The Narrator, Troilus, and the Poetic Agenda

The importance of the classical tradition for the *Troilus* and the complexity of the poet’s engagement with that tradition are evident from the opening lines of the poem. The narrator begins with a solemn and sweeping statement of his theme, defining the noble status of his hero and the outlines of his tragedy:

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovynge how his aventures fallen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
My purpos is, or that I parte fro ye.

[1. 1–5]

It is hard to know to what extent or in what sense Chaucer intended his opening lines to recall the opening of a classical epic. Their sheer sonority and the sureness and economy with which they trace the arc of Troilus’s experience are impressive; but their very comprehensiveness tends to call attention to the shape of the story and its implicit moral, rather than set off any heroic attribute of Troilus himself. Moreover, a number of details conspire to offset whatever impression of epic grandeur the lines may seem to convey. The poet can hardly be said to leap *in medias res*, and indeed his opening is not far from the “Fortunam
Priami,” which Horace cites as a classic example of how not to begin a poem.¹ The very resonance of the repetition in “Troilus” and “Troye” is anticlimactic² and interrupts the sweep of the poet’s overview of his story. There is perhaps a further hinting at the not-quite-epic nature of his theme in the revelation that the adventures of the Trojan prince befell him “in loyynge” rather than in war. This hint is strengthened if we hear (as I will later suggest we should) an echo of Dante in the opening line: for when Dante’s Vergil uses the formula of the “double sorrow” to sum up the theme of Statius’s Thebaid, he associates it not with love but with “cruel arms.”³

Whatever solemnity the opening of the poem manages to attain is further disrupted by the lines that follow the initial overview. All this I intend to tell, the narrator declares, “or that I parte fro ye.” In this abrupt shift from the statement of high purpose to a direct address to his audience we are given a first hint of what we will come to see as the narrator’s characteristic uneasiness with the weighty responsibilities of serious poetry, his need to descend from time to time and speak as a mere man in

¹. *Ars poetica* 136–39:
ne sic incipies, ut scriptor cyclicus olim:
“fortunam Priami cantabo et nobile bellum.”
quid dignum tanto feret hic promissor hiatus?
parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.

And do not begin, as did the cyclic poet of old, “I will sing the fortune of Priam and the noble war.” What can this promiser deliver that will be worth such an opening? The mountains will labor, and a ridiculous mouse will be born.

Horace contrasts this beginning with the opening lines of the Odyssey, and then goes on to warn against beginning a poem on Diomedes by harking back to the death of Meleager (146), precisely what Chaucer’s Cassandre does in explaining Troilus’s dream of the boar (*Troilus* 5. 1464–1519).

². Troy and its fate circumscribe the life and vision of Troilus. It is probably the point of Chaucer’s sound play both to suggest this and to evoke the contrast of the opening lines of the Aeneid, which announce Aeneas’s departure from Troy. Dante, too, has Vergil characterize his poem as the story of the just son of Anchises “che venne di Troia” (*Inf.* 1. 74), and for all three poets, leaving Troy is associated with the mainstream of history. Troilus by contrast is static, bound to the doomed city, a hero without a historical purpose.

³. *Purg.* 22. 55–56: “… le crude armi / de la doppia trestizia di Giocasta…” (“… the cruel arms / of Jocasta’s twofold sorrow…”)
the reassuring presence of sympathetic listeners. But after appealing to us with this touch of domesticating humility, the narrator shifts again, even more abruptly than before:

Thesiphone, thow help me for tendite
This woful vers, that wepen as I write.

[1. 6–7]

The summoning of the Fury stands in jarring contrast to the human bond that the poet had established with his hearers in the previous line. In the wake of its disorienting effect, the poet’s “weeping” verses seem similarly dislocated, not simply a projection of his own emotion like Boccaccio’s verso lagrimoso (Fil. 1. 6), but as if charged with an energy of their own.

Shocking and puzzling in itself, the appeal to Tisiphone assumes an added complexity if we hear in it an allusion to the one precedent for it that earlier poetry provides. Again the allusion invokes Statius’s Thebaid, this time directly: when Chaucer’s narrator, in the “dernesse” of his private alienation from love, calls on the “cruel furie,” his gesture bears an odd and striking resemblance to the prayer of the blinded Oedipus, who calls out from the “eternal night” of his self-damnation to summon this same “cruel goddess” Tisiphone, and by so doing sets in motion the plot of Statius’s poem (Theb. 1. 56–87). At least as striking as the resemblance, however, is the contrast it suggests between the perspectives of the two poets, or their narrators, on the stories they are about to tell. Statius begins his work by claiming for himself the inspiration of the Muses, and traces Theban history back to the rape of Europa and the banishment of Cadmus before settling on the house of Oedipus and the war of the Seven against Thebes as his subject. It is only after he has given a summary of the war and dwelt briefly on the fates of the Argive heroes, revealing in the process a moral perspective on the violence to come and compassion for the human suffering it causes, that Oedipus appears, to invoke the Fury, pronounce a terrible

curse on his twin sons, and give utterance to all that is impious and savage in the world of the *Thebaid*.

Statius will reveal himself to be deeply and at times almost helplessly involved with the dark forces that ravage the world of his poem. He takes pains to show how the demoralizing and spiritually enervating burden of Theban history affects both his characters and his own attitude toward them and threatens to undermine his resolve to affirm the value of piety and heroic virtue. But he clearly wants at the outset to assert his authorial distance from the horrors with which he must deal. The effect of Chaucer's summoning of the Fury is to eliminate any such distance, and with it much of the narrator's claim to a controlling perspective. He too begins with a brief overview of his material, but within the very opening stanza of the *Troilus* he is himself suddenly caught up in the world of the story and drawn, like Statius's Oedipus, into a new and strange kind of collaboration with fate and tragedy. The Fury, traditionally the avenging agent through whom the gods punish impiety and effect violent change in human life, has become a sort of Muse. It is hard to know how to deal with a poetic situation in which Tisiphone is invoked, not simply as a catalyst to the tragic action, but as the power from whom the poet himself professes to derive his inspiration.

We can hardly suppose the narrator capable of any such malign intention toward his lovers as that which leads Oedipus to incite Tisiphone against his progeny. Indeed as the story unfolds, his involvement with the forces that doom the lovers is as unwitting as their own. At the level of conscious intention, there would seem to be no reason for questioning the banal justification he offers for the summoning up of Tisiphone—that her "dreariness" is appropriate to his own sad mood and story. Set in contrast to the deliberate impiety of the embittered Oedipus, such a motivation suggests an innocence of intention worthy of "sely Troilus" himself. But however innocent the narrator's engagement with Tisiphone may be, the pressure she exerts is nonetheless real, and a fuller consideration of what she represents may help us understand the literary challenge Chaucer is taking on in the *Troilus*.

The Fury's role in the poem conforms to her function in epic
tradition insofar as she reinforces in her collaborator a radically subjective and limited outlook on the coming action. Though the narrator of the *Troilus* is linked with his protagonists by a vicarious identification with their love rather than by hatred, his attachment to them has a desperate intensity such that at times the fulfillment of his own emotional need through their union becomes all-important to him. At such moments, that larger perspective that enables him to see the love as inevitably doomed and to regard the lovers with an enlightened charity becomes wholly inaccessible. In a similar way, to the extent that Oedipus's curse and Tisiphone's power define and govern the action of the *Thebaid*, that action is reduced to a conflict of private passions. Its historical dimension and anything that might anticipate the final redemptive intervention of Theseus are obscured as we watch the working out of this conflict and experience the narrator's near despair in the face of it. For both poets, then, Tisiphone is the symbol of an obsessive involvement with the tragic action which the narrators of both poems finally manage to transcend with great difficulty, but which dominates their vision during the unfolding of the action and threatens at times to overwhelm them. And in both cases the narrators' struggle to achieve a perspective on their material reflects a certain uneasiness in the poets themselves about their relation to a poetic tradition whose tragic vision is informed by no clear saving awareness of a spiritual goal.

But while there are deep affinities between Chaucer and Statius, the invocation of Tisiphone in the *Troilus* exhibits a combination of flamboyance and innocence that has no Statian equivalent, and the implied lack of control expresses Chaucer's sense of the special predicament of a medieval poet vis-à-vis the classical tradition. For Statius this is the only tradition, and if he falters in addressing it, he does so in the face of challenges and dangers clearly recognized. But Chaucer is working in the tradition of medieval romance as well as that of classical epic, and it is the peculiar dilemma of his narrator to be torn between a "romance" attachment to his characters' love and a reluctant awareness of the larger pattern of historical forces by which their love is unalterably governed. Invoking the Fury, yet at the same time attempting to restrict her function to commiseration and collab-
oration in his treatment of the love story, expresses this dilemma and points up the narrator’s utter inability to define his role in a consistent way. His intention is to minister to the emotional needs of lovers as a quasi priest. Through his story he will seek to alleviate their inevitable sorrow by sympathizing with their pain and offering them the hope of a future “solas.” But despite his priestly commitment he himself is chronically alienated from the power he invokes, resigned to a vicarious identification with the joys and sorrows of others. His will to affirm the reality and value of the happiness that can be attained by lovers is continually threatened by an awareness that “peyne and wo” are the lot of most lovers most of the time and that the danger of losing what one loves is ever present. Foreknowledge of the outcome of his story controls his emotions and leads him in his office as priest to pray that the god of love, in his mercy,

So graunte hem soone out of this world to pace,
That ben despeired out of loves grace.

[l. 41–42]

In dealing with this dark aspect of the narrator’s self-presentation it is important to recognize that his rueful reflections on his own “unlikeliness” as a lover are more than a comic touch or an appeal to sentimentality: like Statius’s Oedipus, though for very different reasons, he is motivated in large part by deprivation. The deep personal need that underlies his vicarious identification with Troilus and the willed optimism that enables him to ignore the final implications of the story he is about to tell are always in danger of giving way to frustration, envy, and bitterness. Like Pandarus, who is in this respect his surrogate within the poem, and whose emotional involvement with the lovers we can never wholly trust, the narrator has invested all his hope of happiness in the love of Troilus and Criseye, to the point at which, during the consummation scene of Book 3, he can imagine trading his very soul for a moment of such bliss as he imagines them to know. And in proportion as he commits himself to a vision of love as the supreme bliss, he is haunted by a sense of the loss of love as a kind of hell. Hence his inner darkness, too, is a function of his obsession. At this early stage, one effect of his
engagement with his “auctor,” with literary tradition, and with history, is seemingly to exclude the spiritual as a valid category of response to the story he is telling. The intensity of his involvement, the sense in which he both possesses and is possessed by the lovers, imposes on his version of the story a foreshortening of spiritual perspective which complements Pandarus’s emphasis on the finite end of sexual consummation. Together Pandarus and the narrator maneuver the lovers into an unwitting collaboration with the laws of change and the inevitabilities of history; the dire prophecy of the Proem and our awareness of the fate of Troy loom over the action.

The narrator becomes dimly aware at certain moments that his relation to his material is ambiguous. Thus he seeks to explain away our misgivings and his own by claiming to be at the mercy of his source, and hence of the sexual mores of a remote place and time, in rendering the action of the poem (2. 12–49). At times, too, he excuses possible discords in his language on the grounds of his ignorance of love (2. 19–21; 3. 1401–14). But he never fully recognizes the contradictory demands imposed on him by the different traditions with which he is working until the moralizing outbursts of the poem’s concluding stanzas, where, as new awareness dawns, he seeks to exorcise the values of romance and classical poetry together. In the meantime the conventions that program his narration override his better judgment. As the story moves toward the “grete effect” at its center, he is increasingly willing to accept Pandarus’s rationalizations and affirm the pseudo-religious assumptions of courtoisie as a seductive alternative to recognizing the true nature of his involvement with his material. Hence he is wholly unprepared when he is inevitably betrayed by these conventions. Once compelled to recognize their inadequacy to control the larger forces that are shaping the course of events in his poetic world, he is easily brought to the point of despair, and the Furies are invoked once again to express his capitulation:

O ye Herynes, Nyghtes doughtren thre,
That endeles compleynen evere in pyne,
Megera, Alete, and ek Thesiphone,
Thow cruel Mars ek, fader to Quyryne,
This ilke ferthe book me helpeth fyne,
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So that the losse of lyf and love yfeere
Of Troilus be fully shewed here.

[4. 22–28]

The tradition with which the narrator is involved would seem to have no real place for a pietas capable of transcending the world view implied by the poem’s machinery. The only outlets he discovers for response to the unhappy outcome of the love story are grief and moralism (“Swich is this world . . .”), and the only appropriate conclusion is the death of the hero. Read under the influence of Tisiphone and her sisters, the message of the story of Troilus is despairing, and the narrator’s attachment to it is desperate.

There is nothing quite like the strange, lonely experience of the Troilus narrator in earlier medieval poetry, but the same complex relationship between erotic obsession and spiritual enervation may be seen powerfully dramatized in two closely related episodes in Dante’s Inferno. Dante, too, is concerned with dramatizing the interaction of classical and medieval influences in the imagination of a poet whose vision of love has been conditioned both by romance and by a sentimentalized awareness of classical tragic themes. The two episodes I wish to examine, taken together, constitute a powerful analysis of the romance ethos and its effects. The first is the famous moment in Inferno 5 when the Pilgrim, overcome by pity at hearing the story of Paolo and Francesca and unable to distinguish his situation and feelings from theirs, lapses into unconsciousness. At the center of the story Francesca tells is the romance she and Paolo have been reading, the elaborate account of Lancelot’s quasi-mystical awe in the presence of Guinevere, a story that programs the lovers’ own behavior as the values implied by it program Dante’s response. The seductive appeal of romance is clearly implicated here as well as in the lines that introduce the scene, a catalogue that begins with Semiramis, Dido, and Cleopatra, powerful embodiment of destructive desire, and then becomes increasingly “romanticized,” until the hapless company of the lustful is transformed in Dante’s mind into a courtly procession:

“... e vedi ’l grande Achille,
che con amore al fine combatteo.
The relation between the Pilgrim's loss of perspective here and his response to Paolo and Francesca is clear enough. The love stories conjured up in Inferno 5 are projections of the Pilgrim's own imaginative desire, their larger meaning obscured by his obsession with their erotic aspect to the point at which all the protagonists are reduced to the status of the conventional knights and ladies of courtly romance. The Pilgrim's bewilderment here and the swoon to which he succumbs at the end of the episode become more meaningful when set in relation to a second passage, much less frequently discussed, that provides a kind of frame for the Paolo-Francesca episode. The passage I have in mind describes the Pilgrim's first encounter with the souls of the damned at the end of Inferno 3. The heart of the passage for our purposes is the simile in which Dante describes how these souls hurl themselves from the shore of Acheron at the command of Charon, the boatman who is to ferry them to the realm of the damned:

Come d’autunno si levan le foglie
l’una appresso de l’altra, fin che ’l ramo
vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,
similmente il mal seme d’Adamo
gittansi di quel lito.

As the leaves fall away in Autumn, one after another, till the bough sees all its spoils upon the ground, so there the evil seed of Adam cast themselves from the shore.

[Inf. 3. 112–16]
We are told explicitly that the catalyst of the process described here is the cruel words, the “parole crude” of “Caron demonio” (100–102, 109). Vergil had used the adjective *cruda* to describe the strange, demonic vitality of Charon in his old age (*Aen*. 6. 304), and Dante’s use of the Italian cognate seems intended to impute a somewhat darker version of the same quality to Charon’s speech. The effect of Charon’s words points up the importance of language in the episode as a whole.\(^5\) Throughout, the Pilgrim is responding not only to what he sees, but also to the remembered words with which Vergil had described the same scene:

\begin{quote}
\textit{huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat,}

\textit{quam multa in siluis autumni frigore primo lapsa cadunt folia. . . .}
\end{quote}

Here the whole throng of souls rushed forward toward the bank . . . as many as the leaves which fall in the forest at the first chill of autumn. . . . [\textit{Aen*. 6. 305, 309–10}]

There is a significant analogy between the effect of Charon’s words on the damned souls and the effect of Vergil’s remembered words on the Pilgrim; he too is caught up as if by a demonic force, and the results may be seen in the alterations Dante has introduced in appropriating the Vergilian image. For Dante the central detail is not the leaves but the bough that “sees” them as they lie on the earth; the leaves themselves, moreover, fall one by one, “l’una appresso de l’altra.” The unnaturalness of the two details draws us away from the beauty of the image in itself and points us toward its significance in the context of the \textit{Inferno}: the bough is the Pilgrim; the behavior of the leaves, as they fall in sequence, mirrors the sequentiality of his imaginative and verbal response to the controlling influence of Vergil’s words. The simile thus becomes a powerful expression of Dante’s sense of the spiritual challenge involved in imitating a great poetic forebear. So deeply has he felt the power of Vergil’s language and imagery that he has momentarily assimilated also the deep sadness

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5. In using the image of tree and leaves Dante is probably thinking not only of Vergil but also of Horace’s use of the same ultimately Homeric image to compare the “generations” of leaves with the disappearance and recurrence of words in poetic tradition (*Ars poetica* 60–61).
behind them. Thus the action of the “evil seed of Adam” repre-
sents not only the self-destructive impulse of damned souls but
the self-diminishing effect of Dante’s identification with them
under Vergil’s spell. The leaves, representing his own words, are
the “seed” that he spends in an ejaculation of vicarious participa-
tion in the scene he beholds. And the peril of thus succumbing
to the effect of Vergil’s words—themselves finally “parole
crude”—is indicated by the terrible shock the Pilgrim undergoes
when he is forced to consider this potentially suicidal involve-
ment in relation to the promise of his salvation implied by Char-
on’s initial reaction to his presence in Hell (90–93, 127–36).
Totally disoriented by his self-indulgent response to the pathos
and bleak finality of the Vergilian moment, he has lost all sense
of his own moral and spiritual mission and let himself be drawn
to the brink of psychological chaos. The result is that he falls into
a swoon, “like one who is seized by sleep.” When at the end of his
encounter with Francesca he falls again, “as a dead body falls,”
we are invited to see in the second fall a more insidious and
perilous version of the same moral and psychological failure, the
failure of a sensibility rendered incapable of recognizing the fact
of mortality and the self-betraying nature of human passion.6

Though Chaucer clearly studied both of these Dantean epi-
sodes carefully and recalls them at significant turning points in
the Troilus, what is most important for the moment is the sim-
ilarity they point up between the situations of the narrators of
the two poems. Dante’s story of the ill-fated love of Paolo and
Francesca is presented to the Pilgrim just as the story of Troilus
presents itself to Chaucer’s narrator. Its language, like the
“weeping” verses of the Troilus, is suffused by a grief whose
source is somehow uncertain: Francesca’s posture imitates genu-
ine sorrow: she is “like one who weeps in speaking” (126). And
in both cases the effect on a spirit already made “tristo e pio” by
an obsession with unhappy love is overwhelming. But both poets
are careful to keep their narrators’ emotional involvement in
perspective. As the Pilgrim’s self-abandonment to pietà in the
circle of the lustful is only one aspect of the larger engagement

6. On the sense in which the encounter in Canto 5, like that in Canto 3,
constitutes a misreading of Vergil, and of the story of Dido in particular, see
with the world of the dead which is introduced by his encounter with Charon and the *anime prave* of *Inferno* 3, so the fate of Troilus “in loynge” is only one part of the long, tragic story that Chaucer’s invocation of Tisiphone conjures up. Both poets, that is to say, evoke the contexts of classical epic as a way of suggesting levels of more profound meaning which their narrators, committed as they are to a “romance” view of their material, can appreciate only dimly.

To suggest, as I have done, that the attitudes of both narrators are influenced by their common experience of the idealizing love-code of medieval poetry is not, of course, to deny that both Dante and Chaucer were influenced in more positive ways by the tradition of romance and *courtoisie*. The experiences delineated in the *Commedia* and the *Troilvs* are conditioned by deep and appreciative study of courtly models, the most important being the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris.⁷ Both poets were concerned with giving new expression to the element of aspiration, what Dante calls the “good courage” at the heart of courtly idealism, and each in his way can be said to have reconstituted the courtly tradition in his own terms.

It is important, too, to recognize that the narrator’s conditioning by the romance tradition is not the sole reason for the uncertainty of his engagement with classical material. Like Dante, Chaucer understood clearly that taking on the themes of classical poetry and assimilating the roles of the great *poetae* were dangerous enterprises in themselves. Though he offers nothing comparable to Dante’s direct and sustained involvement with the single figure of Vergil, his knowledge of classical poetry was as extensive and profound as Dante’s. He shared Dante’s sense that the vision of these poets had been tragically unfulfilled, a vision circumscribed by darkness, ending only in the shadowy afterlife of the underworld and the sorrow of those whom Dante’s Vergil calls “the ancient suffering spirits” (*Inf.* 1. 116). The last thing we will learn of Troilus is that he has been assigned to the charge of Mercury, whose office is to conduct the souls of the dead to

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this last abode.\textsuperscript{8} The opening invocation to Tisiphone offers us, in a single concentrated image, a clear sense of the psychological threat posed for the narrator himself by his acquiescence in the bleak finality of Troilus's fate. For Chaucer the telling of such a story means following his chosen \textit{auctores} in the same way that Dante followed Vergil into the world of the dead. It is not too much to see Chaucer’s narrator, too, descending imaginatively into hell when he conjures up Tisiphone in preparing to tell of a love that passes finally and irrevocably “out of joie.” His sudden reduction to a “sorwful instrument,” a faithful transmitter of the story’s despairing message, is a version of the almost paralyzing despair that menaces Dante at the gate of the citadel of Dis, “the woeful city,” in \textit{Inferno} 9, where Tisiphone and her sisters demoralize not only the Pilgrim but Vergil himself.\textsuperscript{9}

But it is important to remember that the narrator’s vision is not totally or finally circumscribed by the forces that threaten to distort and subvert his outlook. Vulnerable as his position is, his intuitive human sympathy, what Dante would call his \textit{pietà},\textsuperscript{10} somehow remains a constant element in his attitude toward the lovers. Though it threatens to overwhelm him with sorrow for their fate, it also gives him the capacity to attain at times a certain distance from his story. Thus toward the end of the Proem his attitude becomes informed for a moment by an instinctive charity; he withdraws from his intense emotional identification with the lovers and redefines his bond with them in what seem unmistakably religious terms:

\begin{quote}
For so hope I my soule best avaunce,
To preye for hem that loves servauntes be,
And write hire wo, and lyve in charite,

And for to have of hem compassioun,
As though I were hire owne brother dere.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{[1. 47-51]}

\textsuperscript{8.} On the problem of Troilus’s ultimate fate see ch. 8, p. 234, note 6.

\textsuperscript{9.} \textit{Inferno} 9. 34–54. Chaucer seems to recall Dante’s account at several points: with the “cruel furie sorwynge evere yn peyne” of \textit{Tr.} 1. 9, cf. Dante’s reference to the Furies as handmaids of Proserpine, the “queen of eternal lament” (\textit{Inf.} 9. 44). Cf. \textit{Tr.} 4. 22–24, with Root’s note, and 4. 473–76, where Troilus looks forward to an afterlife of “endless complaint” in company with Proserpine.

\textsuperscript{10.} In appropriating the term \textit{pietà} I am thinking of the two quite different
These lines follow immediately on the long "bidding prayer" in which the narrator in his priestly role asks the happy lovers in his imagined audience to invoke the god of love on behalf of all his servants. The attitude expressed here is, as I have suggested, an instinctive one: the narrator proceeds "streyght to my ma-
tere" without further comment, and shows no clear awareness of the perspective on love that these lines imply. But they none-
theless indicate that a simpler and more genuine piety, so funda-
mental as to be effectively unconscious, underlies the narrator’s conscious attitude of devotion to the god of love and compassion for his servants. They thus foreshadow the more decisive dis-
tancing of the narrator from his subject matter which will take place in the final stanzas of the poem. There the seductive dan-
gers of the story and its traditional vehicle will be exorcised once and for all, leaving behind a scintilla of essential human signifi-
cance to which the poet can respond in full confidence.

The narrator’s sense of purpose will have to undergo a long and complex evolution to attain this final perspective. As Dante, astray amid false images of good, is rescued by being made to experience imaginatively the fates of “the lost people,” so Chau-
cer’s narrator can be liberated from his perilous involvement with the fate of Troilus only by living it through to the end. Like Dante vicariously experiencing damnation on the shore of Acheron or swooning out of sorrow at the story of Paolo and Francesca, he will abandon all rational and spiritual perspective in his identification with the lovers, and the providential effect of his experience will take place almost wholly at an unconscious level. But as for Dante, so for Chaucer the imaginative experi-
ence constitutes an artistic as well as a spiritual process, a sym-

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meanings assigned to it in Convivio 2. 10. 6, in which Dante distinguishes true pietà, a noble disposition of mind apt to receive “charitable emotions,” from the mere passion of pietà, which consists in a potentially debilitating sorrow for the ills of others. The implications of this opposition for the poet of love are discussed by Roger Dragonetti, “L’épisode de Francesca dans le cadre de la convention courteuse,” in his Aux frontières du langage poétique, Romanica Gandensia, no. 9 (Ghent, 1961), pp. 96–99. See also Mazzotta, Dante: Poet of the Desert, pp. 168–69.

11. D. W. Robertson, Jr., “Chaucerian Tragedy,” ELH 19 (1952): 12–13, seems to confuse the narrator’s point of view with Chaucer’s own, reading these lines as making a clear distinction between the wrong love of the servants of Cupid and the right love which the speaker elects to follow himself. See also Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, 1962), p. 475, where Chaucer’s “de-
tachment” in these lines is contrasted with the personal involvement of Boccaccio in the story of the lovers.
bolic and practical exercise in the creation of high poetry. Both poets attain a sense of profound affinity with the vision of the greatest of the antichi spiriti, even as they are led to a rejection of that vision.

At this point I would like to turn to a consideration of how the narrator’s engagement with poetic tradition is complemented by the experience of Troilus, an experience in which the shaping influence of earlier medieval thought and poetry on the theme of love is omnipresent. In the world of the Troilus even Bayard the talking horse is sufficiently a derk to acknowledge the law that keeps him between the traces, and to ease the burden of submission with the consolation of philosophy (l. 218–24). It is inevitable that Troilus, preparing to enter upon the life of a lover, should have come to terms with broad areas of experience whose laws are authoritatively defined, and seem at times to be virtually imposed, by books. No poet has understood better than Chaucer that falling in love is the most thoroughly conventional, as well as the most natural and inevitable, of human experiences, and the Troilus is one of the greatest treatments of this characteristic medieval concern. In its demonstration of the complex ways in which the literary history of love informs the experience of Troilus and Criseyde it becomes, as truly as the Roman de la Rose itself, a poem “ou l’art d’Amors est tote enclose.”

For the poets of the medieval courtly tradition art and love are in collaboration from the first stirrings of erotic or aesthetic feeling. Art at this primary level is articulation, a vocabulary and a set of images in terms of which we first realize imaginatively the condition of loving; it is extremely difficult to determine whether love develops in response to some external phenomenon or whether it is one’s own imaginative creation. Hence the concern of so many medieval poets with the relationship of love and poetry: the virtual identification, in the highly conventional courtly lyric, of the impulse to love with the impulse to sing; the preoccupation of lovers in romance with the foreshadowings of their joys and sorrows in the stories of other lovers; and Chaucer’s presentation of the narrator of the Troilus as “the sorwful instrument / That helpeth loveres, as I kan, to pleyne” (l. 9–10).

Certainly Troilus’s experience as lover is intimately bound up
with poetry. From the moment he first takes purpose to pursue “loves craft,” he seems to respond, spontaneously and intuitively, to the promptings of tradition, and his experience is presented again and again in terms of a sequence of roles borrowed from other poems. His first attempt to articulate the love he feels takes the form of a Petrarchan sonnet. He is compared allusively to Dante the Pilgrim, the lover of the Roman de la Rose, and a host of youthful victims of erotic violence in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Faced with the loss of Criseyde, he becomes Boethius’s prisoner, helpless in contemplation of the seemingly inevitable workings of fate.

Pandarus, too, assumes a variety of conventional roles that complement those of Troilus. Most obviously he is the guide, cast variously as Dante’s Vergil, the Ami of the Roman, and Boethius’s Lady Philosophy. But he is also the artist, a fount of courtly rhetoric, and the architect from within of most of the plot of the love story. In certain of the poem’s most memorable scenes he is a virtual god of love, the presiding genius whose will seems to draw the very elements into collaboration with his grand design. The complementarity between his role and that of Troilus defines the primary level on which the programmatic influence of literary tradition manifests itself in the poem. But as I will suggest in Chapter 2, the relation between Pandarus’s art and Troilus’s love involves a profound tension, and this tension is central to the experience of love the poem describes. Troilus’s love seems preeminently the expression of his own pure feelings, his poetry that of the fool who sings what he discovers in his own heart; but his role is circumscribed by the artistry of Pandarus, who creates around him a continually evolving scenario, allowing full scope to Troilus’s idealism while drawing him ever closer to the fatally compromising goal of consummation. Thus while Troilus undergoes the experience of the lover at the fountain, a pilgrim sustained by the Dantesque “good courage,” a visionary who discovers in love the “holy bond of thynges,” Pandarus is ceaselessly engaged in a process of translation, creating an earthly counterpart to Troilus’s imaginative vision in the light of his own earthbound imagination, an ingenium that reduces all courtly idealism to a repertory of erotic stratagems and will lead Troilus, Pandarus himself, and the poem’s deeply engaged narrator to invest all
their imaginative longings in a vision of sexual consummation as “blisse” which inevitably betrays them.

What happens to Troilus’s vision of love under the influence of the literary program imposed upon him by Pandarus is illustrated in broader terms through the poem’s allusions to the poetae. Beginning on the level of the narrative itself with Chaucer’s subtle but thoroughgoing transformation of *Il Filostrato* and moving outward to the level at which the world of the *Troilus* comes into alignment with the cosmology and historical paradigms of Ovid, Statius, and finally Dante, we can trace a progressive enlargement of the implications of Troilus’s experience and a growing involvement of his experience with that of the poem’s narrator, to the point at which the narrator himself emerges at last as the figure in whom the poem’s meaning is most fully realized. For the narrator, though he resists the implications of his own awareness through most of the poem, is finally in possession of a larger and truer vision of love than pagan Troilus or worldly Pandarus can ever know. Troilus is the aeolian harp on whom the complexities of love are registered, but it is the narrator, rather than Troilus himself, who comes at last to see the relation between the erotic and the spiritual in Troilus’s love and who finally succeeds in discovering and affirming the nucleus of truth at the heart of the courtly ecstasy he has described. For the narrator to come to a clear understanding of this experience, he must come to terms with the literary tradition that shapes his own view of Troilus’s love, provides him with the essential resources for articulating the meaning of what he sees, but at the same time threatens to inhibit his own vision by imposing on it alien and limited conceptions of love, fate, and human freedom.

The narrator’s experience and that of Troilus converge most strikingly in Book 3 of the poem. In the magnificent hymn with which that book opens we can see not only the operation of the cosmic power to which both figures pay conscious homage, but also the higher love of which this natural force is a partial manifestation:

*O blisful light, of which the bemes clere*  
*Adorneth al the thridde hevene faire;*  
*O sonnes lief, O Joves doughter deere,*
Plesaunce of love, O goodly debonaire,
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire;
O verray cause of heele and of gladnesse,
Iheryed be thy myght and thi goodnesse.

In hevene and helle, in erthe and salte see,
Is felt thi myght, if that I wel descerne;
As man, brid, best, fisshe, herbe, and grene tree
The fele in tymes with vapour eterne.
God loveth, and to love wol nat werne;
And in this world no lyves creature,
Withouten love, is worth, or may endure.

Ye Joves first to thilke effectes glade,
Thorugh which that thynges lyven alle and be,
Comeveden, and amoreux hem made
On mortal thyng, and as yow list, ay ye
Yeve hym in love ese or adversitee;
And in a thousand formes down hym sente
For love in erthe, and whom yow list, he hente.

These stanzas are a close imitation of Boccaccio’s Filostrato 3. 74–76, in which their counterparts represent Troiolo’s own response to the joys of love, but Chaucer has quietly adjusted the passage to his own purposes and established a clear hierarchy among the kinds of love it celebrates. Boccaccio from the outset stresses the continuity between cosmic and sexual love; Chaucer is acutely aware of this continuity, but refrains from developing it until he has defined the power he invokes in unambiguously religious terms. Like Boccaccio’s, Chaucer’s opening stanza celebrates love first as a planetary “light,” then as a goddess, and finally, in the language of Dante, as an active force in human life. But where Boccaccio’s Troiolo employs Dante’s stilnovo diction in praise of erotic love, noting that the power he celebrates is the source of his own “sweet sighs” (Fil. 3. 74. 6–7), Chaucer remains on a level of Dantesian exaltation. His association of love with “gentil hertes” seems to echo the opening line of Guido Guinizelli’s famous canzone and perhaps the even more famous revision of that line by Dante’s Francesca, reflecting on the fatal
power of erotic love (*Inf.* 5. 100). But the "hele," "might," and "goodness" he attributes to love are closer to the saving grace, the power and goodness of Beatrice as invoked in Dante's final prayer (*Par.* 31. 79–84) than to the healing power (*salute*) which is the object of the sweet sighs of Boccaccio's Troiolo. Again, in the second stanza, in which Boccaccio places "the gods" together with man and all the other creatures subjected to the *eterno vapor* of love (75. 7), Chaucer points rather to the source of the "vapor": the benevolence of a single transcendent god whose love is a constant sustaining force in the universe.  

Only after defining love in the highest possible terms, poetic and theological, does Chaucer proceed to address the rampant Ovidian power that once inspired the metamorphoses of Jove. Though he goes on to consider love at length on the earthly level and deals objectively with its power for good or ill in human life, he has established an allusive context in which good and ill mean far more than success or failure in the attainment of the "grace" that is the reward of Troiolo's gallantry. For Chaucer, too, courtesy is one of the benefits of love, but it is only a beginning:

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Algates hem that ye wol sette a-fire,
They dreden shame, and vices they resigne;
Ye don hem curteys be, freash and benigne;
And heighe or lowe, after a wight entendeth,
The joies that he hath, youre myght it sendeth.
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[3. 24–28]

The "entente" that is first aroused by lust or aesthetic attraction can evolve into "gentilesse"; it can become, as it will for Troilus,


13. Ida L. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus* (Oxford, 1970), p. 32, claims that the entire hymn can be read in Christian terms, and that "the third stanza, for example, where Venus seems to be identified with the Holy Spirit, vivifying and impersonating the Love of God, can be read in just that way, if we think of Jove as Providence." But these remarks apply much better to Boccaccio's version of the third stanza than to Chaucer's, and they ignore Chaucer's careful delimitation of the functions of Jove from those of the higher power he invokes directly. Where Boccaccio's Giove, influenced by love, is "merciful to the offensive actions of us mortals" (*Fil.* 3. 76. 3–5), Chaucer's Jove is simply made "amoreux . . . / On mortal thyng"; where Boccaccio's goddess makes Jove visit pleasure, rather than deserved punishment, on mankind, Chaucer substitutes an eroticized power that visits "ese or adversitee" on Jove himself.
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a sense of cosmic harmony. At its highest it is Dante’s ecstatic contemplation of Beatrice, and it is one function of allusion in the hymn to remind us of the Dantean vision of a love that transcends and embraces the Ovidian world of natural force and human passion.

In its positive aspect, then, this hymn is one of the most powerful affirmations by a medieval poet of the meaning of human love. I think also that in Chaucer’s allusions here we can see his fascination, at once reverent and speculative, with the imaginative and spiritual life of human beings, in whom love “upgroweth” to a capacity for experiencing its effects on all of the levels at which the hymn evokes it. He maintains a magisterial Boethian control over the rich imagery—cosmological, mythic, and religious—that conveys his sense of the hierarchy of love in the universe, but he also invites us to consider the evolution of our appreciation of this hierarchy. The history of religion itself becomes a bond between its Christian and pagan elements.

But the range of experience implied by the great hymn is, of course, far greater than Troilus, or the narrator insofar as his vision is identified with that of Troilus, can know. It provides the setting for Troilus’s attempt to realize the full implications of love as he and the narrator invoke it; but eros, and the limit imposed on his spiritual horizon by history itself, will combine to betray his vision, and he will attain only a physical and imaginative simulacrum of the bliss he so briefly glimpses. The allusions in the great hymn, visionary and Dantean on the one hand, Ovidian and courtly on the other, evoke not only the spiritual and imaginative energy with which Troilus seeks to transcend his earthly situation, but also the forces of necessity and physical desire to which he succumbs. The irony of Troilus’s rise and fall is best defined by reference to one last book, the most authoritative of all Chaucer’s chosen texts in its formulation of the role of love in the universe, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy.*

The *Consolation* affirms love as the source of cosmic and social order, the power that preserves the bonds among the elements and among human beings and impels all creatures in their proper courses of behavior. The dialogue is punctuated by moments of epiphany when this universal power can be seen as expressing
the will of a benevolent creator. Virtually all of these passages are drawn on at comparable moments in the _Troilus_. Troilus sees
love for a vivid instant as a cosmic “charity,” the “holy bond of thynges” (3. 1254, 1261), and later as the source of “holsom alliaunce” among humankind (3. 1746); the narrator hymns it as “the verray cause of heele and of gladnesse” (3. 6).

But Boethius makes plain that the relation of divine and cosmic love to human behavior is not simple, and their particular effects in human life often bear an uncertain or even contradictory relation to the larger design. There is a natural impulse toward survival, a love of oneself or _caritas sui_, which in its highest form is a desire for unity and a love of the good (_De consolatione philosophiae_ 3, pr. 11. 30–41). But this impulse is mediated by appetite and self-interest as well as idealism and instinctive virtue, and its power to direct our actions along virtuous paths is frequently at odds with the more narrowly self-determining impulse of the individual will. Moreover, the larger natural impulse is not invariably the more virtuous: nature and the will come into conflict not only when the will expresses itself in a self-indulgent way, or is driven to elect some rash course like suicide, but also when we choose to resist our natural attraction to food or sexual activity. Our relationship with the natural order is always subject to the pressure of contradictory feelings, and only rarely can we see our desires in any clear relation to the benevolent power in which they originate and to which they ultimately seek to reunite us.

In the absence of such vision, the natural “intention” that the divine love instills in us may well seem more tyrannical than benevolent, a power coercive and enslaving insofar as it directs the will toward those lesser goods that compromise reason in the interest of sustaining and continuing our natural existence. The _Consolation_ makes it plain that the “laws” divine love imposes through the natural order may even be directly at odds with our pursuit of the greater good of self-realization. Thus Bayard himself, if he chose to question the authority of the “horses lawe” that condemns him to draw with his fellows (1. 223–24),

14. All references to the _Consolatio_ are to the edition of Ludwig Bieler, _Corpus Christianorum_, vol. 94 (Turnhout, 1957). References to specific portions of the _metra_ are by line, those to the _prosae_ by sentence.
could quote Boethian scripture to his purpose. For Boethius, who has so much to say on the necessity and virtue of hierarchy, is also capable of seeing the resistance of animals to human governance as a striving to realize their true natures, comparable to the impulse by which humans seek “the good” (3, pr. 2, metr. 2).

But as Bayard is aware of the whip, so Boethius makes us aware that it is dangerous to resist love’s law: the reins and lashes that subject beasts to human authority are analogous to the coercive power of *natura potens*, who “plies the reins” of creation itself (3, metr. 2. 1). Chaucer recalls this menacing aspect of the Boethian cosmic amor in Book 1 of the *Troilus* in the course of a homily on love’s power which has as text the proposition that “may no man fordo the lawe of kynde” (238):

Now sith it may nat goodly ben withstonde,
And is a thing so vertuous in kynde,
Refuseth nat to love for to be bonde;
Syn as hym selven list he may yow bynde.
The yerde is bet that bowen wole and wynde
Than that that brest; and therfor I yow rede
To folwen love that yow so wel kan lede.

[1. 253–59]

Interspersed with the affirmation of love in these lines are three separate reminders of its inevitability. And the image of the pliant sapling recalls one of Boethius’s more ominous images of the power of nature:

*Validis quondam uiribus acta*
*pronum flectit uirga cacumen;*
*hanc si curuans dextra remisit,*
*recto spectat uertice caelum.*

When a sapling is bent with great strength, it bows its top downward to the ground; but if the hand which bends it lets it go, it draws erect and faces heaven. [3, metr. 2. 27–30]

The opposition between the tree bowed down by the strong hand and its original heavenward orientation recalls the condi-
tion of the Boethian prisoner himself, who had learned from Philosophy to direct his gaze on high, but who has been bowed down to earth by his misfortunes (De cons. 1, metr. 2). But here the coercive hand is not worldly fortune but the power of nature itself. The natural order, it would seem, can be as powerfully disruptive of human aspiration as any worldly accident, and the irony is underscored by the fact that the language of the passage just quoted echoes the famous final poem of Book 2 of the Consolation, on the ordering power of love. Divine love, then, can manifest itself in radically opposing ways in human life, and in both the Consolation and the Troilus there is a persistent undertone of doubt: when human beings pursue happiness, it would seem, they are fated never to know with certainty whether they are fulfilling their role in the natural economy or recklessly deviating from it. Troilus’s impulse toward full participation in the harmony of a universe whose elements are “married” by cosmic love draws him into a chain of events that lead inexorably to the moment when his only impulse will be to seek death in battle.

But if Troilus’s own intuition of beauty and harmony is inescapably bound up with the “blynde lust” in which earthly love consists, the narrator and his audience can come to appreciate it at its full value from their surer spiritual vantage point. The process of breaking away from Troilus’s earthbound desire and entering the realm of charity is inseparable from a recognition that the vehicle of this new insight into love has been “the forme of olde clerkes speche / In poetrie.” The narrator’s final vision is largely dependent on the sympathetic, even reverent assimilation of the flawed but profoundly humane vision of the great poetae. In the end, the poem’s central concern is the narrator’s discovery, and by implication Chaucer’s, of what it means to be, first, a poet, and, second, a Christian poet.

15. With the effect introduced by the si... remisit of line 29, compare that introduced by si... remiserit in 2, metr. 8. 16.