

The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

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The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*

Nec illud minus attendendum esse arbitror, utrum . . . magis secundum aliorum opinionem quam secundum propriam dixerint sententiam, sicut in plerisque Ecclesiastes dissonas diversorum inducit sententias, imo ut tumultuator interpretatur, beato in quarto dialogorum attestante Gregorio.

In my judgment it is no less necessary to decide whether sayings found [in the sacred writings and the Fathers] are quotations from the opinions of others rather than the writers' own authoritative pronouncements. On many topics the author of Ecclesiastes brings in so many conflicting proverbs that we have to take him as impersonating the tumult of the mob, as Gregory points out in his fourth *Dialogue*. Abelard

IN HIS MUCH praised book *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, Donald R. Howard has isolated a perennial strand in the Chaucer criticism of the last thirty years or more—isolated it, defined it clearly, and given it a name. Discussing the Knight's Tale, he remarks:

Chaucer . . . introduced a jocular and exaggerated element that seems to call the Knight's convictions into question. For example, while the two heroes are fighting he says "in this wise I let hem fighting dwelle" and turns his attention to Theseus:

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over all
The purveiaunce that God hath seen biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
The contrary of a thing by ye or nay,
Yet sometime it shall fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft within a thousand yeer.
For certainly, our appetites here,
Be it of wer, or pees, or hate, or love,
All is this ruled by the sight above.
This mene I now by mighty Theseus,
That for to hunten is so desirous,
And namely at the grete hert in May,
That in his bed there daweth him no day
That he nis clad, and redy for to ride

With hunt and horn and houndes him beside.
For in his hunting hath he swich delit
That it is all his joy and appetit
To been himself the grete hertes bane.
For after Mars he serveth now Diane.

(1663–1682)

All this machinery is intended to let us know that on a certain day Theseus took it in mind to go hunting. It is impossible not to see a mock-epic quality in such a passage, and hard not to conclude that its purpose is ironic, that it is meant to put us at a distance from the Knight's grandiose ideas of destiny and make us think about them. This humorous element in the Knight's Tale is the most controversial aspect of the tale: where one critic writes it off as an "antidote" to tragedy another puts it at the center of things, but no one denies it is there. It introduces a feature which we will experience in many a tale: we read the tale as a dramatic monologue spoken by its teller but understand that some of Chaucer's attitudes spill into it. This feature gives the tale an artistry which we cannot realistically attribute to the teller: I am going to call this *unimpersonated artistry*. In its simplest form it is the contingency that a tale not memorized but told impromptu is in verse. The artistry is the author's, though selected features of the pilgrim's dialect, argot, or manner may still be impersonated. In its more subtle uses it allows a gross or "low" character to use language, rhetoric, or wit above his capabilities. (Sometimes it is coupled with an impersonated *lack* of art, an artlessness or gaucherie which causes a character to tell a bad tale, as in *Sir Thopas*, or to violate literary conventions or proprieties, as in the Knight's Tale.) The effect is that of irony or parody, but this effect is Chaucer's accomplishment, not an impersonated skill for which the pilgrim who tells the tale deserves any compliments.¹

Having generated this principle, Howard goes on to apply it, at various points in the book, to the tales of the Miller, the Summoner, the Merchant, the Squire, and the Manciple. He is in

good and numerous company. One thinks of Charles Muscatine's characterization of certain central monologues in *Troilus*: "the speeches must be taken as impersonal comments on the action, Chaucer's formulation, not his characters'"; of Robert M. Jordan, who, having presented an impressive array of evidence for a complicated Merchant in the Merchant's Tale, argues from it, like Dryden's Panther, "that he's not there at all"; of Anne Middleton's exemption of selected passages of the Physician's Tale from the pilgrim's voicing; of Robert B. Burlin's praise of the Summoner's Tale despite its being "beyond the genius of the Summoner"; and of many other commentators on the Knight's Tale, some of whom I mention later.²

Now in my view this "unimpersonated artistry" is a problem, and a useful one. Howard's formulation—an attempt to describe an aspect of Chaucer's general practice—is valuable because it brings into the sharp relief of a critical and theoretical principle something that is more diffusely present in the practical criticism of a great many Chaucerians: the conviction, often unspoken, that at some point it becomes necessary to move beyond or away from the pilgrim narrators of the *Canterbury Tales* and to identify the poet himself as the source of meaning. If the assumption is stated this generally, I probably agree with it myself, but Howard's way of putting it does seem to me to reflect a tendency, common among Chaucer critics, to invoke the poet's authority much too quickly. Howard helps me to focus my own discontent, not with his criticism (much of which I admire), but with a more general situation in the profession at large. If we consider "unimpersonated artistry" as a theoretical proposition, it seems open to question on both general and specific grounds; that is, it seems both to imply a rather peculiar set of assumptions to bring to the reading of any text and, at least to me, to be an inaccurate reflection of the experience of reading Chaucer in particular.

"Unimpersonated artistry" implies a technique, or perhaps an experience, of reading something like this: we assume that the *Canterbury tales* are, as they say, "fitted to their tellers," that they are potentially dramatic monologues or, to adopt what I hope is a less loaded term, that they are instances of *impersonated* artistry, the utterances of particular pilgrims. After all,

we like to read Chaucer this way, to point out the suitability of the tales to their fictional tellers, and most of us, even Robert Jordan, would agree that at least some of the tales, and certainly the *Canterbury* frame, encourage this sort of interpretation.³ We read along, then, with this assumption in mind, until it seems to break down, until we come across a passage that we have difficulty reconciling with the sensibility—the temperament or the training or the intelligence—of the pilgrim in question. At that point, alas, I think we too often give up. "This passage," we say, "must be the work of Chaucer the poet, speaking over the head or from behind the mask of the Knight or the Miller or the Physician, creating ironies, setting us straight on doctrine, pointing us 'the righte weye.'" Unfortunately, these occasions are seldom as unequivocal as the one case of genuine broken impersonation I know of in the *Tales*, the general narrator's "quod she" in the middle of a stanza of the Prioress' Tale (vii.1771). Different critics find the poet in different passages of the same tale and often have great difficulty in deciphering his message once they *have* found him—a difficulty that seems odd if Chaucer thought the message worth a disruption of the fiction.

Thus, Howard, whose observations on the critical disagreement over the humorous element in the Knight's Tale are well taken, offers an interpretation of "The destinee, ministre general . . ." that is in fact uncommon. His account of the ironic tone of these lines in context is at least more attentive to the effect of the language than are the numerous readings that take the passage relatively straight. Even within this group, however, the range of proposed answers to the question "Who's talking here?" is sufficiently various to raise the issue I am interested in. To mention only those who discuss this particular passage, Frost, Ruggiers, and Kean are representative of the large body of criticism that remains relatively inattentive to the whole question of voicing in the tale.⁴ They share a view of the passage as a piece of "the poem's" doctrine, to be taken seriously as part of an argument about man's place in the cosmos. Of those who, like Howard, find something odd about the passage, Burlin suggests that the speaker is Chaucer, who intends to suggest by it that Theseus is a man superior to Fortune but unaware of Provi-

dence (p. 108), while Neuse, the only critic to attribute the speech unequivocally to the Knight, maintains that it differentiates the latter's implicitly Christian view of the story from Theseus' more limited vision.⁵ Who *is* talking here, and to what end? One might ask what the consequences for interpretation are if one concedes both that the passage makes gentle fun of the machinery of destiny, at least as applied to so trivial an event, and that it is the Knight himself who is interested in obtaining this effect. Howard's suggestion to the contrary, the passage is not really directed at Theseus' hunting but at the improbably fortuitous meeting in the glade of Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite, described in the lines that immediately follow (l.1683–713). This encounter is one of many features in the first half of the tale that show that most of the plot, far from being the product of portentous cosmic forces (Palamon and Arcite are consistently made to look silly for taking this view), is generated by human actions and choices, not least by those of the narrating Knight in conspicuously rigging events and manipulating coincidences. The Knight, as Neuse points out (p. 300), is adapting an "olde storie" for the present occasion, and the irony here reflects his opinion of the style of those "olde bookes." To him that style embodies a dangerous evasion of human responsibility for maintaining order in self and society by unconsciously projecting the responsibility onto gods and destinies.

The point is that a notion like "unimpersonated artistry," by dividing speakers into parts and denying them the full import of their speaking, puts us in the difficult position of trying to decide which parts of a single narrative are to be assigned to the pilgrim teller and which to the "author," and in these circumstances it is not surprising that different critics make the cut in different places. All such formulations involve finding or creating two speakers (or even more)⁶ in a narrative situation where it would appear simpler to deal with only one. The procedure seems to me theoretically questionable because it is unparsimonious or inelegant logically: it creates extra work, and it also tends to lead to distraction. Narrative entities are multiplied to the point where they become subjects of concern in their own right and require some sort of systematic or historical justification such as "unim-

personated artistry" or the deficiency of medieval ideas of personality,⁷ and before long we are so busy trying to save the appearances of the epic-cyclic constructs we ourselves have created that we are no longer attending to the poems that the constructs were originally intended to explain. Therefore, I would like to preface my more detailed opposition to "unimpersonated artistry" with a general caveat. I call it Leicester's razor: *narratores non multiplicandi sunt praeter absolutum necessitatem*.

Naturally I do not intend to let the matter rest with this general and essentially negative formula, though I think its application would clear up a lot of difficulties. I want to use the space my principle gives me to argue that the *Canterbury* tales are individually voiced, and radically so—that each of the tales is primarily an expression of its teller's personality and outlook as embodied in the unfolding "now" of the telling. I am aware that something like this idea is all too familiar. Going back, in modern times, at least as far as Kittredge's characterization of the *Canterbury Tales* as a "Human Comedy," with the pilgrims as *dramatis personae*, it reaches its high point in Lumiansky's *Of Sundry Folk*⁸ (and apparently its dead end as well, since no one since has attempted to apply the concept systematically to the entire poem). Moreover, as I said before, we are all given to this sort of reading now and then. I think one reason the idea has never been pushed so hard or so far as I would like to take it is that the voicing of individual tales has almost always been interpreted on the basis of something external to them, usually either some aspect of the historical background of the poems (e.g., what we know from other sources about knights, millers, lawyers, nuns, etc.) or the descriptions of the speakers given in the *Canterbury* frame, especially in the General Prologue. Such materials are combined in various ways to construct an image of a given pilgrim outside his or her tale, and each tale is then read as a product of the figure who tells it, a product whose interpretation is constrained by the limitations we conceive the pilgrim to have. The specific problem of historical presuppositions, the feeling that medieval men *could not* have thought or spoken in certain ways, I would like to postpone until later, because the assumptions involved are often relatively tacit and well

hidden and the problems they present are easier to handle in specific instances. It is clear, I hope, how such assumptions can lead to the kind of constraint on interpretation I have just outlined and how such a constraint puts us in danger of arguing from inference back to evidence, in Robert O. Payne's useful phrase,⁹ when what is desired is an understanding of the evidence—the text—in front of us.

It is the specific problem of the *Canterbury* frame, however, that has been the more stubborn obstacle to reading the tales as examples of impersonated artistry. Since I do not mean by this phrase what either the critics or the defenders of similar notions appear to have meant in the past, the topic is worth pausing over. The issue is generally joined over the question of verisimilitude, the consistency with which the fiction of the *Tales* can be felt to sustain a dramatic illusion of real people taking part in real and present interaction with one another. The critic who has most consistently taken this dramatic view of the poem is Lumiansky, who locates both the "reality" of the pilgrims and the "drama" of their relations with one another outside the tales themselves, preeminently in the frame. He ordinarily begins his discussion of a given tale and its dramatic context with a character sketch of the pilgrim drawn from the General Prologue (and from any relevant links) and then treats the tale itself as an exemplification and extension of the traits and situations in the frame. He is attentive to such details as direct addresses to the pilgrim audience within a tale (such as the Knight's "lat se now who shal the soper wyne") and to a degree to the ways tales respond to one another, as in Fragment III, or the Marriage Group. This approach leads to an account of the poem as a whole that doubles the overt narrative of the frame and, in effect, allows the frame to tyrannize the individual tales: what does not fit the model of actual, preexisting pilgrims really present to one another is not relevant to the enterprise and is variously ignored or dismissed. Other critics have not been slow to point out that this procedure neglects a great deal.¹⁰

The objection to this "dramatic" model that I would particularly like to single out is its disregard for the poem's insistent, though perhaps intermittent, *textuality*, for the way the work

repeatedly breaks the fiction of spoken discourse and the illusion of the frame to call attention to itself as a written thing. The injunction in the Miller's Prologue to "turne over the leef and chese another tale" (l.3177), the more interesting moment in the Knight's Tale when the supposedly oral narrator remarks, "But of that storie list me nat to write" (l.1201)¹¹—such interruptions not only destroy "verisimilitude" but call attention to what Howard has named the "bookness" of the poem (*Idea*, pp. 63–67), as do, less vibrantly, incipits and explicits, the patently incomplete state of the text, or "the contingency that a tale not memorized but told impromptu is in verse." Now this conspicuous textuality (by which I mean that Chaucer not only produces written texts but does so self-consciously and calls attention to his writing) certainly militates strongly against the illusion of drama as living presence. It is no doubt this realization, coupled with the counterperception that some tales do seem "fitted to the teller," that has led Howard and others to adopt formulations like "unimpersonated artistry" in order to stay responsive to the apparent range of the poem's effects. Such a notion allows the critic to hover between "bookness," which the French have taught us always implies *absence*, and what Howard calls "voiceness": the *presence* we feel when "the author addresses us directly and himself rehearses tales told aloud by others: we seem to hear his and the pilgrim's voices, we presume oral delivery" (*Idea*, p. 66). If we cannot have presence fully, we can at least have it partly. But when and where exactly and, above all, *whose*? As I have tried to suggest, a phenomenon like "unimpersonated artistry"—which is, remember, an *intermittent* phenomenon—tries to save the feeling that someone is present at the cost of rendering us permanently uncertain about who is speaking at any given moment in (or of) the text: the pilgrim, the poet, or that interesting mediate entity Chaucer the pilgrim.

It seems to me that the "roadside-drama" approach, the critiques of this approach, and compromise positions (whether explicitly worked out like Howard's or more intuitive) have in common a central confusion: the confusion of *voice* with *presence*.¹² All these views demand that the voice in a text be traceable to a person, a subject, *behind* the language, an individual

controlling and limiting, and thereby guaranteeing, the meaning of what is expressed. The language of a given tale, or indeed of a given moment in a tale, is thus the end point of the speaker's activity, the point at which the speaker delivers a self that existed prior to the text. For this reason all these approaches keep circling back to the ambiguous traces of such an external subject—in the frame, in the poet, in the facts of history, or in the “medieval mind.” But what I mean by “impersonated artistry” does not involve an external subject.

In maintaining that the *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of individually voiced texts, I want rather to *begin* with the fact of their textuality, to insist that there is nobody there, that there is only the text. But if a written text implies and enforces the absence of the subject, the real living person outside the text who may or may not have “expressed himself” in producing it, the same absence is emphatically *not* true of the voice *in* the text, the voice *of* the text. In writing, voice is first of all a function not of persons but of language, of the linguistic codes and conventions that make it *possible* for an “I” to appear.¹³ But this possibility means that we can assign an “I” to any statement. Language is positional. It always states or implies a first person in potential dramatic relation to the other grammatical persons, and it does so structurally—qua language—and regardless of the presence or absence of any actual speaking person. Thus, by its nature as a linguistic phenomenon, any text generates what it is conventional to call its speaker. The speaker is created by the text itself as a structure of linguistic relationships, and the character of the speaker is a function of the specific deployment of those relationships in a particular case to produce the voice of the text.

This kind of “voiceness” is a property of any text, and it is therefore theoretically possible to read any text in a way that elicits its particular voice, its individual first person. Such a reading would, for example, try to attend consistently to the “I” of the text, expressed or implied, and would make the referential aspects of the discourse functions of the “I.” To put it another way, a voice-oriented reading would treat the second and third persons of a discourse (respectively, the audience and the world), expressed or implied, primarily as indications of

what the speaker *maintains* about audience and world and would examine the way these elements are reflexively constituted as evidence of the speaker's character. We would ask what sort of person notices these particular details rather than others, what sort of person conceives of an audience in such a way that he or she addresses it in this particular tone, and so forth.

One might conceive of a study that undertook to work out a poetics of the speaker in literature. It would be a classic structuralist enterprise, moving from linguistic structures to a systematic demonstration of how it is possible for literary speakers to have the meanings they do. But since I do not believe, for reasons I will not go into here,¹⁴ that such an enterprise would succeed, and since in any case it is not where my interests lie, I would like to move back to Chaucer by way of a further distinction. While any text can be read in a way that elicits its voice, some texts actively engage the phenomenon of voice, exploit it, make it the center of their discourse—make it their content. A text of this sort can be said to be *about* its speaker, and this is the sort of text I contend that the *Canterbury Tales* is and especially the sort that the individual tales are. The tales are examples of impersonated artistry because they concentrate not on the way pre-existing people create language but on the way language creates people.¹⁵ They detail how what someone says “im-personates” him or her, that is, turns the speaker into a person, or better, a personality (I prefer this word to “person” because “personality” suggests something that acts like, rather than “is,” a person). What this implies for the concrete interpretation of the poem is that the relation that I have been questioning between the tales and the frame, or between the tales and their historical or social background, needs to be reversed. The voicing of any tale, the personality of any pilgrim, is not *given* in advance by the prologue portrait or the facts of history, nor is it dependent on them. The personality has to be worked out by analyzing and defining the voice created by each tale. It is this personality in the foreground, in his or her intensive and detailed textual life, that supplies a guide to the weighting of details and emphasis, the *interpretation*, of the background, whether portrait or history. To say, for example, that the Miller's Tale is not “fitted to its teller” because it is “too

good" for him, because a miller or the Miller would not be educated enough or intelligent enough to produce it, is to move in exactly the wrong direction. In fact, it is just this sort of social typing that irritates and troubles the Miller himself, especially since both the Host and the general narrator social-typed him long before any Chaucer critic did (1.3128–31, 3167–69, 3182). The characters in his tale repeatedly indulge in social typing, and the Miller types several of them in this way.¹⁶ The Miller's handling of this practice makes it an issue in the tale, something he has opinions and feelings about. The end of the tale makes it quite clear how the maimed, uncomfortably sympathetic carpenter is sacrificed to the mirth of the townsfolk and the pilgrims; he is shouted down by the class solidarity of Nicholas' brethren: "For every clerk anonright heeld with oother" (1.3847). One could go on to show how the Miller's sensibility in the tale retrospectively and decisively inflects the portrait of him in the General Prologue, making it something quite different from what it appears to be in prospect, but the same point can be suggested more economically with the Physician. When we read in the Prologue that "His studie was but litel on the Bible" (1.438), the line sounds condemnatory in an absolute, moral way. Reconsidered from the perspective of the tale, however, the detail takes on a new and more intensive individual life in the light of the Physician's singularly inept use of the exemplum of Jephthah's daughter (vi.238–50). Retrospectively the poet's comment characterizes a man of irreproachable if conventional morality whose profession channels his reading into medical texts rather than sacred ones and who uses such biblical knowledge as he has for pathetic effect at the expense of narrative consistency: he forgets, or at any rate suppresses, that Jephthah's daughter asked for time to bewail her virginity, whereas Virginia is being killed to preserve hers. The situation in the tale is a good deal more complex than this, but I think the general point is clear enough: it is the tale that specifies the portrait, not the other way around.

The technique of impersonation as I am considering it here has no necessary connection whatever with the question of the integration of a given tale in the Canterbury frame. The

Knight's mention of writing in his tale is indeed an anomalous detail in the context of the pilgrimage. It is often regarded as a sign of the incomplete revision of the (hypothetical) "Palamon and Arcite," supposedly written before Chaucer had the idea of the *Tales* and afterward inserted in its present position in Fragment 1. The reference to writing is taken as evidence that the Knight was not the "original" speaker and, in a reading like Howard's, that he is still not always the speaker.¹⁷ As far as it goes, the argument about the chronology of composition is doubtless valid, but it has nothing to do with the question of whether or not the tale is impersonated, a question that can, and ought to, be separated, at least initially, from the fiction of the pilgrimage. Details like the Knight's "write" are not immediately relevant because they do not affect the intention to create a speaker (they may become relevant at a different level of analysis later). Impersonation, the controlled use of voicing to direct us to what a narrative tells us about its narrator, *precedes dramatization of the Canterbury sort* in Chaucer, analytically and no doubt sometimes chronologically. The proper method is to ascribe the entire narration in all its details to a *single* speaker (on the authority of Leicester's razor) and to use it as evidence in constructing that speaker's consciousness, keeping the question of the speaker's "identity" open until the analysis is complete. It is convenient and harmless to accept the frame's statement that the Knight's Tale is "the tale the Knight tells" as long as we recognize that it merely gives us something to call the speaker and tells us nothing reliable about him in advance.

I want to conclude an already perverse argument with a further perversity. I have argued that we ought to reverse the ordinary common-sense approach to the relations between foreground and background in the poem and see the pilgrims as the products rather than as the producers of their tales. I have suggested further that Chaucer's fiction may explain, rather than be explained by, the facts of fourteenth-century social history. I now want to maintain that the poet is the creation rather than the creator of his poem. More perversely still, I want to put a nick in my own razor and reintroduce a version of the double narrator in Chaucer. I do this in order to question a notion more widespread and

apparently more durable than the various versions of "unimpersonated artistry," the notion of Chaucer the pilgrim. I must admit to being less sure of my ground here. For one thing, I am challenging an idea first put forward by E. Talbot Donaldson,¹⁸ who has for years been producing the best line-by-line interpretations of Chaucer that I know, using what amounts to the very technique of reading I have been urging here.

Nevertheless, it seems clear on the face of it that issues of the sort I have been discussing are raised by the notion of Chaucer the pilgrim, the naïve narrator of the General Prologue and the links, who so often misses the point of the complex phenomena he describes in order that Chaucer the satirist or the poet or the man can make sure *we* see how very complex they are. The idea leads to a multiplication of speakers of the same text, not serially (though some critics have considered this possibility too),¹⁹ but simultaneously. It requires that in any given passage we first decide what Chaucer the pilgrim means by what he says and then what Chaucer the poet means by what the pilgrim means. Here, too, there is often confusion about the distinction between the voice of the text and a presence behind and beyond it who somehow guarantees the meaning we find there.²⁰ Descriptions of Chaucer the poet sometimes take on a distinctly metaphysical cast, as in this passage from Donaldson's *Speaking of Chaucer*:

Undoubtedly Chaucer the man would, like his fictional representative, have found [the Prioress] charming and looked on her with affection. To have got on so well in so changeable a world Chaucer must have got on well with the people in it, and it is doubtful that one may get on with people merely by pretending to like them: one's heart has to be in it. But the third entity, Chaucer the poet, operates in a realm which is above and subsumes those in which Chaucer the man and Chaucer the pilgrim have their being. In this realm prioresses may be simultaneously evaluated as marvellously amiable ladies and as prioresses. (p. 11)

But the "higher realm" Donaldson is talking about is and can only be the *poem*, the text—as he himself knows perfectly well—and Chaucer the poet can only be what I have been calling

the voice of the text. Donaldson is, as always, attentive to what the text *says* here, in particular to the tensions among social, human, and moral elements that the General Prologue undeniably displays. The division of the speaker into pilgrim, man, and poet is a way of registering these tensions and their complexity, of suggesting "a vision of the social world imposed on one of the moral world" (p. 9), and I can have no objection to this aim. I do not see the need, however, to reify these tensions into separate personalities of the same speaker, and I think this way of talking about the narrator of the General Prologue is misleading because it encourages us to treat him *as if we knew who he was* apart from his utterances. The general personality traits of Chaucer the pilgrim have themselves become reified in the Chaucer criticism of the last twenty years, and this frozen concept of the character has fostered a carelessness in reading that Donaldson himself rarely commits.

If I were going to try to characterize the speaker of the General Prologue myself, I would follow the lead of John M. Major in calling him, not naïve, but extraordinarily sophisticated.²¹ I doubt, however, that this characterization, even if accepted, would go very far toward solving the problems of the poem, because it still does not tell us much about who the speaker is, and that is what we want to know. The notion of Chaucer the pilgrim at least offers us an *homme moyen sensuel* with whom we can feel we know where we are, but I think that it is just this sense of knowing where we are, with whom we are dealing, that the General Prologue deliberately and calculatedly denies us. For a brief suggestion of this intention—which is all I can offer here—consider these lines from the Monk's portrait, a notorious locus for the naïveté of the narrator:

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees,—
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
But thilke texte heeld he nat worth an oystre;
And I seyde his opinion was good.
What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure.
Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?

Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!
 Therfore he was a prikasour aright . . .

(l.177–89)

The Monk's own bluff manner is present in these lines. I agree with most commentators that he is being half-quoted, that we hear his style, for example, in the turn of a phrase like "nat worth an oystre!" Present too are the standards of his calling, against which, if we will, he may be measured. The social and moral worlds do indeed display their tension here, but who brought these issues up? Who is responsible for the slightly suspended enjambment that turns "As Austyn bit?" into a small firecracker? For the wicked specificity with which, at the beginning of the portrait, the Monk's bridle is said to jingle "as dooth the chapel belle"? Who goes to such pains to explain the precise application of the proverb about the fish, "This is to seyn . . ."? Who if not the speaker? But these observations do not permit us to say that he is *only* making a moral judgment or only making fun of the Monk (the two are not quite the same, and both are going on). A sense of the positive claims made by the pilgrim's vitality, his "manliness," is also registered by the portrait.²² The speaker's amused enjoyment of the Monk's forthright humanity is too patent to let us see him as just a moralist. The way his voice evokes complex possibilities of attitude is neatly caught by "And I seyde his opinion was good": that's what he said when he and the Monk had their conversation, but is he saying the same thing now in this portrait? Did he really mean it at the time? Does he now? In what sense?

The point of this exercise is not merely to show that the speaker's attitude is complex and sophisticated but also to stress how obliquely expressed it is, all in ironic juxtapositions and loaded words whose precise heft is hard to weigh. What we have, in fact, is a speaker who is not giving too much of himself away, who is not telling us, any more than he told the Monk, his whole mind in plain terms. The tensions among social, moral, and existential worlds are embodied in a single voice here, and they are embodied precisely *as tensions*, not as a resolution or a synthesis, for we cannot tell exactly what the speaker thinks either of the Monk or of conventional morality. What we *can* tell is that we

are dealing with a speaker who withholds himself from us, with the traces of a presence that asserts its simultaneous absence. The speaker is present as uncomprehended, as not to be seized all at once in his totality. He *displays his difference* from his externalizations, his speaking, in the very act of externalizing himself. It is this effect, I think, that creates the feeling of "reality" in the text, the sense that there is somebody there. In literature (as in life) the reality of characters is a function of their mystery, of the extent to which we are made to feel that there is more going on in regard to them than we know or can predict. Criseyde is a well-known and well-analyzed example in Chaucer,²³ and I suggest that the general narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* is another. His lack of definition may also explain why he can be taken for Chaucer the pilgrim. Because his identity is a function of what he leaves unspoken—because it is derived from implication, irony, innuendo, the potentialities of meaning and intention that occur in the gaps between observations drawn from radically different realms of discourse²⁴—there is a temptation to reduce his uncomfortable indeterminacy by forcing the gaps shut, by spelling out the connections. But suppressing the indeterminacy in this way involves reducing complex meanings to simpler ones. One infers "Chaucer the pilgrim" by ignoring the things the speaker "does not say" (since, after all, he does not *say* them—only suggests) and by insisting that he "means" his statements in only the plainest, most literal sense. Such an interpretation does not fail to recognize that the complexities of meaning are there; it simply assigns them to "the poem" or to "Chaucer the poet," thus producing what I am arguing is a contradiction: the simple and naïve narrator of a complex and sophisticated narration.

In fact, however, not only the General Prologue but the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* works against a quick or easy comprehension of the speaker. It is to suggest how it does so that I am going to reintroduce a sort of double narration. First of all, though, it should be clear that there is only one speaker of the entire poem and that he is also the poem's maker. The conspicuous textuality of the work makes this fact inescapable. It may be that Chaucer would have "corrected" anomalies like the Knight's "But of

that storie list me nat to write" and that he would have supplied a complete and self-consistent set of links between the present fragments to round out the *Canterbury* fiction. It seems much less likely that he would have revised the Man of Law's promise to tell his rime-royal tale in prose or the "quod she" in the middle of the Prioress' Tale or the "turne over the leef" passage in the Miller's Prologue or the inordinate and undramatic length of the Melibee. And I am quite certain that he would not have altered the fundamental "contingency that a tale not memorized but told impromptu is in verse." What is at issue here is not simply a neutral medium that we are entitled to ignore. If pentameter couplets are the *koiné* of the poem, stanzaic verse (especially rime royal but also the Monk's stanza and even Sir Thopas' tail rhyme) functions as a formal equivalent, a translation into writing, of a different level of diction: it identifies a speaker with pretensions to an elevated style, in life as well as in storytelling. If it is functional in the poem that one kind of verse be sensed as verse, why not other kinds, and prose as well? The poem's insistence on these distinctions has interesting implications for the problem of oral delivery. The *Canterbury Tales* is not written to be spoken as if it were a play. It is written to be read, but read *as if* it were spoken. The poem is a literary imitation of oral performance.²⁵

One effect of this fundamental textuality is to keep us constantly aware that the frame, the reportage, is a patent fiction. There is no pilgrimage, there are no pilgrims. Whether or not Chaucer ever went to Canterbury, whether or not the characters in the poem are drawn from "real life," what we have in front of us is the activity of a poet, a maker, giving his own rhythm and pattern, his own shape and voice, his own complex interpretation to the materials of the poem. And that maker *is the speaker of the poem*, the voice of the text. There is no one there but that voice, that text. The narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* is the speaker we call Chaucer the poet, though it would be more accurate—I cannot resist, this once—to call him Chaucer the poem.

This being said, it is also true that one of the first discoveries we make when we try to characterize this maker and speaker on the evidence of his discourse, to begin to specify the voice of

the text, is that he is an impersonator in the conventional sense: he puts fictional others between himself and us. This is the sense in which the tales are double-voiced: each of them is Chaucer impersonating a pilgrim, the narrator speaking in the voice of the Knight or the Reeve or the Second Nun. They are his creatures, voices that he assumes; he gives them his life.

But it would be as accurate, from another perspective, to say that he takes his life from them, and the amount of time and effort spent on making the pilgrims independent, the sheer labor of consistent, unbroken impersonation to which the poem testifies, suggests that this is the more compelling perspective, for Chaucer as for us. The enterprise of the poem involves the continual attempt, continually repeated, to see from another's point of view, to stretch and extend the self by learning to speak in the voices of others; and the poem itself is, among other things, the record of that attempt.

I have tried to evoke, however briefly, the incompleteness—the indeterminacy and the resistance to classification—of the voice that speaks in the General Prologue. One corollary of this quality is the cognate incompleteness of the Prologue itself, one of whose principal themes is the insufficiency of traditional social and moral classifying schemes—estates, hierarchies, and the like—to deal with the complexity of individuals and their relations. The speaker not only embodies this insufficiency, he recognizes it and feels it: "Also I prey yow to foryeve it me, / Al have I nat set folk in hir degree / Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde" (l.743–45). From this insufficiency he turns to the pilgrims. He sets them free to speak in part to free himself from the constraints and uncertainties generated by his own attempt to classify them—an attempt that, however universal and impersonal it may look at the beginning of the Prologue, is always only his view and one too complex for him to speak by himself. The Prologue does not do justice to the pilgrims. By the same token and for the same reasons it does not do justice to the narrator and his understanding of his world. In the tales, therefore, he slows us down, keeps us from grasping him too quickly and easily, by directing our attention to the variety and complexity of the roles he plays, the voices he assumes. He is, we know, each of the pilgrims

and all of them, but he seems to insist that we can only discover him by discovering for ourselves who the Knight is, who the Parson, who the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath.

We may be impatient to know the speaker of the General Prologue, but as the voice of the poem as a whole, he is the last of the pilgrims we may hope to comprehend, and then only by grasping each of the others individually and in turn and in all the complexity of their relationships to one another. The relation of the voice that speaks in the General Prologue to the personality of the poet is like that of an individual portrait to its tale and that of the Prologue itself to all the tales. It is a prologal voice, a voice

that is only beginning to speak. Chaucer's Prologue, like this prologue of mine, needs the tales to fulfill itself in the gradual and measured but always contingent and uncertain activity of impersonation, in both senses. The speaker of the *Canterbury Tales*—Chaucer—is indeed as fictional as the pilgrims, in the sense that like them he is a self-constructing voice. He practices what I have called the art of impersonation, finally, to impersonate himself, to create himself as fully as he can in his work.²⁶

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Notes

¹ Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 230–31.

² Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), pp. 264–65. In a more general statement on the *Canterbury Tales*, on pp. 171–72, Muscatine observes: "No medieval poet would have sacrificed all the rich technical means at his disposal merely to make a story sound as if such and such a character were actually telling it. The *Miller's Tale*, to name but one of many, would have been thus impossible." See also John Lawlor, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), Ch. vi. Jordan is, on theoretical and historical grounds, the most thoroughgoing and principled opponent of the notion of consistent impersonation in Chaucer's work. In this connection the book just cited deserves to be read in its entirety, as does Jordan's "Chaucer's Sense of Illusion: Roadside Drama Reconsidered," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 29 (1962), 19–33. Middleton, "The Physician's Tale and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamples Mo than Ten' in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973), 9–32. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 165. Elizabeth Salter's reading of the Knight's Tale, in *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1962), pp. 7–36, is perhaps the most consistently developed in terms of the "two voices" of the poet. See also Paul T. Thurston, *Artistic Ambivalence in Chaucer's Knight's Tale* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1968).

³ Howard states the position admirably (pp. 123–24). I suppose no one would question that the Wife of Bath's and Pardoner's tales virtually demand this approach.

⁴ William Frost, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale," *Review of English Studies*, 25 (1949),

290–304; Paul Ruggiers, "Some Philosophical Aspects of *The Knight's Tale*," *College English*, 14 (1958), 296–302; P. M. Kean, "The Knight's Tale," in her *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), II, 1–52.

⁵ Richard Neuse, "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 31 (1962), 312–13.

⁶ See, e.g., Jordan, *Shape of Creation*, p. 181, where what is apparently envisioned is Chaucer the poet projecting Chaucer the pilgrim as the (intermittent?) narrator of the Knight's story. For an instance of how far this sort of thing can go, see A. P. Campbell, "Chaucer's 'Retraction': Who Retracted What?" *Humanities Association Bulletin*, 16, No. 1 (1965), 75–87.

⁷ Jordan once again provides the clearest example of this historicist form of argument, but D. W. Robertson also uses it, e.g., in the Introduction to his *Chaucer's London* (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 1–11, where he both specifies and generalizes such statements in his *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962) as the following: "The actions of Duke Theseus in the Knight's Tale are thus, like the actions of the figures we see in the visual arts of the fourteenth century, symbolic actions. They are directed toward the establishment and maintenance of those traditional hierarchies which were dear to the medieval mind. They have nothing to do with 'psychology' or with 'character' in the modern sense, but are instead functions of attributes which are, in this instance, inherited from the traditions of medieval humanistic culture" (pp. 265–66; see also the discussion of the Friar's Tale that immediately follows). This whole line of argument probably originated with Leo Spitzer's "A Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors," *Traditio*, 4 (1946), 414–22. Spitzer's argument is drawn from particular textual investigations and is relatively

tentative about its conclusions. Judging from his remarks on Boccaccio, I am not at all sure that Spitzer would see Chaucer as a representative user of the "poetic 'I,'" but in any case I think his successors, unlike him, are arguing from "history" to texts, not the other way around. Spitzer's formulation has become fossilized in these Chaucerians.

⁸ G. L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1915), Ch. v; the famous phrases are on pp. 154–55. R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sundry Folk: The Dramatic Principle of the Canterbury Tales* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1955).

⁹ Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 3.

¹⁰ Jordan is particularly good at evoking the element of "the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines" that often finds its way into this sort of interpretation; see "Roadside Drama," esp. pp. 24–26.

¹¹ Quotations from Chaucer are from F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

¹² In what follows I ought to acknowledge a general obligation to the work of Jacques Derrida, perhaps more to its spirit than to any specific essay or formulation. For a representative discussion of the problem of presence and a typical critique of "logocentric metaphysics" see "Writing before the Letter," Pt. 1 of *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 1–93.

¹³ See Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Miami Linguistics Series, No. 8 (Coral Gables, Fla.: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971). Chapters xviii and xx are especially helpful, but the whole section (Chs. xviii–xxiii, pp. 195–248) is of value.

¹⁴ One might observe in passing that many "structuralist" discussions of voice in literature seem plagued by the same confusions as Chaucerian ones. See, e.g., Roland Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), where he remarks of the discourse of the traditional novel that it "alternates the personal and the impersonal very rapidly, often even in the course of the same sentence, so as to produce, if we can speak thus, a proprietary consciousness which retains the mastery of what it states without participating in it" (p. 140). There is not space here to deal with this extraordinary idea, but see Jonathan Culler's sympathetic and skeptical discussion of this notion and related ideas in *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 189–205.

¹⁵ There are a number of tales—the Prioress' is one and the Shipman's another—that suggest how this happens whether the speaker intends it or not.

¹⁶ E.g., "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle. / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle"; "What! thyng on God, as we doon, men that swynke"; "She was a prymerole,

a piggesnye, / For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (l.3299–300, 3491, 3268–70).

¹⁷ See Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 77–89.

¹⁸ Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 928–36; rpt. in his *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone, 1970). Howard discusses the topic in his "Chaucer the Man," *PMLA*, 80 (1965), 337–43.

¹⁹ See Rosemary Woolf, "Chaucer as a Satirist in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *Critical Quarterly*, 1 (1959), 150–57.

²⁰ I suspect that this confusion has to do with a natural desire on the part of critics to evade the feelings of contingency and responsibility that haunt the act of interpretation. If the voice of the text is assumed to be that of an external subject, one justifies what one reads out of the text on the authority of a poet who must have "meant" to put it in. See Donaldson's brilliant and humane critique of stemma editing on similar grounds in "The Psychology of Editors of Middle English Texts," *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 102–18.

²¹ See Major's valuable and neglected article "The Personality of Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 160–62.

²² See Jill Mann's excellent discussion in *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 17–37, esp. p. 20.

²³ See Arthur Mizener, "Character and Action in the Case of Criseyde," *PMLA*, 54 (1939), 65–81, and Robert P. apRoberts, "The Central Episode in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 373–85.

²⁴ This observation suggests that a paratactic style is particularly conducive to producing the kind of effect I am describing, because the information (syntax) that would specify the connection between statements is left out. See Erich Auerbach, "Roland against Ganelon," in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1953), pp. 83–107. Parataxis is one of the main descriptive techniques of the General Prologue, particularly noticeable in the three central portraits of the Shipman, the Physician, and the Wife of Bath, but widely employed throughout. Further, the structure of the Prologue itself is paratactic (composed of juxtaposed independent portraits), and so is that of the poem as a whole (composed of juxtaposed independent tales).

²⁵ I have neglected B. H. Bronson's criticisms of Chaucer the pilgrim and related matters (see esp. his *In Search of Chaucer* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1960], pp. 25–33), because my assumptions about the relations between literary and oral cultures in Chaucer's poetry start from a position very nearly opposite to his. I agree with him, however, that the problem of performance in Chaucer is worth further study; in fact, I think it is a central theme throughout the poet's career. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the frame exists precisely to provide a literary representation of the ordinarily extratextual and tacit dimensions of storytelling in writing. The poem presents not merely

stories but stories told to an audience that is part of the fiction, and this circumstance allows Chaucer to register the effects of a range of conditions of performance.

²⁶ In preparing this article, I was assisted by a grant

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