have suggested that it is Troilus whose unfulfilled passion impels the narrator and his story forward in the closing portion of the poem. But perhaps it would be equally appropriate to say that he is guided by providence. I began this essay by comparing the enterprise of the final stanzas to that of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, and at first sight the situation of the *Troilus* narrator at this stage may well seem as hopelessly confused as that of the dreamer in the earlier poem. But his outward confusion is strangely combined with an underlying purpose that, though it is at this point wholly subliminal and is never ratified by any such vivid sign as the Jovian eagle of the *House of Fame*, is far surer in its orientation than the quest of the dreamer. I would like to begin tracing the *Troilus* narrator’s providential journey by considering the four stanzas that constitute his first attempt to conclude his poem, a passage that begins with his appeal to “every lady bright of hewe” (5. 1772) and ends with his prayer that his book be understood. Throughout these stanzas he is utterly at sea regarding his own intention in the *Troilus* and yet somehow undergoes a significant transformation that leaves him with a new appreciation of the role and capacities of poetry. Though he seems utterly at the mercy of the cumulative effect of his long-standing delusions, there is in fact no moment in the poem at which he is closer to Dante and the poets of the past. To understand the conclusion of the *Troilus* it is necessary first of all
to recognize the effect of the providential instinct that guides the narrator through this crucial transition.

The stanzas in which the narrator seeks to cap the narrative with a moral capable of satisfying both the male and the female portion of his courtly audience show him characteristically evading responsibility for the implications of his story. Other books have told of Criseyde's infidelity (1776), and for his part the narrator finds the falseness of men a more serious issue. With a certain amount of spluttering he manages to convince himself that an appropriate moral for the poem is "Beth war of men," then quickly dismisses the problem by formally offering his completed book to the world. But his ostensible *envoi* brings us not to the end of the poem, but to the threshold of a complete reevaluation of the story of Troilus and his relation to it:

*Go litel book, go litel myn tragedye,*
*Ther god thi makere yit, or that he dye,*
*So sende myght to make in som comedye!*

[5. 1786–88]

The opposition of tragedy to comedy here is often explained as a balancing of the *Troilus*, now almost complete, against the *Canterbury Tales*, but when these lines are read as part of the conclusion as a whole, they may be seen not as pointing forward to a work still to come, but as referring to the precarious generic status of the *Troilus* itself at this crucial stage in its narrative unfolding. ¹ Though the story of Troilus's double sorrow has run its course, his life is not yet complete, and the narrator's discovery of the meaning of "lyf and love yfeere" is only beginning.

In the course of rising to a new awareness of the meaning of his poem, the narrator becomes aware of the relation of his work to that of earlier poets, and, at the same time, of its separate status as a product of his own place, time, and language:

¹. For the view that the lines look forward to the *Tales*, see Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 30–36. 75. The alternative view is discussed by Anne Middleton, "Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales,*" in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward W. Said, Selected Papers from the English Institute, n.s. 3 (Baltimore, Md., 1980), p. 35.
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But, litel book, no makyng thow nenvie,
But subgit be to alle poesie;
And kis the steppes, where as thow seest space
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

[1789–92]

The first stage of this process is the subordination of the narrator's sense of himself as a "maker" to the recognition of his more significant role as a participant in the continuum of poetic experience and poetic tradition. Whether we take "maker" as meaning simply "craftsman," the practitioner of an art, or understand it in a more specific sense as denoting one who writes love verse to the specifications of a courtly audience, Chaucer clearly intends to set this function in contrast to the larger responsibilities of one who would follow the poetae. After the insistent repetition of "makere," "make" and "makyng" in 1787–89, the word "poesie" is introduced into the poem for the first time in 1790. Now, also for the first time, references to the tyrannizing book of "myn auctor" and the chimerical Lollius are replaced by the naming of real poets. In bidding his book revere these poets, Chaucer echoes Statius's admonition to his own poem to follow reverently in the footsteps of Vergil (Theb. 12. 816–17), and so proclaims both his affinity with Statius and his tentative claim to a place in the canon. With this gesture, the narrator rids himself once and for all of the "disese" that had led him at a number of points in the story to deny his responsibility for his handling of the love story and that has appeared again in his attempt to explain away the moral implications of his treatment of Criseyde. To pass from "making" to "poesie" means in effect passing from the service of the god of love and a concern with the rhetoric of "sentement" and "loves art" to a concern with universal values and a recognition of the authority of poetic tradition as a repository of these values. Though the narrator's emphasis is clearly on his "subject" status, and he never claims for himself the name of poet, his new

2. See above, Introduction, notes 1 and 3.
3. On tradition as "the preserved record of what is constantly meaningful to all men in all times and places," see Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance (New Haven, Conn., 1963), p. 84.
position is very different from the hapless subservience in which, overwhelmed by the sorrows of love, he had abandoned himself to the pagan, tragic view of his material earlier in the poem.

In the context of this new departure, the use of the term “poesie” is highly suggestive. Unlike “poetrie,” used of “olde clerkes speche” in 1855, “poesie” occurs nowhere else in Chaucer. In using it to make this crucial transition, he may be recalling Dante’s sole use of poesi, in the opening lines of the Purgatorio:

Ma qui la morta poesi resurga,
    o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono . . .

But here let dead poetry rise again, O holy Muses, since I am yours . . . [Purg. 1. 7–8]

Both poets invoke “poesie” as part of a gesture of self-dedication, and for both, its appearance marks the recovery of vital contact with the classical tradition.4

But while the discovery of an allegiance to “poesie” is clearly of the utmost importance, it is harder to determine how sure the narrator feels about it. His naming of his auctores implies an emerging sense of his own identity, but the literalism with which he bids his book “kis the steppes” where the poets have walked suggests a lingering sense of his own slightly comic ineptitude in comparison with the great masters. In the stanza following, in which he accepts at last the fact of his own responsibility for the language of his poem, his assertion of autonomy is balanced by an anxiety about the ability of his words to survive the process of oral and written transmission—thoughts that are very far from the concluding reflections of Statius and Ovid on the enduring power of art.

Nevertheless, when the narrator discovers simultaneously

4. The rhyme scheme of the “poesie” stanza is also unique in the Troilus and suggests a further evocation of Dante. A single rhyme is sustained through five lines, and the sequence of “tragedye,” “comedye,” and “poesie” stands out with the effect of Dante’s terza rima.
both the nature of his literary indebtedness and the final inde-
pendence of his own poem, he holds the key to liberation from
his inhibiting emotional involvement with the story of Troilus.
We can reconcile the significance of the change he is undergoing
with his evident uncertainty about it by comparing his experi-
ience to that which Dante dramatizes in the later stages of the
Purgatorio. In both cases we must recognize the peculiarly “poet-
ic” nature of this experience; it can be communicated only
through poetry and largely by way of one poet’s insights into the
work of another.

The symbol of this process is Dante’s Statius, and its nature is
indicated by Dante’s emphasis on the wholly intuitive character
of the knowledge vouchsafed to Statius in the course of his
transformation from pagan poet to purified Christian soul. The
catalyst of his experience of conversion was the language of
Vergil, which, by a process compounded of partial misreading
and half-conscious translation, came gradually to seem to him
“consonant” with the doctrines being proclaimed by Christian
preachers (Purg. 22. 37–42, 67–81). We cannot analyze this pro-
cess, nor can we point to clear indications of Statius’s further
spiritual evolution during the period when his crypto-Christian-
ty was concealed, as he tells us, by an outward paganism
(Purg. 22. 91).

In Purgatory Statius’s knowledge remains wholly intuitive. His
account of the unchanging climate of the upper reaches of the
mountain of Purgatory is not an explanation, for the phe-
omenon he is describing cannot be explained in natural terms.
There is no alteration here, yet there is change; there is no
natural cause for the trembling of the mountain, yet it trembles
(Purg. 21. 43–45, 55–60). Statius candidly confesses his inability
to explain these phenomena, and his bafflement is in keeping
with his own experience: for the process of purgation from
which Statius has just emerged and which concludes with the
shaking of the mountain is imperceptible even by those who
undergo it, its only confirmation consisting in the sudden “sur-
prising” of the soul by the newly liberated will (61–63).

By emphasizing the intuitive element in Statius’s newfound
knowledge and by representing this knowledge as the fulfill-
ment of insights first expressed in Statius’s own poem, Dante is
calling attention to the special importance of poetry as the medium of Statius's experience. Statius claims that his poetic and religious lives had diverged and that he had maintained an outward paganism and continued to write classical poetry long after receiving Christian baptism (22. 88–91). But this very poetry remains the sole documentary basis for Dante's account of his career, and by his allusive use of Statius's own poems, Dante reminds us that we, too, are almost wholly dependent on intuition in our attempts to gauge the spiritual significance of a poetic text. Any Christian interpretation of Statius must be a matter of intuition, for no single detail of his poetry will yield a clear and unmistakable Christian meaning. The kind of reading needed to bring the *Thebaid* into line with Dante's spiritual biography of its poet is close to the kind of reading that Dante credits Statius with having applied to the poetry of Vergil (*Purg.* 22. 64–73). It depends on our giving a privileged significance to elements in the poetic text that may well have had an altogether different value for the poet himself. By inventing a spiritual-historical context for Statius's own poetic activity and for his revisionist reading of Vergil, Dante is establishing him as an important intermediary between the classical and Christian worlds, between imaginative and spiritual experience, between the great poetry of the ancient world and the poetry of Dante himself.

But if we cannot locate Statius's conversion in time or define it in precise psychological terms, we can see the symptoms of it already in the *Thebaid*. Its most striking foreshadowing, as I have already suggested, is the account of the conversion of Menoeceus, which becomes the basis for Statius's discourse on the soul in *Purgatorio* 25. In delegating Statius to trace the development of human life from the origin of the natural embryo to its consummation in the soul, Dante is pointing to the presence of a kind of "embryonic" spirituality in the *Thebaid* itself: Statius's intuition of the inner experience of Menoeceus becomes the germ of his own liberation from the psychological chaos of Thebes. Poetry, it would seem, can mean more than it knows, and by inventing the conversion of Statius, Dante is

5. See above, chapter 4, pp. 138–40.
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positing a mode of uniquely poetic experience, an interaction of literary sensibility and spirituality as impervious to analysis as the image of the transformation of sunlight into wine which climaxes Statius’s discourse (Purg. 25. 76–78).

One of Dante’s boldest acts of invention thus becomes the vehicle of one of his most serious explorations of the capacities of poetry. What the apotheosis of Menoeceus comes to represent in the spiritual career of Statius as “invented” by Dante is what this same act of invention represents for Dante himself. Statius’s conversion is finally most important as a symbolic prefiguration of Dante’s own growth to spiritual maturity through poetry, a growth that will be illustrated in his encounters with Bonagiunta da Lucca and other poets in the later cantos of the Purgatorio. Thus by a series of engagements in which poetic and spiritual experience are indistinguishable, Menoeceus’s encounter with Virtus in the Thebaid leads directly to that moment in the Purgatorio in which Dante will discover himself capable of explaining the inspiration of his own poetry as a response to the in-breathing of divine love:

“I’ mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch’è’ ditta dentro vo significando.”

“I am one who, when Love inspires me, takes note, and goes setting it forth after the fashion which he dictates within me.”
[Purg. 24. 52–54]

This creative process is hardly less mysterious than the infusion of the human soul which Statius will describe in the same imaginative terms in the following canto:

lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto
sovra tant’ arte di natura, e spira
spirito novo, di vertù repleto. . . .

The first Mover turns to [the fully formed foetus] with joy over such art of nature, and breathes into it a new spirit replete with virtue. . . . [Purg. 25. 70–72]
In both of these moments of insight there is something essential that defies analysis. We cannot see the unfolding of the process that brings about Dante’s self-discovery or the animation of the human embryo. In both cases, in Dante’s terms, we are surprised—as we are surprised by the apotheosis of Menoeceus; as we are surprised by the appearance of Statius in Purgatory and his retrospective unveiling of a history that had been invisible in his own poetry; as the soul is surprised by the sudden liberation of the purified will. And it is as a surprise of the same order that Chaucer’s narrator will realize the power to resolve his poem in a new way, such that its completion leads, as in the case of Statius’s treatment of Menoeceus, to the discovery of spiritual meaning.

In simplest terms, the narrator of the final dozen stanzas of the *Troilus* bears the same relation to the narrator of the poem up to that point that Dante’s Statius bears to the Statius of the *Thebaid*. But Chaucer goes even further than Dante in emphasizing the narrator’s subservience to tradition and his inability to appreciate what is happening to him. When he bids farewell to his “litel book,” he is clearly unaware that he is soon to gain a new perspective on his story and break free once and for all from his acquiescence in its tragic message. When he “subjects” his poem to poetic tradition, it is hard to find any trace of Dante’s implicit confidence in his own power to rival the great poets of antiquity and go beyond them into new areas of experience. Even the lines that urge respect for the poem’s language are primarily an expression of anxiety: though they stand in significant contrast to the narrator’s earlier disclaimers, their main concern is with the dangers of misconstruction to which the linguistic enterprise of the *Troilus* had rendered him liable. Certainly there is no hint of anything like Dante’s pride in his refinement of the mother tongue. If the process through which Dante achieves poetic self-awareness in Purgatory is left obscure, its equivalent in the case of Chaucer’s narrator seems to be an impulse that never becomes fully conscious. The intuitive sympathy that had made possible Statius’s appropriation of Vergil and Dante’s Christianizing of Statius is here reduced to a subliminal instinct, which carries the poet forward almost in spite of himself.
We may begin to understand the contradiction between the narrator's lack of awareness and the poetic purpose being enacted through him if we compare with his situation the circumstances under which "poesie" had first exerted its influence on his great predecessors. Dante at the opening of the *Commedia* is lost in the absence of Beatrice, beset by moral and spiritual doubts to the point that he has been turned back upon himself when he encounters the shade of Vergil, who becomes his guide. Statius, too, tells us that he would have died in pagan blindness and excess if Vergil's words had not shown him his error. In both cases the stabilizing influence of poetic tradition manifests itself at a time when the beneficiary is incapable of self-determination. From the beginning, then, the capacity for "poesie," though it assumes a deep love and respect for ancient poetry, is from the poet's point of view largely fortuitous, a matter of "lucky words," and it comes only gradually to exercise its formative influence on the poet's conscious will.

Again and again in the course of the *Troilus* we have seen the narrator in the position of abandoning all self-awareness in favor of his idolatrous and desperate attachment to his love story, and his futile attempt to conclude the story reflects the implications of this attachment. He is seeking to cut it off at the point at which it threatens to outgrow his sentimental notion of tragedy and challenge him with moral and spiritual questions he feels unable to resolve. So Dante had foundered in *pietà* when confronted with Paolo and Francesca, and so Statius had turned away from the larger concerns of the *Thebaid* and ended his poem by joining in the general lament over the dead. In their several ways all three poets show themselves irresolute in facing the implications of their themes, and it is only the shaping power of "poesie" that renders these themes in a form sufficiently definitive that maturer vision can discern their full significance. We sense, as the Pilgrim of *Inferno* 5 cannot, the importance of his lurking awareness that Paolo and Francesca come forth from the company "where Dido is." We can see ahead, as the historical Statius could not, to the completion of his insight into the death of Menoeceus in his account of the birth of the soul in *Purgatorio* 25. The Dante who conceived the Francesca episode, deeply conditioned by Vergil's account of Dido's fatal passion, reveals
that conditioning by inventing a story of fatal passion which inevitably refers us to Dido as its archetype. In the Purgatorio, Dante, reading Statius from his own Christian vantage point, revises the *Thebaid* in a way that brings out a potential significance of Statius's poetic rendering of spiritual experience. In both situations, poetry, conceived as a means of giving stable and enduring form to the most serious human experiences, is the essential source of continuity, making possible the creation of new poetry that develops the intuitions of the old, while at the same time ensuring the essential conformity of the new to what is universal in the old.

To be a poet, then, is to participate in a continuum of imaginative experience which transmits the essential truths of human life from one generation to another. The “truth” of poetry consists in its fidelity to its own tradition and its capacity to reveal new meaning in the light of evolving historical and spiritual perspectives on that tradition. It is in terms of such a view of poetry that we must understand the experience of Chaucer's narrator. In reducing him to a virtually unconscious collaborator in the discovery of his true poetic vocation Chaucer is not simply exhibiting his characteristic humility. His purpose is to show by this comic means just how far it is possible to proceed in the direction of spiritual enlightenment under the influence of the “olde clerkes.” In the absence of any conscious application of craft or knowledge on the part of the narrator, it is “poesie” itself, the normative influence of poetic tradition, that guides his hand, enabling him to complete his artistic task and give full expression to the implications of Troilus's experience.

The first confirmation of the narrator's new vocation appears in the four stanzas that describe Troilus's death and posthumous vision. With the rendering of the “epic” aspect of Troilus's experience—his final show of valor, death in battle, and ascent to the eighth sphere—the formal and moral demands of “poesie” in its classical aspect will be satisfied. In bringing Troilus's life to completion, the poem will complete itself at a new and deeper level and assume its authentic place in the providential, Dantesque economy of the narrator's development as a poet. Thus when the narrator returns abruptly “to purpose of my rather speche” after his remarks on language (1799), both he and his hero are
poised for flight. Troilus, like Statius's Menoeceus, is on the threshold of death and a posthumous transcendence of the tragic world in which he has been drawn by his special virtue toward his inevitable end. He ascends through the spheres and comes to see at last the terms on which life is lived in a pagan universe. There can be little doubt that we are intended to see this final vision as a confirmation of the purity and depth of his intuition of the meaning of love.

It would be a mistake, of course, to assign any final meaning to this vision in itself. Despite the richness of Chaucer’s account of Troilus’s enlightenment, with its echoes of the Somnium Scipionis and the Paradiso, we must recognize that he is actually suspended in a spiritual void, that there is no category of religious experience to which we can confidently refer his celestial journey. And we must not forget that he ascends to the eighth sphere only to set forth again and vanish with Mercury we know not where. But this final flight, which both fully articulates and finally circumscribes the aspiration of Troilus’s spirit, also represents the first exercise of the narrator in his newfound role of poet. And like the apotheosis of Menoeceus, viewed in the light of Dante’s retrospective account of Statius’s career, Troilus’s ascent to heaven is finally meaningful only insofar as it foreshadows the poet’s transcendence of the world of his poem. True to his resolve to be “subject” to the great poets, the narrator’s attitude is hardly distinguishable from Troilus’s own as they ascend the spheres, and Troilus speaks for both of them in his sensitive response to the cosmological and spiritual vision of

6. See John W. Conlee, “The Meaning of Troilus' Ascension to the Eighth Sphere,” Chaucer Review 7 (1972–73): 27–28, who points out that Chaucer’s introduction of the celestial journey is not a declaration about the fate of Troilus’s soul. Obscurity on this point mars the fascinating study of John M. Steadman, Disembodied Laughter: Troilus and the Apotheosis Tradition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972). He notices (pp. 137–42) but does not really deal with the problem that Troilus’s life has not been of the sort traditionally rewarded by admission to Elysium. And while lines 1826–27 leave many possibilities open, there is no real basis for Steadman’s assertion (p. 167) that they show Troilus attaining “a perdurable seete' above variableness and shadow of turning—a steadfast good common to both classical and Christian tradition.” Ian Bishop (Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde: A Critical Study [Bristol, 1981], pp. 95–96) points to the solitary and intellectual cast of Troilus’s experience. Certainly there is nothing congratulatory about the “Swich fyn!” stanza, which follows immediately.
The Ending of the *Troilus*

neo-Platonism. Only then, after Troilus's life has come to its imaginative consummation and he has been relegated once and for all to the unknown, does the narrator emerge, suddenly and powerfully, as a Christian poet.

In the final stanzas of the poem the voice we hear is that of a poet who has been finally liberated from the darkness of his long and excessive involvement with the story of Troilus. He is distanced from his "completed" work to the point at which that work can finally assume the status proper to a work of art, an embodiment of aesthetic and human qualities that may be appreciated for themselves and for their exemplary value with no danger that they will be confused with the spiritual values that are now the poet's primary concern. The very structure of the poem's final six stanzas may perhaps be seen as symbolizing the poet's new perspective; they may be read as two triads, each of which begins with an almost frenetic rejection of earthly vanity and pagan folly and each of which ends in religious affirmation.

In the first of these triads the finally abortive love of Troilus is balanced against the love of the young lovers in Chaucer's audience, which is not confined by the tragic world view and which can be matured and refined in the light of inner vision to the point at which it becomes an all-consuming love of God. The three stanzas and the three types or stages of love with which they deal form a sequence like that of Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise, and in this evolving pattern lies the essential meaning of the poet's emancipation from the world view imposed by his pagan story. He has sent forth his book and commended his poetic fortunes to God, only to have the "litel tragedye" return to him transformed into a divine comedy.

But the transformation of the poet and his distancing from the world of the poem are not so absolute as may appear, and we are reminded that his emancipation has been achieved only at a price: as Troilus, from among the spheres, views the world both harshly ("This wrecched world") and tenderly ("This litel spot of erthe, that with the se / Enbraced is"), the poet, too, is insecure in the face of the story's lingering attraction for him. He vacillates between the need to reject it with harsh moralism and the desire to preserve some bond of appreciative sympathy. Thus the
stanza that begins with the heavy repetition of “Swich fyn!,” “Swich fyn!,” ends with a couplet that traces the arc of Troilus’s experience with no hint of condemnation:

And thus bigan his lovyng of Criseyde,
As I have told, and in this wise he deyde.

[5. 1833–34]

These lines have the moral gravity of the preceding exorcism without the violence. They focus on the sad fact of Troilus’s loss in a way that lends urgency to the following stanza, in which the poet reminds his young hearers that they, at least, have an alternative to “feyned love.” And in a sense it is the very force of the exorcism that precedes them which, by purging the narrator’s tone of any trace of sentimentality, makes possible their combination of objectivity and compassion. So in the Thebaid, as Statius condemns the dead sons of Oedipus to suffer all the punishments of hell, he thinks simultaneously of the sad condition of mankind (11. 574–76) and immediately mitigates even his judgment on the princes themselves with the spectacle of the mourning of the bereaved father Oedipus, who comes at last to discover fatherly piety and the power of the bonds of nature (11. 605–9). In both poems the fulfillment of the curse of Tisiphone, the completion of the story told under her inspiration, releases in the poet the capacity to express a larger, more humane appreciation of the meaning of that story.

But in the Troilus we are made to linger over Troilus’s experience by more than compassion. As the emotional force of the poet’s appeal to his young readers derives in large part from the sadness and finality of the couplet that is his last word on their love, so there is a significant continuity between the moral content of the lines that appeal to the “yonge fresshe folkes” and that of Troilus’s posthumous vision in the preceding stanzas. Looking down on the world at the culmination of his celestial journey, Troilus had recognized and dismissed

\[1823–25\]
Though these lines ostensibly represent Troilus’s own final reflections, we should notice the marked shift of emphasis in the final line and the slight syntactic disjunction (“And sholden . . .”) that sets it apart from the tightly structured lines that precede it. In fact, we cannot say with certainty who speaks this line, which seems at first only the completion of Troilus’s realization, but which can perhaps be taken equally well as expressing the narrator’s own futile desire to draw Troilus toward the affirmation that would be the spiritual complement to the contemptus mundi he has already come to feel. Heard in this way, the line would also represent an involuntary reemergence of the narrator’s own Christian instincts, intruding themselves again as artlessly and unselfconsciously as in the final stanzas of the Proem to Book 1. But the significant effect of the ambiguity is to render imperceptible the precise point at which the narrator’s insight into Troilus’s experience becomes clearly distinguishable from Troilus’s own. It is almost as though the religious lesson the narrator goes on to draw from that experience were being vouchsafed to him by Troilus. This continuity of experience is reemphasized by a continuity of language: the injunction to “caste” our hearts on heaven strikes a note that sounds again when, after condemning the futility of Troilus’s love and the squandering of his nobility in the pursuit of “false worldes brotelnesse,” the narrator issues his beautiful appeal to the young to “cast up” their inner vision to God. The point so simply made is profound: the love that “upgroweth” in Chaucer’s young Christian readers has grown as well in Troilus. The difference between his “blynde lust” and their power to attain the vision of God and Christ is a body of knowledge that the poet then recalls with paternal simplicity:

And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke god that after his ymage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire
This world . . .

[1898–41]

The subtlety of these lines, the unobtrusive artistry with which their highly Latinate syntax sets off the meanings conveyed by
“herte,” “visage,” “ymage,” is emblematic of the long poetic schooling that has issued in the narrator’s recovery of what he now offers as simple truth: we see most truly with the eyes of the spirit; we are made in the image of God; the beauty we behold outwardly will pass away. The absence of such knowledge, so fundamental as to be taken for granted and all but forgotten by the “yonge fresshe” medieval reader, is what caused Troilus to fall short, to worship a deceiving, ephemeral incarnation of that divine presence he had sensed so strongly at the heart of his experience of love.

The final three stanzas of the poem again follow an ascendant, Dantean pattern, moving from an exorcism of the themes and cosmology of classical poetry through the presentation of Chaucer’s own text for the scrutiny of learned friends to the final prayer. Here the emphasis has shifted from the implications of the poem to the experience of the poet, and in the first of the three stanzas he balances a vigorous rejection of the pagans and their gods with a couplet that states plainly his debt to the world he is rejecting:

Lo here, the forme of olde clerkes speche
In poetrie . . .

[5. 1854–55]

The placement of this couplet in its triad corresponds precisely to the placement of the couplet in which the poet had mentioned Troilus’s story for the last time (1833–34), and the parallel is significant. As the earlier couplet conveys a sense of both strong compassion and spiritual distance, the latter implies both the poet’s debt to poetic tradition and his new perspective on that tradition. He has finally separated himself from his pagan story and set it in a larger context that transforms its significance, but the “form” around which his spiritual intuition has taken shape is that of a poem in the classical tradition, a poem whose treatment of human experience, like Statius’s account of Menoeceus viewed from the perspective of Dante, can now be seen as bearing a typological relation to the narrator’s own experience in creating it, an experience that has culminated in the discovery of religious truth.
There is something jarring in the sudden emergence from this last evocation of the literary past into the fourteenth-century reality of the address to Gower and Strode. This has the same practical emphasis as the earlier stanza on the instability of English. Unlike Dante, who presents himself frankly as having realized the truth-telling capacities of his idiom more fully than the older poets he encounters in Purgatory, Chaucer appeals to his friends as one conscious of the danger that he may not have realized his intention, that in seeking to do justice to human love he may have failed to satisfy the demands of truth. We may see these lines, with the earlier stanza on language, as providing a realistic frame for the intuitive and highly symbolic transformation of the poet-narrator’s role which takes place in the intervening eight stanzas. They show us a poet who remains humbly aware of the perishability of his medium and of his own precarious status as auctor. They remind us, in short, that Chaucer is a writer, setting pen to paper in a particular place and time. Whatever may have happened to the narrator of the Troilus under the influence of “poesie,” through his responsiveness to “the forme of olde clerkes speche,” has happened because Chaucer made it happen, because he invented it, and he in his frailty must accept responsibility for it.

Or have I invented it? In claiming for poetry, or in claiming that Chaucer claimed for poetry, the power to guide its subjects to the threshold of spiritual understanding, have I perhaps succumbed to my own need to discover something “important” in the Troilus, like the narrator responding to the consummation in Book 3? Has the critic merely taken advantage of the openness and good will of Chaucer and his narrator to make them act out his own idea of how poetic tradition ought to work? I have not been given the run of these handsome pages to engage in such soul-searching, but there is something about the clear air of the Gower-Strode stanza that encourages it, and I too have had learned friends in the back of my mind as I thought about the ending of the poem. Has Chaucer rendered the reality and value of poetry so accessible as I have pretended? As my friend Jean Krochalis once remarked, there is a disconcerting sense in which the Troilus, for all its appeals and signals to the reader, can seem a curiously private poem, something Chaucer might have writ-
ten purely for his own satisfaction. At the very least we must acknowledge that much of the significance of whatever continuity he came to sense between his own work and that of the poetae is incommunicable, concealed beneath the words of the text like the conversion of Dante's Statius, and that its discovery was for Chaucer the poet largely an end in itself.

Moreover, even if we share, or feel we share, Chaucer's appreciation of the achievement of the poetae, is not this appreciation, as Anne Middleton argues, inseparable from a recognition of their remoteness, their powerlessness to speak directly to the living? Poetry in the sense in which Chaucer understood the term can, she declares, "have no real designs upon the world"; it "confers no certain good on the living human community." Still less can the poetae help us spiritually: "no work of literature can, by its very nature, have as a deed the kind of efficacy that the smallest prayer has."7

There is no getting around the fact that it is the combination of Chaucer's largely cryptic suggestions and our own responsiveness as interpreters which accounts for whatever role we understand the poetae to play in the Troilus. As Middleton further reminds us, there is no verb that can specify in the present tense what the poetae did, and thereby bring their intention to bear upon us.8 But what we can do is to read them, as Chaucer's narrator bids us read, or hear, the Troilus, "with a good entencioun" of our own. Perhaps they cannot teach us all we need of charity, and the telos of our desire may lie beyond their dreams, but if we bring to our reading of them good will and the capacity for a love that "upgroweth," they can help us achieve moral and psychological integration and purpose. This is what Dante's Pilgrim, mindful all the while of Beatrice, discovers in Vergil:

“Oh pietosa colei che mi soccorse!
et te cortese ch'ubidisti tosto
a le vere parole che ti porse!
Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto
si al venir con le parole tue,
ch'i' son tornato nel primo proposto.”

"Oh, how compassionate was she who helped me, and how courteous were you, so quick to obey the true words she spoke to you! By your words you have made me so eager to come with you that I have returned to my first resolve." [Inf. 2. 133–38]

Within barely a hundred lines the Pilgrim will once again lose this sure sense of his "first resolve," abandoning himself to a fruitless sympathy with the damned. He must learn the worst and most painful as well as the noblest truths that poetry has to teach, and his progress through the Inferno is punctuated by a series of shocks. The very eloquence of the poetae, as we saw in considering Dante's imitation of Vergil at the end of Inferno 3, has a dangerous power. The unwary imitator is always in danger of conjuring up demonic forces, as Chaucer's narrator involves himself unwittingly with Tisiphone. But both the Pilgrim and Chaucer's narrator are sustained by love, however dimly realized. The Pilgrim is never wholly cut off from the impulse to honor the lady whom he envisions "in the court of heaven" (Inf. 2. 123–32), and the narrator of the Troilus, even at his most disillusioned, preserves subliminally that half-wistful, half-compassionate sympathy with all lovers which flowers at last into charity.

In the Troilus, moreover, our sharing of the narrator's exposure to the psychological constraints and spiritual uncertainties of the world of the poetae is not controlled by the rigid terms of the Inferno. Though we are given a clear perspective on the narrator's involvement and made vividly aware of its potential dangers, the deeper effect of Chaucer's treatment of the ancient world is to enlarge our sense of human community, even as we withdraw to the religious distance of the poem's final stages. We do not need to engage in speculation about the salvation of the righteous heathen to find value in an experience of poetry which withholds the final orientation of a religious perspective until we have been made to see in the condition of Troilus, and in the lives of the Ovidian victims and Statian heroes with whom he is compared, the lineaments of the love that upgrew in Chaucer's hearers. The motive for such a use of the poetae is, I think, very close to that which will lead Chaucer to create the
violent secular world of the *Canterbury Tales* and seek out the spiritual element in the lives of even its most worldly and tormented inhabitants.

Even the prayer that concludes the *Troilus* conveys something of this sense of human community. There can be no questioning its religious emphasis, and it constitutes the first and sole moment at which we can hear the poet speaking with no direct reference either to the poem itself or to his activity as poet, but there are nonetheless signs that Troilus and his world are within its purview. It is based on the invocation used by those souls in Paradise who await the perfecting sacrament of reunion with their earthly bodies:

Quell'uno e due e tre che sempre vive  
e regna sempre in tre e 'n due 'n uno,  
non circuncritto, e tutto circunscrive . . .  
[Par. 14. 28–30]

Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,  
That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,  
Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive . . .  
[Tr. S. 1863–65]

The translation is word-perfect, beautiful English that is at the same time a complete rendering of the Italian. There could be no clearer affirmation of the bond Chaucer feels himself to have established with Dante: they speak here with one voice. But Chaucer’s allusion may have been prompted by Boccaccio, who echoes Dante’s prayer in the second section of the *Filostrato*, making Pandaro declare to Criseida that no soul so perfect as Troiolo’s has informed another being “since he who circumscribed the universe made the first man.”

9. “poi che colui che ’l mondo circoscrisse  
fece il primo uom, non credo piu perfetta  
anima mai ’n alcun altro venisse  
che quella di colui che t’ama tanto,  
che dir non si potrebbe giamaia quanto.”

“Since he who circumscribed the universe made the first man, I do not believe that anyone was ever endowed with a soul more fine than belongs to him whose love for you passes expression.” [Fil. 2. 41. 4–8]
allusion in Boccaccio is hard to gauge: it is one of many instances in the *Filostrato* in which the appropriation of Dantean rhetoric to the celebration of earthly love seems almost an end in itself. But it is easy to imagine its ironic appeal for Chaucer, who has rendered in so much more depth the sorrow of Troilus’s abortive vision. If we can imagine him thinking simultaneously of the fatally circumscribed spirituality of Troilus and of the glory of the bodily regeneration promised to the souls in Paradise, then his use of Dante’s lines may be seen as a plea for the reintegration of human life, for the redemption of the imagination and a resolution of that psychological schism that has allowed Troilus to invoke love in the language of Dante’s Saint Bernard, praying to Mary at the summit of the *Paradiso*, yet has allowed him also to believe that Paradise is the love of Crisseyde.

But of course the allusion is first and last to Dante, and it may be seen both as symbolizing Chaucer’s sense of indebtedness and as marking the point at which the two poets part company. Dante allows his disembodied souls a lingering concern with the spiritual well-being of others who had been dear to them in the world, but his emphasis in the prayer as a whole is on the supernatural radiance that the resurrected body will exhibit. Poetry, too, is for Dante only a means; in the *Paradiso* he has already distanced himself immeasurably from the world that poetry can claim to engage. Chaucer never turns so decisively away. His concern is more with aspiration than with transcendence, and to the end of his career he makes us aware of the importance for him of poetry as a mode of vision. He sees deeply into Dante’s achievement and makes it the measure of his own achievement in the *Troilus*, but he finally chooses to follow a different path.