vehicle, from the twelfth century onwards, for the new feeling about love, also intensely significant and subjective. One of the fundamental activities of all literature is to externalize our inner life, thereby to test it, and share it, and so give it a validity beyond the merely individual. Fourteenth-century dream poems began to develop in a special way what I have called the fourth centre of validating originality, that of the poet’s own personal feelings. Machaut, particularly in his last poem, *Le Voir Dit*, appears to approach genuine autobiography, thus reuniting with narrative some of the inner expressivity of the lyric, and yet also reaching

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brewer, ‘Gothic Chaucer’, *WBC*, p. 7; Curtius, *op. cit.*, pp. 214 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Zumthor, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–16.

<sup>3</sup> Delargy, *art. cit.*, p. 194.

out directly into the actual world. Professor Kane<sup>1</sup> has established beyond question some degree of actual, if unmeasurable, degree of autobiographical content in the references by Chaucer and Langland to themselves in their poems, which are in ambiguous relationship with their fictional self-representation.

Chaucer uses traditional forms to enable him to respond with unusual fullness to such developments. He positively seeks both the traditional and the new. He imitates the popular storyteller by refusing to take responsibility for the tale, not only in 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women* but even in 'The Prologue' to 'The Miller's Tale' (*CT.* I, 3167-86) where he clearly has a reader in mind. The older he grows the less he suggests even those hints of personal expressivity found in earlier poems written under the influence of Machaut, and the more he poses as an old-fashioned traditional storyteller, the climax being his own telling of that drasty rhyme 'Sir Thopas', where he represents the traditional gestour, disour, or minstrel whom he must have heard in youth declaiming the English romances. From this point of view Chaucer is the last of the English minstrels who walked wide over the land, whose tone he had early caught, and whose modesty and deference to his audience he adopts, in such contrast to the vatic aura of the traditional primitive court-poet, as in Ireland,<sup>2</sup> or the official didacticism of some medieval Latin poets, or Dante's authority, or Petrarch's avid desire for personal fame as a sage, or Neoclassical claims of the poet's moral and intellectual supremacy. The personal modesty is also to be taken at face value, provided it is not confused with the lack of self-confidence.

Yet the use of traditional tales and forms paradoxically allowed Chaucer to insert into his tales that extraordinary amount of scientific, historical, philosophical, and rhetorical comment which reflects the new desire for intelligibility and comparison with the non-verbal world of actual experience. He also inserted, in various ways, the description of himself which is essentially the product of the new literary and intellectual forces, and which connects the poems with the world of actual experience.

<sup>1</sup> G. Kane, *The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies*, Chambers Memorial Lecture, University College of London, H. K. Lewis & Co. Ltd., London, 1965, p. 17: 'it is almost certain that the dreamers and narrators of Chaucer and Langland are not fictions in any total sense; that they do mirror to some extent the actual men who created them'.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'The court poet in medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lvii, 1971.

There is some variation in his practice. At first, in *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, he follows Machaut and others and specifically includes himself within the action, thus establishing a real, though equivocal, relationship with the world outside the poem, which thus, through the poet, exerts a pull of validating originality. He slightly characterizes himself as a dull man within the poem, which is obviously absurd. He thus both does and does not extend the autobiographical and expressive interest that was developing among his immediate French predecessors.

In *Troilus and Criseyde* the situation is different. The poet is not within the fiction, nor does he describe himself. Nevertheless, he dramatizes himself as a teller of the story. The effect is to project with greater vigour the varying and to some extent mutually inconsistent successive limited contexts of the narration. The notion of the Narrator, developed by many critics after Professor Donaldson,<sup>1</sup> has helped to reveal the dramatized telling and the multiplicity of points of view in *Troilus and Criseyde*. But the notion that the Narrator represents actually and deliberately bad, or paradoxically bad, poetry in the poem, as a technical device, is unconvincing, because there are no signals beyond the often disputable suggestion that the poetry is bad. There are undoubtedly flaccid or awkward passages in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but there is no evidence that they are intentionally bad, which would be absurd, or parodic. Nor are they directly the subject of a theory of poetic, since good or bad poetry may be produced by the same poetic, as by the same poet. *Troilus and Criseyde* exists first on a literal narrative level of the poet telling a story in terms of direct address to an acknowledged audience, whom we join and who must take at face value at least the beginning and the ending of the poem, though recognizing the rapid changes of tone. Chaucer then takes advantage of the pre-existence of the story, and of the varieties of narrative element provided by traditional forms, to treat the story partly as an independent entity, as a popular storyteller might. But he also represents himself as intensely engaged with, and moved by, the story, in several different ways. Popular tellers are also moved by the stories they tell, but Chaucer's involvement is personal, historical, to some extent responsible, partly contradictory, and ultimately ambiguous. The basic unity of the poem resides in the sequence of events,

<sup>1</sup> E. T. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-12, 65-101.

not in the multiplicity of comment and reaction that it gives rise to, first in the poet, then in his readers. But much of the richness of the poem lies in this poetic representation of the poet's own dramatic attitudes to the story, which make a sequence of vertical contexts. If the poem is about the poet's responses to the variety of events that constitute the story, there is no need to seek a unity within the variety of his presented feelings, attitudes, or judgements. Their variety is allowed by the limitations of the contexts of traditional narrative, and held together metonymically by the chain of events, which carry us through a living process of response where change is natural. Process is as important as product. From this variety may be ultimately sifted out a general view, but it will be complex, and must contain elements whose incompatibility is hard to resolve.

In 'The Prologue' to *The Legend of Good Women* and in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer once more introduces himself. His comments, made within the poem, about himself outside the poem, must sometimes be taken at face value, for example when he gives lists of his works. He thus increases that uncertainty of perspective and of the limits of the containing frame, increases the mixing and fluidity of forms, the combination of learned and popular; in a word, he increases that *ambiguity* of relationship between art and 'life', which characterizes so much Gothic art, and entitles us to call Chaucer a Gothic poet.

When the poet describes himself as a 'dull man', as he does in 'The Squire's Tale', or says that 'The Tale of Sir Thopas' is the best rhyme he knows, these seem to be examples of the only kind of self-description in Chaucer's poetry that we cannot take at face value. Yet they have a special status since they refer to a character who is not in fact entirely fictitious. There is thus a tension, or interplay, between the fictional and non-fictional centres of validating originality. This tension exists, though not so strongly for us, in some of the other character descriptions of 'The General Prologue'. Manly's work of historical identification is somewhat out of fashion nowadays, but there can be no doubt that some of the characters described in 'The General Prologue' refer, however problematically, to real people, and the purely self-contained, self-referring nature of the poem cannot be maintained.<sup>1</sup> What is peculiar is that

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Manly, *New Light on Chaucer*, Henry Holt Company, 1926, repr. Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1959.

the reference outside the poem may be false, as with Chaucer's dullness. The reason for this is that references outside the poem are apparently always satirical, even if only self-satirical. In satire, the ideal is asserted, at the cost of the real person or object in the world. So that in satire Chaucer still in a sense maintains the dominance of the internal reference over the external.

One example will show how equivocal this dominance is; the portrait of the beautiful lady, who is always the same; this topos absorbs the reality of the Duchess Blanche. The same formula is applied to Alisoun, the wanton village carpenter's wife.<sup>1</sup> The joke is against her. To take one detail: to praise a girl because she is clean, and thus as shiny as a new coin, is evidently comic. It is the more comic in the vertical context of the traditional topos, which is the main context, since the description contributes almost nothing to the horizontal context. There would be little joke without the vertical context, the traditional self-referring topos. Nevertheless, Alisoun is not, like Blanche, entirely absorbed within the topos. That is the whole point. She does not fit. Hence the joke. But in order to make the joke, a competing centre of originating reality has been set up, that of ordinary life, and it pulls against the internal centre. The parody allows the tradition to continue to function with new subject-matter, and so to triumph still. But it is a Pyrrhic victory.

We find ourselves again in an area that might have been designated by our great Neoclassical empiricist, Samuel Johnson, as that where there is always an appeal open from literature to ordinary experience, and, as always, there is a tension between the two.

Chaucer appears to be peculiarly conscious of such tension, and to exploit it, especially in *The Canterbury Tales*. 'The Clerk's Tale of Griselda' is an outstanding example where the realism of his telling of an implausible traditional tale creates an almost intolerable tension. This itself is high virtuosity and it is released by the extraordinary technical virtuosity of the Envoy, totally ambiguous as to fictional status and speaker, breaking every Neoclassical rule of decorum, unity, and frame one can think of.

He exploits the same tension in the variably dramatic propriety of the tales as spoken by their tellers. The

<sup>1</sup> D. S. Brewer, 'The ideal of feminine beauty', *The Modern Language Review* 50 (1955), pp. 257-69.



elegant, patronizing, rhetorically rich 'Miller's Tale' is put in the mouth of a coarse uneducated man. The limited range of context allows Chaucer to put a long speech on true *gentillesse*, undoubtedly to be taken at face value, in the middle of the 'Tale' by the Wife of Bath whose character and expressed opinions are far different. There is no need to reconcile the inconsistency by elaborate naturalistic theories. The confessions of the Wife of Bath, Pardoner, and Canon's Yeoman similarly move between life and literature, defying any purely naturalistic interpretation, and not calling for any elaborate over-all reconciliation, though in limited local contexts they are sufficiently naturalistic to justify many critical insights based on naturalistic premisses.

The tension between literature and life need not be represented as a struggle, though it often leads to paradox. In certain respects it can be represented as the continual effort of literature to absorb life, to hold and fix it, merely moving from traditional methods to newer ones. The parodic use of ancient *topoi* pours new wine into old bottles. Sometimes the bottles break, but the wine is not lost. The reaching out of Chaucer's poetry into new areas is also demonstrated by the great number of new words in his vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that he introduced such words into English in the sense that he personally invented or naturalized them; but that they are first recorded in his works is significant of his literary absorption of the developing vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

In Chaucer's use of words, as in some other respects, an intense *literariness* of a rather modern kind is the cause, or effect, of his new realism, as of his new responsibility and intelligibility, all different from the traditional qualities he chose to imitate, or, sometimes, to pretend to imitate. Although he remarks on the possibilities of variation in 'The Prologue' to 'Melibee', Chaucer insists on the preservation of the detailed precision of his words and metrical forms in a way very unlike that of the truly oral poet, and here again we must take his meaning at face value. His success is marked by the fact that hardly any of his scribes 'participated' in the composition of his poems, apart from a few tiny scraps, as they certainly did with other English Gothic poetry,<sup>2</sup> adding, subtracting, or

<sup>1</sup> N. Davis, 'Chaucer and fourteenth-century English', *WBC*, pp. 58-84.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Piers Plowman, The A Version*, ed. G. Kane, The Athlone Press, University of London, 1960, pp. 126 ff., and J. Mills, *Six English Romances*, Dent, Everyman's Library, London, 1973, Introd., pp. xxvii ff.

changing the order of words and stanzas, taking part in the process of tradition. Even the revisions of *Troilus and Criseyde* that Chaucer pretty certainly made do not much affect the relative stability of the text, for all the carelessness of scribes, and for all Chaucer's own carelessness about certain kinds of naturalistic detail. Even when Chaucer uses 'oral-formulaic formulas' they are normally carefully placed; an imitation of oral delivery quite as much as an example of actual practice. In *The Canterbury Tales* particularly, but also in many aspects of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a reader is clearly envisaged who is likely to be concerned with the accuracy of the text. The accuracy of his text deeply concerned Chaucer;<sup>1</sup> and the implication of this seems to be that the face of the word must accord with its mind; the text must be true to itself. In this respect the development of Chaucer's literariness has moved far towards the precisions of Neoclassical principle and print culture, and away from the formulas of traditional culture.

It may well be that this sharper sense of literary precision, paradoxically balanced against the traditional and popular modes that he partly inherited and partly imitated, contributed to a final dismaying sense in Chaucer that secular fictions were not only incompatible with devotional writing, but that such sustained ambiguity was no longer tolerable. The 'Retracciouns' at the end of *The Canterbury Tales* must also be taken at face value. They are not ambiguous. They represent the non-fictional elements that had already appeared in the earlier fictions: they represent that new desire for intelligibility, responsibility, in the written word; they also represent most strongly the pull of what Chaucer thought of as the real world, and they represent the poet's own sincere, expressive, autobiographical view. They thus represent those third and fourth centres, as I have called them, which brought so much new life into traditional secular literature that eventually they overwhelmed the popular tradition, as happened in later centuries; and as Chaucer paradoxically forecasts when he denounces his own secular works in favour of a greater moral realism, which destroy literature in the name of that very unsatisfactory substitute, 'life'.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *TC.* v, ll. 270, 1793-9, and the poem 'Adam Sciveyn'; *CT.* 1, ll. 3176-7.