

only one in muddlement
and too much apathy
Onwards Christian soldiers
marching to and fro
without the slightest notion
where we ought to go.

Churches are used to getting knocked. If they get knocked it is because we all have some sense of what the Gospel might mean if it was actually operated in the world of today. There is a terrible tension between the Living Word and the way the Church actually thinks it has to live. It was Benjamin Franklin who once said: 'He who shall introduce into public affairs the principles of primitive Christianity will change the face of the world.'

If we are impatient with the Church—those of us who are its members—it is only because we sense what might be. A Christianity of poverty, of reconciliation, of loving enemies—national as well as personal—of self-judgement, of non-violence, of forgiveness, is a lever strong enough to move any boulder of hate or fear. In the Cathedral of Coventry, I once called the Church the sleeping Giant. So it largely still is. Cautious, conservative, thinking itself to be outside politics, much too friendly with Caesar, it nevertheless has the greatest potential.

The Value of Literature: I — Chaucer's language of forgiveness

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It would seem that literature these days is increasingly a matter of taste. We are helped, not to learn and practise discrimination between the good and the bad, but to buy and consume according to our 'special interest'. We ask of a play or novel, not whether it will sharpen our understanding, nor whether it may damage our sensibilities, but that it should appeal. It has not always been so. When Chaucer chose to take his leave of the reader at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* with a formal apology—though no mere formality—for the 'translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees'¹ it was precisely their appeal for which he sought to make amends.

The recognition of the power of stories to shape character, and to shape language, has led to the Tradition, a canon judged worthy of study and constitutive of our culture. That Tradition is now under attack. Where it has not already been dismissed as irrelevant, it is rejected as 'elitist', a snub too hastily dismissive of Leavis' wish for 'an English School ... designed for an elite'² Literature, has even been deemed the creation of a powerful, wicked literary institution in which the universities are prime movers. Terry Eagleton has argued in his book *Literary Theory* that

literary criticism cannot justify its self-limiting to certain works by an appeal to their 'value' (because) that criticism is part of a literary institution which constitutes these works as valuable in the first place. ... Shakespeare was not great literature lying conveniently to hand, which the literary institution then happily discovered: he is great literature because the institution constitutes him as such³.

It is clear that we have lost sight of the value of literature; most people no longer know why certain works have been thought to foster virtue or pander to our vices. This occasional series of articles is offered in response to such confusion; it is offered as a defence of literature. In each the work of an author from the traditional canon will be assessed in order to reveal particular reasons why we, as Christians, should value it. As Eliot maintained, 'literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint'⁴, though it may also be true that literature will explore weaknesses within that chosen standpoint. The method will not be to range widely over a given theme, or to offer the last word; rather, certain quotations will be analysed in detail and put forward as exemplary. Later articles will turn to Shakespeare and Tennyson; this first looks at Chaucer. It begins by examining how we blame and accuse each other, by attending closely to the language of condemnation; the article then proceeds to show how in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* such language is acknowledged, while in that acknowledgement Chaucer invites us to a common forgiveness.

For an example of the way in which accusation moves, I hope that I may be forgiven for looking at the arguments of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory*. Not only does the wicked university adore a baby it has foisted upon us; it batters the baby as well: 'texts are hermetically sealed from history, subjected to a sterile critical formalism, piously swaddled with eternal verities and used to confirm prejudices which any moderately enlightened student can perceive to be objectionable' (p. 217). These are forceful, if vituperative, statements condemning the universities, though the precise charge is hard to find and hold on to. The prejudices are not detailed; any possible qualifications are brushed aside by the onward pace of the syntax. What matters is the guilt of the

accused and our speedy compliance with the judgement. Or consider the following:

The impotence of liberal humanism is a symptom of its essentially contradictory relationship to modern capitalism. For although it forms part of the 'official' ideology of such society, and the 'humanities' exist to reproduce it, the social order within which it exists has in one sense very little time for it all. Who is concerned with the uniqueness of the individual, the imperishable truths of the human condition or the sensuous texture of lived experience in the Foreign Office or the boardroom of Standard Oil? Capitalism's reverential hat-tipping to the arts is obvious hypocrisy, except when it can hang them on its walls as a sound investment. Yet capitalist states have continued to direct funds into higher education humanities departments, and though such departments are usually the first in line for savage cutting when capitalism enters on one of its periodic crises, it is doubtful that it is only hypocrisy, a fear of appearing in its true philistine colours, which compels this grudging support. The truth is that liberal humanism is at once largely ineffectual, and the best ideology of the 'human' that present bourgeois society can muster.'
(pp. 199—200).

What makes some claim to cool analysis in the opening sentence, by choice of the professional and medical 'symptom', the abstract term 'essentially contradictory relationship' (just what is essential about this contradiction?), veers through the subsequent rhetorical question into bluster. It can hardly be that no-one who works in the Foreign Office *ever* evinces this kind of concern for another human being, nor that such care is *always* put aside on entering the doors of Whitehall, attempt though we do to compartmentalise, and departmentalise, our lives! We may of course have good reason to share the author's profound disgust with liberal humanism and capitalism. (In fact I should argue that we have excellent reasons.) But it is far from clear just how 'obvious' the hypocrisy is of the men at Standard Oil, far from clear who are the people for whom it is obvious. Civil servants and business-men delight in music, opera and the stage, and there is nothing to suggest that their delight is mere pretence. If it is claimed that they cannot really value or understand it, because, if they did, they would no longer engage in capitalism, then such a claim ignores the gap between knowledge and virtue, the twists and turns of conscience, our *akrasia*. Not every artist has been graced with the temperament of Fra Angelico; nor should it be expected of every spectator; and the ambiguous relationship between an artist's work and morals is to be teased out, as it is in Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi*. Christianity might suggest that hypocrisy is obvious to

others, but not to those who practise it, as in the parable of the beam and mote; but if that is so, then the author's tone of total condemnation lacks self-criticism, the proper modesty of one who may himself be blinded from his faults. That 'obvious' is there to push the reader, to browbeat him or her into agreement.

It is important for this way of talking and accusing to limit the grey areas of moral choice and moral discourse; and that in turn renders it necessary to simplify the world in which such decisions and conversations occur. In case the greys, the shades of right and wrong, will not sufficiently pick out this person, or this group, as guilty, the writer has recourse to reductive phrases of the kind, 'The truth is that ...'. If you are a reader of *Literary Theory* I would warn you to look among much that is apt (and funny) for phrases like 'The true reason why ...' (p. 199), or 'To think of literature as the Formalists do is really to think of all literature as poetry' (p. 6), or, 'The present crisis ... is at root ...' (p. 214). At all costs we are urged to see the world in black-and-white, and thus to pick out the enemies for condemnation.

The all-too-human desire to condemn is one which Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* acknowledges and seeks to remedy without denunciation. Chaucer allows us to see how condemnation fuels violence, a vicious, if often funny, circle of requital both in the stories told and among the story-tellers as they jockey for position. Thus Jankyn berates the Wife of Bath with his sententious accounts of the aptly-named Symplicius Gallus, who left his wife 'for terme of al his lyf' simply because she was seen bare-headed at the door, tales of Lyvia and Lucye. The reward for such moralising with its once-and-for-all punishment is that the Wife of Bath seizes the book that Jankyn is reading from, tears out the pages, and punches him. Battle ensues and, momentarily floored, the Wife tricks her husband:

'O! hastow slayn me, false thief?' I seyde,
'And for my land thus hastow mordred me?'

Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee'. (III. 800—802)

She deceives him; he apologises and begs forgiveness; lured within range he is soundly and suddenly trounced! And fittingly, what deceives him are words that belong to the black-and-white world of his story-telling. The Wife may come from Bath, but her lines are hackneyed, as is betrayed by the break in rhythm when she switches gleefully to the audience at 'I seyde'. Simplistic accusation leads to violence and a foolish credulity in the accuser.

In treating such a theme, Chaucer is able to evaluate and implicitly criticise the language of sin and guilt. Such conventional language stands at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, in the Parson's Tale, but we reach it only when we have completed stories that sound out its limitations. The Parson, forthright and uncompromising, confident in his ability to

classify human behaviour, quotes the authorities:

For trust wel, 'he shal yeven acountes,' as seith Seint Bernard,
'of alle the goodes that han be yeven hym in this present lyf,
and how he hath hem despended; in so muche that ther shal
nat perisse an heer of his heed, ne a moment of an houre ne
shal nat perisse of his tyme, that he ne shal yeve of it a
rekenyng'.

(X. 252—3)

But by the time the Parson begins to preach, Chaucer has explored the inadequacies of this language by questioning our ability to give a 'reckoning' of the world around us, and of our own actions, our self-knowledge. He has shown us as all too keen to keep accounts, but none too successfully. In the Prologue to the Parson's Tale the narrator plays with that keenness as he sets his disclaimers besides the precision of the figures in his calculation:

By that the Maunciple hadde his tale al ended,
The sonne fro the south lyne was descended
So lowe that he nas nat, to my sighte,
Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte.
Foure of the clokke it was tho, as I gesse,
For ellevene foot, or litel moore or lesse,
My shadwe was at thilke tyme, as there,
Of swiche feet as my lengthe parted were
In sixe feet equal of proporcioun.
Therwith the moones exaltacioun,
I meene Libra, alway gan ascende,
As we were entryng at a thropes ende;

(X. 1—13).

Chaucer sets the precision of the thymes and the figures offered against the avowed guess-work, in a comedy of coincidence. We know all too well that Chaucer's narrator isn't so minutely observant of the world he moves through, and we know better than simply to take him at his word. We can do such sums, wield the words, but not with such neat accuracy. Our love of reckoning is humoured but also put in place. The author points to the artifice of the poem and tales, the ability of art to bring things together with an exactitude rarely caught in nature. Nature is not so tidy, and what we delight in as art we are thus reminded not to expect outside the *Tales*. What Chaucer mocks are the terms that enchanted and bewitched the canon and his yeoman in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, and this play with numbers takes its cue from the pejorative meaning of to 'multiplie', which is to practise alchemy. The yeoman waxes lyrical:

Whan we been there as we shul exercise
Oure elvysshe craft, we semen wonder wise,
Oure termes been so clergial and so queynte.
I blowe the fir til that myn herte feynte.

What sholde I tellen ech proporcion
Of thynges whiche that we werche upon—
As on fyve or sixe ounces, may wel be,
Of silver, or som oother quantitee—....

VIII. (750—57)

Chaucer's good-humoured parody helps to free us with laughter from the lure of calculation beyond our true ability. Freud mistakenly thought that jokes were a way of stepping out from the constraints of morality; Chaucer proves him wrong: they allow the return of a truly moral perspective.

The author sees our desire to condemn others, but has questioned our mastery over what we do, when, as in the comic example of Jankyn and his wife, our behaviour is patterned by other people's. We fall, and we fall to accusing our neighbour; but in so doing Chaucer can ask how far we have fallen victim to our own weak nature. Contrast the resolution of St Bernard towards the *Tales'* end with the opening of the Prologue.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
When Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...

(1—12).

Chaucer places human desire both in and against a framework of natural and instinctive activity. Virtue is here firstly and literally a force of nature, the flower a blossom, although it is still possible to hear an echo of commonplace metaphors and usage, whereby virtue is moral excellence, the flower (of courtesy, of chivalry), the man or woman whose life perfects that excellence. Metaphors which find their place in speech that decides moral worth, freedom, and judgement, are recalled in the sense that they must admit their origins, their roots, in language that does not allow of moral evaluation. If the punctuation (which follows the standard text of F.N. Robinson), appears to delimit the bracketed explanation in line 11, to separate the natural order from the description of human desires, then it should be remembered that the semi-colon is an editorial addition. When read aloud such confident division and compartmentalisation is lost, rendered ambiguous. And

such loss may be our salvation, for it questions a hard-and-fast free will, and the wilfulness that condemnation presupposes.

David Burnely, noting the shift from predominantly perfect tenses dependent on 'Whan' to present tenses following from 'Thanne', has talked of 'a very direct, indeed causal relationship'⁵ between the description of nature and human nature here; yet, that is too determined a reading. The conjunctions chime perfectly, but after unexpected delays and digressions as the narrator's mind lights on other points. We are aware of his freedom to hold off, for a time, the second clause and keep us waiting. In line 11, 'corage' means nature; but it too recalls a wider usage, as it looks forward to Chaucer's view of himself in line 22 as of 'ful devout corage'. The word is used more readily to name a state of mind than of body, and as such brings a specifically human note that strikes the reader as odd when applied to the fowl.⁶ Yet against a description of the human that questions the distance from a world of cause and effect, Chaucer has balanced the personification of nature. That personification is itself a consciously literary device, and as such it draws our attention to how we imprint our own simple images on the complexity of the natural order.

I am offering the *Canterbury Tales* as an example of how literature can alert us to dangerous simplifications in how we view others' actions, and how we condemn such actions; but I must qualify this by admitting that Chaucer shows literature as a way in which such falsifications can be created. To mention again David Burnely, he has set out the way in which medieval literary convention assigned to given characters given speech, and how preachers especially had to speak a language appropriate to their theme: 'one praised the constancy in the faith of a churchman, the beauty of women, and the justice of an emperor. The simplest theoretical approaches in the arts of poetry decried any confusion of these proprieties'⁷. But Chaucer does indeed confuse them, for he sees the common humanity that all share, as well as the quirks and oddities that make a nonsense of type-casting. Here the grand literary sweep of Zephirus and Aprill is offset by the detailed, loving observation of the smale fowelesle 'that slepen al the nyght with open ye', and in the prologue these two ways of talking sit happily together. They maken melodye. But the *Tales* will also go forward to expose the tensions between them and the risk that our own delight in our powers of speech will in their convention lead us astray.

So far, then, I have argued that Chaucer shows us how we accuse each other to little avail and with a refusal to admit moral complexity and uncertainty. Finally, I want to suggest how the description of his fellow pilgrims in the Prologue offers an alternative way of describing sin, one which avoids enmity and a circle of requital, to offer instead communal forgiveness.

In the first part of this article I looked at how Terry Eagleton used phrases like ‘the truth of the matter is this...’ or ‘at root ...’. Chaucer, by contrast, marks the Prologue with the phrase ‘I gesse’ (e.g. lines 82 and 117), qualifying any assertion with a reminder of his own limitations, limited knowledge. It isn’t mere guesswork but a shrewd compassion. There is of course a joke here too, because as author Chaucer’s characters and scenes are what he creates them to be, but in sharing the joke we are encouraged to share his reticence. As Derek Pearsall has said, Chaucer ‘keeps for the most part in touch with the illusion that he is telling us what might be discerned by an observer or elicited by an interlocutor; he does not induct us, as an omniscient author, into all the mysteries of human nature; and he leaves some things to emerge in the course of the pilgrimage.’⁸ Except that there is not so much an illusion to maintain, as collusion to enjoy and learn from. Pearsall suggests that to ‘develop portraits so as to make them accord with subsequent revelations would disturb this illusion’; rather, it would remove moments that check our too-confident judgement. The aim is not to prevent disturbances, but to learn humility through encountering them.

Chaucer repeats in the description of each character the phrase ‘Wel koude ...’ as with the squire, ‘Wel koude he sitte on hors and faire ryde’ (1.94); but it is not mere repetition, for it binds the portrayals of the individual pilgrims together, as the understatement with a knowing smile draws the listeners and reader into agreement with the narrator: not only *could* the squire do this; he spends his every free moment indulging his fancy! There is an implied judgement; but Chaucer has avoided open condemnation. Much has been said of Chaucer’s satire, but satire requires an edge of anger absent here and deflected. The portrayal of the Prioress is a case in point. Chaucer begins by noting that she was ‘of hyr smylyng ... ful symple and coy’ but goes on through detailed observation to explore the human imperfections and complexities behind that surface, repeating the term ‘ful’ in ‘ful faire’ and ‘ful muchel’ or ‘ful semyly’. The effect is to imply the pains she is at to achieve perfection, to imply the pride thus taken in appearing simple. The stresses fall on the repeated phrase and signify the hidden appetite for her own image. The detailed description of her manners is set beside the terse dismissal of her entourage in just three lines, and that imbalance is allowed to communicate not just the interest of the narrator, but of the nun herself. Her motto is ‘Amor vincit omnia’, and the accent falls on that ‘omnia’, all the things which she desires and has beneath the simple appearance seized on. Yet there is no open judgement and in its place Chaucer has allowed these measurements of character to be taken by the rhythm of the verse. They are present but as something between author and audience which, precisely because not articulated, can bind them together, told knowingly with a smile at what is intimated. And we can only pick up the intimation because we know of other examples and places where sin has taken this particular form, where these rhythms bespeak pride, where these

habits betoken our desires; and thus we understand the sin of the Prioress only by admitting its place in our own familiar world. It is something we share.

By questioning our freedom of will; by mocking our powers of self-knowledge and of reckoning; by describing sin in such a manner as to show it all too human and familiar to us, Chaucer can remove sin from the sphere of the individual and acknowledge it as something which, like language itself, our turns of phrase, belongs to the common community. And in the laughter he generates there lies a communal forgiveness. People tend to view language as a means of telling truths and falsehoods, as made up of true and false propositions, the moral imperative being to eschew the second. We also tend to think that to give or imply moral judgements is to condemn the person concerned, no matter how the judgements are presented to us. And so Derek Pearsall, wondering whether or not we can see Chaucer as a man 'who sees all, forgives all, and condemns none', sets against such a view the fact that there is 'too much moral judgement implicitly asked of us'.⁹ But it is a false dichotomy. Precisely through implication judgements are advanced which yet refrain from condemnation and provide a space in which forgiveness can occur.

What we can learn from Chaucer, though not, I fear, so easily from the author of *Literary Theory*, is that language, like the Church, has the power to bind or loose, include and exclude, and can become a means to the forgiveness of sin. Chaucer was not great literature because elevated to that status by wicked universities; nor is it simply a package of values to be held up for admiration by those who share them. It leads us to see how values and creeds that we hold fit to our wider lives, how practice may deny the import of what is preached. The language of the Parson's Tale, of Sin and Fall, was not rejected, but its inadequacies are registered when heard beside our falls of voice and turns of conversation. Next time you are asked in the bookshop for your special interest, don't just think of a topic to be broached in the book but wonder where the book will leave your response to that topic. Will it lead you to condemn or forgive?

- 1 Fragment X, 1.1084. All quotations from the *Tales* are from *Works* edited by F.N. Robinson. Subsequent line references are bracketed in the text.
- 2 Quoted in M.I. Finley's essay 'The Heritage of Isocrates' in *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 195.
- 3 *Literary Theory*, p.202. Subsequent references bracketed in text.
- 4 Quoted in M.I. Finley, *op. cit.* p. 210.
- 5 David Burnely, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, p. 46.
- 6 On the register of 'corage' and Chaucer's choice of the word elsewhere to translate the word 'animus': *ibid.*, p. 216.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 8 Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 52.
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 66.

The next article in this series, on Shakespeare, will appear in our December issue.