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Chaucer's History-Effect

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THE POINT of this essay is to explain a compositional device Chaucer invents in the *Troilus and Criseyde*. Later it will argue that by this device Chaucer constituted himself as an object of investigation, but the essay's best rationale is that the device has never been fully explained or even recognized. Chaucer stages its introduction at the beginning of book 2. Approaching Criseyde on Troilus' errand, Pandarus apologizes for interrupting the parlor entertainment:

“But I am sory that I have yow let
To herken of youre book ye preysen thus.
For Goddes love, what seith it? tell it us!
Is it of love? O, som good ye me leere.”

“Uncle,” quod she, “youre maistresse is nat here.”
With that they gonnen laughe . . . ¹

Criseyde's one-line reply caps this bit of the exchange. But what is her reply, exactly? The drift is tolerably clear, the specific content is not: she seems to

1. Quotations from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

respond, with either regret or rebuke that might be serious or humorous, to suggestions, either flirtatious or self-pitying, that she finds or pretends to find in her uncle's words. The laughter that begins the next stanza clarifies a bit—oh, it's a *joke*—but the moment of clarification acknowledges that the joke cannot be confidently experienced with clarity: the audience can read the characters' laughter as a clue, but cannot laugh with them. Criseyde's sentence is not formally obscure: the blank over which it is pleased to make readers stumble is not a difficulty of syntax or semantics. And there is no obscurity at all for her or Pandarus: the stanza break and the ingressive force of *gonnen* combine to suggest their laughter's fluent simultaneity. The problem is not what the sentence means, but what Criseyde means by it, and what her uncle understands. But asking what a character means or understands tacitly concedes that the character has a mind that can do these things; just by being asked, the question commits the questioner to believing in a subjectivity that conceals at least one item of unexpressed mental content. Further, the idea of a mind with *only* one thought unexpressed is incoherent and, more important, unimaginable: a mind that has one thought has countless others—already, in Criseyde's case, shadowed forth by the several guesses a dutiful reader could make about her meaning. With this, Chaucer begins an experiment in using ordinary structures of narrative inference to create the mirage of subjective depth. He disrupts the easy comprehension of the characters' words with a question which offers too many answers and too few grounds for assessing them, and which takes the shape of a routine and subliminal desire for understanding (*what does she mean?*). That desire in its turn smuggles along as its premise, as if it were a habit already formed, the unexpressed mental contents that must be the object of such investigation. The simultaneity of Criseyde's and Pandarus' laughter, following the connective "with that," shows it to be an immediate and involuntary response. The poem is full of such moments of reflex response.² When Pandarus finally is ready to propose Troilus as a lover, he grows serious and asks Criseyde to "take well" what he is about to say. Talk briefly and abruptly breaks off, again signaled by the consequential "with that": "With that she gan hire eighen down to caste, / And Pandarus to coghe gan a lite" (2.252–53). His nervous cough and her lowered eyes mark a shared and involuntary reaction to stimulus. The question of what causes their awkward self-consciousness implies that they have selves to be conscious of. It does not need to have an answer: its job is done once it gets this premise through the door. By its

2. This is one reason it is a rich source for Burrow's study of nonverbal communication; John A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

means Chaucer can conjure a psychic richness and presence that he may, but need not, elaborate. This illusion, in its turn, enables the intrigue that has kept Chaucer critics so long in the business of guessing at the characters' minds: what does Criseyde want; how much does she understand; how and how far does she consent, and when, and for what reasons; and what satisfaction does Pandarus get from it all? The very texture of personality the poem evokes is the byproduct of this basic puzzle, the puzzle that makes the reader wonder what the characters mean by sentences that rely for their precision on things unsaid because already known to them, and therefore assume that there are minds to rummage in for the answer.

That is the device, a machine for making character. It has been a while since the mainstream of Chaucer criticism, or of any criticism, has said much about character as richly individuated subjectivity. It took a nasty spill—certainly, in Chaucer studies, from Marshall Leicester's brilliant 1980 attack on the neat discrimination of voices in the *Canterbury Tales*, but more generally and fatally from the critical disposition that Leicester's essay represented.³ It was submerged as a topic in the poststructuralist years, but had been a source of disciplinary nail-chewing for longer than that. The tendency to prefer talk about characters as enabling functions of narrative structure is the most recent form of a pressure that academic literary criticism has long and repeatedly put on itself.⁴ Even the most serious and independent work on character in medieval narrative has shied from any hint of treating characters as selves encountered as having depth, even when the sense of that depth is their salient fact.⁵ The worry was understandable: the fetish of character has too often assumed a prurient *bonhomie* with narrative protagonists instead of understanding them, and too often reduced literary criticism to literature-appreciation. The fault of counting Lady Macbeth's children was the fault of treating characters as *explanantia* rather than *explananda*, as the sources rather than the products of the literary discourse. But correcting the fault does not require pretending that the effects do not exist or

3. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "The Art of Impersonation: a General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 213–24. Precisely because it fit more snugly into that critical disposition, the argument of this essay seems to have been more influential than the conclusions Leicester drew from it in H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); there the discrimination of subjectivity from "speakerhood" produced what amounted to a splendid discussion of characters.

4. Diagnosed with great wit by Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 267–71.

5. Notably Warren Ginsberg, *The Cast of Character: The Representation of Personality in Ancient and Medieval Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), esp. 98–133; and Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

matter: if the products of discourse and the devices that produce them cannot be thought about, our discipline does not have much on which to train its thinking, and there is something pointless about wishing away the experience that most peremptorily seizes most readers. The subjective presence of character *is* there in the *Troilus*, as an effect that emerges from the logic of the narrative's discourse. The three elements—characters' status as effects of discernible causes, their discursive character, and the possession by the narrative of a describable logic—can be combined to make characters vivid, and can be analyzed to make that vividness available to understanding. The characters are not "real" (in the sense that all grownups know that characters are not real), but the *feeling that* they are real *is*. If criticism has been shy about talking of character, it has never been shy talking about imprecision: the sense that, in one way or another, poems are not to mean but to be suggests at the least that literary status is achieved by resisting clarity, and is one axiom that remains almost invariant through different moments and theoretical idioms.⁶ But clear thought about how the indeterminacy is produced and how it calls forth its effects has been less common.⁷ The *Troilus* confronts its readers saliently with the experience of character. Any account of the poem that does not allow that experience cannot account for much. My explanation ties that sense to the imprecisions that Chaucer cultivates. It has three advantages over most of the discussions that have appeared heretofore. First, it needs to imagine no entities (like "social persons") apart from the inferential procedures initiated by the narrative itself. Second, it can treat a specific kind of indeterminacy without being itself indeterminate, can precisely describe a technique of imprecision.

6. In Chaucer criticism, breadth and multiplicity of possibility seem almost to define Chaucerianness as such; classically, e.g., E. T. Donaldson, "Chaucer and the Elusion of Clarity," *Essays and Studies* 25 (1972): 23–44. Outside it, what is shared by, say, W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. ("The Structure of the 'Concrete Universal' in Literature," *PMLA* 62 [1947]: 262–80), Mikhail Bakhtin (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]), Wolfgang Iser ("Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller [New York: Columbia University Press, 1971], 1–45), and Roland Barthes (*S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1974]) shows how resilient is the sense that indeterminacy makes literature and with what precision that sense can be deployed.

7. A major exception to this generalization was Barthes, *S/Z*; see 22–23, 75–76, 144–45, 178–82. Its influence on my more pedestrian argument here will be clear enough. The nearest approaches I know of to the particular account I offer are found in A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante, and St. John* (London: Methuen, 1980), 128–43 (concerning St. John's gospel); in Peter R. Schroeder, "Hidden Depths: Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory," *PMLA* 98 (1983): 374–87; and in the superb discussion in Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads the "Divine Comedy"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 80–83.

And third, it can explain Chaucer's development of character without making it, or worry that it might make it, a way-station on the road to the novel. Chaucer devised the trick of character to do a job peculiar to the *Troilus*, to produce an erotic intrigue that arises less from what characters either say or avoid saying than from what they do not need to say, from what seems clear to them but not to us. The mystery about Chaucer's characters lies in what they do not need to think about, what comes without prompt and goes without saying—in what they presuppose. The poem's most engaging indirections are not those that characters execute against each other, but those the reader encounters as if by accident. It is an experiment peculiar to the *Troilus*, and so therefore is the device of characterization he crafts to enable it; there is nothing quite like either in the *Canterbury Tales*. (Indeed, he seems rather to have lost interest in it.) It was an experiment that we may call, in shorthand, the subjectivity-effect.

It was, as I say, without direct issue; it was nearly without precedent as well. Familiar as the device became in prose fiction (Flaubert would scarcely exist without it), character in classical and medieval narrative most often expresses itself rhetorically, complexities of thought and motive laid out exhaustively in direct discourse and explicit narration. Manifesting character in rhetorical performance—the soliloquies and the epigrammatic dialogue of the *Metamorphoses* distill one style of it—elaborates character as the momentary or developing realization of narrative situations and of thoughts already spoken. Understanding the narrative does not require guessing at what goes unreported, but in making the incremental adjustments that the reports require. This way is not second-best: it gives us Virgil's Aeneas and Ovid's Narcissus and Chrétien's Lancelot. It gives us also Chaucer's source for the *Troilus*, itself hardly naïve: Boccaccio's youthful *Filostrato* is a work whose rough but manifest genius comes largely from embracing and elaborating the explicit rendition of character, using it to construct a narrative of erotic intrigue very unlike the one Chaucer will build on its frame. Boccaccio's is the intrigue of those whose thoughts and affects stretch only as far as what they can say about them. The pathos of the erotic in the *Filostrato* is not its depth but its shallowness: love is a flesh wound that kills by infection and without dignity, that cuts deeper into its characters than their characters go. The story offers the intrigue of those who can only know what they say, and who develop personhood only by being brought to say it. The toughest puzzle of Chaucer's story—what does Criseyde know and when does she know it?—is not even a question in Boccaccio, whose Criseida knows seduction when she sees it and dickers over its terms; the questions about his Cri-

seida do not begin until she begins to pose them. When she and Troilo and Pandaro conceal things, they conceal them unconcealedly, you might say. Chaucer's intrigue, by contrast, is made not from what his characters avoid saying, but from what they do not need to say or avoid.

Which is not to say that his Pandarus and his Criseyde do not conceal; only that the mysteries about them do not lie there. But their deceptions and indirections do stage the process by which gaps and abruptions prompt desire. As Pandarus prepares his niece to hear the proposition he brings, he deploys a silence whose purpose is to provoke curiosity: "And with that word" ("with that," again),

he gan right inwardly
Byholden hire and loken on hire face,
And seyde, "On swich a mirour goode grace."

Than thought he thus: "If I my tale endite
Aught harde, or make a proces any whyle,
She shal no savour have therin but lite,
And trowe I wolde hire in my wil bigyle;
For tendre wittes wenen al be wyle
Theras their kan nought pleylny understonde;
Forthi hire wit to serven wol I fonde."

And loked on hire in a bisy wyse,
And she was war that he beheld hire so,
And seyde, "Lord! so faste ye m'avise!
Sey ye me nevere er now? What sey ye, no?"
"Yis, yis," quod he, "and bet wol er I go!
But be my trouthe I thoughte now if ye
Be fortunat, for now men shal it se." (2.264–80)

The repetition of *loken* at either edge of Pandarus' silent strategizing ("he gan . . . /loken on hire face"; "And loked on hire") frames his thought as an obligato played silently upon a suspended gaze.⁸ The gaze is mutual: Pandarus can look "inwardly . . . on hire face" only if she is looking back at him, and the adverb suggests the intentness of investigation, an effort fixed on divining the others' thoughts. Pandarus' thought (about which he lies in the

8. B. A. Windeatt, ed., *Troilus & Criseyde: A New Edition of "The Book of Troilus"* (London: Longman, 1984), *ad loc.*, notices the effect of the repetition.

final lines) is indeed directed to what she will think; and Criseyde's redundant insistence "What sey ye, no?," pointlessly pressing him to answer a rhetorical question, suggests how unnerved she is by reflections whose presence is evident but whose content is not. Criseyde's urgency about specifying the unreported thought that has stopped Pandarus speaking is an intradiegetic operation of Chaucer's diegetic device. Its mechanism works like this: confront your audience with an abruption that does not disturb the speaker (Pandarus is not puzzled by his own silence) and the connection unmade asks to be made, engages uncompleted inference as desire and inquiry. Now the fact that Chaucer represents Pandarus and Criseyde in this concrete instance of the dynamic of enigma does not in itself prove that the idea of it is available to him in a form abstract enough to be deployed and analogized on other scales, in different registers, and as an instrument of his own narrative technique, but the poem does show it in operation elsewhere. We can see it in the narrator, as I will observe later, and we can see it in his protagonist: as one critic astutely observes, it seems to be Criseyde's paradoxical air of simultaneous withdrawal and defiance during the festival, striking a note of subjective presence, fetching and promissory, that calls out Troilus' love.⁹

In fact, the abstract idea of this dynamic was formally and familiarly available to the middle ages. That an urge to interpretation is provoked by an utterance that acts as though it makes a sense which is not apparent to its hearers is a notion bequeathed to it by the second book of Augustine's *Christian Pedagogy*: a passage that formally promises a meaning that it fails to deliver or trammels up in enigma—by passages that have the form of meaningful utterances but do not seem to communicate meaningfully—poses a problem to the reader, draws him by a desire to understand, until he finds the account that pieces the puzzle together and which rewards him with delight. The obscure and enigmatic expressions of Scripture work to call back the intellect from a disgusted satiety ("ad . . . intellectum a fastidio revocandum"), stimulating the mind to a "labor" that yields "discoveries more pleasing": "nemo ambigit . . . quaeque . . . cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inveniri."¹⁰ The utterance that does not deliver the meaning it promises dangles the bait of pleasure before the inquiring intellect.

Chaucer knows the principle, and so, it proves, do his characters. At least Pandarus does. His silence here is designed to pull Criseyde into surmise.

9. Carolyn Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 200.

10. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. Paul Tombeur (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), 2.6; translations of this and all works in the essay are mine. See the discussion in D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 57–64.

Later in book 2, he will, in a shameless fiction, claim that he was drawn along in the same traction. When she asks how he first learned of Troilus' love, he says that some inconsistent behaviors of Troilus—guilty silences, tears unsuccessfully concealed—provoked a “suspecioun” (2.561) that he was drawn to allay. So he “gan . . . stalke hym softely byhynde” (2.519), eventually overhearing a monologue in which Troilus reveals the source of his sorrow.

There is an element here that adds a wrinkle to Augustine's principle and leads us into a denser, more complex part of the story of how Chaucer came to devise his device. Both these indirections of Pandarus' are advertent actions that pretend to inadvertency: he is not suddenly derailed by distraction to break his discourse, and Troilus does not unwittingly reveal his love; Pandarus feigns the distraction to prompt in her the intense curiosity with which she responds, and lies about Troilus' revelation to keep his visit from seeming a conspiracy. In both cases, inadvertency is something he feigns because it is the warrant of good faith, because it promises that what is revealed has no designs on its audience, indeed has no intention to communicate at all. A man surprised by his own words is unequal to premeditation or insincerity. That is why Pandarus insists on it. He tells Criseyde the story of proxied courtship as a train of things that could not be helped: Troilus could not avoid betraying the fact of his love; Pandarus on discovering it could not resist helping his friend; Pandarus on revealing it to Criseyde cannot but slip into a muse at the thought of her luck. All of this is meant to peel away any suspicion that the courtship is a thing devised and strategized, a suspicion he must avert precisely because it is such a thing. This shows, then, that Chaucer gives his characters an awareness how apparent incompleteness and inadvertencies can seem to reveal thoughts unwittingly. It does not show how he uses them to create these characters as characters, or where the technique came from. That story is more tangled.

But the characters' recognition of how they can fake inadvertent gaps and hints does help reveal this longer, more roundabout story of how Chaucer came to contrive his technique of gaps and hints, of clues dropped by characters who do not notice them and would not think them clues if they did. The availability of Augustine's idea does not itself explain why Chaucer should be interested or why his interest would take this form; it is the pose of inadvertency that points to the source that does. For while the inadvertent disclosure by which Chaucer conjures the illusion of subjective depth and presence is a relatively new thing, the advertent pretense of inadvertent disclosure is not; it was codified in a rhetorical figure. Among the tropes introduced in every handbook is that pose of strategically tardy self-

ensorship called aposiopesis, an almost invariably histrionic figure common in what we might call the operatic mode of antique and medieval literature. Its most famous instance comes in book 2 of the *Aeneid*, as Aeneas narrates how the Trojans, against their interest and all good judgment, took the wooden horse into their city. What tipped their balance was the speech of the Greek Sinon, a speech they trusted because he pretended an unwillingness to speak it. Sinon, "dolus instructus et arte Pelasga" (152), deceives the Trojans. He pretends to have escaped murder at the hands of the Greeks, and affects to be unequal to relating their treachery:

nec requieuit enim, donec Calchante ministro—
sed quid ego haec autem nequiquam ingrata reuoluo,
quidue moror? (2.100–1)¹¹

The ablative absolute ("Calchante ministro") suspends grammatical resolution, so that "donec" begins a clause that never achieves either a main verb or a subject; "sed," beginning the next line, audibly aborts the narration in supervening emotion. His suppression of the story near its beginning whets the Trojans' desire to hear its end: *then*, Aeneas says, after Sinon has broken off his telling, the Trojans "burn" ("tum . . . ardemus," 105) with desire to know what he knows but is not saying. Once this tale is done, what had been a curiosity to know the thoughts he was suppressing becomes an unresisting identification with him: "His lacrimis uitam damus et miserescimus ultro" (145). The rhetorical tactic of his bogus awkwardness is obvious to every reader, and should (Aeneas implies) have been obvious to the Trojans: their failure to see it is, now in retrospect, evidence of the mad doom impending. The Trojans help Sinon convince them: their desires connive with his vulgar pretense to obscure its vulgarity and believe what could persuade only the desperate. It is thus that the flames with which they "burn" for him to resume the story become the flames that destroy their city. Virgil portrays Aeneas' retrospective clarity about his people's fatal choice, and borrows the regret to convey the brutal pointlessness of the city's night of destruction; Chaucer, whose *Troilus* makes the city's approaching fall the more haunting for its refusal to narrate it (1.141–44, 5.1765–69), builds his effect from recognizing the chill horror of lines like this.

The figure of aposiopesis might itself have suggested to Chaucer the experiment in characterization. At points Criseyde seems to condense both parties in rhetorical performance—the poser who gulls his audience and the

11. Quotations from Virgil, *Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

audience that chooses to be gulled—in a single subjectivity. In *Troilus* and in *Criseyde*, there are gaps apparently invisible to themselves, wobbles of understanding that evoke the presence of a feeling and thinking self with heft and texture. *Criseyde*'s deliberations after Pandarus leaves display a discontinuity not of speech but of affective experience that she both contrives and is shocked at. Thinking about what he has said, she hears a Trojan crowd celebrating *Troilus*' triumph in the battle from which he is just returning, and from her window sees him pass by:

Criseyda gan al his chere asprien,
 And leet it so softe in hire herte synke,
 That to hireself she seyde, "Who yaf me drynke?"
 For of hire owen thought she wex al reed,
 Remembryng hire right thus, "Lo, this is he
 Which that myn uncle swerith he moot be deed,
 But I on hym have mercy and pitee." (2.645–51)

The involuntary somatic symptom—the blush that feels like drink gone to the head¹²—looks like an ambush by unexpected feeling, experienced as something that befalls her rather than something she brings forth. Readers have found it easy to take her at her word.¹³ Talking to her uncle, she finds it hard to maintain a freedom of response without falling into a tone of bantering premeditation ("Nay, therof spak I nought, ha, ha!" 2.589). Now alone, this rush of feeling seems to reveal a sentimental attachment heretofore unrecognized, deeper than self-interest or self-control. The exclamation "Who gave me drink?" is meant to warrant her guileless authenticity. But the consent implied by the detail that she "leet" his image "in hire herte synke" spoils the impression of surprise: she must in some measure be aware of an effect she chooses to permit. The explanatory backtracking of the next stanza traces her cry to her blush, and the blush to conscious internal discourse: "this is the one my uncle says will die unless I show him mercy." Turn the sequence back around into right order, and this is what happens: she thinks a thought that induces a response she instantly forgets she has induced, pre-

12. So I understand the line; but the alternate reading ("love-potion"), proposed by Robert Kilburn Root, ed. *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1926), 445, and endorsed by, e.g., Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 138, would not alter the point here.

13. E.g., Stephen A. Barney, "Troilus Bound," *Speculum* 47 (1972): 445; Joan G. Haahr, "Criseyde's Inner Debate: The Dialectic of Enamorment in the *Filostrato* and the *Troilus*," *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992): 262. Subtler, more alert readings are adumbrated by, e.g., D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Chaucerian Tragedy," *ELH* 19 (1952): 21–22; and Wetherbee (next note).

meditates what she plans to experience as unforeseen. "Nothing about her reaction is simply spontaneous,"¹⁴ it is true, but the function of the swoon is to convince her that everything about it is. Only by seeming so can the feeling claim to have emerged from depths she had not suspected; indeed, it is the discontinuity of the surprise that produces the effect of psychic depth. The device Chaucer uses to convince us of his characters' interiority is the device Criseyde uses to convince herself of her own. It persuades because it is not seen as a device, because the emotion and the cry seem to come from some part of the self whose response to Troilus is obvious to itself though was not before obvious to her thought.¹⁵

One stage, then, in Chaucer's deployment of aposiopesis, of rhetorically premeditated discontinuity simulating unpremeditated revelation, is the uncertainty in which he casts his characters' relation to their own avowals. They discover in themselves, and reveal to us, elements of their pasts that land as surprises though the expressions speak as if they are already obvious. In book 3, when Troilus pins Criseyde back on the bed, saying "Now be ye kaught . . . / Now yeldeth yow," she famously answers, "Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, / Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!" (1208–11). The avowal is neat—it smoothly ducks Troilus' coltish eagerness without ungraciously rejecting it—but it does come as a surprise: since she has so clearly, even when speaking to herself, insisted that she has not yielded, this deflating response creates an uncertainty whether she was pretending before or is pretending now. The work gives us no grounds for deciding; again, just posing the problem does all that the moment needs, inducing the question and with it the assumption that there is evidence *in there* that, if excavated, could explain her. The counterfactual form of her response here implies the range of possibilities that still leaves in place the indefiniteness that implies its own explanation.¹⁶

But though aposiopesis could alone have been the source of Chaucer's experiment, it probably was not, and Criseyde's counterfactual ("Ne hadde I . . . / Ben yolde") signals what may have brought it to his attention. Counterfactuals and negative conditionals (in forms "if . . . not" and "but if") crowd his poem, as forms of utterance that entertain an indecision that remains formally unresolved.¹⁷ The first words from Troilus's lips after he falls

14. Winthrop Wetherbee, III, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on "Troilus and Criseyde"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 184.

15. Derek Pearsall, "Criseyde's Choices," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer Proceedings* 2 (1986): 17–29.

16. Nicely read in David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 130–31.

17. See, e.g., 1.229; 1.415; 1.746; 1.971; 2.609; 3.578; 3.795; 3.899; 3.1267; 3.1774; 3.794;

in love are the opening words of Petrarch's "S'amor non è"; his translation "If no love is," "abstracting from Petrarch's abstractions,"¹⁸ makes what in Petrarch is the waver of unclarity into a rhetorical counterfactual. The choice of Petrarch neatly suggests the obvious fact about Troilus, that as a lover he is a lyric that can become a narrative only through Pandarus' offices.¹⁹ The love begins to speak with one counterfactual; and the narrator ushers it to its end with another, speaking of the story not told—"if I hadde ytaken for to write / The armes of this ilke worthi man . . ." (5.1765–66). The choice of Petrarch also signals Chaucer's deliberate linking of his characters with the poetic past he chooses for his poem, the tradition into which he inserts it and which he dramatizes within it.²⁰

I mean a moment in Dante's *Inferno* when "if not" coincides exactly with an aborted utterance. Before the gates of Dis, Virgil's unflappability briefly lapses. Prevented by the demons from entering the citadel, his attempt to reassure Dante does just the opposite when it falters in mid-sentence: "Pur a noi converrà vincer la punga, / cominciò el, 'se non... Tal ne s'offerse."²¹ The unfinished negative conditional "If not—" functions just like Sinon's unresolved ablative absolute in the *Aeneid*: the interrupted syntax points to meanings the speaker realizes should not be spoken and that the listener must infer. And that is just Dante's source: his Virgil's "if not . . ."—"se non . . ."—in Latin is "si non": *Sinon*, the name of the character to whom Virgil had given poetry's most celebrated interrupted sentence, begins the interrupted sentence Dante gives Virgil, and with the allusion, Dante advertises his novelty: instead of showing a character who pretends inadvertency to look authentic, he shows a character who is authentically inadvertent. Writing the *Aeneid*, everything Virgil did had the rhetorical premeditation of Sinon's uncompleted sentence; but of this poem, Virgil is not the author, and the interrupted conditional shows that, while Dante treats him still as an author, he himself can be blindsided by what transpires. It suggests—only this once, but it only needs this once—that Virgil has an inner life, a series of unpremeditated and unreported thoughts, and that the relative confidence

4.98; 4.221; 4.281; 4.437; 4.566–67; 4.637; 4.774; 4.1233; 4.1332; 4.1343; 4.1560; 4.1579; 4.1618; 4.1647; 5.124; 5.897; 5.906; 5.932–33; 5.961; 5.1337; 5.1531; 5.1765.

18. Barney, "Troilus Bound," 447

19. Donaldson, "Elusion of Clarity," 33–34.

20. Ginsberg says that in the *Troilus* he reads Boccaccio through Dante, where elsewhere he reads Dante through Boccaccio. Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 109–11.

21. Quotations are from the Petrocchi edition, as it appears in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

with which he negotiates *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* is not the manifestation of a placid interiority but the index to one more complex and obscure.

In *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil both have thoughts. Each guesses at the other's, with unequal results. As they approach Hell, and Dante first reads the inscription on its gate ("Lasciate ogne speranza . . ." [3.9]), he quails: "il senso lor m'è duro" (12). There are several senses in which these words might be "hard," none of which the words or their preceding context is sufficient to specify.²² Virgil, however, answers "come persona accorta," and enjoins Dante against all *sospetto* and *viltà* (14–15). The knowledge signaled by *accorta* must, accordingly, be Virgil's familiarity not with Hell but with Dante's thoughts. The original complaint, "their sense is hard for me," momentarily bespeaks that uncertainty which projects around it all the possibilities and all the complexities of fallen human subjectivity, which Virgil's words immediately dispel: the words are hard in the sense that they are personally threatening. The unspecifiability *to us* of Dante's thoughts, the limitation that periodically conveys the impression of an affective and intellectual life that surfaces only fitfully into narration, proves to be our limitation; it does not constrain Virgil, who abruptly reduces the enigmas to their insufficiently expressed sense. The situation is asymmetrical: that same participle *accorto* appears, now describing Dante, when at the brink of Limbo Virgil goes pale, and Dante, "del color . . . accorto," asks "Come verrò, se tu paventi / che suoli al mio dubbiare esser conforto?" (4.16–18). That is, Dante confidently interprets an underspecified phenomenon just as Virgil did before, and reaches the same conclusion that Virgil did: that his companion is afraid. But Dante is wrong, as Virgil immediately informs him that his pallor derived from pity, not fear. Virgil is opaque to Dante in a way that Dante is not to Virgil.

These moments of mutual interpretation, both those that succeed and those that do not, assume that there is something to interpret, that the contents of the minds producing those words fix their meaning. Dante also frequently, even iconically, gives his characters moments of unexplained discontinuity and equivocations unresolved, to dangle before the reader evidence of an inner life undescribed and unspecified. During its first very first exchange of dialogue, the narrator has called for help to the figure, "shade or man," who first identifies himself as the singer of Aeneas' story and then immediately poses to Dante questions that Dante unthinkingly bypasses:

22. On commentators' difficulties from the beginning regarding these words, see Francesco Mazzoni, *Saggio di un nuovo commento alla "Divina commedia": Inferno canti I–III* (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), 337–42.

“Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?”

“Or se' tu quel Virgilio . . . ?” (76–79)

Strictly described, Dante's response is both a redundancy and a *non sequitur*: it solicits an answer it has already received (Virgil already has said that he is Virgil) and neglects the question just put (it does not explain why he returns to such pain). Those defects serve to convey the affective force channeled through Dante's response: the devotion he expresses in the next lines—“Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore” (85)—is communicated first not as a discursive statement but as a prediscursive rush of piety, the very awkwardness of which is meant to give witness to his earnestness. Those failures of coherence and social continuity, the poem implies, are witnesses securer and more eloquent than any declaration of love, and so by burdening his speaker with those failures Dante also gives him the illusion of affective presence that a less cumbersome response would not convey.

In the *Comedy* Chaucer encountered the materials from which he would make the *Troilus*'s subjectivity-effect, but that is not its first use for Dante. In the normal course of the *Comedy*'s narrative, Dante's narrator is the only character the immensity of whose unexpressed consciousness is suggested by partial and failed and enigmatic suggestions: damned souls are drained of possibility; blessed souls have resolved or are resolving all possibility (in the *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio* respectively) into plenary actuality. This device of characterization, signaling but not displaying the obscurities of a human self still *in via*, is mobilized for a single end, to display the particular darkness in which persons still alive encounter their own selves, which will only be finally displayed and interpreted when they suffer the *contrapasso* of hell or occupy the rose of heaven. But the device of characterization is part of a larger discovery of Dante's, which bears still more importantly on how Chaucer's makes character in the *Troilus*. Something new in the *Comedy*, something unlike anything in the western literature he inherited, is the experience of spatial solidity and coherence, the “continuous presence of a terrain,”²³ it conveys. *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* especially convey not merely the fact of their extension in space, but the experience of their coherence and immensity; *Paradiso* manages to suggest that spatial extension itself is

23. Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in Piers Plowman,” in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 103.

insufficiently spacious for completed meaning to inhabit. That the helpful diagrams that nearly every edition and translation of the poem includes can so easily be drawn attests to the mappability of the poem's imaginary space; but that every edition feels the need to include them attests to the exigence of the poem's topographical consistency and continuity. Not only retrospectively can one look back across the landscape traveled, and discover that it fits together; one can prospectively sense that the landscape will be there, without knowing what it is.²⁴ The immediate scene is felt as, and derives its significance from being, a part of a continuous and consistent whole.

At the start of the *Inferno*, what evokes the presence of this fully elaborated spatial scene is the fact that what is not visible is still sensible, that what is not yet seen makes its imminence felt as sound, seeks out a limit and discovers the space that bounds it. The poem feels its way along its landscape with the same fragmentary suggestion by which it suggests the unspoken and unrealized thoughts of the narrator, a suggestion whose coherence implies what is not disclosed—sounds that establish the presence of a landscape in the darkness before its features can be discerned, prompting a vigilance that wishes to discern them. As soon as Dante passes through the gate of hell into the darkness of the "air without stars," he hears sighs, complaints, cries; four lines cataloguing the sounds, which measure the space that cannot be seen, and the brief simile that catches them up—the sounds "turned about in the perpetually dark air like sand when the wind blows it"—suggests how they imply the bulk of the space they issue from while having no bulk of their own, as the whirlwind of sand outlines a shape that it does not pack with solidity.²⁵ What they convey provokes the pressure of investigation to fill the implied scene with sight: Dante strains in the next canto to "fix his eyes on the bottom" of a space he can hear but cannot yet see. The famous cat-echresis describing the darkness of hell—"loco d'ogne luce muto" (5.28)—is more than a striking comparison; it is an expression complementary to the auditory indications that imply the scene that will become visible,²⁶ and renders it real by making it sensed before it is viewed.

It is my claim that in Dante Chaucer discovered a principle of literary design and a source of compositional virtuosity: supplying details that imply

24. The contrast with the *New Life* suggests how programmatic this was in the *Comedy*; see Mark Musa, "An Essay on the *Vita nuova*," in *Dante's Vita nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 100–4.

25. On such devices, see Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 89–99.

26. In the lines that follow, he says that the sighs come from "turbe . . . / d'infanti e di femmine e di viri," (29–30), which sounds as though he is making the scene out only aurally; but in the next tercet, Virgil wonders why he does not ask what spirits they are that he sees ("che tu vedi," 32).

a coherence they do not disclose—of mental acts, of physical space—can prompt an investigative desire to discern the principles of coherence; the act of seeking it tacitly concedes the reality of the materials supposed to cohere; and it thereby accepts the illusion of its existence. He does play with what Dante learned about implying the coherence of spatial geography: the narration seems to expect us to understand the arrangement of rooms, left undescribed, in Criseyde's and Pandarus' houses: when it has Criseyde descend "the steyre" to "the garden," the definite articles assume the obviousness of their placement.²⁷ But that is evidently not his chief use for it. Dante is most interested in realizing palpable extension in space embodying the claim that his vision was not "visionary" but simply real.²⁸ Chaucer retools the device chiefly to represent extension in time, and especially the durable reflexive awareness that constitutes selfhood.

In seeing what Chaucer took from Dante we can see how much he added of his own. What is not to be found in Dante's use of discontinuous dialogue, what is new in Chaucer, is an inadvertency deeper than and different from that which attends mistakes and accidents and surprises. For the inadvertencies he uses include what is unplanned not because it is a mistake or an oversight, but because it is simply presupposed—not the sort of clue people mistakenly leave when they are trying to say something else or nothing at all, but the sort that acts like a clue only because accidents of circumstance obscure to readers what is transparent to the characters. It is dialogue's analogy to Dante's landscape: something obvious to anyone who is present in the scene but unknown to the reader who is not. Chaucer combined the givenness of Dante's landscape, sensed more powerfully in fragmentary evocation than it could be in fuller description, with the suggestive power of the incomplete or fragmentary utterance.

Think again about that laughter that Pandarus and Criseyde share at the start of book 2, whose spontaneity marks the presence of thoughts and meanings that we do not learn because they do not need to be made explicit. I did not observe its most obvious implication: the characters' shared understanding marks not only the presence of minds but their duration together through history, a shared past in which habits of intimacy have settled into second nature.²⁹ To understand their joke would you would need to relive

27. H. M. Smyser, "The Domestic Background of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Speculum* 31 (1956): 297–315; Saul N. Brody, "Making a Play for Criseyde: The Staging of Pandarus's House in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 115–40.

28. Charles S. Singleton, *Dante's "Commedia": Elements of Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

29. Well noted by Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets*, 182.

their lives, to occupy their routine presuppositions. Their easy understanding of what is hazy to the reader conveys that past's presence to them: Criseyde's joke is not clear to us because we have not had the experiences she has had with Pandarus. Their routine teasing performs that intimacy, by signaling how much is shared and can be left unsaid. What can go without saying points to the common experience that relieves communication of the burden of explicitness; but for just that reason, what goes without saying is that which, going unsaid, implies the experience and enables the meanings of what is spoken.

SO THE subjectivity-effect entails and depends upon a history-effect. By it, a past acknowledged but unnarrated gives narrated actions that effect of depth and vividness thoughts acknowledged but unreported give to the characters, and for much the same reason: the past that they can presuppose makes up the thoughts they have. But this history-effect works more broadly too, giving narrative chronology a weirdly backwards relation to readerly expectation, and by that means giving historical sequence itself that illusion of palpability. The *Troilus* imagines the future of its story as a matter closed and fixed; the latitude of possibility that even the most unconvincing constructions of suspense attribute to a story being told is lopped from the *Troilus* before it gets underway. The action begins as Calchas divines the end of the Trojan story (1.67–68), learns what every reader already knows about the city's fate. But the poem has already placed its readers in Calchas' position, informing them, before they have a chance to object, what the whole shape of *Troilus*' "double sorwe" will be: "in lovyng of Criseyde, / And how that she forsook hym er she deyde" (1.1, 55–56). Knowing this double sorrow has two effects. First, the future immanent to the story presents itself as a constraint, a future built of necessity rather than possibility. We willy-nilly encounter the characters' choices from an ironic superiority: what they claim and plan is measured against our knowledge of their end. The narration itself wiggles impatiently against that knowledge as it moves to its close.³⁰ The same narrator who at the start of the first book coolly summarizes the story's trajectory resents that trajectory by the start of the fourth: he recoils from the plain statement of "how Criseyde Troilus forsook" with the pointless qualification "or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde": such desperate adjustment of tone is the only freedom the story leaves him. What she

30. See Patterson, *Chaucer*, 114–26; Sylvia Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 73–83.

did “*moot* hennesforth ben matere of my book, / As writen folk” (4.15–18); constrained to say what she *did*, the only freedom left is imagining what she *meant*. He knows the end of the story because he has read it; that knowledge, like the source that inflicts it on him, feels like bondage once he wants an ending different from the one it offers.

But what yields the narrator some refuge of freedom and yields characters real enough to feel themselves free is, strangely, more of the same. He tells us repeatedly that his poem says only and exactly what he finds in his source, reporting “every word” (1.397) it offers him. This utter fidelity to his source is of course a fiction, but the narrating voice returns to it obsessively. He worries about the details his source does not allow him to fill in (*e.g.*, 1.132–33; 3.501–4; 5.826). This in itself creates some of the solidity of his world and its characters by what it subtracts rather than what it adds: by lacking “facts” it can afford to lack, the poem suggests that its world extends beyond what its narrator knows of it.³¹ But it moves further toward the palpability he works hardest at, the seeming presence of his characters as minds and pasts, pressing the bondage of fact so far that it reveals the past as the only source of freedom it can realize. Chaucer seems to achieve this odd homeopathy by taking more seriously than it is meant a claim in one of the sources he thought most about, the *Historia destructionis Troiae*. Guido delle Colonne begins his work precisely by offering to resuscitate his protagonists imaginatively—the “writings of the ancients, faithful custodians of things gone by,” offer the image of “things past as if they were present,” and to men long dead, “through wakeful acts of reading, pour in the spirit of their strength imagined, as if they were alive.”³² And it offers to evoke their free

31. “. . . to create ‘truth,’ one must be at once precise and insignificant” (Barthes, *S/Z*, 69).

32. “Et antiquorum scripta, fidelia conseruatricia premissorum, preterita uelud presentia representant, et uiris strenuis quos longa mundi etas iam dudum per mortem absorbit per librorum uigiles lectiones, ac si uiuerent, spiritum ymaginarie uirtutis infundunt”; Guido delle Colonne, *Historia destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel E. Griffin (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1936), 3. Though there is some difference on how deeply Chaucer used Guido’s work, it seems clear that Benson is right to claim its influence on him (C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature: Guido delle Colonne’s “Historia Destructionis Troiae” in Medieval England* [Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1980], 134–43); indeed, he could have relied more on details than he does. It was the *Historia*, for example, that might have suggested to him the utility of the Trojan sewer-system (Troilus, 3.785–91; Guido, p. 48; though on this see Will Robins, “Troilus in the Gutter,” in *Sacred and Profane in Chaucer and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of John V. Fleming*, ed. Robert Epstein and William Robins [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010], 91–112); when Chaucer tells us that Achilles “despitously” slew Troilus, his word echoes Guido’s word (*crudeliter*, p. 204) more closely than Boccaccio’s (*miseramente*), and in a single adverb rather than in Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s clause conveying the same affective tone (“Grant cruëuté, grant felonie / A fait,” 21444–45). See in general George L. Hamilton, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer’s “Troilus and Criseyde” to Guido delle Colonne’s “Historia trojana”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1903); and Karl Young, *The Origin*

spacious range of action by severely foreshortening his own: these vivid portraits remain alive for succeeding ages by the *fidelis scriptura* of those who copy them. It is clear enough what Guido means: by leaving transmission of their acts as uncontaminated as possible, the author keeps the record close to the deeds lived and acted; he makes it vivid by keeping it true. Chaucer would have found the source Guido's notion in the source shared with him, Benoît de Sainte-Maur's *Roman de Troie*: "I follow the Latin to the letter; I have not wished to add anything to what I have found written."³³ As a theory of literary effect, this *fidelis scriptura* is wanting; but it poses a claim that Chaucer develops with perversity and flair. Their documentary punctiliousness becomes the psychodrama of Chaucer's narrator, and thus (by a logic this essay has used more than once) both implies that he has a psyche and explains the allure of finding one. For most of his poem, as has been often remarked, the narrator presents himself as a translator hewing to the letter of his single source: "as myn auctour seyde, so sey I" (2.18). Over its course, as is also known, he is snared by the story he tells;³⁴ as his *fidelis scriptura* lures him into engagement and partisanship, the illusion of his subjective presence comes to rival that of the characters whose story he transcribes. But it is precisely the unrevisability of that story that evokes the investments, measures them, and so evokes a self in the desire to be free of constraint. The moments when he strains to qualify the action ("Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte," 5.1050) try to soften or delay the collision with fact. By them he tries to imagine that there is some room for choice in what his source says the story must bring. But two effects, unmistakable though unannounced, are observable in these moments. First, they speak now not of "myn auctour," but of "folk" (4.18), of "men" (5.1050). Somewhere on the way to the story's catastrophe, other sources have silently inserted themselves between the narrator and his Lollius; the implication that he has sought versions of the story alternate to his source insinuates the desire that would make him do that, the desire to find some grounds for denying what it tells him about Criseyde; and he thus comes to have the same unavowed but inferable motives that his characters do.

and Development of the Story of Troilus and Criseyde (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1908).

33. "Le latin sivrαι e la lettre, / Nule autre rien n'i voudrai metre, / S'ensi non com jol truis escrit," Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le roman de Troie*, ed. Léopold Constans (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904), ll 139–41.

34. Most intelligently by Morton W. Bloomfield, "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *PMLA* 72 (1957): 18–19; E. T. Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), 80; Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 129–31; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 39–47.

And second, the hard ineluctability of the story's "facts" is encountered as its known and unyielding future: what *must* ("moot") happen as it advances to its close. At the same time, the possibilities of complexity and freedom are visible in the uncertainties they reveal after the events that cannot be avoided have finally happened. It is not in the facts as they come, because they must come, but in the meanings and purposes of the characters once they have become facts, that the poem can find in its characters of a complexity answering to its investments in them. Once the future slides into the past, its brute facticity mellows into the blur of intentions retrospectively inferred; as intentions, they imply freedom, imply the whole room of psychic possibility that the future event, known only as event, cannot have. Criseyde becomes Diomedes's lover, no way around that; but we do not know whether she gave him her heart. Not much, that; but when the future seems frozen into a dead certitude, the past remains rich with possibility.

This is true not only of the characters' empirical past, the store of experience, thought, and purpose that seems to lie behind each action and utterance. It is true also of the world in which they live. Recognition of the *Troilus*' "classicizing" character, a character that constitutes a part of what Chaucer really did to the *Filostrato*, is one of the clearest accomplishments of its recent scholarship.³⁵ The classicizing project—the actual serious research that underlay it, and the pose of antiquarianism that the narrator adopts—imagines subjective experience as something that has finite historical conditions systematically expressed in period conventions. The poem thus comes to create and then use a sense of historical difference *simpliciter* as a resource for evoking the palpability of its narrative world, through behaviors emerging from codes that we cannot expect ourselves to understand. It is like thoughts thought by another world. In the proem to Book II, Chaucer affects to worry that his characters' love-talk will seem foreign and hapless, and asks pardon if "any word be lame." In his defense, he explains that

in forme of spech is change
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
 Us thinketh hem. (2.22–25)

35. See, e.g., Morton W. Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 51 (1952): 308; Alastair J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982); Barry Windeatt, "Chaucer and the *Filostrato*," in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 171; and most magisterially and consequentially, John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's "Troilus"* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

Behind these lines, obviously, lies the observation of Horace's *Poetic Art*: "multa renascentur quae iam cedere, cadentque / quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula" (70–71),³⁶ but the valuation ("pris") of which Chaucer speaks differs a little from Horace's *honor*: he means not what feels elegant but what passes as current, and the variations he plays on Horace's own *vocabula* work systematically in this direction. These lines conceive both language and behavior as produced by normative prescriptions law-like in their systematic character ("Ecch contree hath his lawes"; compare Horace, "ius . . . loquendi," 72), so ingrained that they make custom feel like nature. The lines are trying to ward off the charge, not that the Trojan love-talk is unintelligible, but that it is stupid. Their rebuttal supposes that when you understand a word but think it "lame," you have failed to grasp the structure of convention that makes it work. This structure is what he calls "usage" ("in sondry ages, / In sondry londes, sondry ben usages"; compare Horace, "usus," 71) and what we call "culture."³⁷ In other words, this passage makes language-change the metonym of all that makes the past foreign.

Variability in language has from the poem's beginning been the index of what we know we cannot fully see or grasp: when we are told that Criseyde stands first in beauty despite her widow's black ("natheless"), "Right as oure first lettre in now an A" (170–71), surely the point is not to think of Queen Anne,³⁸ but to think of those ages, like that narrated in this poem, when the "first letter" had been not *a*, but *alpha* or *aleph*.³⁹ But a case later in book 2 shows much more dramatically how Chaucer uses the structures of routine philological inference to create the sensation of a past accidentally happened upon, by making readers work at construing a locution unreflectively clear to the characters. Working still to sharpen Criseyde's desire for his news, Pandarus feigns a readiness to leave, as if he has forgotten his promise to reveal it. With literally a word, Criseyde detains him and dismisses everyone else:

36. Horace, *Opera*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1985).

37. In book 1, he uses the word to describe the framework of custom within which Trojan paganism goes about its "observances."

38. Originally suggested by John Livingston Lowes, "The Date of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *PMLA* 23 (1908): 285–306, this understanding has remained uncontroversial in the dating of the poem; see, e.g., Barry Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 4–6; Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 168.

39. "Litterae Latinae et Graecae ab Hebraeis videntur exortae. Apud illos enim prius citum est aleph, deinde ex simili enuntiatione apud Graecos tractum est alpha, inde apud Latinos A"; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae sive originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 1.3.4 (not paginated). The biblical declaration "Ego sum alpha et omega" (Rev 1:8, 21:6, 22:13) kept before western eyes the first letter of the Greek alphabet; in the unlikely event that Chaucer forgot this circumstance, he would have been reminded by *Paradiso* 26: "Lo ben che fa contenta questa corte / Alfa e O è di quanta scrittura / mi legge Amore" (16–18).

“I have to doone
 With yow, to speke of wisdom er ye go.”
 And everi wight that was aboute hem tho,
 That herde that, gan fer away to stonde (2.213–17)

“Wisdom” here clearly has specific illocutionary force, a delicate and inexplicit request for privacy; the quick unanimity of her retinue’s withdrawal (“everi wight” “gan”) shows that it is a conventional euphemism readily understood by all—that it is (in the sense just discussed) *usage*. But it is not Middle English usage. As far as I can find, “wisdom” appears nowhere else that with such euphemistic sense or illocutionary force, nor does the sense seem to be borrowed from any other language.⁴⁰ Chaucer invents an alien colloquialism, jargon of a past that never was, and leaves his readers to infer it from use and effect—and, if seized by a reflective mood, to notice that that meaning becomes inferentially available to them only by the accident of narrated detail: Criseyde’s sentence alone—“I have to doone / With yow, to speke of wisdom” would, without the report of her household’s reaction, have seemed merely to say what the English words convey—and only the report of its effect on Criseyde’s retinue conveys the meaning that its use alone would not have done.

This conveys just how much can “change” when form of “speche” changes, just what difference the proem to book 2 describes. Things spoken differently feel different: “in som lond were al the game shent, / If that they ferde in love as men don here.” The past is communicated *as* a past to the extent that it fails to communicate; the ignorance that keeps us from sharing its structures of feeling makes the importance of those structures felt through their absence.⁴¹ But just when this passage in the proem to book 2

40. Neither OED nor MED, both *s.v.* “wisdom (n.),” shows any trace of the sense; nor does any passage cited in either show an undetected usage in this sense. Only MED’s sense 4(c), uncertainly offered—“? a clever plan, an agreed-upon counsel”—comes at all close; its only instance is from the *Ludus Coventriae* and thus much later than Chaucer. Similarly, Lewis and Short, Forcellini, and Niermeyer offer no use of *prudencia*, *sapientia*, or *philosophia* as a concrete noun in any sense close to this one, or any passage using it as such; and the same is true in French for *prudence*, *sapience* or *science*. I might have missed something; but even if Chaucer created it off another language’s usage, my point here stands. Similarly, the sense that Chaucer seems to construct is easy enough to derive—it relates most directly to those established senses that deal with practical reason and judgment (MED sense 3) and with counsel (MED sense 4)—but this is no objection, since the reader’s ability to infer Criseyde’s insinuation must depend on established Middle English senses of the word.

41. Chaucer would later find in the tale of Griselda a story as if designed to create for all readers a “modernity” that isolates them from the thought world of the story; see Anne Middleton, “The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer 2* (1980): 121–22, and chapter 7 above.

gets most thoughtful about the baffling self-identity of the past, it takes a final step that undoes the whole effect by proving too much. What finally is most mysterious about the cultural past is how little mystery, after all the worry and bother, it actually presents:

Ek scarsly ben ther in this place thre
 That have in love seid lik, and don, in al;
 For to thi purpos this may liken the,
 And the right nought. (42–46)

This would seem to demolish everything that went before, to make cultural difference nothing more than idiosyncrasy writ large, and the radical historical discontinuity on which this proem seemed to insist nothing more than the difference between how you ask a girl out and how your best friend does. But then history and selfhood define each other. One might say that the difference between the Trojan past and the English present is no more than the difference between *you* and *you*; but then one has also said that the difference between *you* and *you* is as vast as the difference between two historical worlds. The subjectivity-effect and the history-effect are indistinguishable.

The trick by which Chaucer flourishes a historical "alterity" and then whips it away again suggests how it is simply the desire for a mystery, to feel what would be needed to understand sympathetically, that constructs the fascination both of the past and of other people as literary narrative constructs it, even while acknowledging that the construction of character is as much a device as the construction of the pagan past. Chaucer flaunts this; and he flaunts at the same time its endlessly renewable character. Even as book 2's proem first promises us the touch of a world not ours and then stumbles into conceding that it's our world after all, it substitutes another past that can serve as object of the reader's desire. The deictic features in the lines just quoted—"scarsly ben ther in this place"; "this may liken the, / And the right nought"—imply a context of performance that has nowhere clearly been signaled up to this point. Readers of the *Troilus* could assume that they are the addressees to whom the poem has repeatedly spoken *until* they reach this address in book 2, which implies an audience present to the speaker and object of his physical gestures—required for the distinction between "the" and "the" in lines 45–46 to be meaningful—they discover that in fact they have not been hearing the author's address to themselves but overhearing an address never meant for them, an address implying that the poem was made for an audience whose immediacy to the occasion was so obvious as ordinarily to escape remark. This, in its turn, proves to be a feint. The poem does

not try to sustain the fiction that it is script or transcript of some past performance whose occasion has vanished. It erects that fiction just long enough to trigger the sensation that readers with the book in their hands are adventitious witnesses of a vanished performance—that they cannot share in the immediacy of Chaucer’s own presence and the shared privacies that familiarity encoded, that the book is only the mute image of an event now irrecoverable—and then drops it, training the sensibility in a particular kind of poetic effect, the investigative impulse whose literary use is to fill out the imagined reality of what at the same time it can still know to be unreal. At the end, Chaucer launches the poem into the world as a written object (“Go, litel bok” 5.1786), a text that Gower or Strode might read and revise (5.1856–59).

These games enact a demonstration of an authorial power, the power to create a past just by creating the desire for it. But even within them there arises yet another notation of loss, in which a future paradoxically too well known not only accompanies but produces the effect of a lost past. In this case, it is not some element of the narrative the book proffers nor of the performance in which it might originally have proffered it, but of the book itself, the artifact that is the object of reading. After bidding the work farewell, the speaker’s *congé* turns in the next stanza to the anxious contemplation of its future:

for ther is so gret diversite
 In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge,
 So prey I God that non myswrite the,
 Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge. (1793–96)

We have collectively loved these lines for what they have said about the textual entropy of manuscript culture and the formal instability of Middle English.⁴² But their pedagogical utility does not explain why Chaucer wrote them. Textual entropy was a fact everyone knew. The difficulty of maintaining a correct copy of the Bible brought it early and often to visibility: there are “almost as many versions as there are copies,” as St. Jerome had said in his *praefatio* to the four Gospels.⁴³ The very power of *mouvance* and variation

42. Compiously and brilliantly expressed in Ralph Hanna, “Presenting Chaucer as Author,” in *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretation*, ed. Tim William Machan (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), 17–39.

43. “tot . . . exemplaria pene quot codices”; Jerome, *Praefatio in quattuor evangelia*, PL 29.526. The problem was visible merely upon informed reading of sources: “tot iam saeculis aliud legit Hieronymus, aliud Cyprianus, aliud Hilarius, aliud Ambrosius, aliud Augustinus”; Erasmus, *Apologia in Novum Testamentum*, in Desiderius Erasmus, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. Annemarie Holborn and Hajo Holborn (Munich: Beck, 1933), 166.

to explain the ordinary premises of medieval poetry shows that it needed no emphasis. Certainly the uncodified status of written English and its dialects—the “diversite / In Englishh and in wrytyng of oure tonge”—increased the probability of scribal error, especially of the sort that would incommode the music of verse-rhythm. Certainly, too, Chaucer’s prayer acknowledges that the more successful his work proves, the more quickly and disastrously it will devolve from what he wrote. But this explains the reference of the lines, not the point of explaining what needed no explanation. That is their virtuosity: by recording common knowledge as if it were a pathos peculiar to himself, he sublimates that knowledge into a recognition that even the work you think you are reading is itself not quite available to you. Readers, holding in their hands a manuscript of the *Troilus*, could not know how far down the line of its dissemination their own copies are; could not know how much miswriting had disrupted the text being read, how often or how badly mismetering had smudged the verse.

THAT IS, the *Troilus and Criseyde* itself becomes a past unavailable to confident apprehension though witnessed by its fragmentary survivals. After teasing its audience with the thought that the minds of its characters, their histories severally and together, and the affective texture of the Trojan world are all objects beyond their ken—and the more to be desired for that—the poem concludes by translating *itself* beyond their ken, recalling that the book is not what Chaucer wrote but an imperfect record of it. Chaucer’s integral *Troilus* is the lost past that remains lost, an object of investigative desire instead of an object of experience.

And this gives us the author, Chaucer, the putative real felt *as* real (just as the past is felt *as* past) by being encountered as the missing explanation of its apparent effects. This poem evokes its author not as the speaker and guarantor of the words on the page but as a biographical entity of uncertain relation with them. The stanza before his hopeless prayer for the continuing integrity of his work, he has hoped that, after this “tragedye” of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he will be given to “make in som comedye.” This hope is easily read as looking forward to the *Canterbury Tales*⁴⁴; whether it does, the line is designed to prompt just such speculations, to place the author as a historical datum insufficiently apprehended. Chaucer makes his own career a fact only partly explicable, like the thoughts of Criseyde and Pandarus, a fact that stays just

44. Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the “Canterbury Tales”* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 30–45; John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139.

out of sight behind the work's gaps and enigmas and so is to be sought with the greater energy. The history that produces the poem is produced as an effect by that poem, just as are the history that the poem portrays and the characters that people it. The history-effect devises the erotic intrigue in the story it tells, but also develops an authorial intrigue in the telling of it, and the latter is as much a part of its literary performance as is the former. Certainly there are things we can know about the *Troilus* that it does not know about itself; but it does not allow us to know which things these are.