

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FRAMES IN CHAUCER, DANTE AND BOCCACCIO

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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When an author produces a frame narrative, she simultaneously makes language both a represented object and a representing agent; when we imagine framed speech, we imagine both the scene its words represent and a mouth that speaks those words. Framed language is thus perfectly mimetic: the words we imagine being spoken within the fictional world are the same we use to effect that fiction's representation. Since its first function is to represent itself, the framed word acts both to push us out of the frame into our own temporality and to draw us into fictional times and spaces. This dissertation explores how first Dante and subsequently his successors, Boccaccio and Chaucer, deploy this structural feature of frames to engage difficult philosophical and theological disputes of their age. In the *Divine Comedy*, framed language allows Dante to approach the perfect presence of God without transgressing into a spatial conception of the divine. Intensifying Dante's procedure in his *House of Fame*, Chaucer forecloses the possibility of representation; he transforms every speech act into an image of its utterer rather than its referent, thus violently thrusting us back into the time we pass as we read. Boccaccio—first in his *Ameto* then in the *Decameron*—eschews this framed temporality in favor of the temporality of the fetish: while his narratives threaten to dissolve into their basic

linguistic matters, the erotic energy of the people that populate those narratives forces them to cohere as fully imagined spaces and times. Finally the Chaucer who writes the *Canterbury Tales* fuses his initial reading of Dante with Boccaccio's response to it; he constructs the Canterbury pilgrims as grotesques who each open up a limited angle of vision on the time and space they collectively inhabit. These angles overlap and stutter over one another, unsettling the easy assignations of identity any given pilgrim would enforce on a tale or agent within the narrative. In doing so, Chaucer makes the temporality within his *Tales* strange and poignant in a way that fully mimics our own experience of extra-narrative time.

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For Andrea, who taught me what I know of grace, and for Grace, who is teaching me again.



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In many ways, narrative frames are erected around texts in order to avoid the sort of theorizing in which I'm about to indulge. Frames help to bridge the gap between reader, author and the characters and events internal to a narrative; they imagine stories, and they build responses to those stories directly into their overarching fiction. Authors are thus able to overtly direct readers' responses to their texts by showing how others, who are in virtually the same position, respond to the text. Though most frames are still fictional, they thus possess a mimesis that differs from that of most fiction: by making the procedures of fiction-making part of their fiction, they seem more proximal to reality;<sup>1</sup> their fiction is designed to resemble our reality, wherein we assemble letters and words into imagined spaces and times while self-consciously existing outside of them. Frames are fictional, but they position themselves outside other fictions in the same way we position our own reality outside of the fictions we produce within it; realities are those nodal points from which multiple fictional spaces can be composed and divergent historical trajectories imagined. It is the flexibility of reality that makes it real: from it, we can imagine spaces and times that differ from our own; the real does not insist on its own identity, but rather allows itself to be refashioned in the conscious mind to something else. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that the presence in which reality inheres does not insist on its identity; as will become clear in the following discussion, presence is presence not by virtue of the things that exist within it, but rather on its persistent novelty, its capacity to constantly remake itself as something new. From

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<sup>1</sup> Most Arabic frames, for instance, actually serve an authenticating function—they attempt to link a story to a historic personage, and thus make it non-fictional. See Gittes, *Framing the Canterbury Tales*, 78-79.

the present moment in which we always read, we can shape any number of imagined histories tangential from our own. Framed narratives are one such tangent, but a tangent bearing a special relationship to the real reader's mind from which they proceed, for they are the nodes from which further tangents stem; even as they narrate themselves into a defined, sensible space and time they simultaneously imagine the malleable present moment from which the procedures of fiction making can proceed. While frames are often designed to circumvent the sorts of interpretive problems that critics pose about other texts,<sup>2</sup> they orient us more directly to the sorts of philosophical—and specifically phenomenological—questions that we face about our own reality. In particular, they force us to meditate on the temporal conditions of presence from which we are able to compose other spaces and times.

The concept of presence offers one of those strange philosophical problems that everyone constantly lives, but nobody can adequately describe. It is the foundation of ontology—anything that “is” is in the present moment—and yet a thing's being only becomes evident as it slurs from that present into the past; present being is, ironically, only made legible by a persistence that relies on a past state of being. As St. Augustine famously diagnosed, the past—like the future—has no being in itself;<sup>3</sup> it has already been sloughed through the oculus of presence, and so, even if some vestiges of it remain, the totality of circumstances that presence describes has already mutated into something else equally fleeting. Yet though presence is the foundation of being and so the intelligibility

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<sup>2</sup> Though, of course, the very means by which frames circumvent interpretive problems can easily be made the target of the narrative; an author need only betray a self-consciousness about the interpretive work being done by the frame in order to shift our attention to it. Frames are analogous to allegories in this sense: whereas, on the surface, allegories are designed to fix a certain interpretation of a body within a text, many literary allegories self-consciously reflect on the relationship between ideas and bodies.

<sup>3</sup> See Book 10 of the *Confessions*.

of beings, the concept itself seems incoherent without the past it excludes. However much we shorten the interval of time's passage, presence seems to always describe persistence: the miracle of being is that some object whose moment has passed into nonexistence continues into successive moments despite the imminent possibility of its unmaking in a present that is always new. Perfected presence is unimaginable, since it is defined by its constant novelty; nothing inhabits it, since it admits no incursions from the past, and yet it is the wellspring of ontology. Much contemporary philosophy on time has surrendered the present to hermeneutics, arguing that any present moment is dependent on the past for its identity. The present is only capable of recombining old discourses, and it only seems different from the past by means of a semantic trick. Yet I want to suggest here that this attitude is exactly backward: the past is, rather, reliant on the insistent novelty of the present for its intelligibility, since persistence would be meaningless without the creative unmaking to which presence subjects all of us, all the time.

I will unpack these theories of presence below, first by tracing contemporary theories of time from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl to the present, then by exploring some important, predominantly mystical, theories of presence from the medieval period, and finally suggesting how frame narratives fully dramatize these theories of presence in a semiotic register that resonates with modern philosophy. To begin, however, it will suffice to say that this dissertation has two primary contentions: first, that medieval concepts of presence offer an important corrective to contemporary philosophy on time, which tends to view presence as illusory, as either a mere permutation of the past or as an artificially frozen segment of temporal flow. By allying the idea of presence to God, the medieval world allowed presence its fully revolutionary

character. Though presence was the wellspring of history and ontology, in its perfected form it effaced the very ontology it enabled; history erupted from the constant, eternal novelty of the present, but presence itself transcended history rather than being beholden to it. My second contention—and the one that will govern the explication of this dissertation—is that the frame narratives of Chaucer, Dante and Boccaccio offer some of the most sophisticated elaborations of the Medieval philosophy of presence. By situating language as both a narrating tool and a narrated object within themselves, frame narratives thrust us toward the present moment in which language is spoken, a moment that transcends the world of objects that language speaks; in doing so, these narratives allow us to contemplate the procedures of linguistic differentiation through which we forge present meaning from past. This Saussurian pattern of semantic differentiation is—by the mechanism of narrative—extended to time and history more generally, demonstrating how they spill out from the present moment the text thrusts us toward.

### *Theoretical Genealogy*

Most philosophy on time within the past 100 years has worked to disabuse us of facile concepts of presence. Presence had its last theoretical heyday in the phenomenology of the early 20th Century, particularly in that of Edmund Husserl and his student, Eugen Fink. In seeking a solid ground for scientific reasoning, phenomenologists like Husserl argued that natural sciences could not provide the justification for their own practice; they rely on their own preconceptions about the world to produce more particular knowledge about that world and the way it works. Science thus remains locked in a hermeneutic circle, unable to explore its own underpinnings and find a firm rationale

for its practice and methodology. For Husserl, natural sciences are useful, but only as subordinated to a different sort of philosophical imperative that he termed phenomenology. The goal of phenomenology is—insofar as possible—to eliminate the preconceptions that we bring to any particular moment and simply experience its sensations as they are, in their fullness. Any form of human knowing has its justification and grounding in this experience of astonishment or wonder that provides us with the most bare and essential experience of being.

The task of the philosopher, then, is to practice what Husserl calls the “phenomenological reduction,” which has two parts: the epoché and the reduction proper. In the epoché, the philosopher essentially brackets the various schema we use to understand the world. For Husserl, we normally live in what he calls a “captivation-in-an-acceptedness”—we regard as dogmatic not just cultural customs, but also the essential patterns through which we perceive the world.<sup>4</sup> Our basic experience of the world is colored over by preformed beliefs that we perpetuate by performing them for subsequent generations. The unconscious acceptance of these beliefs hold us in thrall to them, such that we become incapable of seeing the world any other way; these beliefs fool us into thinking we have exhaustive knowledge of the objects and phenomena we encounter in the world when, in reality, they cause us to understand only certain limited facets of those objects. This captivation-in-an-acceptedness is, in a sense, endemic to perception—our bodies and their sensory organs are equipped to perceive only a fragment of the phenomena that occupy the world around us. Our situation within the partial world we are birthed into inhibits our ability to understand that anything lies outside of that world.

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<sup>4</sup> The clearest articulation of this concept from Husserl’s thought is in Fink’s *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 41.

In his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, Fink suggests that we can bracket this world through careful philosophical meditation; the very act of inquiring into what might lie beyond our perceptual faculties and cultural assumptions signals that the epoché has already begun. It signifies a movement toward the transcendent that lies behind and shapes the partial world to which we are accustomed. Thus, “the transcendental tendency that awakens in man and drives him to inhibit all acceptedness nullifies man himself; man *un-humanizes* [*entmensch*] himself in performing the epoché, that is, he lays bare the transcendental onlooker in himself, he passes into him” (39-40, emphasis in original). Fink is careful to note that the epoché does not deny the existence of the world—the world is, in fact, the object phenomenology hopes to study more clearly; however, it struggles toward an indifference to the existence of the world we have known prior to the epoché, which indifference is the necessary prerequisite for really understanding anything within that world. As a person sloughs off the hold of an acceptedness, she becomes something other than human, since human being is the product of what we have accepted about the world.

Now, such a seemingly naive optimism should raise the hackles of even the most indifferent student of modern hermeneutics; the fervor with which hermeneutics has been practised in the past century is largely a reaction against the type of philosophical perspective Husserl and Fink imagine here. Hermeneutics, in its various forms, essentially argues that the acceptedness phenomenology seeks to excise is inextricable from perception. Acceptedness, in fact, produces perception; there is no objective position outside of an acceptedness from which we might perceive the world within it, and even if such a perspective could be imagined, it would lack access to the world, since



to witness anything within the world would require a subject position inside it. The only way to produce knowledge within such conditions is to study one's own subjective perspective on a phenomenon and catalogue its influence along with data about the phenomenon itself. While the hermeneutic objection to the epoché has some force, in reality it is not so different from what Husserl and Fink propose. The epoché can only be performed coincidentally with the second part of the reduction, the "reduction proper." In this moment, the philosopher gazes back, as it were, at the acceptedness from which she has freed herself and recognizes it as an acceptedness. Whereas modern hermeneutics often leaves us lodged within an inevitable subjectivity, phenomenology works to account for the paradoxical objectivity that hermeneutics offers: in saying that we are the captives of our past experiences, we have already discovered some transcendental agency that can understand our captivity. This insight into our preexisting beliefs, itself, lessens the hold of any acceptedness on us; we might say that there are always further, more subterranean beliefs that still color our perception even after we have rooted out more surface ones, but any such belief still remains susceptible to the liberating effect that self-reflection offers. The irony of hermeneutics is that when we recognize our captivity to subjectivity, we liberate ourselves by viewing that subjectivity objectively. For Husserl and Fink, then, the recognition of our prior captivity already begins to liberate us from it: the reduction proper enables the epoché even as the epoché exposes the "transcendental onlooker" that gazes back. Each movement of the reduction is a prerequisite for the other; they build incrementally, with progressive realizations of our captivity preparing us for increasingly substantial liberations from it.

The philosopher who performs the phenomenological reduction is essentially liberated from history, but only so that she can return to the world with new eyes; the movement toward transcendence that Husserl and Fink describe is a movement toward a perfectly present moment and so a fuller experience of whatever being inhabits that presence. By divesting ourselves of what our personal histories have taught us about the world, we become more capable of seeing the radical dimensions of an object's being, or at least of acknowledging that those dimensions exist and are integral to the object's identity. Husserl never entirely sheds idealism to find the objective world his reduction thrusts him toward: ultimately, the phenomenologist is concerned with describing conscious life in order to discover its possibilities and its limitations.<sup>5</sup> But the purpose of knowing those limitations is to gain some awareness of what lies beyond them in the unreachable depths of the phenomenal world. The phenomenologist renders herself aware of these dimensions by shrugging off the partial modes of vision the world trains us to deploy so that we can function within it; she thus increasingly approximates an experience of the full presence of a thing, an experience of all the infinitely varied effects that emanate from it. Her experience never exhausts the richness of an object—if consciousness was capable of fully knowing a thing, it would become the thing itself; but the recognition of its inexhaustibility produces the wonder that Husserl and Fink believe lie at the heart of any scientific enterprise.

Wonder is precisely an experience of presence, when our attention is rapt upon a thing whose most minute movement holds the deepest fascination. In so fixing our attention, we begin to move outside of lived, historical time by burrowing more deeply into an object we encounter in time; we refuse to summarize the object into an event that

<sup>5</sup> On Husserl's latent idealism, see Harman 24-34.

can be easily digested into the motions of history. As we will explore further in the discussion of Bergson that follows, though we normally ignore the indifferent intermediate movements of an object—the time required to move from one posture that interests us to another, however minute that interval might be—in wonder, every indifferent movement becomes itself the focus of our attention. We thus move toward an experience of the full presence of an object, unconstrained by the captivation of our self-selection; we begin to witness the object as it is in itself, deeper even than what the object is to itself, since self-consciousness maintains the partiality of any other act of vision. Of course, we never actually move outside of lived time, even when we are rapt in wonder—as the necessary language of motion implies, so long as we are perceiving, we are still operating within time and so fail to achieve the presence that is the limit point of phenomenology. But we do hurtle toward the presence that transcends historical time by perceiving objects with an increasing fullness. Though we usually think of presence as the simple waypoint of history, phenomenology demonstrates that presence transcends history by exceeding the partial perceptual schema with which history equips us.

Phenomenology thrusts the philosopher toward this radical presence where restrictive preconceptions give way to a fuller picture of the objects that populate the world; Husserl and Fink share this movement toward an ineffable presence with earlier generations of mystics, but with one central difference that ultimately undoes their project: at the apex of the reduction, when the observer arrives at a pure presence, she retains her capacity to perceive and question. The philosophical rigor of the reduction—while appealing for its comprehensibility—ultimately betrays what the philosopher finds in the present moment, the paradoxical self-dissolution that the mystics found at the fount

of ontology. Phenomenology attempts to clarify the consciousness of a subject, but consciousness itself is fraught with the history and partiality that the reduction was supposed to reduce. Consciousness always entails a grammar, however expansive, that organizes an experience first, into a horizontal temporal sequence, and second, into a vertical catalogue of perceptions. The reduction proposed to purify this grammar, but the idea of grammar itself is foreign to perfect presence—the perceptual grammar that we apply to any experience is exactly what turns it into history. To pose the problem another way, consciousness necessarily relies on one’s past history to produce the field of experience from which the present moment differs. This is not a problem of hermeneutic inevitability, it is a problem inherent in even the purest, hypothetical form of perception; even if the specific character of one’s past is bracketed, the form of historical experience itself persists into the present moment and so taints the very thing that makes it present: its transcendent being that admits nothing not present. Consciousness avoids the priority of presence by making it a product of history rather than the other way around; it trains us to believe that the present is contingent upon history when history is the incidental product of presence. Even as we approach presence, so long as our perception continues to be a question answered by some object, we remain capable of only partial and fragmented vision. Presence must put to rest the perpetual questioning inherent in the directedness of perception; presence is rather, a perpetual answer that refuses the form of an answer since no question can inhere within it. I will dwell on these points at some length and from several angles, as they are central to the concept of presence I want to advance here; for now it suffices to say that phenomenology was the last philosophical school to strenuously advance a theory of presence, but it ultimately undermined the

radical capacity of presence to unmake the identity of both philosopher and object at that limit point. The thinkers who followed after Husserl tended to criticize the concept of presence in its entirety, but their conclusions ultimately signal phenomenology's failure to be birthed into a fully mystical science.

The first, and most substantive critique lodged against Husserlian phenomenology came from Husserl's most gifted student, Martin Heidegger. At its simplest, Heidegger's philosophy denies the capacity of consciousness to ever exhaust its object. When we direct our deliberate attention to some object, Heidegger says that it becomes "present-to-hand;" we see however many facets of it we are capable of seeing and record them in the storehouse of memory. We think that, through our perception, we have somehow completed the object, bringing it into the presence that only cognition really apprehends; yet Heidegger's tool-analysis critiques the primacy we offer perception in believing it gives us access to the phenomenal world. As Graham Harman summarizes, Heidegger argued that present perception is not our most characteristic way of interacting with objects; more often we interact with them in the mode of a tool, "ready-to-hand."<sup>6</sup> We interact with tools in a fundamentally different manner than objects of direct perception. Tools are an essential part of our experience, yet we rarely fixate on them as objects—they are intermediaries that we rely upon unconsciously. Tools in this sense extend far beyond what we might traditionally associate with the term: the floor we stand on constitutes a tool, as does the dirt beneath it, the air we breath, the grammar we use to speak, etc. These are tools for Heidegger because they allow us to do other things without focusing on them: when I make a sandwich, I might concentrate on the

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<sup>6</sup> Harman treats Heidegger's theory of tool being in a number of places throughout his work; the most accessible and succinct of these occurs in *The Quadruple Object*, 35-40.

mayonnaise I slather on the bread, but not so much on the knife I use to do so, or refrigerator that kept it cold beforehand, or the floor that keeps both myself and the refrigerator from plummeting to the ground.

Heidegger notes that such ready-to-hand objects really only become present objects of our perception when they break or fail to perform as we expect. My sandwich might be ready-to-hand if I only eat it to sustain myself for some other activity and so fail to appreciate its savor; however, it may become present-to-hand if the meat has gone rancid or a seed from the bread sticks in my teeth. Certainly other scenarios exist that would present an object to our perception: in fact, normally we compose eating into an event and attend to the flavor of an object in itself and not as a means to some other end. Aesthetic apprehension, in fact, brings an object into present perception without expecting it to function in a utilitarian way; unlike a broken tool, we expect to attend to such an object directly. Presence is the generic aim of any art. But for Heidegger, the basic paradigm of presence is malfunctioning, rather than such aesthetic concerns. When an object breaks, we attend to a singular facet of its totality; the object, in itself, still possesses a multitude of features, but we ignore them to fixate on the one that has failed to conform to our semi-conscious expectations of it. The breakage, for Heidegger, reveals the inherent partiality of perception—whenever we bring something into direct observation, we invariably fixate on some partial aspect of it rather than the entirety of its being. Phenomenology's dream of producing a complete perception is illusory precisely because present, directed perception is inherently partial.

For Heidegger, we can only furtively access the reality of objects in the way we interact with tools; our approach to them must be tangential, never directly focused on

them, but integrated into their rhythms. He calls this mode of vision “circumspection,” but as Harman notes, “this supposed sight does not make the tools visible in the least” (38). Tools remain invisible, locked in a system of interrelated purposes with other tools. No observer’s gaze can fully exhaust the life of such a tool: however thoroughly we study its interrelations, we fail to know every possible way in which it is situated within this subterranean backdrop of tool-being. Each perspective from which it might be perceived—every effect it has on some other object—is partial, and the aggregation of those perspectives is impossible for the mind to conceive. The mind is itself only another perspective, and so cannot possibly conceptualize the ripples that every object casts out into the great sea of being. Mind would cease to be mind if it could achieve such a totality of perspectives—it would have to become the logos itself, the system of relations which it sets out to perceive or conceptualize. But the entire procedure of perception already signals the lack of this totality; its advent cannot occur through perceptual or conceptual means since these processes demonstrate that we are distinct from what we observe. Perception creates a zone of separation from that totality into which we represent objects; perception is only ever memory, since the act of absorbing a present being into a mental representation already introduces a secondarity that a radical presence must eschew. To perceive the full being of an object, we would have to merge into the entire network of relations that defines the contours of the object; but to do so, we would lose the vantage point from which we perceive—perception would have to bring about its own death in its fulfillment.

Heidegger is correct to say that not even the most Herculean act of imagination—which extends perception to its fullest limit—could fully exhaust the being Heidegger

finds in the tool. The microcosm of the mind can never fully absorb the macrocosm or the two would become coextensive, not micro- or macrocosm at all but a continuous plane of presence constantly realizing itself. Heidegger is also, in a sense, right to name presence as the failing of phenomenology, but in many ways he falls into the trap of his own critique. Presence, in Husserl, effectively was perception, or at least the perceptibility of an object conceived in its totality. Presence was the moment of impact, where the valence of an object's being made contact with another object; even if this object was not a human sensory organ, its contact signified a possible perception already taking place, as though we might situate an eye at each such point and, through the aggregation of data collected from all such eyes, attain a full understanding of the object's being. Heidegger critiques the methodology of presence advocated by phenomenologists, but his tool analysis does not really critique the underlying model of presence—it simply and rightly assigns it to a subterranean depth that is beyond the access of perception. Heidegger thus arrives at a methodology in which the willful attempt not to perceive, not to cognize an object, is preferable to science; but he does not, by means of this methodological inflection, eliminate the model of presence assumed by phenomenology. Being, for Heidegger, is still contact (albeit a rich and multifaceted contact) and that contact—while it lies beyond our representing perceptual faculties—still constitutes a present moment. Heideggerian philosophers are like the wheat threshers from *Anna Karenina*—they are tools using tools to thresh tools to feed tools, and so on; they suppress their conscious experience to the limbic system, intuiting there, rather than discovering, a participatory preconsciousness of the being that lies behind things. But their participation still assumes that real being lies in contact, and that contact occurs in a



present moment which, could it somehow be recorded in its fullness, would offer us access to these objects.

Neither Husserl nor Heidegger extend the trajectories of their philosophies to critique this ontological model of presence as contact; but in fact radical presence necessarily excludes contact, and with it, the object itself. If Heidegger's innovation was to discover the secondarity of perception, the truth he was unable to face is that all contact shares this secondarity—perception, is in fact, the tertiary record of a secondary contact that cannot occur in the radical present. This counter-intuitive truth becomes evident through the analysis of another post-phenomenologist, Henri Bergson. The essence of Bergson's work is a thought experiment that, arguably, constitutes the most significant advance in the theory of time since Augustine's *Confessions*. While Bergson never announces his theory as a critique of presence per se, it constitutes the most significant challenge posed to any model of presence in modern philosophy; it, likewise, renders the phenomenological moment impossible. Bergson's essential innovation was to analyze time in the age of film; Bergson saw how filmmakers fudged a representation of time by splicing together vast numbers of still images. This, he realized, is how the human mind understands time: it is a series of immobile cuts severed from the pure temporal continuity that birthed them, and then spliced back into a sequence of jerkily moving instants. Time, in its essence, could not be parsed into such frozen instants, however; as the space between any two decimal points is infinite, so too are the intermediary postures between any two images. Time constantly flows between any images we can apprehend; it thus becomes pure movement for Bergson, a concept he calls "duration."

The concept of presence is a deeply misguided way of understanding beings in motion, but the perceiving intellect is fraught with its error. When we perceive something in time, we experience the full progression of every infinitely divisible event we have witnessed; but the intellect invariably fragments the fluid totality of any such duration:

all the intelligence retains is a series of positions: first one point reached, then another, then still another. But should something happen between these points, immediately the understanding intercalates new positions, and so on indefinitely. It refuses to consider *transition*; if we insist, it so manages that mobility, pushed back into more and more narrow intervals as the number of considered positions increases—recedes, withdraws and finally disappears into the infinitely small. (14)

As it attempts to recover the duration between retained images, the intellect only succeeds in fragmenting their duration further. It further immobilizes the motion between two images by generating more of the same; but each image remains distinct and frozen in the memory, which records not the continuity of time but the recomposed sequence of events generated by the intellect.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the conundrum posed by pure motion, the intellect demonstrates its own incapacity to itself—it simultaneously acknowledges the necessity of conceptualizing the infinite points of movement while demonstrating its inability to do so.

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<sup>7</sup> As we will have occasion to explore further in Chaucer, this model of memory strikingly resembles classical and medieval mnemonic techniques like the “architectural mnemonic,” in which one would identify important points in some text to be memorized and key it to some image in the mind somehow representative of that point. The recollector then filled in the gaps between those points, since they necessarily implied all the intervening images needed to travel between the mnemonics. For more on these *artes memorandi*, see Carruthers 89-98.

In the course of ordinary life, we rarely go to the lengths Bergson describes, trying to recover the full duration of some span of time. Rather, we contract these spans into events—durations that are encapsulated by the paradigmatic moment we found important in them. This procedure resembles a comic book or storyboard more closely than a film; a comic book records a narrative and so describes a length of time, but it discloses its time by selecting paradigmatic instants chosen from the infinite possible moments that populate the lacunae between any two images within it. If the artist attempts to represent these intermediary images more thoroughly, we eventually arrive at the flip book and then film; in this sense, comics offer a profound analysis at the procedures of historical production: they most self-consciously represent the selection involved in perception and the violence that this selection does to duration.

Just as no narrative could be represented without this event-making, neither could we live our daily lives without constructing time in this way. If Husserl revealed that our historical consciousness only glimpses partial faces of an object so that we might go on living in the world, Bergson reveals that this same partiality necessarily occurs in temporal consciousness as well: we only select those frozen granules of time that our intellect deems relevant for whatever reason. Bergson argues that this procedure occurs through a mechanism of habit, perhaps the most important point in Bergson's analysis of time. Intellectual habit stems from our most basic motor habit, which "once contracted, is a mechanism, a series of movements which determine one another: it is that part of us which is inserted into nature and which coincides with nature; it is nature itself... [O]ur inner experience shows us in habit an activity which has passed, by imperceptible degrees, from consciousness to unconsciousness and from will to automatism" (275). As

infants—or rather, even before infancy, at the earliest prenatal stages and beyond—we have the most full experience of duration that human life can offer; we cannot say that no habit has formed since life itself is a habit, agreed to by all the cells and particles of one’s body, contracted into relation with one another. Eggs and sperm are subject to habit before they combine to form a zygote: DNA is habit and pattern writ large in the structures of the body. Every name describes a habit and only a habit. However, these early habits are the most rudimentary in lived experience; boiled down, the maturation of any object—living or not—is the process of more complex habits accreting into a unified body. Objects are more than the sum of their parts precisely because some new shell of habitual relation occurs once all the parts coalesce and tacitly agree to unify into a new habitual mode of existence. A chair is not just a collection of wood pieces, just as those wood pieces are not collections of fibers, nor fibers collections of molecules and so on down to the most elementary particles. These things are more than the sum of their parts because their parts contract into a new habit that relates to other habitually formed objects in different ways, molded by one another’s contours and purposes. In the case of human intellect, the basic motor habits of closing one’s hand on an object to grasp it or moving one’s legs to walk on the ground elaborate into all the more diverse and complex habits that constitute human life.

Bergson’s analysis of intellectual habit implies an even more startling realization: our habit of transforming duration into the immobile cuts of history responds to the rhythmic structure of the natural world. The images that inhabit nature, at all the varying scales of their being, are habits—movements contracted into repeating, and so intelligible, patterns. Our analysis of Husserl and Heidegger already demonstrated that

the contours of the objects we encounter in the world are shaped by other objects, and that we only ever experience partial faces of any phenomenon. Our own being is determined by our partial experience of objects, just as the shape of sand is determined by its partial experience of water: sand only manifests the erosive force of water, but water is more than its erosiveness. Deleuze and Guattari use the example of a bee and flower to describe this sort of insight: bees and flowers are symbiotic organisms, many of whose features develop in response to the other. Bees are fuzzy so that they can gather more pollen; flowers are shaped and colored so as to attract bees (10). The contours of both objects are shaped by the other, yet each has an independent life that is not exhausted or entirely experienced by the other: the entirety of bee-being is not understood by the flower, only the part of it relevant to the flower's propagation. The shape of each is partially determined by the partial view it has of the objects that surround it; this is as true of inanimate objects as of animate ones, and is true on down the scale of being to the most basic cellular and atomic levels: perceptibility is a consequence of the habitual motions one object motivates another to perform in their mutual, partial perception of one another. The movement of one object conditions the movement of another object such that it becomes a unity—each contracts into the unity of object-hood in response to its partial experience of the other as it similarly contracts into a unity; subsequently, they contract into the organism, a whole of parts that operates through a habitual contract between its component objects. Such object-organisms become capable of interacting with other object-organisms and organizing more complex organisms on up the scale of being.<sup>8</sup> The unity of any such object simply describes the consistent patterns of motion

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<sup>8</sup> In articulating this logic of object-organisms, I run the risk of what Graham Harman has termed “undermining” the object (8); that is, he considers the attempt to describe objects as aggregations of some prior, elementary particles erroneous since it does not explain the unique integrity of the object as object.

they engage in as a result of this conditioning, though as any cursory study of evolution can demonstrate, the unity of any object will deteriorate and change if the conditions that produced it are removed. Any structurally cohesive unit of matter shares this habitual composition. Ultimately, the trajectory of Bergson's analysis reveals that ontology is nothing more than the study of habit, and that being describes a hierarchy of increasingly complex motive particles contracted into characteristic modes of movement. Perceptible images are amalgams of habitual motions, and our intellect—keyed, as it is, to the rhythms of nature—retains memories of these motions and so becomes capable of determining our own habituated being.

Habit is essentially opposed to duration, since it contracts duration into a paradigmatic span of time; this is not simply a human malady (though human consciousness may represent the most egregious case of habit), but one that frames existence itself. But Bergson believes that, though habit is the means by which we are separated from duration, it can also be the means by which we reconstitute duration. Habit is constantly at the work of exposing its own inadequacies: habit and the history it structures are allegories of their inability to represent the presence that births them. They imply presence at every turn; they are constantly at the work of exposing the infinite lacunae that stretch between any two habitual cuts from duration. Like Husserl, Bergson

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However, my suggestion here is that a complex, integrated object-organism is more than the sum of its parts precisely because it engages in new habitual interactions with other object-organisms on its particular scale of being. In its turn, this solution runs the risk of “overmining” (10) as Harman calls it—attributing the identity of an object solely to its relations with other objects. However, though Harman is right that all objects have a radical being that is never disclosed by any single act of perception, I will maintain that it is accurate to say that they are disclosed by the hypothetical aggregation of all acts of perception actual and virtual, proximal and distant, literal and metaphorical. In order to form progressively more complex totalities, the object-organism must deny its own radical being and enter into the limited habitual engagements that shape it; however, could all of its transversal associations with other objects across time be collected, we would reduplicate the object, or at least, create a simulacrum of it that was perfectly coincidental with its original such that we could no longer speak of an original and a duplicate.

sweats blood and tears in attempting to retain the possibility of perception within duration. This question of how perception can make contact with the fluidity of duration haunts his work:

how would [duration] appear to a consciousness which desired only to see it without measuring it, which would then grasp it without stopping it, which in short, would take itself as object, and which, spectator and actor alike, at once spontaneous and reflective, would bring ever closer together—to the point where they would coincide,—the attention which is fixed and time which passes? (12)

As we have seen in Husserl and Heidegger, however, consciousness is the asymptote that, however closely it approximates presence, never makes contact with it; as in earlier theories, Bergson's insistence on retaining the subjective point of perception ultimately undermines the truly revolutionary character of what his thought experiment reveals. He again tries to frame a methodology for approaching the pure mobility of time, the slur of the present moment as it sinuously unfurls; this is understandable, since Bergson believed that duration undermined the idea of a presence as it had been conceived before. The essence of time, for Bergson, was motion; the immobile cuts of past presences that we carve from this pure mobility were only illusions that defied the flow of time. Perception might then persist into duration so long as its scientific aspect—its tendency to measure passing time and catalogue the objects that populate it—is foreclosed in favor of a new form of awareness that flows along with time. In describing this new awareness, Bergson offers a temporal version of Heidegger's circumspection—the goal of philosophical practice is to integrate oneself into the background of the phenomenological field as it

passes rather than to arrest some fragment of it. The sinuous pageant of time would still pass before us, but we would deliberately cease to give priority to any particle of that passage; or perhaps better, we would work to give priority to all of them and so none of them, to persist in a continuous state of wonder at the emergence of time rather than any single thing that inhabits and moves through it.

But Bergson's theory of duration never actually does away with the concept of presence—in fact, it thrusts us toward a presence more radical than Bergson himself is willing to conceive. What his thought experiment does demonstrate is that presence cannot be populated by frozen images; images are movements contracted into habits, which habits are the fundamental base of phenomenal being. But the presence that Bergsonian duration increasingly approximates cannot admit movement or the contact that occurs as a result of it.<sup>9</sup> Movement requires both an object that manifests the movement, however infinitesimal that object is, and multiple spatiotemporal coordinates through which it progresses. But objects, we have already seen, are contracted habits of movement and so, by their very nature, can never enter in upon perfect presence; subsequently, any object that manifests movement cannot experience presence because it cannot occupy two points in space simultaneously (in which case we would not have movement anyway), but only successively. Further, whatever divisible particles comprise the object cannot contract into the habit anyway, on down to the point where matter itself is revealed as a vestigial motion. Just as presence is prior to history, by its own internal structure, so too must it be prior to space—space describes the possibility of

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<sup>9</sup> We approach Bergsonian duration through something resembling Zeno's paradox of the arrow, wherein Zeno argues that, if an arrow is not moving in a single, durationless moment of time, it can never begin moving; but where Zeno's conundrum led to a static moment, the model of presence Bergson's analysis thrusts us toward is one in which the physical object of the arrow could never inhere in the first place.



differentiation between objects and the possibility of their movement relative to one another. Space describes the differentiation between coordinates that makes movement possible. But presence is prior to the object or any of its contracted habits of being; nothing can move in a perfected presence, because nothing can be in it, at least in this traditional, habitual sense. Presence must also, therefore, be prior to differentiation, even though it is the ground from which differentiation proceeds, both spatially and temporally. Presence is prior to the unity of the object, precisely prior to the relation of the congealed movements that progressively form matter. Presence is a no-place where material being cannot actually inhere. Matter itself is a historical vestige inexplicably spewed forth from a presence that excludes it. The attempts of both the phenomenological reduction and duration to construct a methodology for contacting the present moment is exposed as misguided in this realization; the idea of methodology assumes a perceiving intellect, but perception relies on differentiation, and the movement that enables contact to take place. Neither of these can take place in the radical present, nor could there be a third, differentiated vantage point from which perception could view such contact.

The methodologies we have explored thus far are best understood as preliminary meditations on presence; they are useful, but only insofar as they expose to the perceiving subject the necessity of abdicating methodology altogether as she approaches her unreachable goal. Methodology always begins by defining a scientific object, then describing how an ignorant subject can come to make observations about that object;<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As Michel de Certeau writes in describing the science of mysticism, every science has a methodology and an object of knowledge; in the case of the mystics, their object is infinite, just as is perfect presence and so could never be known from a finite, historical perspective. The methodology of the mystic, then, became the frustration of her attempt to define an object, to paradoxically make the attempt not to define an object the object of mystical practice. To this end they practiced disciplines of self-dissolution in all their

but presence is occupied by neither subject nor object. To say presence is ever “occupied” by anything, as I have, of necessity, done throughout this discussion and must continue to do, is erroneous first because it applies a spatial metaphor to presence when presence transcends space and second because it assumes a differentiation that presence, being prior to movement, will not admit. There is no language—nor is there any possible language—that can describe presence; language, like methodology, always targets some object and presence transcends the differentiation that defines objects as unities. All such methodological approaches can only ever succeed in demonstrating the necessity of relinquishing the perceiving subject and all of the methodological inquiries her perception constantly poses.

We might, at this point, begin to think that this anti-quest to somehow approach presence is doomed as a philosophical enterprise before its outset; but in a very real sense, presence is the only possible object for philosophy. If philosophy is an inquiry into first principles, presence is precisely the principle of transcendence; if it is an inquiry into how and what we know, philosophy must begin by recognizing the fundamentally historical character of any object, its noncoincidence with itself. And this movement toward presence yields some unexpected but important practical fruits: against centuries of determinism, lodged in a mechanical cosmos populated by Bergson’s frozen images, it announces a new will. Only in the context of the true relativism of a transcendent presence can any object free itself of the chains of causality that bind events and objects to one another. Against idealism, it announces an authentic other that is truly outside the mind—that we must, in fact, relinquish mind in order to approach. This other is not some

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various forms, including those that dissolved the pretense that a negative self-dissolution offered any access to God. It is thus not simply negative, but positive, generative (77-78). An adequate theory of presence faces precisely the same challenges and must inevitably swerve toward the same conclusions.

entity in the phenomenal world—the historicity of objects that appear to be differentiated is, in fact, a startling point of contiguity and sameness between them. Objects and subjects that space appears to differentiate and offer an authentic identity are revealed, in their most fundamental temporal structures, as being quite similar to one another; they are all contracted habits—albeit indefinably idiosyncratic ones—that form the object as a pole of unity, bringing together diverse parts to form something that exceeds them. Presence is, on the other hand, wholly other to our historical being. And against the imperialism of self-satisfying philosophies whose model of the cosmos invariably consume its otherness into a cognizable same, presence announces a genuinely uncognizable object, an object unable to be conceptualized as such (though we always risk cognizing it by naming it uncognizable). It replaces the imperialism of all intellectual endeavor with a humble and respectful passivity; but that passivity, far from leaving us inert, invigorates us with a newly discovered will and a mode of perception liberated from the strictures of history.

This last point—that presence counters the imperialism inherent in most philosophy—reveals an ethical dimension to presence best expressed by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas finds, in traditional models of ontology, a deadening effect similar to Bergson’s immobile cuts; Levinas frames this failure of ontology in terms of language, a framework that will be particularly useful in the discussion of the mystical works and frame narratives that follows. The basic dichotomy Levinas draws in his analysis is between the “saying” and the “said” of any instance of language.<sup>11</sup> Normally, we only use language to recuperate the said of what it attempts to represent to us. I engage in this sort of usage right now, struggling to make the target concepts of this exposition as clear

<sup>11</sup> See *Otherwise than Being*, 3-9.

as I might. When we use language in this way, Levinas believes that—even with the best of intentions—we attempt to colonize the other. By apprehending some external object with a single term, we believe we have absorbed it into what Levinas calls “the same” of our minds; as subjects, we apply schema to the external world that ultimately accommodate it to the unified vision of the world that is, for all intents and purposes, our self. In Bergsonian terms, we absorb the world into the habits that allow us to function as organisms. But by cognizing what is outside of ourselves, we inherently reduce its otherness, transforming it into another satellite lodged in the orbits of our understanding. Moreover, when something is said, it loses some measure of its agency—even if its said seems to confer subjectivity on its object, the mind attributing that subjectivity to the object occupies a privileged subject position, exercising subjectivity rather than having it exercised upon her. The object is subordinated to the one who defines its parameters, and also becomes a cog thrumming away in the machinery of the world as she envisions it. Drawing on the insights of Heidegger especially, Levinas realizes that we never fully understand any of the objects that populate our psychic lives; but where Heidegger simply found ignorance in the faith we place in our intellects, Levinas sees something much more insidious: the violent absorption of the external world into the internal world is the site of a profound ethical breakdown. For an ethical obligation to emerge, an object first has to have a defined identity, but for Levinas, the very mechanism by which we ascribe this identity to others is itself violent.

Levinas finds an answer to this dilemma in the same situation that causes it: speech, or more specifically, dialogue. While dialogue can always threaten to become the ethical morass described above, the possibility of discourse itself indicates that we have

already acknowledged an ethical situation that constantly precedes us. For language to occur—over and above what is actually said in any given speech-act—both the speaking subject and the target of her speech must have an already integrated identity. When we speak to someone, we tacitly acknowledge their equality with ourselves; before any of the mental habits calcified in grammar can distribute a stream of phonemes into mental images, we acknowledge the presence of the other before us, and we acknowledge her as an authentic “other” who exceeds the mental categories we might apply to her. In essence, we acknowledge our coexistence with the other in the presence from which both of our beings derive.

The colonizing effect of the said is an aftereffect of our anxiety at the other’s approach; in fact, Levinas goes so far as to say that it is this approach of the other which causes us to become integrated subjects capable of response:

The approach of the other is an initiative I undergo. I am passive with regard to it—and even passive in a more pure sense than the sense in which a material substrate receives, with an equal and opposite reaction, the action impressed on it, and in the sense that the sensibility is passive as a receptivity that synoptically, or syndotically, receives the medley of sensation given to it. Here no form, no capacity preexisted in me to espouse the imperative and make it my own. (xxiii)

Perception itself is conditioned upon a relationship of responsibility: before the perceiving subject becomes an integrated unity, the otherness of objects populating the world confronts her. The identity of objects in the phenomenal world summons perspectives from which they can be seen into being; Levinas’s concept of the other

refutes a philosophical idealism that prioritizes the subject above the world she perceives. Being thus faced with the other, the perceiver's identity contracts, by degrees, into a more cohesive unity itself. Without the integrity of the other, we would not have any reason to birth ourselves from the entropy of unconsciousness—it is the other's transcendent unification that generates a likewise unified perspective from which it can be seen, albeit partially.

The concept of the other in Levinas can be rather elliptical and at times even obtuse in its refusal to outline an ontology; this may make some sense, given his mistrust of the ontologizing said, but he does not thereby escape the necessity of ontology. His ontology ultimately resides outside the boundary of human speech, but for all our failure to speak them, objects still have being, perhaps even more so than in other philosophical systems. In this, he draws upon the phenomenological tradition I have briefly outlined above: for Husserl and Heidegger, as for Levinas, objects have an integrity that exceeds any partial definition we might give of them. When we make them present to ourselves, we inevitably ignore some of the features of their total perceptibility, since to fully understand them we would have to become the entire field of relations that constitutes the world. The integrity of the object is what makes it other, and it is precisely this otherness that forces new objects to coalesce into their integrated identities, and so on down the great chain of being. Levinas locates this unspeakable identity in the saying precisely because it evokes the movement toward presence and identity described in the reduction—wherein Husserl believed we would become uniquely capable of defining an object—while methodologically frustrating whatever it is we attempt to say. In so frustrating the said, Levinas acknowledges both the inexhaustible tool being of Heidegger, while

simultaneously shunting us toward the sinuous presence described by Bergson wherein objects inhere; saying, after all, reduces language to a pure procession of phonemes, deliberately lacking the content they profess to have.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, saying is a perfect expression of Bergsonian duration: the grammatical habits by which we compose images—represented images, but also the prior word-images through which we represent—are surrendered to reveal the deep unfolding of sounds passing directly before us. As for the others, Levinas's ontology, and so his ethics, resides in a presence which it is the task of the philosopher to recuperate, albeit by the same mental sleight of hand wherein we perceive presence by somehow refusing to perceive at all.

Yet as I have outlined above, the identity that these philosophers want to discover in presence seems to dissolve as we approach the limit point of its perfection. The movement that makes contact possible and the tertiary perception that apprehends it are impossible in the present; it is only as presence slurs into history that it becomes capable of movement and so tangible. Levinas is right to say that the subject coalesces in response to alterity, but it is problematic to locate that alterity in the others that populate the near-presence of the saying. This is not because objects in the world don't have identity, but rather because they are all intrinsically historical—their being is a temporal shadow of the no-place of perfect presence. This common historicity introduces a fundamental contiguity to all phenomenal beings that renders them alteregos of one another; all material beings, conscious or unconscious, must negotiate their relationships to a presence from which they have always already slid away. True alterity does not reside in the other material existents that populate the phenomenal world, but in the

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<sup>12</sup> Though one of the paradoxes that besets Levinas's model of saying is that the reduction of language to its material signifiers is deliberate; insofar as it is deliberate, it regains some of the content of which it sought to divest itself.

presence that refuses their approach even as it hurtles them into historical being. While Levinas is right to say that material objects have a certain integrity, and that we form ourselves into objects in response to that alterity, the relationship of lived, historical time to presence forges a community that binds all material beings together without, of course, collapsing them; but presence is other to history itself—presence is a continuous novelty whereby the past becomes legible.

If we revise Levinas's ethics to place presence in the position of the other, history itself occupies the subject's position, coalescing into its slurred, perceptible moments of time as a response to the absolute alterity of the present. For presence is, structurally, other to history—as I have noted, if the present moment were not always different from the past (however short the interval), history itself would collapse; though philosophy, throughout the modern era, has indulged in a sort of relativistic determinism—prior discourses determining what can be said in the present—the radical present cannot be coincident with the past.<sup>13</sup> History—like the Levinasian subject—struggles to colonize the present in its effort to define its own being and it is this effort at colonization that transforms history into a coherent progression; from the simple non-being of the past, history becomes an organism itself, slowly mutating in its attempt to define a presence that remains intrinsically other to it, whose otherness rendered it legible. Philosophical determinism thus describes the future quite accurately, but not the present. The future describes, exactly, our projections of what the organism of history will mutate into as it continues to negotiate the presence that births it. The idea of a future beyond the present

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes's *scriptor*—elaborated in “The Death of the Author”—is a paradigm instance of this determinism: for Barthes, present authors are only capable of recombining past figures and tropes to create “new” literature. Barthes robs the author of a genuinely creative novelty by recognizing that all literature must emerge within generic constraints that make it comprehensible; the wholly new is an incoherent concept, more incoherent even than gibberish (which also has its own genres).



is thus inherently deterministic, because to describe that future we already assume a continuous past. But presence is not the infinitesimal point where future becomes past, since historical beings cannot inhere in the present; rather, presence is the transcendence that causes history to coalesce. Physical being is a ghostly afterimage of presence that emerges in response to its absolute, constant alterity from history and space; its organization becomes increasingly more complex and cohesive to reflect and grapple with this perfectly unified other.

Conceiving of presence as the other offers an important inflection to the concept I have offered thus far: it asserts presence as a positive identity. I have had recourse to terms like nothing, other, transcendence and “no-place” to describe presence thus far in this discussion; these terms, while they serve the important function of opposing presence to vestigial, historical matter, inflect an erroneous sense of vacuity into the concept. They are a *via negativa* to something that cannot be described; but we cannot simplistically say that presence cannot be described without reducing its meaning, and thereby colonizing it in our attempt not to. Despite the non-coincidence of the lived, material world with presence, presence is still—as Augustine realized—the only “is;” we are never outside of the present moment, though neither are we ever inside it. If presence were simply nothing, it would be paradoxically static: nothing would persist, unchanged, through time. But the nature of presence is to be not coincident with the past, again, however brief the interval between past and present might be. A hidden spatial metaphor persists beneath the idea of absence that makes it constitutionally ill-suited to describe presence: when we initially imagine a no-place as the one I have attempted to deploy, we too often marshal our spatial consciousness to create an image of some black, dead space with

nothing in particular inhabiting it. But its emptiness still categorizes it as space. If we were to describe presence in such a way, we would still be imagining a duration, encapsulating the event of its eventlessness with such an imagined non-image. Presence would, thus, be consistent with the past; it would not change and so, structurally, would not be presence. Rather, we must somehow conceive (or resist conceiving altogether) of presence as dimensionless and durationless, but nevertheless infinitely new, never coincident with some moment in its past, never dead or dying. This novelty is not defined or understood by the changing of material bodies—the changes to which matter is susceptible are a byproduct of the transcendent novelty of presence. Novelty, in the sense presence demands, cannot be understood as change at all, since change requires that two moments of time be cut from a duration and compared; material change is possible, however only because the inexhaustible novelty of presence makes no material body entirely coincident with any point in its own past. A material body's habitual modes of being might resist this insistent novelty, but the very struggle for continuity signals that a radical reinvention of the world is always occurring.

The philosopher who best understood this feature of presence was Derrida. Though he too, with an audacity to rival Nietzsche's, announced his theory as a critique of the "metaphysics of presence," he actually comes closest of all modern philosophers to describing the novelty that inheres in presence. Operating in the shadows of Bergson and Levinas in particular, Derrida lamented the tendency of Western philosophy to locate identity within presence, and what he perceived as the exclusion of history from the present. As Arthur Bradley summarizes, for Derrida "whatever we perceive or experience as fully 'present'—the sound of my own voice, the wooden desk that I can

touch in front of me, the thoughts that are running through my head while I read or write, even the ‘here and now’ of space and time in which I exist—is actually shot through with an infinite, and almost imperceptible, number of differences, delays or spaces” (7). As we explored in our discussion of Bergson, the slow slur of time does not really permit identity to coalesce in the way our minds want it to. The mind tries to arrest the present moment as it passes and, within the frozen cut of time it extracts from duration, it assigns being and identity to discrete objects within that cut. Derrida’s innovation is to introduce the concept of difference and otherness to duration; whatever moment we intellectually arrest only seems present by virtue of how it differs from every moment that we have arrested before it.

In its most essential form, Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence applies Saussure’s synchronic model of the sign to a diachronic history. For Saussure, any linguistic sign only means what it means by negating every other sign in the language.<sup>14</sup> Any speech act evokes the entire system of language in the mind of a listener, but its specific phonemic patterns distinguish the individual word from all other possible words: dog is not hog because its slight phonemic variation carves a different relief from the raw material of the whole linguistic system. For Derrida, presence operates on a remarkably similar paradigm: we understand the present as present because it differs from the past. Presence pushes the past into non-being, thereby legitimating its claims to

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<sup>14</sup> See the *Course in General Linguistics*, 65-70. Saussure’s brief mention of the inherent linear temporality of the sign is also relevant to my larger discussion: he argues that time is the essential dimension of language, because its elements unfold in a duration. Other forms of sign present themselves instantaneously without this temporal unfolding according to Saussure; while I would argue that even visual images still unfold themselves in a temporal manner, Saussure is right that language draws our attention to its signification through time more so than other types of signs.

a preeminent existence.<sup>15</sup> But Derrida argues that, in our anxious effort to suppress the past, we actually expose the historicity of the present we have constructed. Thus, “no historical moment, body of thought, epoch or tradition, is ever wholly at one with itself because it inevitably contains the traces of what precedes and follows it” (Bradley 37). For Derrida, any form of identity relies on everything outside itself to define what it is; presence is, he supposes, our most egregious offense, since our treatment of presence as the emergent locus of meaning ignores the ways in which it is always shot through with the past.

Derrida’s model of temporal difference accurately describes presence, but the conclusions he draws from it erroneously emphasize history’s impact on presence. For Derrida, the present moment is a sort of illusion produced by every moment in the past; but though Derrida incisively describes the anxiety of influence that, in part, constructs our historical identities, he does not thereby authentically critique presence. If presence were simply an idealist construct as he suggests—if it did not exist anywhere but within our minds as a play of difference—Derrida might be right to demonstrate its historical nature. But presence is not simply a projection of the mind, and in fact, it would be more accurate to say that the mind is a projection or aftereffect of presence. Derridean difference, rather, gropes toward an understanding of a perfectly novel presence, one which is authentically transcendent and never coincident with itself. Derrida argues that this difference reveals that presence is shot through with history, but the transcendent

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida’s arguments, in this respect, are precursors to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the “field of cultural production,” wherein artists, vying for cultural capital, must position themselves in relation to the past. They co-opt elements from certain outdated modes while rejecting one’s immediate precursors; in doing so, the artist seems novel. Such snobs and quarrels between artistic eras are merely symptoms of a larger problem with the human tendency to seek the new in the present, for Derrida. On Bourdieu’s concept, see *The Field of Cultural Production*, 42.

difference of the present—the difference that is not simply a projection wrought by puerile and self-involved minds—is what allows us to perceive history as continuous. The absolute otherness of the present is what causes time to unfold as a pure, uninterrupted duration; no atom of time, however minute, can persist or be coincident with itself, and so historical beings slur and mutate in the coherent progression that undergirds Derrida’s analysis of presence. Derrida is right to criticize presence as it is constituted by historical beings, the presence where objects and ontology seem to inhere; but presence is a more radical concept than he is willing to admit. It is not the locus of ontology, but the point where being dissolves, unable as it is to mobilize itself and so manifest its identity on some other being. Presence ultimately precedes movement and influence, and so it precedes history which, in its most complete form, is the fossil record of every object’s influence on one another. The otherness that Derrida discovers in presence does not make it an illusory play of historical difference, but rather demonstrates its transcendence of the linear progression of history.

It is this notion of the present’s transcendence of lived, historical being that most directly opens upon the mystical understanding of time I will briefly recount below; however before proceeding on, a more succinct summary of the features of presence that I have offered through this rapid exploration of contemporary philosophy is in order. The first tenet of presence is that it is the only time that ever “is.” History has always already passed into non-being, by its very definition. Where we normally experience time as a progression, in reality there is only ever presence, from which history seems to slur away. The second, more difficult tenet of presence, is that the concept of being itself is really inapplicable to presence. When we theorize being, we are usually attempting to

substantiate the objects that populate the phenomenal world; however all such objects are the products of motion manifesting motion, and motion requires a temporal duration in order to be comprehensible. The most basic forms of matter—atoms, Higgs Boson particles and so on—are always vestigial, always comprised of the movements of some more elementary particle against another. These motions contract into habits of relation that give way to increasingly more complex forms of habituated organization; these vestigial habits of motion are what define the identity of an object, or more aptly, an organism—it is more than the sum of its atoms insofar as it adds some new layer of habituated action relative to other habituated organisms on its own scale of existence. As products of movement, they are always historical or outside of presence. The third tenet is that historical beings coalesce in response to the alterity that is, structurally, a feature of presence. Presence is presence by never being coincident with the past; it is always novel, though we cannot conceive its novelty as a function of the change experienced by a material body. Change and potentiality are how we experience the present's alterity—our bodies cohere in response to its constant onset, re-knitting the fibers of our identities to counter and mirror the simple, transcendent unity of presence—but since change requires movement and duration, it is not presence. A corollary to this tenet is that, despite the seemingly negative logic of presence's alterity, it does not undermine being but serves as the ground from which being can begin to cohere. Presence does not become absence simply because no object fully inheres within it; rather, its alterity is, by nature, infinitely productive. This relationship to history is what I have been calling transcendence.

The fourth tenet is that the continuity we experience in history is a product of the creative alterity of the present. Movement slurs into a vestigial being because the present does not extend for any duration, it does not remain. But the present's alterity is not somehow erratic; rather its transcendence is simpler than the complex forms of historical relation that it spawns. It is this simplicity that is mirrored in matter's tendency to organize itself into habituated patterns of organism, and organism is what makes history coherent as a progression. While it seems that the present, as continuous novelty, should produce some new chaos in every after image of itself, the idea of chaos is itself incoherent: when we imagine chaos, we imagine an absolutely random series of movements. But movement, if it is to be movement, assumes order—it assumes the coherence of an object moving through space and time. Thus chaos, at its limit point, would be nothing, since no material could organize its movements into being, and we have already established that presence must be productive rather than negative. History must, therefore, become a continuity capable of producing the vestigial objects that coalesce in response to the simple novelty of presence. Fifth, and finally, the methodology for approaching presence must, by its nature, be tangential; we cannot directly perceive presence or authentically theorize about it, since perception is an afterimage of a motion that could not take place in the perfect present. Our minds are constitutionally unequipped to perceive the presence to which they respond: if there is one idea that all of these philosophers agree upon, it is that the normal intellectual habits through which we perceive the world around us obscure what time and being really are. Ultimately, approaching presence entails an impossible dissolution of the self who approaches; but that perceiving subject never fully disintegrates—she always reorganizes

into a deeper, more subterranean self that remains an afterimage of the presence she attempts to witness. Our understanding of presence can, thus, only ever be tangential—witnessed, not directly, but through the phenomenal world that is inherently exiled from presence—and incomplete. A corollary to this point is that, on the human scale of being, the methodology for approaching presence must always entail some reconceptualization of the language we use to understand it. Language is the means by which we arrest static images from the pure flow of time,<sup>16</sup> and is itself an instance of this image making—in speaking, we parse an indivisible progression of sounds into the discrete events of individual words, phrases, sentences and so on. To approach the pure flow of time proceeding from the inaccessible present, we must cease to arrest images and define their identities by the play of differences that makes them meaningful. This does not entail that we should cease to speak, or that our speech should cease to mean (in which case it would no longer be speech), but rather that we must understand language simultaneously as what it attempts to mean and as the transcendent fact of its saying. It is this particular methodological insight that medieval frame narratives develop most fully, as I will detail below.

### *Presence and Transcendence in the Middle Ages*

Many of the concepts of presence described above have their unacknowledged genesis in medieval theology. The touchstone of medieval temporal theory that all

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<sup>16</sup> Language arrests time in two senses: in the most basic sense, it tries to re-present some past cut from a temporal sequence; but also, in its own internal structure, language requires a historical reconstitution to form its progressive units of meanings. We understand language only from the position of its termination; even if we comprehend something as it is being said, we only do so by completing it in our minds before it is completed—the futurity of such linguistic anticipation is still a historical process. In my chapter on the Canterbury frame, I will discuss this in more detail as the foundation of language's mimesis: signifiers may be arbitrary, but the historical unification of a unit of meaning acts in precisely the same way as the habitual organization of material organisms.



subsequent theologians would have to grapple with is contained in Book XI of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine comes to meditate on presence by musing on the question of what God did before he made the world (9.2.9). He concludes that this question, asked by many of his contemporaries, is actually incoherent in itself: if God was simply reposing before the creation, this would imply that He changed his mind, deciding to get to work at making a universe. But God would then not be eternal—He would be time-bound and changeable, just like everything He created. If God made time, caused the original cause that set all the others in motion, then there is no historical moment in which He was not making the world (9.2.14). The causal structure of creation—wherein objects generate effects in other objects that generate still further effects—necessitates this point outside the circle of history that first caused the entire chain of causality. God cannot be some spatiotemporal creature, occupying the same space He is supposed to create, because this would imply that a space and a time existed before Him, in which case He would not be God.

Augustine thus proves that God is eternal, but eternity is not a matter of existing through an infinite span of time. Augustine's God is not the *Deus absconditus* of Enlightenment philosophy—He does not simply instigate a rational cosmos that then follows preordained rules; the eternity of God is not prior to history but a transcendence that runs through history at every microscopic instant of its passage. God, at least in temporal terms, is the present that grounds all being, the only time in which objects actually have being. Augustine's essential insight into time, that no theory before or after has been able to circumvent, is that the past and future—by their very nature—have no being in themselves. We must alter the verb tenses we use to describe them in order to

indicate their absence: things in the past were and things in the future will be, but neither simply are. They acquire some measure of being by being made proximal to the present: in the case of past events, they must be re-presented from memory or historical texts while future events must be predicted or prophesied. In both cases we bring what is nonexistent into a more immediate memory so that it can be made to influence our current actions. Past and future never have any being in themselves; they are structurally nonexistent, though we instinctively perceive of time as a progression from one to the other. But in reality, we only ever subsist within the present; we are never outside the present moment even though it seems impossibly brief to us. Presence is eternal only in this sense—it is all that is, not preexisting or outlasting history but hovering above it as the ground of its being.

But though presence persists through history, it does not therefore become part of history's movements; the present is not merely the point that ushers the future into the past but rather it is a moment without extension, not really conceivable as a moment at all in the traditional way we use the term. Augustine comes to this conclusion through a thought experiment resembling Bergson's: he begins by asking what measure of time can be considered present. He concludes that a century cannot be present because within it years pass, but neither can years be present since months, days, hours, minutes, seconds, etc. pass within each interval of time. This procedure of measuring and dividing time, as we saw in Bergson, cannot adequately describe what time is; time is infinitely divisible, and so the present must, at the unreachable apex of this infinite divisibility, be without interval. Though in time one instant, however it is measured, succeeds another, "in eternity there is no such succession of things, the entirety is present, and that cannot be a

time. In time, the past is shoved away by the arriving future, and the future trails behind the past, and both past and future are constituted by the present they flow through. Who will catch and calm the heart, to see in stillness how it is the stillness of eternity that controls the past and future, without itself being either past or future?” (265) In the perfect presence that this thought experiment uncovers, the succession that allows time-bound objects to move cannot occur; fully integrated within itself, the novelty of the present has not spawned some prior moment within which the successive states of movement could occur. Though time is purely mobile, the presence that generates time is, not static, but extensionless. It does not describe an apprehended interval, but the infinite point prior to the movement that any interval summarizes.

While the nature of this limit point is to be other to lived historical existence—which otherness generates time—its lack of extension yet makes it transcendently unified and simple. Like the Neoplatonists, Augustine perceives temporal existence as inherently fragmentary: as we saw above, he conceptualizes presence as a stillness that quells the “unquietness of time.” Both objects within time and the successive moments of history manifest a diversity that separates them from the presence they grope toward. Historical objects and subjects seem to acquire being only insofar as they persist; their unity as objects reflects the transcendent unity of presence, but that unity is spread throughout time and so ultimately subject to dissolution. This tendency toward dissolution is due precisely to the fact that their identities are historical—their organization depends on what is nonexistent. Objects are objects insofar as they have a sort of memory of remaining in a certain shape with certain physical properties that relate them to other objects on their scale of temporal organization. But if the past is, by its nature, what does

not exist, then the entire being of phenomenal objects is a re-presentation, an attempt to reassemble some prior experience of presence again. Historical being resists the most salient fact of presence: that it does not persist, but always is and is different from the past that historical beings occupy. Their near-present being is thus spread out inextricably across a host of past moments they experienced only partially. Yet their fragmentary existence does not, by this resistance of present difference, become absurd or vain necessarily, though it is always in some measure tragic; rather, they progressively record the poignancy of the presence that is other to themselves. As vestiges of some prior moment, they can never fully contact that present—their perception, in the broadest sense, always records some successive state of being that “occurs” because it is outside of presence and has interval. But the present’s lack of extension is the basis of their being; its eternal novelty is what generates the near-presence which they inhabit. The truth of its encounter with presence is what any object struggles to preserve, even as presence supplants the object’s identity by degrees.

Augustine argues that all human beings—and we could extend this logic to all objects generally—struggle to return to the presence that constantly creates and recreates them. He uses an exile metaphor to express this idea: “He is our origin, since we would have no place to return after wandering unless he were continuously there” (11.2.10). The eternal presence of God is the locus of being that does not admit the motion of time; the metaphor of wandering is both important and apt, evoking the exile of Exodus to describe the successive states of history. We will see this metaphor of walking throughout the frame narratives discussed in this dissertation used to describe a similar exile from presence. In this analogy, all action in the world is conceptualized as a sort of

pilgrimage back to the presence from which temporality is continually generated; but the actions that attempt to recuperate presence are, by virtue of being actions—by virtue of occurring in some interval and being performed by objects or subjects that have historical identities—exiled from the presence they seek. Insofar as they have a discernible spatiotemporal identity, objects cannot make contact with the presence that is all that is. They are doomed instead to the exile of history, attempting to get closer to their point of origin but remaining infinitely distant from it.

Augustine does envision various forms of contact with presence, but their ecstatic quality is tempered by a recognition that we always inhabit lived, historical time. Human beings cannot somehow escape time to fully encounter the present, since to do so would entail the dissolution of the subject so escaping; in a problem we will encounter again shortly, a person cannot, by an act of will, destroy her will since the attempt to do so would establish a new will destroying the prior will. Will would reinscribe itself in the attempt to willfully destroy itself, and it would thus remain time-bound, in the world of actions and their intervals. The escape back to presence must, therefore, always be partial, furtive, and accompanied by the history that seems incompatible with presence.

Augustine's preferred example of this seemingly paradoxical transcendent experience is language. In describing presence, he contrasts human language to the Word of God; whereas our language occurs through a succession of syllables, words, phrases and so on that emerge and pass away to be reconstituted in memory, God's Word is durable, unchanging and without temporal extension. God's Word must be outside time and space, since it created both: "If, in order to make heaven and earth, you had said 'Let there be heaven and earth' in sounding and passing words, there would have been a

physical medium before the creation of heaven and earth, a medium in which the words could make changes in time in order to run through their temporal sequence” (11.2.8). God’s Word must precede the spatiotemporal medium that it creates; its “speaking,” then is something different from our normal modes of linguistic expression, a transcendent form of language that does not re-present a prior object, but which is itself originary presentation, the first movement of temporal differentiation from the present. Though human language only exists in sequential time, its capacity to make meaning offers a basic analogy by which we can begin to understand “the timeless word heard in silence.” Whereas God’s Word generates the silent medium through which human words persist—and in some measure disrupt—the biblical metaphor offers two modes of access to God. The first is negative: by comparing God’s creative activity with human language, the biblical analogy forces us to consider the ways in which it is inadequate, thereby prompting a reflection on how God made the world. However, the analogy also suggests an imperfect correspondence between the human mind from which language proceeds in time, and the divine mind from which time itself proceeds. Pure mind—insofar as it is distinct from the material world in which it subsists—is a reflection of God’s presence that is capable of hearing the Word that produces history “in silence;” when its own activity ceases, the mind becomes passively capable of recording the microscopic succession of instants in which time is created from presence. The mind is thus both deeply unlike and deeply like God’s Word; so Augustine concludes “I shudder off from it and burn toward it, shuddering off because I am so deeply unlike it, burning toward because I am so deeply like it” (11.2.11).

Augustine emphasizes the necessary mediocrity in any human attempt to contact God's presence; he recognizes that contact with presence would dissolve the self, since differentiation cannot inhere in the present. The mind that marshals its energies to make contact with the present, however, remains distinct for Augustine. In fact, the distinctiveness of its identity exists in exact proportion to its efforts to know God. Augustine's realism on this score distinguishes him somewhat from the mystical tradition he will inspire. While of course different mystics will conceptualize this contact with God in various ways, they are generally united by an optimism in the individual soul's capacity to dissolve itself into God's preeminent being. By retreating from the lived world of historical time, the mystics escape the fragmentation and partial vision of their subjective selves to break upon presence. The mystics know God by ceasing to "know" anything; they collapse the distinction between perceiver and perceived and so end even the most basic receptivity that divorces us from the pure present.

This optimism in Christian mystical texts stems from a common source: the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, the wellspring of mystical theology in the Middle Ages. While Pseudo-Dionysius tends to explicate his mystical theology in terms of the metaphysics of light, the methodology he describes has striking temporal implications as well. In *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes how "by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is" (1.1000A). Pseudo-Dionysius is particularly emphatic that everything perceptible and comprehensible must be left behind at the furthest reaches of spiritual practice; since God is the undivided point prior to spatial and temporal differentiation, the mystic's

abandonment of the world must likewise be absolute and undivided. Pseudo-Dionysius frequently uses the metaphor of darkness to describe this state: whereas earlier philosophical and religious traditions envisioned God as the light of reason that makes the world intelligible,<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius recognizes that God must precede even the rational categories He generates for the world, since they entail differentiation and temporality.

The problems Pseudo-Dionysius confronts in trying to describe this pre-rational God run parallel to the difficulty of adequately describing perfect presence; negation of the material most closely approximates His otherness to the lived world, but it ultimately transgresses its own principle by rendering God intelligible. As we saw above, negative definitions of presence still leave an empty space and time in their conceptualization and so miss the mark they aim at. Though Pseudo-Dionysius is often associated with negative theology, he actually says that negation is, in fact, only preliminary to a deeper mystical methodology:

since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.

(1.1000B).

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<sup>17</sup> Plotinus is a key source for this metaphorical association between light and reason: he frequently has recourse to light as a metaphor for the ordering activity of the unitary soul on matter. The divine light of reason shines on formless, receptive matter and so confers an intelligible shape to it; the hylemorphic body then refracts that light, always in a lesser degree, on other material forms. See, for instance, *Enneads*, 4.17.



As he does in his other works, Pseudo-Dionysius suggests that the attributes and likenesses positively attributed to God in Scripture are preliminary waypoints in any spiritual odyssey; such metaphors are useful, but must ultimately be negated as we begin to, in whatever measure possible, comprehend how fully God's being transcends lived existence. Presence, too, must transcend historical time and so seems governed by an emptying negation. However his final move is to collapse the binary between affirmation and negation—negation of the material is only another method of approximating God's being and rendering it understandable to the human intellect. God's priority to both affirmation and negation becomes a deeper form of positive theology, renewed by its journey through negation: the affirmation of God's priority to this binary becomes a negation of negation that leaves God not empty, but superabundantly full. Metaphors of emptiness are equally transgressive—equally positive—unless they result in this final movement; likewise, the otherness of perfect presence to time cannot be comprehended through a negation that leaves it sterile. Since it can never be coincident with itself, it is transcendentally full; it has no interval—which durability is normally how we understand being—but it is not, for that fact, any less actual or new. The hidden positivity of negation must be corrected by the hidden negativity of affirmation.

Pseudo-Dionysius's most powerful description of this mystical experience comes when he describes Moses's transcendence of Hebrew spiritual practice. In his account, Moses engages in rituals of purification with the community; however, when they are complete, he hears trumpets and sees lights that the others do not, and so stands apart from them. By means of these visions, God's "unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of these holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses]

breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.... Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing” (1.1001A). Pseudo-Dionysius comes close here to describing an unintelligible state of God prior to presence, but he stops short: the “unimaginable presence” is shown to Moses, and so still implies a subject point from which that presence is being perceived. The final movement of the vision is to collapse this perception—wherein Moses can still walk as an integrated personality—and thus dissolve the self in the presence that precedes perception. The means to accomplish this transcendence feel remarkably Levinasian: “the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One” (1.1001A). Just as the saying of language presupposes an other that underwrites ethics, so do mental and physical perception presuppose a presence that transcends the content of any given perception. As the mystic moves up this ladder of presuppositions, she ultimately surpasses the most basic forms of historical ontology, beyond the divisions of space and time. She lodges in an unknowing that, as Pseudo-Dionysius has shown us, is neither affirmative nor negative, but simply other to history.

To effect an authentic negation of negation, Pseudo-Dionysius will undercut the substantive negating metaphors he uses throughout his own work. In his final lines he concludes “Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by

virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial” (5.1048B). Not only does Pseudo-Dionysius undermine the fundamental metaphor of darkness he has used to negate the positivity of prior philosophy and theology, but he creates statements that self-implode in the act of their speaking. When he says “it is beyond assertion and denial,” he commits both of the transgressions he cautions against: the statement itself is an assertion, and its “beyond” gives it the form of a denial. Likewise, in the following sentence he attempts to describe the necessary proximity of any assertion or denial to God’s actual being; yet the form of this statement, again, purports to describe the “it” that the statement itself argues can only be described tangentially. Freedom from limitation is itself a limitation, describing something God cannot be.<sup>18</sup> Such assertions ultimately reflect the spiritual practice Pseudo-Dionysius advocates: they take the predicating form of human understanding and turn it upon itself, rendering its own activity nonsensical through its exercise. The intellect—whose spatial and temporal divisions separate us from perfect presence—recognizes its inadequacies when faced with a non-object such as God’s presence; it thus relinquishes its self-cohesive force, leaving the mystic psychologically empty and outside history.

While Pseudo-Dionysius most often describes his mystical methodology and its object in spatial and epistemological terms, one of his most faithful expositors translates it into a specifically temporal register: the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The *Cloud*-author—whose work is roughly contemporary with Chaucer’s

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<sup>18</sup> This insight corresponds to incarnational theology, which is, in essence, a disguised and specific form of the *negatio negationis*: if the statement “God cannot be limited” is self-contradictory, being a limitation placed on the divine, then the physical localization of God within a single body—rather than limiting the definition of God—actually manifests his transcendence of a limitation, the limitation of God’s ability to self-limit Himself.

own—not only translates Dionysian spirituality into the English vernacular, but he offers more pragmatic approaches for the aspiring mystic. The approach most pertinent here is his use of monosyllabic prayer. As Eleanor Johnson describes, the *Cloud*-author recommends a unique type of prayer, wherein the aspirant—or perhaps in this case a “suspirant”—repeats a single, monosyllabic word like “God” or “love” repeatedly. Johnson argues that such prayers are designed to bring the person praying nearer to “atomic time”: the most minute, indivisible units of temporality that can be defined. Language normally situates the speaker more fully in the space and time she occupies; as we have seen, language activates all of the intellectual habits by which we mistakenly perceive time as a broken succession of frozen images. Even prayer tends to be transgressive in this sense: in praying to the God who is fully outside of time, we often concern ourselves with events in our own time bound lives, using language that, as Augustine noted, makes its meaning in a fragmented succession of instants. Both the form and the content of language implants us into passing historical time. But as Johnson notes, “prayer, for the *Cloud*-author, is neither narrative nor syntactic; rather, it is recursive and asyntactic” (346).<sup>19</sup> As in Bergson’s procedure for reconstituting duration, this monosyllabic prayer deconstructs the entire syntactic machinery of language; instead of using words to reference ideas that are then coordinated in relation to one another, monosyllabic prayer makes the speaker aware of the surface sounds of the words being used to pray. It thus pushes a speaker into a greater consciousness of the present

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<sup>19</sup> As I have suggested above, this “asyntactic” quality is actually somewhat problematic in constructing a methodology for approaching presence, since it divests time of its rational, progressive sequence. Insofar as this kind of practice tries to lodge us in a presence that precedes and excludes history, it transgresses the principle of novel generativity that is endemic to the idea of presence. It moves toward the emptiness of true chaos in which moment doesn’t even follow moment.

circumstances in which she prays, where she would normally focus on the content of the prayer.

Johnson argues that the *Cloud*-author's atoms of time actually have some indivisible duration that solves the quandary Augustine identified; as evidence of this, she cites a passage where the *Cloud*-author defines the interval of atoms in terms of human will: the atom "is neiþer lenger ne schorter, bot euen acording to one only steryng þat is wiþ-inne þe principal worching miȝt of þe soule, þe whiche is þi wille" (18.3-5).

Monosyllabic prayer, for Johnson, thus represents the smallest unit of language that still contains meaning; these units thus encapsulate the movement of the will that corresponds to a single atom of presence, thereby pushing speakers to the indivisible duration of the present. However, this passage does not really suggest that presence has an indivisible interval—the *Cloud*-author has learned his lessons from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius too well to simply believe that some unit of time is indivisible. Rather, he does not describe the accomplishment of some act of will, but only its genesis; this birth of an intention in the soul is the closest that the human mind can come to understanding God's perfect present. Will always struggles to effect some change in the historical world. It mobilizes the body to alter something from its past state; though it operates in the historical world, it thus contains a species of the difference inherent in the present. The birth of a desire in the soul thus resembles that most infinitesimal slur of God's present into a nonexistent history, when presence becomes non-coincident with itself and so generates time. The presence from which time proceeds does not thereby acquire interval even though it generates time; in its indivisible form it must remain prior to all temporal

extension. The birth of a desire in the soul, prior to that desire's mobilization of the body to effect itself, most closely resembles that present in which God inheres.

Monosyllabic prayer pushes us closer to that experience of time that would render all language—as a movement in time—unintelligible. For repeated words do not retain their potency, but rather lose it; any child revelling in words understands that a single word repeated indefinitely begins to lose its coherence as a word; the phonemes themselves begin to show the seams that stitch a word together. The word itself becomes, not an indivisible unit of meaning, but an arbitrary assemblage of sounds that cannot cohere into meaning. Its incoherence does not, however, reduce the act of will motivating the speaker to speak; instead, it situates her awareness not in the accomplishment of the will to speak, but in its inception, in the first germ of difference that accomplishes itself within time but which begins outside of it in an undifferentiated presence that is purely other to history. The repetition of a word like “God” does not locate a preeminent, indivisible significance in that word but, rather, fulfills the critique of traditional prayer that its procedure suggests: it renders the word we use for “God” incomprehensible to thrust us toward a Dionysian unknowing. It does not simply negate this word: it does not, in an intellectual mode, try to impotently declare that God is not God. Rather, it disrupts language to gesture toward a Dionysian “beyond” language that is neither affirmation or negation; it avoids the event-making procedure of language to demonstrate the infinitely divisible Augustinian particles of time that occur throughout any act of language. And it adds to these two thinkers the realization that will itself is created in the image of God. Insofar as that will remains the property of a distinct personality with its own partial view of the world—its own aim and intentions within the

world—it remains exiled from God’s presence; but as it renders its own modes of worship incoherent—while continuing to will that incoherence—it paradoxically comes to approximate that presence more and more.

This necessarily brief glance at the two most important figures of the Christian mystical tradition and their synthesis in the English *Cloud*-author has added several dimensions to our earlier theoretical discussions of presence. Perhaps most importantly, contra Derrida and Heidegger, Augustine’s analysis of time demonstrates that presence is the only time that “is.” The past and the future are, by their definition nonexistent; however, this emphasis on presence does not necessarily tend toward the difficulties inherent in a Derridean “metaphysics of presence” largely because, in the absolute present, no material being could subsist. Material life is structured by a distention of the present into the past, but this interval removes us from perfect presence. However, contra Bergson, this distention does not fundamentally describe what time is, but rather what our minds are capable of perceiving. Bergson’s infinitely divisible thought experiment does not prove that time is a fluid duration, but rather that a presence exists that precedes all temporal extension to which we fundamentally lack access. Contra Husserl, Pseudo-Dionysius recognizes that the perceiving subject must finally dissolve in the face of her ultimate object. A fully present perception does, as Husserl suggests, require that the subject excise herself of the past experiences that color and skew her perception; however, even without her own private history, the subject still brings a temporal structure to any experience that is ultimately foreign to presence. Presence lacks experience because it lacks the division into subject and object of temporal existence and the movement through a duration by which such objects relate to one another.

Methodologically this creates a difficulty: the science of perception that Husserl sought to create is ultimately an impossible venture. Rather, the mystical methodology Pseudo-Dionysius proposes is one which renders the subject unknowing. Along with Levinas and Bergson, the *Cloud*-author proposes a further facet to this methodology: whereas language is usually the means by which we generate the sequentiality of time, language perceived as a fluid duration can be the means by which we become more aware of our present circumstances. Unlike Levinas, the *Cloud*-author suggests that perceiving language as a saying rather than a said brings us into contact, not with an external other, but with our own will as it bleeds from presence—the transcendent other—into time. Perceiving the musical slur of language in its fullness pushes us back to the will that generated the sound in the first place and it the human will that most closely resembles God’s infinitely novel, yet eternal, presence.

### *Language in the Medieval Frame*

The above discussion is, of course, hardly exhaustive; it sets out only to recount the various permutations of the phenomenological theory of presence and to demonstrate how a few, paradigmatic medieval thinkers can complicate the ways in which modern philosophers in the phenomenological tradition have thought about presence. The trajectories of this new theory of presence could intersect with a number of other theories—especially the recent theoretical trends of object oriented ontology and postmodern theology—and could likewise admit to a variety of applications to different types of texts. However, a theory’s value can ultimately only be determined by what it allows us to do in a text; to that end, the medieval frame narrative proves a surprisingly fertile testing



ground. Historically speaking, my claim is that the poets of the late Middle Ages took the mystical and theological theories of Christian presence to their fullest fruition; after centuries of rarefied expository that tried to describe God through various means of positive and negative predication, the poets—most notably Dante—took up the discourse not through more expository prose, but through narrative. This simple generic shift resounded through the theological world of the Middle Ages like a thunderclap; most simply, it relocated discourse on presence from the abstract and abstruse musings of the theologians back into the space and time that narrative invariably invents. More specifically, though, the authors who prove themselves most sensitive to the temporal dimensions of their poetry deploy framed narration which—largely by virtue of its layering effect, its multiple, simultaneously imagined scenes—is uniquely capable of expressing their veiled theories of presence.

This methodological shift was already pregnant in theological discussions on presence: as we have seen, the transcendence of presence excludes our willed movement toward it and our perception of it; perception can become like the asymptote, perpetually closing gaps between its experience and presence, but presence itself remains out of reach insofar as we perceive. Insofar as we retain a will and some vestige of consciousness that perceives the ascent to presence, we remain outside it. Pseudo-Dionysius promised that this will could confound itself, and in its confustication, dissolve into the presence that precedes it; but the trouble remains that any methodology, however circuitous, still defines its object in relation to the self pursuing it. However much they protest to the contrary, mystics can never achieve their limit goal of total self-dissolution because, as they labor at dissolving their selves, a new, subterranean self emerges to enact the

dissolution. Their humiliation at the failure to realize their goal brings them ever closer to self-dissolution, but it nonetheless never quite accomplishes that goal. Only in death is a person truly relieved of the defined identity that exiles her from presence; but insofar as mysticism does not devolve into ritual self-sacrifice, it is a heroic endeavor. The strength of the mystic will is shown by its accommodation to paradox that allows it to unmake itself. But in unmaking itself, it has always already remade itself in a new image, and that image is potentially more perverse than the one it has shed if the mystic identifies through it, if she smugly believes she has made essential contact with the divine. Mystical praxis thus, in its most honest forms, becomes a matter of constant anxiety; insofar as the mystic retains her identity she knows she has not reached her object, but the attempt to eliminate that identity results in a new identity that again locates her in lived, historical time. The best we can do, as the *Cloud*-author suggests, is discover the moment where the birth of an impulse in our will first situates us within time.

Chaucer and his forebears respond to this situation with narrative. The theology of presence locates true being outside of lived time but it offers only a self-defeating, recursive methodology to “access” that presence; but in their frames, these authors take as their starting point the inescapability of lived existence, and they work to locate transcendence within that existence rather than outside it. To be clear, they do not render presence somehow historical, but they try to demonstrate how the present constantly operates through time and how its constant transcendence actually shapes the movements of history. In a word, the medieval frame narrative entails a fully incarnational poetics that rediscovers transcendence in lived experience. The forms of transcendence these authors propose never fully extract us from time, nor should they—lived time is the

vantage point from which presence demonstrates its infinite fertility. If the temporal creation could, by some means, come into contact with its source, it would be annihilated and presence would be sterile and non-differential; time is how presence expresses its being, even though no temporal interval ever persists in the present. For medieval frame authors, then, temporal identity is a divine gift of the God occupying perfect presence; it accomplishes the work of love in the creation, which even as it suggests an affinity between two beings, allows to each an authentic individuality.<sup>20</sup> Presence is thus other to historical time, but the beings that persist within time have authentic, purposeful identities insofar as they continually register the divine otherness of presence.

As a medium, narrative allows these authors to meditate on this constant moment of creation; poetic creation, of course, offers a metaphor of the work of creation at large. The poet births intentions into words into a fully realized temporality wherein objects move relative to one another. The author, however, must be careful not to simply fall into the intellectual habits by which we normally live, fully captivated within the world's procession of images and objects. The transcendence of presence is still operative in such a narrative—our intellectual habits do not, somehow impinge upon presence, but only our capacity to recognize it—but it is masked in the same way it is usually masked throughout our lives. Such narratives only further lodge us in the ontologies of history rather than working to discover the presence that generates history. The author's task, then, is to somehow produce lines of flight to the presence that transcends their narratives and all temporal creation while still imagining a time; in doing so, narrative becomes

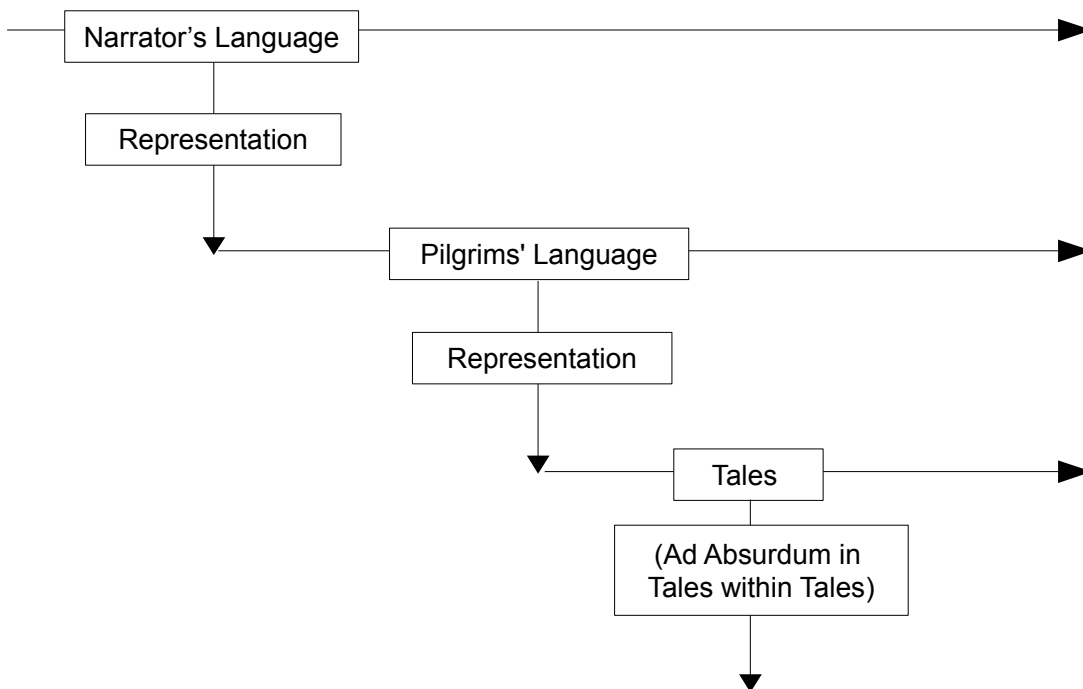
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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy calls this maintenance of difference by an undifferentiated presence the “paradox of time, which is to be simultaneously pure succession and pure permanence, according to the pulsation of one in the other. Thus, even when nothing new happens, it still happens that the distinction is maintained and things do not collapse into one another. The separation and distinction of all things is not a banal, *de facto* given. It forms, on the contrary, the gift, the giving of things itself” (159).

authentically mimetic, imitating the relationship between history and presence outside its bounds.

Frame narratives do this by making language both an object imagined by the narrative and the agent that imagines other bodies. They literally imagine the speech-act that produces their narrative. When we read them, we always retain a preeminent awareness of their existence as language, an awareness that words are being used to conjure a scene (the frame) in which words are being used to conjure other scenes (the tales). This graphic illustrates, as an example, how Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* uses a frame structure to represent language:

Figure 1: Imagined Linguistic Timelines in *The Canterbury Tales*



While the words of any narrative level are, of course, sometimes used to simply imagine material objects and characters, they are used far more often to imagine the words that characters on a lower level are speaking. As a reader constitutes the events of a tale, she must imagine not only the events themselves, but the several mouths from which the words representing that tale are spoken. This runs contrary to the logic of most fiction, which tends to hide the machinery by which it is produced, deploying our intellectual habits to tidily invent its forms, locales and characters in the minds of readers. This structure forces readers to overlay the narrative image of a tale with a consciousness of the pre-representational speech act, in which a word is imagined as a sonic object within the frame at the same moment that it becomes a vehicle for imagining something else. In this pre-representational dimension, words themselves become the objects that mark out the time inhabited by a speaker, not solely the means to imagine other such narrated objects.

Chaucer, Dante and Boccaccio use this structure of framed language to explore the pre-representational saying that always accompanies the narrative said. In deploying this structure, they suggest a procedure analogous to those described by the *Cloud*-author, Levinas and Bergson: they use the intellectual habits that entrap us within historical time to suggest a line of flight to the presence that transcends and always accompanies it. The language by which we normally parse time into discrete events populated by distinct objects is, in part, surrendered to a consciousness of the language by which their being is enunciated; the internal grammar by which this language means its objects into the imagination is accompanied by an aesthetic music of language that manifests the full

duration of temporal existence. That fluid duration is the fullest experience of presence available to beings in time: in it, no fraction of temporality is rendered insignificant, but rather has its own unique beauty that is the basis of its being.<sup>21</sup> This music pushes us back still further to its initial conception in the will, prior to its realization in action, and so to the first movement of presence into time. While the theorists and theologians oppose this experience of transcendence to lived time, framed narrative shows that the linguistic habits that compose our experience of lived time are an essential part of the continuum between history and presence. These authors do not try to break the machinery of language as the *Cloud*-author does, but rather they allow these habits to play out to their fullest extension—the creation of an entire fictive temporality. This narrative methodology does not vainly attempt to destroy time, but to fulfill its destiny by demonstrating the transcendence that generates time.

In my first chapter, I will explore how Dante deploys such a narrative methodology to reconceptualize the ascent toward divine presence. Dante's most substantive and insightful revision to earlier theology was to spatialize Paradise. In doing so, he reintegrated time and presence; lived experience invariably provided the access to a divine presence just beyond its horizon. Philosophers and theologians from at least the era of the Neoplatonists onward had insisted that perfect, divine presence could not be spatial or temporal; presence is the only thing that meaningfully is, but matter—as the phenomenological tradition has rediscovered in a somewhat more systematic way—is

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<sup>21</sup> In his study of Plotinus, Pierre Hadot surveys the work of several authors who associate beauty with a pure experience of time, including Ravaissou and Bergson himself. For Ravaissou, such an experience constitutes a "eurythmia," which he defines as a "movement that does well" (qtd. in Hadot 50). For Plotinus, Ravaissou and Hadot, such gracious movements demonstrate the superfluous trace of the Good in the created world. I will return to this relationship between beauty and presence in my discussion of Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*.

always vestigial, a product of habituated contractions of movement whose successive states cannot be admitted to perfect presence. Perfect presence was also perfect unity, and so could not admit the differentiation between objects in space, or the differentiation between moments in time. To return to the divine ground of being, then, the philosopher had to practice ascetic disciplines of detachment;<sup>22</sup> while theologians could not be so detached from their active duties to parishioners, their concern was fundamentally to spread that detachment from worldly concerns to others.<sup>23</sup>

Dante's *Paradise*, however, shows just how sterile this vision of divinity was; in their insistence on the perfection of deity, the theologians had stripped away its infinite generativity. In place of a continuously novel presence they set up a stagnant no-place populated by paradoxes and contradictions.<sup>24</sup> By resituating presence within emergent, unfolding time, Dante manages to reintegrate generativity into the concept without profanely rendering divine presence just another historical entity. Presence is lodged within every significant experience, just beyond the horizon of the infinite parsing to which we can subject any temporal event; we only approach that horizon, however, when

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<sup>22</sup> One source proximal to each of the poets discussed here is Boethius; while the *Consolation* does not center itself on temporal issues per se, it demonstrates the necessity of detaching oneself from the machinery of politics and history to discover the rationality that transcends them.

<sup>23</sup> In the monastic tradition, detachment was framed as the contemplative life which contrasted the active one—a development which mirrored the philosophical distinction between *praxis* and *theoria*; while most religious treatments of this topic advocate the need of a “mixed life,” authors like Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux tend to prefer the contemplative side of the equation. For an overview of the early Christian history of the *vitae*, see McGinn 58-74; for a broader overview, see Lobkowitz.

<sup>24</sup> One of the more convoluted problems lurking in this Neoplatonic system was the ontological status of angels, which theologians made analogous to Platonic forms. For Plotinus, the forms were beings that existed in closest proximity to the first hypostasis; they contemplated it perfectly and so lived a paradoxical existence in which they both were and were not differentiated from one another. As perfect reflections of deity, they had to reflect its unity; but in their secondary status as reflections they were differentiated from the One. The Empyrean, in traditional theology, is beyond spatial and temporal differentiation, yet of course the angels and the most blessed were supposed to reside there. Dante's solution to this paradox is to simply sweep away one half of the contradiction: he renders this uppermost reach of Paradise spatial and temporal.

we fall under the erotic spell presented to us by some object in the physical world—in Dante’s case, his beloved, Beatrice. The beloved opens us to a different experience of time wherein we do not elide the Bergsonian gaps between moments, but rather try to fully instantiate the infinite passage of time. The beloved effects this vision of duration by becoming radically intentional: the elision of temporal moments that defines the event—however minute that event might be—is always accompanied by the containment of objects into partial identities that accompanies any act of perception. As Heidegger described in his theory of tool-being, perception does not actually reveal an object to us; in fact, it closes off numerous facets of that object’s total being. An object’s identity is determined by the innumerable relations it engages in with other objects surrounding it; however, when we perceive something, we curtail most of those relations to better see those aspects of it that hold some relevance to ourselves. In a purely physical sense, this partiality is simply intrinsic to perception: our eyes cannot see the way an object reflects certain wavelengths of light, our ears cannot hear the minute vibrations of certain molecules and so forth. When we perceive something, we intend toward it in a particular way, from a particular angle of vision, for particular purposes and on a particular scale of temporal organization; there is no unintentional, disinterested act of perception, but only perceptions that highlight some relevant datum of an object while obscuring others.

For the great multitude of perceptual acts, such a system works exceptionally well—we generally do not need to understand the radical identity of a chair, the multitude of interactions and possible interactions it has with other objects that surround it. We only need to perceive those aspects of it that make it suitable for sitting on. However, if our lives were populated by nothing more than these limited, functionalist perceptions, none



of them would have any real meaning; the world would be devoid of any ethical imperative, since we could reduce the being of objects to suit whatever self-centered reduction of ourselves we had effected. In the presence of the beautiful, however, we intuit the dimensions of an object that exceed our perceptual capacities. We perceive them in the full consciousness of the limitation of our perception, but with an enduring desire to recuperate the full being we know we deny them; contra Heidegger, that fullness of being does not lie in a renunciation of perception, but in an impossible radicalization of it that would account for all the possible, partial, intentional perspectives available on it. As the beautiful object can be radically intentionalized within space, so too can it be across time wherein the object's relations take place; without abandoning the specificity of each moment, the beloved object can make us witness time in the fullness of its passage, without compressing it into functionalist events. For Dante, it is the poignancy of each moment of the beloved's presence that opens us to the beatific vision: the fetishization of the beloved makes us greedy to witness each infinitely divisible atom of time as it passes, without any compression of it into successive moments. This perfect experience of time's passage is what thrusts us toward God's perfect presence, a presence whose novelty and poignancy is realized within spatiotemporal experience, which avoids the stagnation of nonexistence by spewing history from itself.

In Dante's vision, then, the only sin is to restrict this sort of fetishization onto a single, particular beloved; though Dante had tasted the divine through his immature love of Beatrice, he mistakenly believed her to be the only object in the cosmos worthy of this sort of vision. Beatrice's remonstrance in the Earthly Paradise redirects him to the philosophical point that was implicit in his love: the experience of presence cannot be

located in a particular object, but is a feature of existence that certain objects disclose to us. While the beloved attains a special status in Dante's phenomenology, his ultimate goal will remain allegorical: ultimately, his project is to generalize this temporal vision such that every object within the universe has the same fetishistic resonance as the beloved herself. They all inhere within a sinuously unfolding time; their matters are mirrors of the divine presence that exceeds and produces the limited historical processes by which they are formed. Matter is thus not opposed to the divine, but rather in its sinuous manifestation of duration, becomes the interpretive vehicle through which we approach the infinite generativity of presence. No object, in itself, is uniquely worthy to be experienced in its fullness; rather, every object—and every component object that comprises some larger object-organism on a greater scale of being—possesses its own strangeness that can prompt an experience of presence. The beatific vision occurs when this fetishization—this radical intentionalization of the object—occurs through every object on every scale of being, when the entire creation becomes populated with an almost infinite pageant of unique existents whose strangeness pushes us to the horizon of the temporal experience they persist within. Theology is not, then, a discipline that detaches us from lived experience, but one that radically attaches us to it.

Chaucer's staggerment at this vision cannot be overstated; it reduced him to a sort of timid, but impossibly excited, quivering. Dante presented to Chaucer, not just a reconstituted justification of poetics, but a justification of the lived experience that poetry reflects. Suddenly, poetry—and all the spatiotemporal arts—became our primary means

of access to the divine rather than distractive temptations;<sup>25</sup> what is more, in Dante's vision their very distractiveness became sacred. Sin became salvation; the tendency of objects, in and for themselves, to absorb our attention became the means by which we transcended our limited perception of them to glimpse the horizon of the divine. Chaucer's first attempt to deploy the resources offered to him by this new vision of temporality is the *House of Fame*—the subject of my second chapter—which presses on a single idea he derived from Dante: the application of ecstatic temporal vision to language. Normally, language is the means by which we understand and express a partial, intentional perception; it begins to express the identity of an object, at the expense of limiting our vision of it. Additionally, language inherently requires temporal elision to function—not only must we freeze the object we describe into a single, always past moment, but we must also reduce the pure succession of linguistic sounds into the discrete events of words, sentences, paragraphs and so on. In his *Paradise*, Dante began to experience language in its pre-linguistic aspect; when he first hears Cacciaguida speak, for instance, he perceives not the discrete words, compressed and divided into distinct events, but rather their pure unfolding as sounds; unlike Nimrod's babble in Hell, this paradisiacal speech does not lose its meaning, but rather suggests the sum intentionality of its referent before committing to a particular meaning about it. Likewise, it focuses our attention back on Cacciaguida as a speaker, rather than solely on the referents of his language. As in a frame, whenever he narrates something, we first see the joyous act of his narration before the specific objects and events he imagines. Speech, first and

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<sup>25</sup> The denigration of fiction extends back at least to Plato's exclusion of fiction from his ideal civilization in book 2 of the *Republic*. From there, it is picked up by the monastic tradition and then into the academic tradition of the Middle Ages; while authors still, of course, wrote fictional works, they were never considered adequate vehicles for philosophy or theology by church institutions.

foremost, signified the act of perception being actualized by its speaker, before that perception took on its specific, limited character.

The sound bodies that populate the *House of Fame* push this conception of language to its furthest extent. Where Dante's shades remained historically intact people—their present forms being a result of the accreted events of their past lives—Chaucer disintegrates the speaking subject into the full, infinite temporality she inhabits. He effectively undoes the temporal elision that language requires by giving each, infinitely divisible moment its own discrete body; the poignancy of each unique moment that we must normally suppress to make speech mean is restored to the speaker. Chaucer enframes speech, but he strands his reader at the signic waypoint most frames elide, never allowing speakers' tales to be realized as such. The *House of Fame* forecloses the possibility that language can mean what it says, instead making mean only the fact that it was said; the speaker is frozen in the moment of meaningful articulation, focusing her attention on the experience of making meaning rather than the limited meaning she was making. In adopting this structure, the poem itself methodically pushes us out of its imagined space back into the lived time in which we intend toward it. It thrusts us back to a moment immediately preceding—not so much temporally as structurally—linguistic reference, a pre-linguistic point where, as in Cacciaguida's transcendent speech or Augustine's birth of the word in the soul, we can glimpse the intentional pattern of language before it has committed to a single, limited idea about its referent, and before it has been codified into the discrete linguistic event of the word.

In disarticulating speech, Chaucer restores a temporal experience of language, but at the ultimate expense of meaning; he freezes the speaker in her posture just prior to

making meaning, but he never allows language to fulfill its ultimate destiny. He directs us to the proto-matter of language, the frozen moment prior to speech becoming articulated and so taking on some specific character; in a Saussurian sense, he directs us to the point immediately prior to the most rudimentary differentiation of speech: some meaning is about to be birthed, the entire apparatus of the linguistic system is evoked, but the speaker has not yet begun to exclude any part of that system through phonemic differentiation. Though language is, in a sense, present in its totality in Chaucer's structure, that very structure threatens its being called language at all: this linguistic proto-matter has no actual meaning, only the potential for and structure of meaning implicit in every speech act. By locating the temporal experience of language in the prelinguistic, Chaucer threatens to undermine the justification of poetics effected by Dante; if we can only access the hidden, radically intentional structure of experience before language has become its specific referent, poetics returns to askesis: we must renounce the pleasures of meaning-making to discover the temporal horizon which every object inhabits. But Dante's contribution to theological discourse was to realize how dangerous such renunciations were; his own solution to this problem as it pertains to language in Cacciaguida's super-intelligible speech remains vague and precarious. After Chaucer has pressed on it in the *House of Fame*, it begins to curve back into what it was supposed to oppose.

In this sense, the *House of Fame* fell into Bergson's temporal trap: if we do not offer any of the objects within time their specific character and identity—preferring, instead, to relinquish our eliding and constraining intellectual grasp on them—we threaten to hollow out time and presence entirely. If time is pure movement, there is

nothing left within it to move; temporal mobility requires the calcified matters and organisms of history to manifest itself. For Bergson, the goal of his new temporal awareness was to witness the pure, mobile passage of time without trying to grasp any particular moment, with which we might form a historical succession out of paradigmatic event-images. Chaucer implicitly asks us to do the same thing in his infinitely divisible sound bodies. However, the procedure Bergson asks us to engage in is tantamount to asking us not to perceive; it is the limitations imposed by perception as it brings a moment “to presence,” as it arrests an indivisible succession into a paradigmatic image based on its own limited aims, that Bergson balks against. But if time has to lose its intentionality in order to achieve the perfect mobility at whose horizon lies presence, time ceases to be inhabited by anything; if an object is the sum of its possible intentional perceptions, eliminating perception paradoxically empties time, making it a static chaos rather than a mobile duration. Presence again ceases to be generative and novel. Chaucer’s extension of Dante’s procedure threatens a very similar problem by locating the experience of pure temporality that gives us access to divine presence in the pre-linguistic.

But Chaucer saw, in Boccaccio’s response to Dante, a poetic configuration that was flexible enough to avoid these difficulties: the framed narrative. Granted, he obviously knew of framed narratives well before he encountered Dante or Boccaccio from the French tradition; however, it was not until this poetic structure had passed through the matrix of the spatiotemporal theology offered by Dante that its unique virtues became apparent to Chaucer. He had to read Boccaccio’s use of frame narrative as a solution to the conceptual problems he explored in the *House of Fame* in order to see the

potential of the frame for expressing a fully intentional vision of temporality. Boccaccio, for his part, seemed to understand many of the dangers inherent in Dante's particular configuration of temporal vision that Chaucer explored in the *House of Fame*. In my third chapter I will examine how Boccaccio, in particular, balks at Dante's allegorization of the beloved. For Boccaccio, when Dante democratizes the temporal experience of the beloved onto every object within the cosmos, he essentially liquidates them of their particularity; all things become signs of God's preminent presence; theologians and poets alike must, in the final equation, turn away from particular spatiotemporal experiences in order to see God. For Boccaccio, Dante abandons his most salient contribution to theology at the end of his work; the very spatiotemporal experience he sought to recuperate is supplanted by a vague vision of God. The cardinal sin of Dante's approach, to Boccaccio's mind, is his abandonment of Beatrice in the final cantos of *Paradise*. In his initial response to this aspect of Dante's poetics—which response is contained in the *Ameto*—Boccaccio reinstitutes the female body in the uppermost reaches of deity; while the text is itself an allegory by genre, its insistence on the physical description of its feminine personifications works against its allegory, dramatizing the conflict submerged beneath Dante's text.

While the *Ameto* constitutes his first response, Boccaccio's most sensitive negotiation of this problem occurs in his *Decameron*. Boccaccio addresses his text to love-lorn ladies in need of distraction; he says that their lack of enriching experiences leads them to spiral into deep bouts of romantic depression when they cannot actualize or even really express their desires. That depression is imagined as the plague of his frame in which the world has radically lost its desirability. Organisms fail to cohere; cancerous

growths afflict physical and social bodies such that they degrade into the base, shifting matters of which they are composed. Seen through the matrix of his love-lorn ladies, Boccaccio's plague reimagines the situation of Dante upon the death of Beatrice—as he describes it in the *Vita Nuova*, every object in the world becomes a dark reflection of her absence. The world radically lacks the grace that makes objects cohere into unities. In essence, the plague thematic that Boccaccio uses to frame his tales summons us back to the *selva oscura* from which Dante embarks on his allegorization of love. But where Dante consoles himself by refracting Beatrice's beauty onto everything within the creation, Boccaccio opens a different road, a road that leads deeper into the *selva* rather than out of it. For Boccaccio's stated purpose of his text is to distract these young ladies from his text, offering them pleasure and useful counsel that will hopefully offer them some respite from the contagion of love that afflicts them. Rather than allowing the stilnovistic allegory of love that their situation implies to take its course, Boccaccio pushes them toward other, limited perceptual experiences that will not reduce themselves to a single, totalizing allegory. In doing so, Boccaccio validates the particular in experience, making the crass, fetishizing limitations of vision integral to the ongoing existence of the world.

To the Chaucer who wrote the *House of Fame*, the most poignant aspect of this response is its treatment of language. The plague describes a dissolution of the human scale of temporality; its festering bodies betray their own organization as integrated objects, reverting to more basic structures. For Boccaccio, the plague begins to rescind God's creative powers—if the Creation describes a certain distention of God's perfect presence into the various scales of historical time, the plague begins to shorten the



interval that a body can record. The habitual compact agreed to by the various component parts of the body to form an organism is dissolved; they begin to record time's passage more immediately rather than on the human scale of historical transactions between objects. Within the plague state, words are subject to the same dissolution as every other unified body; they devolve into their sibillant sound matters because nobody is left to hear them, or those who are left don't care enough to engage in the social compacts wherein words become meaningful. The storytelling of the brigata thus achieves a peculiar poignancy: words are always set in relief to the plague, and so their simple coherence as words, and subsequently as the progressively more complex units of narrative storytelling, becomes itself precious. Boccaccio's frame makes the coherence of the word itself as an imagined object an integral part of the drama of his narrative; those discrete word-objects do not remain in their material state, but are subjected to larger organisms of meaning, interpreted and intentionalized by the members of the brigata. If their internal interpretations are sometimes limited and short-sighted, this is precisely Boccaccio's point—to become enfleshed within the perceptible world, no such object can fully expose its radical being. Words, like everything else, should not be allegories, but pleasant distractions that disrupt their own allegorization and so enmesh us in the world.

The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's reconstitution of the project he set out upon in the *House of Fame*, refracted through his reading of Boccaccio's reading of Dante; like Boccaccio, Chaucer's wants to install a vivid sense of the particularity of the people and objects populating his world. However, unlike Boccaccio, he wants to use that particularity as a vehicle for rediscovering a revised Dantean presence. Boccaccio aligned the linguistic presence of the frame with his plague thematic; when language

becomes an object in itself with its own ontological resonance, the space it tries to create evaporates, organisms linguistic and otherwise break down into their sibilant matters. He thus introduces distraction as a poetic rationale to counteract Dante's allegory of grace; the petty limitations of a perceiver not recuperating the divine in the perceived is what constitutes the physical world. As we have seen, it is these habitual limitations that allow objects to cohere as progressively larger organisms—when components of an organism contract into a pattern of relation, they do not perceive the radical being of one another, but only particular, relevant facets of one another's being. To the other facets, they turn a blind, distracted eye. Without such self-interested perceptual limitations, no object-organism could cohere, and in such a vacant world, the allegory of Dantean grace would be undone. If every point in the world tried to recuperate the sort of radical vision of grace that Dante tries to effect, the physical-temporal structures of that world would begin to dissolve.

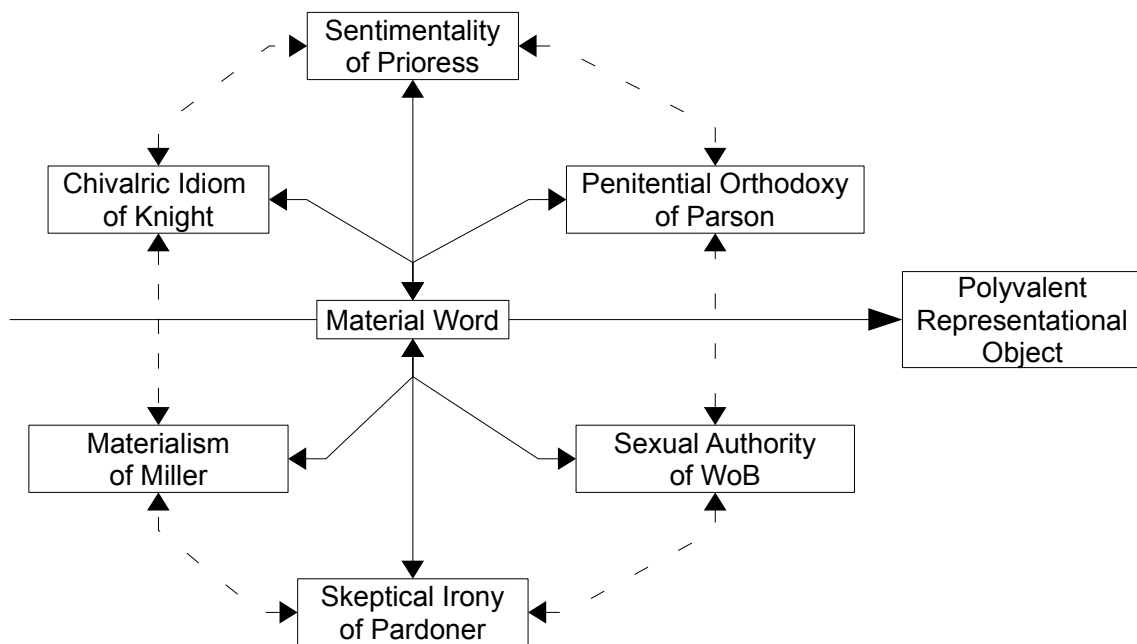
Boccaccio's critique of Dante's allegorical methodology is, in many ways, a damning one; however, as in the phenomenological tradition, Boccaccio ultimately doesn't critique the target of Dante's model of grace, only the means he uses to arrive at it. Boccaccio suggests that only God can possess beatitude, and if we hubristically attempt to acquire it for ourselves, we threaten to unmake God's world, the very world we have attempted to rejuvenate. As Chaucer reads this veiled philosophical dialogue, he realizes that Boccaccio's methodology of distraction can be adapted into a means for approaching the very thing it sought to resist: Dantean presence. In narrative terms, it requires only a slight tweak of the interpretive equation of the frame narrative as Boccaccio had envisioned it: the transformation of Boccaccio's malleable and plastic

brigata into the quarrelsome snobs and lovers of the Canterbury troupe. Chaucer's principle innovation on Boccaccio's frame scheme is to use the stereotypes of estates literature to create his characters, as Jill Mann has demonstrated. While the members of Boccaccio's brigata were rhetorically pliant—immanently susceptible to the appeals they voiced to one another in their tales—Chaucer's characters are essentially grotesque—they each have a starkly restricted, virtually impregnable perspective on their world. While the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* renders us aware of the pure, sonic passage of language that thrusts us toward an authentic presence, the limited perspective imagined by each pilgrim onto that language forces it to cohere into a fully imagined narrative, replete with ideological and philosophical resonances. As in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer uses his frame to imagine the speech act; before he allows us to imagine the tales themselves, he draws us to the waypoint in which the word is itself the signified rather than the signifier. However, unlike the *House of Fame*, the poem's internal audience doesn't allow us to become stranded at this waypoint; they intend toward the linguistic objects passing between them too violently and with too limited an angle of vision for us to not signify along with them. As readers, we can identify with the Canterbury pilgrims and see the world open up as they see it; one of the most salient pleasures of reading the *Canterbury Tales* is inhabiting their various perspectives, imagining the Wife of Bath's response to the *Miller's Tale*, or even better, to imagine the Wife of Bath's response to the Knight's response to the *Miller's Tale*. But just as Chaucer does not leave us stranded at the material word, neither does he leave us stranded in any single grotesque perspective imagined by the pilgrims; rather, all of the limited perspectives imagined by the poem are available to us simultaneously; though we cannot inhabit them all simultaneously, we can

shift fluidly between them at will, and we retain a prescient awareness that other perceptual and interpretive perspectives overlap whatever one we apply at a given time.

The following graphic summarizes the point:

Figure 2: Chaucer’s Linguistic Phenomenology



The grotesque perceptual angle of each pilgrim produces the pressure necessary for the signified word to cohere as a discrete unity, but at the moment it coheres into that linguistic object, it is refracted; the pressure that birthed it into a unity is not singular, but multiple. Its codification into an object—brought about by a Boccaccian particularity—simultaneously reveals it as polyvalent; its being is greater than the sum of any single perceptual relationship that brought it into being. The word possesses supplemental dimensions that inevitably go unperceived; narratologically, it is implicated in multiple imaginative structures; semiologically, it assumes multiple roles within those structures;

sociologically, it is refracted across the limited perspectives of the various estates; historically it is refracted among readers of different eras with concerns unimaginable to the poem's internal audience or its author.

When we read the *Canterbury Tales*, we thus have an overriding sense of the strangeness of the people, things, and words that populate Chaucer's world; as they are disclosed to our imaginations, we retain a sense of the ways in which they exceed that disclosure, exceed whatever we perceive about them. We become aware of their presence, the particular grace that animates each of them; we become aware of the relational pressures that have brought them into being, aware also of the failure of any one of those pressures to understand the full dynamism of the unity it has helped birth into history. However our awareness of the particularity of an object increases in direct proportion to our awareness of its strange grace; unlike Dante's allegory, Chaucerian grace does not transform everything into a sign of divine presence, but rather into a thing in the full sense of that term. Allegorization itself is folded into Chaucer's scheme as only a singular angle of vision that does not exhaust the being of the object it allegorizes; no allegory, in and of itself, can accommodate the full mystery of matter. But as a variety of allegorizations begin to stutter and stammer atop one another, their additive attempts to colonize the object into their modes of meaning begins to disclose the transcendence of the object; it envisions the object as the nexus of a great web of relations and obligations that collectively generate the being of one another. As we begin to perceive them—and to intuit what we fail to perceive about them—in this way, their full duration and constant emanation becomes apparent; they ceaselessly move through the slur of time, unimaginably manifesting themselves on one another without pause, without freezing

into any single image. We begin to see them as God would see them from the horizon point of presence, from which the history of their interactions slides.

## CHAPTER II

### IMMEMORABILITY ON THE CUSP OF PARADISE

Dante's description of Paradise depends on an overriding paradox: Paradise is outside of time and space, yet Dante narrates his sensory experience of it and so reinscribes it within time and space. Heaven—which should, in Dante's theological milieu, be understood as a realm of intellection abstracted from the material world<sup>1</sup>—has all the exigencies of materiality and temporality imposed on it. Even further, the visual faculty through which we primarily understand the spatiotemporal world is not so much frustrated or superseded by the ascent to Paradise, as it is perfected. Though at first glance the bodies of the blessed in Paradise seem to become increasingly less material as Dante ascends toward the Empyrean, the Empyrean itself is starkly spatialized in the narrative, revealing the earlier rarefaction of the blessed to be a condescension; whereas most commentators on the *Comedy* emphasize—along with Dante himself<sup>2</sup>—the condescension of the divine into narrative figures during the ascent to the Empyrean, at the point when those figures should reveal themselves as they are, Dante reinscribes them

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<sup>1</sup> In Aquinas's psychological model, physical objects are abstracted into phantasms that encode their individualized forms into our memories; the active intellect further abstracts from these individuated forms into their intelligible species. This sort of Neoplatonic formalism underpins the medieval understanding of Paradise and especially the Empyrean. Dante's innovation is to relocate the physical at the uttermost reaches of this procedure of abstraction. For a summary of Aquinas's model of perception, see Ginsberg, *Dante's Aesthetics of Being*, 29-34.

<sup>2</sup> The source of this confusion is Beatrice's comment in *Paradise* 4.40-42; there, she informs Dante that the division of the blessed into a hierarchy is only a condescension to his limited faculties of understanding. What he sees on his way up to the Empyrean is thus nothing more than a didactic figuration meant to prepare him for the beatific vision. Most critics have taken these lines as a theologically informed commentary on Dante's fiction—in order to defend his poetics, Dante couches them as an imperfect figuration of the actual state of the blessed. Rachel Jacoff, for instance, likens Beatrice's caution to the anthropomorphization of God in the Bible, arguing that we are not thereby meant to believe that God has these members, but only that the Bible is trying to relate some feature of God to imperfect humans (109). However, I think that such criticism takes Beatrice's comment too far and so miss the truly revolutionary character of Dante's Paradise; only the hierarchy of the blessed is a condescension, not the figuration of the blessed themselves. When Dante reaches the Empyrean, he never disavows the narrativity of the figures there and he never suggests that their bodily appearance within a starkly delimited space is a condescension to his faculties.

within time and space. The Empyrean does not simply transcend time and space, but perfects them by making vision perfect, capable of fully seeing all the discrete persons within the Rose at whatever remove and God at His infinite remove. If Dante's narrative fails to represent his experience there entirely, it fails due to a superabundance of narrative detail rather than a dearth of it. By doggedly insisting that Paradise is a narrative space—even if its full narrativity cannot be represented—Dante implicitly alters the model of divine truth we can hope to find there. He reconceptualizes contact with the divine not as a unification or identification with God that effaces the physicality of the believer—a model authorized by the Neoplatonic and mystical currents within medieval Christianity—but rather as an experience that more fully situates us within time and space.

In his book on Dante's metaphysics, Christian Moevs has explained the physicality of the *Comedy's* metaphysics as a deliberate contradiction. Moevs describes Dante's vision of the Empyrean as deeply engaged with the Aristotelian and Scholastic models of the universe, which tend to dematerialize the highest reaches of spiritual ascent. Closely reading Beatrice's descriptions of the Empyrean, Moevs argues that, in line with these earlier traditions, Dante's Empyrean exists outside of time and space; since all desires are fulfilled there, the Empyrean is static and immobile, the distinction between the subject and object of desire having been collapsed within it (23); being outside the creation, it is actually better understood as the perceiving subject who understands the created world as a play of appearances that it produces (169). When Moevs confronts the narrativity of Dante's Paradise, its purpose is therefore to prompt the sort of cognitive dissonance that frees readers from the allure of the material world:



The *Comedy*'s unprecedented realism, its irresistible continuity with spatiotemporal experience, is... intrinsic to its purpose: to understand how this fictive textual world becomes inescapably real is to awaken to the sense in which the spatiotemporal world is fictive (contingent or relatively 'unreal'). By Dante's metaphysics, both worlds seem to be noncontingent realities because both force our suspension of disbelief, and by the same device: by drawing us inside their frame of reference so deeply that all our questions presuppose that frame of reference. (10)

For Moevs, Dante creates a convincingly mimetic world in order to render us conscious of our captivity to our own notions of materiality. Physical objects—beginning with our own bodies—create a system of reference that is self-contained and self-sustaining. They therefore become capable of engrossing the intellect such that it cannot contemplate the metaphysical planes of existence from which the contingent world takes its being. The Empyrean represents a “space” in which those notions are transcended, or at least one whose inhabitants have transcended the categories of space; the particular poetic form Dante chooses for the Empyrean is thus secondary to the transcendence of spatial logic one must undergo to reach it: “if we wish to picture it (for example, as a gigantic rose full of seats, children and sages), we must be aware that all that is appearance (*parvenza*), and the reality is light, however understood” (24). Ultimately, to align Dante with the metaphysical tradition he inherited, Moevs must reduce the rationale behind the *Comedy*'s narrativity to a reductively allegorical one: the material quality of his Paradise can only demonstrate the unrepresentable quality of its actual referent.

In a lesser poet, such an explanation may suffice; however the entire machinery of Dante's poem seems to insist that transcendence itself must somehow be understood in spatial and temporal terms. Narrative in the *Comedy* is more than the condescension to human faculties that Beatrice admits to in *Paradise* 4. The highest reaches of the divine realm are imagined in narrative, and this imagination is more than a convenient metaphor. This is not to say that Dante's God is somehow materially sensible,<sup>3</sup> but only that Dante meticulously structures his narrative to show that transcendence is immanent in our spatiotemporal experience; the *Comedy* does not abstract us away from that experience, but rather situates us more fully in it.<sup>4</sup> The theological traditions that inform Dante too often—as Moevs does—cast contact with the divine in terms of its opposition to matter and its endless capacity for change.<sup>5</sup> Space and time are the primary media in which this change can occur: space allows en-formed beings to be distinguished from one another, and time offers a series of successive moments of being within which they can interact and affect one another. In the Middle Ages, this potentiality and malleability of the physical world led theologians to contrast it with the immutable divine, where form and being were permanent and constantly present. Dante struggles to preserve these qualities of God while simultaneously suggesting that the experience of God's perfect presence is implicit within spatiotemporal existence; unexpectedly, he makes the temporal metamorphosis we experience in the physical world the basis of our understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> See *Summa Theologiae* 1.12.3.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Dante's procedure is fundamentally opposed to negative theology—which posits a God who is the inverse and ground of all the partial beings language is capable of naming—though neither is it simply kataphatic, naively trusting in language's capacity to represent the divine. Rather, Dante finds an essential analogy between what is indefinable in God and what is indefinable in our bodily experience: the perfect presence that we inhabit, and that we understand through our relationship with the physical, historical world.

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of matter in Aristotle, see Gill, especially Ch. 1.

God's perfect presence, as I will explore in more detail below. Narrative can offer a mimetic reflection of this immanent possibility of transcendence; it takes us into a space and time, but always remains aware of its aesthetic, pre-linguistic presence. For this reason, Dante does not, like Augustine, break from his figural autobiography into a more serious and rational expository prose to cope with the demands of describing divinity. Rather, narrative persists, even through the theological exposition of why it cannot exist; if anything, space and time become, in Dante's poem, the essential conditions by which metaphysics can announce its transcendence, since theology always occurs as an act of language and language presupposes a dialogue between distinct individuals.<sup>6</sup> When Beatrice describes the immateriality of the Empyrean, she does so from the perspective of a space and time within which she speaks.

It is in this sense that we can speak of the *Comedy* as a framed narrative; while, unlike traditional framed narratives, its *raison d'être* is firmly located in the frame—the narrative of Dante the pilgrim's progress through the afterlife—that afterlife is itself an amalgam of the myth, poetry and theology spoken by the people he encounters along his way. Dante, for the most part, does not permit his sources to remain in the shadowy background of allusions or analogues, but situates them directly within the narrative alongside what they narrate. Their tales are absorbed, coordinated and reimagined, back into Dante's narrative world; nothing so richly expresses the *contrappasso* running throughout Dante's afterlife as his insistence that his sources live within the milieu that they have individually and collectively narrated. As Giuseppe Mazzotta has argued in

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<sup>6</sup> In Levinasian terms, its saying presupposes the existence of a self and an other situated within space and time; ethically speaking, the attempt to annihilate that spatiotemporality of the theological encounter is an imperialistic attempt of the self to colonize the other. Though the theologian pretends to be destroying the individual self along with space and time, in reality he absorbs the difference inherent in space into the sprawling same of his intellectual model of the cosmos.

*Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*, the imagined space of the *Comedy* is an encyclopedia of knowledge condensed and reconceptualized from its many sources (18-19); but whereas the encyclopedia frames its objects of knowledge in a static, synchronic and arbitrarily ordered way, Dante's narrative sets those objects into relation to one another and so back into space and time. Mazzotta argues that he does this primarily by situating Dante the pilgrim as a learning subject within the poem; I would add that the living, motive quality of the *Comedy's* epistemology arises from the fact that it recounts, at every moment of that journey, the dialogic procedure by which knowledge has been produced. As in any frame narrative, it uses language to imagine bodies using language to imagine other bodies; we are consistently aware that language is both an imagined object of the narrative and an imagining agent structuring other narratives within that frame. Dante, however, refuses to fully sequester these narrative shells into a hierarchy of subordination; rather, he makes the framed stories impinge upon the way the frame that contains them is imagined. By virtue of this frame structure, Dante is able to articulate the immanent transcendence his narrative aims at. At once, we can become absorbed into the objects and events his narrative imagines and apprehend the aesthetic music of language—a language whose sounds manifest the presence of their speaker before they can constitute their meaning—that hovers above and through that act of imaginative absorption. Dante firmly censures either extreme: the unintelligibility of a pure linguistic music is drastically curtailed in his silencing of Nimrod—though it reappears in a rehabilitated form in Cacciaguida's unintelligible speech—while Dante's own, fetishistic poetics is condemned through his restoration of the Siren. Between these

two extremes, however, lies a different apprehension of language and temporality through which Dante ultimately accesses the perfect presence of God.

While a full exploration of this theme throughout the *Comedy* certainly outstrips my reach here—as does any theme worth exploring in Dante’s prodigious poem—I will explore his construction of this alternative apprehension of time by means of what I am calling Dante’s “immemorability topos,” the purely rhetorical contention that an experience outstrips the ability of memory to record it. Three such topoi exist in *Paradiso* 1, one of which is explicit, while the others occur through analogies to Ovid and become legible only in the context of Dante’s baptism in Lethe at the end of *Purgatorio*. As a variant of the ineffability topos, immemorability would seem to imply precisely the kind of despatialization that Moevs and many critics see in Dante’s ascent to the Empyrean, but in fact Dante insists on precisely the opposite. Dante figures memory as incapable of recording his experience of the divine, but this failure of memory does not render that experience any less spatial or temporal; immemorability, in fact, implies a superabundance of spatiotemporal detail that overwhelms memory’s ability to parse temporal flow into discrete images and events. In this sense, memory runs parallel to the procedures of language on two counts: first, it requires that we divide an uninterrupted, temporal stream of sounds into units coordinated by grammar; second, it requires that we key those delimited sounds to memorial images. Such experiences are fundamentally historical and so they lack presence; they surrender presence to the past and future by constructing it into temporal events, situated within the grammar of history.

Beauty, however, offers an alternative apprehension of time as presence. That experience is grace in its aesthetic form, which for Dante describes the intervention of

God into human life more aptly and specifically than discussions of theological grace. Dante's formative experience of Beatrice's beauty, recounted in the *Vita Nuova*, offered him a window into the presence which God inhabits; the beautiful object made him aware of the poignancy of presence as it passed. While we still experience such objects in time, their ability to fascinate us offers a fluid, mobile vision of time that locates us in the present as it passes. We cease to cut temporality into frozen and immobile images to be stored in our memories as artifacts. Though Beatrice's beauty presented such a window, Dante failed to typologize that beauty into a broader experience of grace; instead, he fetishized her as the sole object of grace, and so attempted to re-present her in his poetry, only to reinscribe her loss. Beatrice converted him by drawing him back to his original experience of beauty, using it to critique all his subsequent attempts to recuperate that experience in the material world—both through his relations with other women and his poetry—and finally, by bringing on an amnesia that ultimately converts him. Dante uses this temporal idea of conversion to rehabilitate Ovid's nullifying irony that threatens to undo representation, and so entails a nihilistic immemorability. The encounter with Ovid at the beginning of the *Paradiso* forces Dante to reconceptualize his poetics in terms of an aesthetics of experience that ultimately locates beauty and being at the ground of language as it attempts to signify, not solely in the objects of those attempts. The shadows of Paradise that he is capable of representing are, in a sense, secondary to this prelinguistic music in which language first articulates the sinuous, ongoing present moment in which it is articulated—a move which recuperates the nihilism of Ovidian irony.

### *Perception beyond Memory*

As I have briefly outlined above, memory is the precondition of language in two senses: it is required first in the recombination of sounds, second in the referential keying of delimited sounds to images we have experienced or imagined in the past. Paradise, in this sense, should be fully ineffable, since its denizens experience the pure presence of God. The Middle Ages largely figured ineffability as a failure of reference: no word could positively describe the referent of God, since God was, by definition, undelimited being. Language could only define and describe some partial facet of the totality of God's being; it cuts a particular feature from the sum background of being itself, always assuming a generalized existence whether predicating positively or negatively.<sup>7</sup> It sets fragmented beings in relation to one another while never becoming capable of describing the fundamental commonality between them. The peculiar problem of human language was thus that God was the ground beneath every utterance, yet no individual utterance could describe Him. This ontological failure of language was accompanied by the temporal one: language assumes presence, attempts to describe it, and its sounds always occur in the temporal slur away from presence, yet it only succeeds in describing a partial, encapsulated historical moment that lacks duration. Language embarrassedly constructs the event—a cut from an ongoing and infinitely divisible temporal sequence into a single, discernible point supposed to capture that sequence's essential meaning.

Memory thus makes the event singular in two senses: it condenses the duration of speech

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<sup>7</sup> The ineffability topos of the Middle Ages is, in this sense, the unexpected alterego of the object as defined by Harman's Object Oriented Ontology; for Harman as for Heidegger, the totality of any object's being is ultimately unspeakable—speech, in fact, only brings one perceptual facet of an object to our present consciousness. In a similar sense, God—whose being precedes the temporal groundwork that allows all object relations to occur—can only be partially apprehended; but where, in the case of the object, it is the object's substantiality that refuses full definition, in the case of God, it is His otherness to the historicity of substance that does not admit definition.

into linguistic units, and it condenses the duration of the events described into historical units. Certainly, any such event is susceptible to a more minute delineation that defines events within the event—within the larger event of the Bolshevik revolution, for instance, we could define the more minute event of the storming of the Winter Palace, and within that yet more minutely parsed events. The event is hierarchical in structure. With each movement toward specificity in this hierarchy, we approach something resembling the perception of temporal duration as it passed for those inhabiting that moment; however, like an asymptote, that duration is irrecoverable through the procedure of language that constructs the event. The linguistic attempt to recuperate presence not only testifies to a loss of presence, but, as Bergson has demonstrated, it illustrates that language can never describe presence in the first place. The entire procedure of language denies the sinuous unfolding of presence in an infinitely divisible succession of moments; time does not consist in a causal sequence of immobile events, but rather in the continual emergence of the present.

As Dante ascends through Paradise, it is the two temporal failures of language that preoccupy his professions of ineffability rather than the ontological one. This is not to say that he excludes the latter, but rather that he expends more of his considerable semiotic imagination on the former. In fact, he ultimately begins to rely on the variant of the ineffability topos I have described above—the immemorability topos, a profession that he cannot even remember what transpired in the divine realm, though the artifact of the poem itself resists that claim. This topos differs considerably from simple ineffability: whereas ineffability locates the failure of representation in the linguistic sign and its ability to adequately represent something contained within the mind,



immemorability implies a failing in the mental faculty preceding any act of language. Dante suggests that, as he ascends to the pure presence of the Empyrean, the plenitude of temporality begins to overwhelm his historicizing mind. Paradise is a realm of infinite fascination, where every person and object is capable of engrossing the fullness of Dante's attention. The fetishizing attention he once reserved for Beatrice alone—whose every gesture held the greatest significance, who alone exceeded the procedures of event-making for the earthly Dante, thrusting him toward the experience of presence that justifies time-bound experience—can now be cast onto everything. Dante protests that memory is unable to record his experience because the plenitude of Paradise overwhelms his capacity to code it into mnemonic representations. He cannot cut the event from the sequence, since doing so would constitute a deep violence to the perfect presence he experienced in Paradise.

Of course, in Dante's poem, such protestations of immemorability are fraught with the same paradox that besets the purported immateriality of Paradise: Dante narrates past them, and with astonishing detail and imagination. An experience that transcends memory should defy narrativization as much as a disembodied one; it would resist the historical causality that narrative and language encode. But Dante continues despite the limitations of narrative and, more significantly, despite the immanent threat of transgression he faces in narrativizing Paradise. He insists, at his peril, that Paradise is visual, and so spatial and temporal, through and through, Moon to Empyrean. If we are not to read his immemorability topoi simply as disingenuous rhetoric, or as a nervous couching of his otherwise brazen narration, then, our task must be to elaborate how he reconciled the absorptive presence of Paradise to the historicity of narration.

Immemorability, for Dante, effects a reconciliation between history and its transcendence by forcing us to attend to the materiality of Dante's signifiers; by framing his utterance in terms of what it cannot condense into mnemonic pictures, he tangentially gestures toward the supplemental dimensions of experience always evident in Paradise. The same presence he encounters there is available in any space when we hold the aesthetics of language in constant tension with its meaning.

Of all the instances of the immemorability topos littering the *Paradise*, none expresses this tension quite so well as the one at the poem's outset. Dante begins the *Cantica* by undermining his own poetic capacity to remember what he relates:

Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende  
fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire  
né sa né può chi di là sù discende,  
perché appressando sé al suo disire  
nostro intelletto si profonda tanto  
che dietro la memoria non può ire.

[I was in the heaven that takes in most of His light, and I saw things which I neither know how to, nor could recount, since our intellect, bringing itself near to its desire, goes so deep that the memory cannot go behind.]<sup>8</sup>

Dante's notation that he cannot "ridire," or literally "re-speak" his experiences in Paradise already orients us to the both the memorial and linguistic nature of his incapacity; the things he sees become a form of original representation—anticipating Beatrice's revelation in Canto 4 that all of Paradise except the Empyrean is a condescension, a performance put on for Dante's benefit—that his re-representation

<sup>8</sup> All Italian translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

cannot fully figure. He casts this failure twice as an epistemic failure rather than a simple failure of poetic capacity. His “né sa né può” seems almost redundant, except that where “può” suggests an incapacity of language, “sa” implicates the poet’s own mental faculties in this failure. We learn in the next stanza that the failure is one of memory rather than intellect. Memory is pictured as a sort of laggard in the normal course of events, traipsing behind the intellect and recording its activity. It is a secondary activity, reconstituting some primary behavior of the intellect. The memorial image is always an “ombra... segnata nel mio capo” [shadow... marked out in my head] (1.23-24);<sup>9</sup> such memorial images are always already past representations of the temporal contact between objects that intellect—which seems to be a faculty of original perception here—alone participates in. The presence of Paradise thus repels the memory’s attempts at representation.

We might be tempted by this analogy to take a Neoplatonic approach to the immemorability of Paradise: in Plotinian philosophy, the purest form of intellect does not think in the way we traditionally conceive of the word. Intellect, as applied to human creatures, takes place in time and language; it abstracts from sense impression to the immaterial form, or else it enumerates logical syllogisms that, however obliquely, refer to our physical experience of the world. However forms themselves—creatures of pure intellect—are devoid of both spatial and temporal dimension. Memory cannot inhere within this primary intellectual consciousness, since the forms only gaze at the pure presence of the one that en-forms them.<sup>10</sup> Dante’s refusal of memory at the most

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<sup>9</sup> This subsequent image recollects the common metaphor in the Middle Ages of memory as wax, upon which perceptions were impressed to make images. See Carruthers 16, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Although, as I have noted, their differentiation itself poses an insurmountable problem in Neoplatonic thought, since it implicitly spatializes and temporalizes them, however much Plotinus might protest.

profound depth of intellectual life seems to accord well with such a conception. But the analogy, in fact, resists the Neoplatonic frustration of materiality that we expect; in a larger sense, though it distinguishes intellect from memory, the analogy Dante uses resists the delineation of one faculty from another altogether. The intellect is personified, becoming a metonym for the poet himself standing agape before God in the Empyrean; as his *appressando* suggests, Dante is spatializing intellectual inquiry here, using the directional metaphors that always prove the hobgoblins of formalistic metaphysics. This spatialization, ironically, foreshadows the spatialization of his journey in toto at precisely the moment it seems he should deny this spatiality. The intellect itself is figured as a pilgrim approaching a destination whose descriptor—*profonda*—explicitly conflates conceptions of intellectual profundity and spatial depth.

As a pilgrim itself, the intellect interestingly becomes a faculty of perception. In this, Dante seems to be extending Aristotle's analogy between sense perception and intellect from *de Anima* 3.4-5. Aristotle's analysis of both perception and intellect applied a logic of hylomorphism: a passive mental substance is actively imprinted by the form of its special object. A special object is simply some dimension of form keyed to the perceptual faculty, as color is keyed to sight.<sup>11</sup> In the case of sensation, he conceived of our perceptual faculty as a receptive potentiality capable of receiving the form of its special object. When we perceive a rock, for instance, we abstract its form from its matter; that form imprints itself upon our mental faculty, forming a new compound—a mnemonic image of the rock and of a more general rock-ness—within our minds. Memory subsequently encodes these perceptions even after their physical form has passed. In an analogous sense, "the thinking part of the soul must... be, while impassible,

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<sup>11</sup> See 3.1.

capable of receiving the form of an object; that is, must be potentially identical in character with its object without being the object. Mind must be related to what is thinkable, as sense is to what is sensible” (3.4). The object that “is capable of being thought” by an individual thinker in potentiality—or passive intellect—is informed by the active intellect, the thought moving from potentiality to actuality. Dante’s allegorical personification bears some debt to this analogy—the intellect, returning to its true special object, embarks on an *itinerarium mentis* back to God. As it increasingly patterns itself upon God’s perfected intellection of Himself and the creation, the human intellect must shed memory as something ancillary to the work of perfectly present thought.

Yet Dante’s metaphor is even more radical than Aristotle’s: he attributes not only perception to the intellect, but also “disire,” an activity more appropriately assigned to the will. He infuses the neutral Aristotelian special object with desirability and the volition it implies. In doing so, he further enflashes his personification of the intellect: first, intellect took on the attribute of perception in its journey toward the profound depth of Paradise; now, it has also taken on the quality of will, whose provenance in Dante’s text is more properly Augustinian. Dante associates memory with movement; it is memory in his invocation that temporally and spatially “goes.” Though a verb of motion, or perhaps of becoming, is implied in the line on the intellect, Dante omits the main verb, offering only the participle “appressando sé,” literally a sort of “en-nearing itself” and “being at.” This omission offers the pairing of *ire* and *disire* a special resonance—“disire,” breaking free of its etymological moorings, becomes literally a “dis-ire,” the object in which the motion of desire finds its rest. In Augustine’s analysis of the will, desire indicates an imbalance or restlessness that inclines us to act until we possess the object of our desire.

Desire bespeaks an absence and incompleteness that we attempt to remedy by means of willed choices bringing its object under our control. For Augustine, however, only God is the proper object of our desire; in his justly famous equation from 1.1. of the *Confessions*, Augustine says that “our hearts are unquiet until they rest in you.” The intellect’s *disire* of God implies this cessation of desire that only God can offer; but where in Augustine’s analysis, intellect is supposed to govern the desire of the will with its more perfect knowledge, Dante makes desire itself a property of intellect. By dissociating memory from both desire and intellect, however, he implies that it differs from traditional human desire; it does not entail the loss of desire’s object and the resulting imbalance, but rather a new order of desire in a perfected, calm equilibrium, an equilibrium that the final image of the poem will formalize.

Memory cannot participate in this intellectual form of desire; the desire generated by memory inevitably reinscribes the loss of the desired object that the will drives toward. Memory recollects the brief and furtive moments of satiety whose cycle of loss and recovery organize our will; the will, in turn, can almost be said to organize the human experience of time, since the objects and agents that move through time are always configured around our desires. In Bergsonian terms, the frozen images—immobile cuts from the larger sequence—that our memories record are determined by our desires, by our will to retroactively rationalize a history that serves our desires even as those desires are determined by our past experiences. This is the fundamental tenet of hermeneutics: whatever an objective history might look like, we lack access to it; our construction of history always reveals our desires. Only when our attention is rapt in the presence of the beloved does our experience of time approaches a perfect presence. Simple being

achieves a special resonance; the memory scrambles to encode as much of the image sequence as possible. It struggles to approach that infinite succession between any two temporal sequents in its effort to record the perceptual experience of the subject.

However its motive function ceases to have relevance in the presence of the beloved when the intellect and its will are at rest in simple perception. Ironically, perceptual plenitude overflows memorial capacity and so transcends history while remaining in it.

Now certainly, in the case of a delimited, material beloved, time and memory instantly recolonize that moment: the poignancy of the moment is inscribed with its always impending loss. Thus, for Augustine, the heart remained restless until it found rest in God—all other rests were temporary, and so no rest at all, no real “dis-ire.” The essential metaphor for this loss, especially for Augustine, was sexuality—the climax that rationalized the sinuous temporality of sex was fraught with its own brevity. The expectancy that allows lovers to approach this experience of presence is always betrayed by the foreknowledge that the experience of presence offered by sexuality ends, abruptly. The loss that structures temporality thereby pollutes the experience of the material beloved, thwarting its promise. In our contemporary context, this explains the pornography of the self: pornography that features others has its rationale in curiosity and imagination, the projection of the viewer into various roles within the erotic *mise en scène*. This rationale fails to explain, however, the drive to record oneself in the sex act. While certainly there must be some social dimension to this—the representation serves as an artifact of exhibitionism—its primary function is mnemonic. It represents the moment of satiety and so allows the lover to recuperate it, approximately, through imagination and memory. This drive extends well beyond the example of sexuality, which is only a

paradigm case; yet something of the loss that such acts—which admittedly are not ubiquitous—record is present in every attempt to transform experience into a mnemonic artifact. For Dante, it was the drive to write poetry which, even before Beatrice’s death, overlaid her presence with the dark ladies suggesting her inevitable absence. I will explore such episodes from the *Vita Nuova* in more detail below; however I will note now that all such representations gesture toward the palimpsest of the present experience of desire, which promises to end the willed movement of temporality in an act of miraculous perception, but which ultimately reinscribes the loss implicit within time and memory into that perception.

The logic of such moments of satiety is one of habit: habits reorganize our desires after they have passed, motivating us to either reenact them or wistfully recollect them. The habitual experience is, however, subject to a further deprivation, precisely the deprivation of memory: it is always structured as a recapitulation of some prior experience in which we approached present being. It assumes an originary experience of present being that, of course, is actually illusory, since it recedes backward indefinitely in the memory, groping after an experience prior to the loss of presence; but it is the loss of presence that instigates memory, self, and so anything that remotely resembles human experience. In other words, the originary experience of perfect presence that habitual desires attempt to represent precedes the structure of self inaugurated by its loss; one almost wants to say that this infantile experience is pre-conscious, though not prior to perception. Lacan calls this stage of development the “Real” from which we are sundered by our induction into the—for our purposes aptly termed—“Imaginary.” The infant mind does not realize its distinction from the world around it; lacking this capacity



for differentiation, it cannot understand time, since we comprehend time through the movement and action of bodies relative to one another. Difference comes to be understood by means of withdrawal—of the breast, or to regress even further, the constant feeding of the umbilical cord—which forces a vestigial consciousness of difference and so institutes a desire, a will to recover that pre-conscious state of perfected present perception. That difference is subsequently codified through a Levinasian fear of the other: once the self has vestigially contracted into a self, the onset of the other becomes threatening; for Levinas, such an unrealized self implicitly enjoins the other not to kill her, and in that fear of its own destruction it becomes fully integrated as a historical being. But the habit instigated by loss and fear never succeeds in what it sets out to accomplish because the loss that motivated habit becomes part of the very thing it desires. The object in which it seeks satiety becomes the agent of its deprivation. While I do not have the space to pursue the argument here, I would suggest that this habitual logic structures the temporality of Hell.

For Augustine as for Dante, such desirables—though partial and temporary—bear a typological affinity to God. They prefigure the “rest,” the cessation of movement through time, that one can only experience when one desires God alone. When Dante locates the *disire* of God within the intellect, he references this Augustinian allegorization of particular instances of desire—the intellect, as an interpretive faculty, coordinates the meaning of such instances into the more generalized desire of human temporality for presence. Time and history take their being from presence—they are predicated on events that once passed through the oculus of presence, or which will eventually do so—and yet by their nature they lack presence. For Augustine, then, when we allow our

desires to be organized by the past, we are participating in sin, the order of non-being; however, when we read such habituated desires as an attempt to seek presence, we can allegorize their meaning into a new, transcendent desire. This desire, when consummated, does not so much escape history and lived temporality as it fulfills what they implied all along; so Augustine, in his *Vision at Ostia*, experiences a moment of contemplative contact with the divine from within his autobiographical narrative, an experience from which he necessarily returns sighing. So, for Dante too, the vision of God is accompanied by a return to lived experience, and it is under the sign of this return that his entire narrative is written.<sup>12</sup>

Yet though Augustine's narrative suggests the necessity—perhaps dogged—of uniting temporal experience with its transcendence, Dante's substantial revision of Augustine and the other philosophers and theologians that preceded him remains that he figures the transcendence itself in spatial terms. The immemorability that characterizes all such experiences does not take him out of time, but situates him more fully in it. The invocation we have been exploring is the first indication of this—it spatializes the intellect, the faculty closest to God and responsible for abstracting sensory experience. It reintegrates another of the soul's primary faculties—the will—to offer a foreshadowing of Dante himself standing before God in the Empyrean. Yet both the invocation and what it foreshadows are starkly temporal in character. To briefly treat Dante's vision of God, whereas most medieval mystics and theologians expressed the vision of God as a sort of unification, a loss of the self in which the self becomes absorbed in the God's presence,

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<sup>12</sup> As John Freccero argues, the autobiographical conceit of Dante's text requires a sort of death to his former self. Autobiography assumes that the author writing the record of his life is radically different from the self that he narrates; the author must reach a point of finality and completion for his prior life to be subject to narration. See Rachel Jacoff's excellent analysis of this point in Freccero's thought in *The Poetics of Conversion*, xii-xiii.

Dante very clearly remains a distinct figure, integrated both spatially and mentally. The most startling feature of the Empyrean is how it treats vision—whereas one would expect vision, the primary faculty through which we understand space and time, to become slowly superfluous during Dante’s ascent, in fact vision becomes perfect. Dante is capable of seeing the objects populating the Empyrean at whatever remove; at the moment he perfects vision, Dante also perfects distance and space. As he gazes upward toward God, then, he figures God as still impossibly distant, yet available to him through perception. This is not to say that Dante spatializes God, which would be clearly heretical; but he avoids that heresy by positing an inverse relationship between insight and vision: the more one understands God, the further one is from him. The vision of God does not absorb Dante, though it absorbs his attention; rather, his perfected vision penetrates ever deeper but never to the end of God’s being. That distance actually situates him more fully in his own spatiotemporal experience by positing the annihilation in God inherent in many theological and philosophical accounts at an ever increasing remove. In God’s incarnational depths, he even seems to see a reflection of the human person—Christ—residing in the perfect presence of the Trinity. Thus, even after Dante’s *alta fantasia* is finally exhausted,<sup>13</sup> his metaphor is one of a perfectly sustained orbit rather than one of absorption: “volgeva il mio disio e ‘l velle,/ sì come rota ch’igualmente è mossa,/ l’Amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” [the Love that moves the sun and the other stars turned my desire and will, as a wheel that is evenly moved]. The final image

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<sup>13</sup> In the Aristotelian terms deployed above, “fantasia” occupies a contentious and somewhat inconsistent place in Aristotle’s psychology; however, it generally describes a faculty between perception and thought but distinct from the two. Dante’s admission that his fantasia failed him—far from despatializing the final encounter—suggests that he attained an experience of pure, present perception unattended by conventional linguistic thought or even the most inchoate slurring of that perception into thought. Gerard Watson calls phantasia “a remainder, something left over from the actual sensation” (103), indicating that it is also implicated in the first descent of perception into memory. The key section of *de Anima* on phantasia is 3.3.

is one in which Dante participates in the temporality marked out in the Heavens; his spatial vision of the Empyrean does not render transcendence static or somehow outside of time, but rather sets the temporality that desire defines for will in a perfect, unending revolution. The final vision thus resembles something like Gregory's desire of desire: Dante continues to live in the world, yet the temporal experience his vision has enabled constantly transcends history to participate in God's presence.

Still, some specter of Neoplatonic disembodiment may yet haunt this notion of *disire* as the cessation of temporality in the invocation. But Dante clarifies, in the following stanza, the relationship between this transcendent experience and memory:

Veramente quant' io del regno santo  
ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,  
sarà ora materia del mio canto.

[Truly, as much of the holy realm as I was able to make treasure in my mind will now be the matter of my song.]

Most translators feel the need to signal the apparent contradiction between this stanza and the one preceding it by rendering the "veramente" as a qualifying conjunction like "however," or "nevertheless." Yet, if my analysis of the prior lines is correct, there is no real contradiction in Dante's suggestion that he possesses memories of the intellectual experience that transcended memory. Indeed, it would be more remarkable if, given the spatial metaphor and its anticipation of an even more starkly spatial Empyrean, he did not have some memory to record; the entirety of the *Paradiso* stretching out before us would stand as witness disavowing its own first claim. The failure of memory in the above lines becomes one solely of quantity: the plenitude of presence abounding in Paradise

overwhelms his capacity to parse it into memorial images. Where in the previous lines Dante seemed to criticize memory, here he appears indulgent—its capacity to reify temporality into discrete mnemonic artifacts is imagined as a treasuring. Notably, mnemonic conversion is not primarily rendered as a verb, but rather as the noun “tesoro,” into which the “regno santo” must be fashioned; it is these fragmented artifacts of the total experience that Dante represents into the even more material “materia” of his song. This last line admits to a second relevant interpretation: the “materia del mio canto” is simultaneously the represented images of his song and the linguistic matter comprising the “canto”—the poetic division that has structured all three realms—at the moment we read the phrase. The suggestion is admittedly subtle, but already Dante is proposing a unification of these divergent, seemingly opposed modes of linguistic perception. The transcendence of memory does not entail its renunciation; intellective perception simply becomes superabundant as it nears God’s presence. Dante’s representation thus, from its outset, becomes a text that is at least as much about the unrepresentable lacunae in his text as it is the objects he is capable of representing.

To summarize, Dante’s personification of the intellect, while it suggests the sort of delineation between faculties common to medieval theology, actually succeeds in blurring the margins between such categories. Intellect both perceives and wills, traveling through a space that metonymically represents the poet’s own journey here at its outset. Though he distinguishes and disavows memory, this intellect seems to possess it also until reaching the innermost depths of deity. Dante presents a reintegrative vision of an intellect whose experience of God relies on time and perception. Rather than presenting a Neoplatonic vision, which would abstract, dematerialize and detemporalize

the subject, Dante's understanding of presence arises from temporal experience as an alternative mode of perceiving bodily existence. Mystical accounts of rapture from Augustine to Bernard and beyond were deeply informed by the former tradition, making the narrativity of Paradise one of his most important responses to theology and philosophy. The immemorability topos he offers at the beginning of his text does not gesture toward this sort of detemporalized Paradise as we might expect, but rather to a plenitude of lived experience that overflows the images contained in the memory. Those images are parsed and cut from an infinitely divisible—and so indivisible, constantly mobile—temporality; within Paradise, each successive, sinuous moment of that temporality achieves a special resonance that thrusts Dante toward an experience of perfect presence in the Empyrean, a journey foreshadowed in the invocation.

### *Dante's Perverse Poetics of Resurrection*

This immemorability of Paradise places Dante in an especially odd state of affairs when we consider it in the context of the events that concluded the *Purgatorio*. Dante's ultimate confession and conversion was consummated by his baptism in Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. On its face, the mythological reference—coupled with the immemorability topos that begins the *Paradiso*—would leave Dante with no prior memory and no capacity to form new memories. Again, such an image seems to stand against the fact of the text, this time retrospectively: as readers, we have just read the product of Dante's memory when we reach the Earthly Paradise, and so we know that Dante has modified the concepts of memory and forgetfulness. He not only recollects the past of the *Comedy* itself—the record of his salvation by the grace of Beatrice—but all of

the transversal associations and allusions that the text has invoked thus far, both to his private life and to literary history. In Canto 31, Beatrice suggests that Lethe washes away only memories of evil as she summons him to conversion, saying “le memorie triste/ in te non sono ancor da l’acqua offese” [the unhappy memories in you have not yet been erased by the waters] (11-12). Dante’s “memorie triste” refer both to a generalized, habitual memory of “evil” that caused him to sin and the specific sin of “unhappiness” or “sullenness” that beset Dante upon the death of Beatrice. She makes this clear in her subsequent dialogue:

... Per entro i mie’ disiri,  
che ti menavano ad amar lo Bene  
di là dal qual non è a che s’aspiri,  
quai fossi attraversati o quai catene  
trovasti, per che del passare innanzi  
dovessiti così spogliar la spene? (22-27)

[Within my charms, which were leading you to love the Good of that place beyond which there is nothing to which one aspires, what ditches obstructed or what chains did you find, that consequently you had to strip yourself of the hope of passing beyond?]

Dante thwarted this movement toward the good “tosto che ‘l vostro viso si nascose” [as soon as your face hid itself] (36). Though Beatrice will at least partially censure Dante’s desire of herself within the next few stanzas—insofar as it sought a transitory, material object—here she imagines it in the typological relationship described above. Such desire—since it allowed Dante to comprehend beauty—gestures toward the experience of

Paradise, the better object of human aspiration. Dante again makes this typology of desire explicitly Augustinian: the “catene” of line 25 recalls the metaphor of chains by which Augustine described habitual desires in the *Confessions*. Chains, for Augustine, represent the historical procedures of memory, where each link is a particular event reinstating some desire (8.5.10). These habits are both confining and inexplicable, their search for originary fulfillment dwindling into obscurity. They bind us not only to our own past, but to an entire perception of time as a causal history, organized by desires seeking an elusive satiety.

As she castigates Dante, Beatrice further defines these *memorie triste*, in part, by means of an allusion to the vision of the Siren in Canto 19. Beatrice explicitly relates his sin to this scene when she says

Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte  
del tuo errore, e perché altra volta,  
udendo le serene, sie più forte,  
pon giù il seme del piangere, e ascolta. (31.43-46).

[However, so that you may now bear the shame of your error, and so that another time, hearing the sirens, you may be stronger, lay down the seed of weeping and listen.]

Beatrice ties Dante’s dream of the Siren to his material attachment to her body—the seed of his weeping and the shame he must bear—in these lines. This earlier episode occurred immediately after Dante had passed through the terrace of the slothful, a sin which holds special relevance for him. In its less personal dimension, Dante imagines sloth as the typological inversion of contemplative detachment from the world, as Jeremy Tambling



has suggested. As Vergil explains to him in Canto 17, the *amore d'animo* [love of the mind] “puote errar per male obietto/ o per troppo o per poco di vigore” [can err through an evil object or through too much or too little vigor] (95-96). The measure of one’s love for any object should proceed from its relation to God—all creatures must ultimately refer back to their creator, and they should be loved by virtue of the religious insight they offer. No object of desire is intrinsically desirable without this relationship since, as Augustine argued, God is the only object of our love that is innately desirable. This prioritization of the love of God over the love of any object effectively places the material world at an intellectual remove from the contemplative; it detaches us from the interior hermeneutic of desire within the world by locating the final source of desirability outside of the world. The majority of the sins Dante encounters on his road err on the side of too vigorously valuing some good that, loved in moderation, would be acceptable. However, in the terrace of the slothful, he encounters the inverse—the sort of exhaustion with the world that Tambling relates to the monastic sin of *acedia*, a “lack of care, listlessness... [or] indolence of the heart” (56). The sin of the slothful prefigures contemplative detachment, but it lacks both the insight that reinvigorates earthly objects with desirability and the desire that offers people their first glimpse of the divine.

In its more personal dimension, this sin suggests to Dante the extreme indifference to the world he experiences after, and even before Beatrice’s death. The two primary types of sin Vergil defines are in fact intertwined for Dante, since that indifference resulted from the loss of the woman he desired out of measure. The *Vita Nuova* records how Dante’s fixation on her death accompanied and coexisted with his celebrations of her beauty. In Chapter 23, Dante is visited by a sickness that prompts him

to consider his lady's mortality, that "di necessitate convene che la gentilissima Beatrice alcuna volta si muoia" [of necessity it must be that the most gentle Beatrice, at some time, must die]; he says that the very thought of her death

mi giunse uno sì forte smarrimento, che chiusi li occhi e cominciai a travagliare sì come farnetica persona ed a imaginare in questo modo: che ne lo incominciamento de lo errare che fece la mia fantasia apparvero a me certi visi di donne scapigliate, che mi diceano: 'Tu pur morrai'; e poi, dopo queste donne m'apparvero certi visi diversi e orribili a vedere, li quali mi diceano: 'Tu se' morto.'

[wrought in me so strong a sense of loss that I closed my eyes, and my imagination began to torment me, like a delirious person, and to conjure up images in this way: so that at the beginning of this wandering that my fantasy made, certain faces of disheveled women began to appear to me, that said to me "you too will die;" and then, after these women, certain faces, various and horrible, appeared to me, the which said to me "you are dead.]

Oddly enough, Dante's fixation on the death of Beatrice is transformed here into a relatively selfish reflection on his own death. As he preemptively mourns her, Dante implies that he already understands the transgression that he will confront on the cusp of Paradise: his brand of fetishistic love reduces the experience of beauty to a historical event. In essence, it fails to allegorize the beloved—to read her beauty as a trace of divine grace—then subsequently fails to typologically recast every other object in the world as a participant in that allegory. Beauty offers a glimpse of a more intuitive, fluid

experience of time that instigated the “new life” Dante imagines as a preliminary conversion, prefiguring his baptism in Lethe; however, in locating that experience solely in one object, he has resituated beauty within time and history. Beatrice’s death thus seems to fracture and multiply through time into the ugly, dissheveled faces—whose description anticipates Dante’s transformation of the Siren—of women who are only capable of reminding Dante of his own, and everyone else’s, mortality. These *mementi mori* prefigure how Dante will experience the world after Beatrice has died: feminine grace will be transformed into a grim specter of death to come, the world will be evacuated of significance. All faces will become capable of representing only their tendency toward non-being rather than their present animation; they constitute only a habit performed over and over, recollecting an originary experience of presence. This loss will be multiplied almost indefinitely by time, making every moment not torturous—torture actually implies an experience of the fluidity of time at the other extreme of sensation—but senseless; this loss actually inverts the typological relationship Dante should adopt toward objects in the world: rather than understanding them as typological shadows of the grace he finds fully realized in Beatrice—who is herself an allegorized figure of the grace of God—Dante deprives them of any relationship to his beloved in order to make his experience of her more singular. Since Dante imagines this new mode of perception before her death, he even suggests that it infects even his experience of Beatrice herself; it coexists with the experience of presence she enables, which is transformed into an event and so lodged within history. Beatrice prompts Dante to transcend memory but Dante converts transcendence back into a memorial event. The consummate evil of this new mode of perception is that it makes all exterior signs refer to

the desiring subject rather than to God. Their present being, which they derive from God, comes to only signify the historical destiny of the subject—his attempt to colonize and possess the beloved. The world is configured around Dante's fetishism of Beatrice—objects within it become either means to the end of his acquiring her, or vacant symbols of her non-presence—and so everything, including Beatrice herself, loses its resonance in the face of its impending dissolution. Dante thereby perverts his own present being as well into a symbol of its future, dying before he is dead, as the proximity between the faces' future and present statements indicate.

This evacuation is not only sinful, but disingenuous, since it pretends to evacuate desire when it really just locates desire in a different object: death. Death, to the medieval world, required an allegorical logic to avert the ongoing tragedy of the world: the temporary quality of any given object of desire forced us not to locate a self-sustaining meaning in it, but rather to look for meaning in God, the ground of a being that exceeds the subjective duration of any given life span. However Dante—along with most people—found this allegorical procedure extremely difficult to actualize in practice. As Beatrice tells him in the Earthly Paradise, earthly objects provide the first means by which everyone experiences God; but due to their obvious perceptibility, they more often prompt mourning rather than contemplation. Mourning, contrary to common sense, is not authentically an evacuation of desire—so long as we live, human beings cannot cease to desire since we cannot cease to will; our being is will, even if we will only to languish inertly. Rather, mourning displaces desire onto death, the perverse parody of the end to desire Dante hopes to find in God. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante very deliberately projects his idea of Beatrice onto the figure of Death—after seeing her dead body, wearing a look of

infinite humility in his vision, he summons Death: “Dolcissima Morte, vieni a me, e non m’esser villana, però che tu dei essere gentile, in tal parte se’ stata. Or vieni a me, che molto ti disidero; e tu lo vedi, ché io porto già lo tuo colore” [Sweetest Death, come to me, and do not be boorish to me, since you must be gentle, to have been in such a place. Now come to me, for I desire you greatly, and you see that I already bear your colours] (23). We need not belabor the eroticized portrayal of Death to perceive it here—not only has Death recently been inside the space of Beatrice’s body, but Dante coos to him in the idiom of Romance. Love seems to possess the *luf-daunger* of the Romantic woman—*daunger* in Romance indicates a sort of feigned rejection of the lover that indefinitely defers courtship.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, it incites the desire of the lover. Just so, the usually cruel Death has been gentled by his occupancy within Beatrice. Yet the desire for Death, unlike the desire for Beatrice, requires an interminable courtship—Dante, in fact, ensures that he will not be left bereft of his new beloved.

This displaced love of death is the only way Dante can persist in his old paradigm of desire; it offers a perverted, sullen experience of presence in which the anticipation of Dante’s own death offers him a new sense of temporality. This is, even still, a familiar trope—as in the cavalier “carpe diem” poems, the fragility of some desired object can offer a more intense experience of its presence. The death in things—their historicity—becomes the focus of their desirability. Poetry becomes the instantiation of this shifted focus for Dante. In his second canzone on the death of Beatrice, Dante demonstrates how this displacement works:

Dannomi angoscia li sospiri forte,  
 quando ‘l pensiero ne la mente grave

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<sup>14</sup> On this concept, see Barron 1-3.

mi reca quella che m'ha 'l cor diviso:  
e spesse fiata pensando a la morte,  
venemene un disio tanto soave,  
che mi tramuta lo color nel viso.  
E quando 'l maginar mi ven ben fiso,  
giugnemi tanta pena d'ogne parte  
ch'io mi riscuoto per dolor ch'i' sento. (31.43-51)

[Anguish gives me deep sighs/ when the thought in my heavy mind/  
recalls her who has divided my heart from me:/ and often while thinking  
about death,/ there comes to me a desire so sweet/ that the color in my  
face is changed./ And when the image is well fixed in me/ such sweet pain  
reaches me from every side/ that I shake myself through the pain I feel.]

The vivification Dante once felt while in the presence of Beatrice occurs, after her death, through his poetic reconstitutions of her memory; but his former desire for her has been overlaid with his consciousness that it is a recollection and a representation. His sighs become a new form of animation—literally an “anima,” which term is etymologically related to breath—that suffuse him with color and unite his members with a common purpose. He recognizes poetry as what it always was: a representation, which fundamentally assumes the absence of whatever it represents. But rather than becoming simply slothful, he uses his poetic *imagines* of loss to reinvigorate himself, even as they remain artifacts of his initial dissolution.

These reanimated artifacts come to so thoroughly define Dante's desire that he personifies his canzone in its totality as Beatrice's sullen surrogate:

Pietosa mia canzone, or va piangendo;  
e ritruova le donne e le donzelle  
a cui le tue sorelle  
erano usate di portar letizia;  
e tu, che se' figliuola di tristizia,  
vatten disconsolata a star con elle. (31.71-76)

[My piteous poem, now go, weeping,/ and rediscover the ladies and the  
maidens/ to whom your sisters/ were used to convey joy;/ and you, who  
are the daughter of sadness,/ go hence, disconsolate, to be with them.]

Dante imagines all of his poems as daughters of his union with Beatrice here, an image which, read in the light of those poems, has definite incestuous connotations; his earlier poems record the experience of presence that Dante felt as he courted Beatrice. Here, he refigures courtship itself as sexual consummation—the *daunger* which invigorated him was tantamount to the consummation it deferred. His earlier poems are imagined as secondary records of the primary experience of presence this sexual metaphor implies: a child always fundamentally represents some earlier moment of climax, and sex is a primary metaphor for the experience of presence. However, the *donna tristizia* testifies more to the need for continuance inherent in the drive to procreate. This child is a product of Dante's union with the death that inhabits Beatrice, the death onto whom his desire has been displaced. She records not the presence implied in sexual climax, but the fear of death and the need for continuance. But as a representation of the need for continuance, she paradoxically becomes yet another *memento mori*, testifying to her mother's death. She is a poem, self-conscious of her status as poem; in creating her,

Dante attempted to represent her mother in language, but the language, at its surface, only testified to its existence as language and not as the body of Beatrice. Dante infects his entire corpus with that self-consciousness when he instructs his *figliuola* to go stand, disconsolate, among her sisters; beyond his own corpus, he even attempts to infect his audience—the *donne* and *donzelle* who read his earlier works—with this consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The ghastly *visi* he saw prior to Beatrice’s death are reconfigured as his own poems here, which in their misguided effort to reference Beatrice now only reinstitute her loss. Again, he insinuates that the inevitability of death has suffused even his happiest, most celebratory memories of her; those moments of presence that organized his desire have been fully subsumed back into a consciousness of her as a historical being. This morose recollection, however, rejoins the scattered members of her body into the disconsolate image of the poem; the sadness itself proves to be an animating force—perhaps, Dante muses in a peculiarly Ovidian moment, the only animating force available to him or anyone. This reconfiguration of his poetics offers to Dante a new, incestuous drive to make his own poetic recollections of Beatrice the object of his desire.

This final move especially—in which loss that the poem records itself becomes the *anima* of the beloved—permits us to understand Dante’s Siren. While Dante watches the slothful run about their terrace, he indolently falls from one thought into another, and ultimately into a dream state—a procedure of free-association that resembles the delirium in which he saw the dissheveled *visi* above. The product of Dante’s slothful vision is likewise similar to those faces: “mi venne in sogno una femmina balba,/ ne li occhi guercia e sovra i piè distorta,/ con le man monche, e di colore scialba” [a stammering

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<sup>15</sup> This image signals one of the principal shifts we will discover in Boccaccio’s response to Dante in the *Decameron*: Boccaccio’s poem also imagines sad, love-lorn ladies, but it purports to distract them rather than to reify itself into one of them, then infect them with an irrecoverable sadness.



woman came to me in a dream, cross-eyed and distorted on her feet, with maimed hands and pale of color] (19.7-9). Much of the criticism on Dante's Siren has explored the analogues that generate her transformation from this corpse-like figure into an image of a beautiful woman. Yet in all the criticism, I have never seen suggested what seems to me unavoidable: the Siren is the, quite literal, corpse of Beatrice. Whatever other resonances she suggests (and of course these are present, if only in the mythological name), this significance is preeminent for Dante. The misshapen image suggests a corpse, or rather one of the disheveled zombies of Dante's vision, a *figliuola tristizia* shambling around and muttering about her death. Dante offers in her a vicious critique of his own poetics which, in the perverse act of incestuous necrophilia he imagines in the *Vita Nuova*, recreates those corpses as figures of desire.

This reading of her is born out by the effect of Dante's gaze:

Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta  
le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,  
così lo sguardo mio le facea scorta  
la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava  
in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,  
com'amor vuol, così le colorava. (19.10-15)

[I gazed at her; and as the sun comforts the cold members that the night weighs down, just so my gaze made her tongue sensible, and then straightened all of her in a short time, and colored her lost face, just as love desires.]

Dante's gaze, in a very literal sense, resurrects the *femmina balba*, transforming her deformed, maimed body into a shape "com'amor vuol." In a supreme instance of hubris, Dante likens his gaze to the sun, an image that in the *Convivio* and *Paradiso* he will use as the primary analogy for God.<sup>16</sup> Dante's gaze becomes a parodic rendering of God's act of creation, vivifying (expressed through the romantically pregnant *conforta*) the cold *membra* that night had rendered all but inert; it confers intelligibility to the siren's stuttering *lingua*, and suffuses her *smarrito volto* with the same color that the desire of death had offered Dante himself. The analogy between this episode and his earlier, poetic resurrection of Beatrice should be evident<sup>17</sup>—Dante's gaze rejoins the members of the siren's body into a whole, overlaying its decay with a new *anima*. He attempts to restore the grace of Beatrice's limbs to his figuration of her which, as Dante discovers in the Heaven of the Sun, is the fundamental point of the resurrection. The blessed yearn to return to their bodies because their bodies will more perfectly manifest the grace of God. Soul and body are properly joined together; the embodied soul is more perfect than the disembodied one, just as poetry is ultimately, for Dante, is preferable to theology. Poetry has the capacity to both reflect deity and to usurp its privilege. Significantly, Dante imagines his poetic activity in this incident not as writing or speaking, but as an act of seeing, emphatically reinforced by both *mirava* and *sguardo*. Dante's transgression is to fetishistically focus on the referent of his poem, even though the poem itself testifies to its removal and difference from that referent. Poetic words attempt to become something other than what they are, and in their attempt to reanimate the dead and reconstitute

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<sup>16</sup> See Freccero 243-44.

<sup>17</sup> Mazzotta, following Grandgent, notes that "the Siren's 'sweet voice' constitutes a specifically poetic temptation" (*Poet of the Desert*, 141).

union with her, produce monstrous children capable only of representing their distance from what they try to represent—children onto whom the poet then displaces a perverse erotic desire; just so, Dante sabotages the image of the Siren for both us and himself by describing the deformed template upon which he erects his representation.

Dante's poetic activity is figured as this referential gaze, but the Siren also uses language to reconstitute herself. Once Dante's gaze has performed the initial act of resurrection, she becomes complicit in its figuration:

“Io son,” cantava, “io son dolce serena,  
che' marinari in mezzo mar dismago,  
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena.

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin, vago  
al canto mio, e qual meco s'ausa  
rado sen parte, sì tutto l'appago!” (19.19-24)

[“I am,” she sung, “I am a sweet siren, who enchanted the sailors in the middle of the sea, so full of pleasure I am to sense. I turned Ulysses from his road, charmed by my song, and whoever becomes used to me rarely leaves me, so fully do I satisfy him!]

Like Dante's *figliuola tristizia*, the Siren is only able to sing of herself; she acquires a semblance of agency and substantiality in her frantic attempts to reify the desirability with which Dante's gaze has endowed her. Poetry creates a vicious circle in which the poet's gaze, once instantiated in the poem, reinforces the beauty of the object that motivated itself; it creates a circle of self-justification that legitimates the original desire and short circuits any attempt to allegorize it. The representation satisfies so fully

because it is self-justifying; it lodges Ulysses—whom the Middle Ages often understood as an allegorical figure of philosophical desire—in the hermeneutic circle of the world. Yet, as we have seen, the representation can never succeed in becoming the object it attempts to represent, and so—by means of its resemblance—it becomes primarily a signifier of its difference from the beloved. Like any habit, subsequent recollections of the original act are both fulfilling and exhausted; the threat of its dissolution, its becoming meaningless, is part of the motivation for reduplicating it. The poet comes to value the fetishized memory more than the object of desire itself, and so, as Beatrice suggests in the Earthly Paradise, is averted from seeking the good by the very object which gives access to the good.

Beatrice singularly intervenes in Dante's dream, signalling its importance to Dante's project. She appears to Vergil and fiercely asks "O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?" [O Vergil, Vergil, who is this?] (19.28). Vergil, always stoic in such matters of desire—indeed, this scene may give us an inkling of why Beatrice chose him above all other figures as Dante's guide<sup>18</sup>—tears off the Siren's clothes, showing Dante her stinking belly, presumably her material entrails, the womb from which he hoped to draw the *figliuola tristizia*. This last image is redolent of the denuding of Marsyas which I will explore in some detail below; for now, I will simply note that Vergil reveals the Siren for what she always was—the smelly corpse of Beatrice's physical body. The tableau Beatrice creates in her appearance already suggests this; she appears to contrast the allegorized grace that Dante should have loved in her with the material body that Dante's poetry had fetishized. We do not fully understand this implication, however, until we reach the Earthly Paradise, where Beatrice's first words bitterly echo the first words of

<sup>18</sup> On the relationship between Virgilian stoicism and Dante's choice of guide, see Wetherbee 10.

the Siren: “Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice” [Look well here! Well I am, well I am Beatrice] (30.73). Beatrice ridicules Dante’s animating *sguardo* by enjoining him to “guardaci ben;” her repeated “ben son” ironically reflect the Siren’s repeated “io son” while also signalling Beatrice’s outrage at his desecration of her. She thus begins his rehabilitation by criticizing the model of poetics he had articulated through the image of the Siren, setting her paradisiacal self in stark contrast to the fetishistic grace of his reanimation of her.

Unexpectedly, Dante finds himself bereft of tears when he sees Beatrice again; the poet who had made a veritable homunculus of his tears and sighs finds those tears frozen around his heart. It is not the grace of Beatrice that looses them, but rather the sympathetic song of her attendants liquefies them to “spirito e acqua” [spirit and water] (98). His tears must achieve a different character than those he had wept earlier; only the tears of the penitent will satisfy the debt that must be paid to enter Lethe, not the tears of mourning. The loss that generates mourning only instills memory further, entrenching the subject more deeply into history. While Dante’s freed tears suggest an inchoate penitence, Beatrice remains initially unmoved. Rather, as a lawyer accusing Dante, she turns to the ladies and informs them that, while she was on earth

il sostenni col mio volto:

mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,

meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto.

Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui

di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,

questi si tolse a me e diessi altrui. (121-25)

[I sustained him with my face: showing my young eyes to him, I led him with me turned to the right place. Yet as soon as I was on the threshold of my second age and changed life, he took himself from me and gave himself to another.]

The implication of infidelity is an odd one for Dante, who continued to worship Beatrice long after her death, as we have seen. In fact, the *Vita Nuova* has shown us that Dante essentially lacked the capacity for infidelity—any other woman he loved was a dim shadow of Beatrice; he asked his own poems to infect all other women with her grim countenance. Whatever real infidelity Beatrice may refer to here, Dante’s primary infidelity was, ironically, his devotion to her. Beatrice never repudiates the sustenance her face gave him; if anything, she suggests that the beauty that initially drew Dante to her increased upon her death: “bellezza e virtù cresciuta m’era” [beauty and power had matured in me] (128). She is not disavowing the experience of spatial beauty, nor can we even say she is entirely allegorizing it, if allegorization entails removing that beauty from time and space. She is suggesting that the experience of presence he found in her remained available, even more so, after her death when he no longer needed to fetishistically attach it to her alone. The young eyes grow up, but do not lose their grace—as Paradise will show, her eyes in fact become incomparable loci of radiance. Yet Dante was unable to understand what his experience of her indicated about existence itself; he localized the experience of grace and so initiated the cryptogram of memory and desire we have been exploring. He, instead, fixated on her corpse, transformed its crossed eyes into Beatrice’s clear ones and tried to maintain an unsustainable model of desire.

Beatrice elaborates on the transgression of that model and the allegorization of beauty in Canto 31, where she outlines why her death should have more fully turned him toward the good:

Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte  
piacer quanto le belle membra in ch'io  
rinchiusa fui, e sono in terra sparte;  
e se 'l sommo piacer sì ti fallio  
per la mia morta, qual cosa mortale  
dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio? (49-54)

[Never did nature or art present to you as much pleasure as the beautiful members in which I was enclosed, and which are scattered in the earth; and if the greatest pleasure so failed you upon my death, what mortal thing should then draw you into its desire?]

Beatrice explicitly notes that Dante fetishized the pleasure he took in seeing her beautiful members, which were only an enclosure for the spirit that animated them. Those members were the vehicle for a deeper grace that ran through Beatrice, but he located that grace only in her skin, as it were. He failed to generalize the experience of her beauty, to realize that the presence and being he felt with her is a condition of existence, not the provenance of some partial and temporary *cosa mortale*. Mortal things are rather signs of the presence of God; the mortality in them is their conceptualization as a historical body rather than a participant in presence. This reduction of the beautiful object to its body renders it discrete and mortal, makes its desirability “suo disio” rather than a sign of God’s preeminent presence, which is the ground of desirability. As Beatrice goads Dante

toward penitence, she presents him with an interpretation of her beauty that transcends such partial manifestations without disavowing them. This penitence prepares him for the baptism in Lethe that will wash away this historicized model of desire with the immemorability of the perfect presence beauty implies.

Lethe, however, does not wash away this memory of evil—or we might now say, the evil of memory—alone, nor the memory of Dante’s sadness at Beatrice’s death; it also washes away the unhappiness of repentance, the immediate unhappiness that Dante suffers in Canto 31—a move which equates it with Augustinian grace. Augustine’s conversion is unique in proceeding not from his own self-chastisement or philosophical inquiry. The entire course of the *Confessions* actually demonstrates how ineffectual such measures are in inspiring constant good action; the chains of habit cannot be broken by an act of will since habit was instigated by will in Eden. After his tearful scene in the garden at Milan, he embarks on a long excursus explaining the fundamental brokenness of the will. Will is essentially ascetic in the sense that, when we are conscious of willing, we have already failed to desire whatever we will. We desire something else, but desire that we did not desire it; or to approach it from the other direction, we do not desire what we will, but rather desire that we desired it. It is ultimately the utter debasement Augustine feels after his repeated attempts to convert that allows him to finally succeed; he no longer conceives of the act as occurring through his own volition, but rather through the grace of God. In Dante’s conversion, Lethe represents this final movement toward an unwilled, unmerited grace. After he is rebuked by Beatrice for his desire of material things, he is commanded to gaze at her again. Upon doing so, he begins to see her with different eyes:



Sotto 'l suo velo e oltre la rivera  
vincer pariami più sé stessa antica,  
vincer che l'altre qui, quand'ella c'era.

Di penter sì mi punse ivi l'ortica  
che di tutte altre cose qual mi torse  
più nel suo amor, più mi si fé nemica.

Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse  
ch'io caddi vinto, e quale allora femmi  
salsi colei che la cagion mi porse. (82-91)

[Beneath her veil and beyond the river she seemed to me to conquer her  
old self more than she conquered the others here, when she was there.  
The nettle of repentance so stung me then that whatever of all other things  
had turned me most toward its love now made itself most hateful to me.  
So much recognition bit my heart that I fell, conquered, and what I then  
became she knows who gave me cause.]

Beatrice's speech to Dante has introduced a reverse order of negative desire that makes his previous desires seem at best inadequate, and at worst outright hateful. Her speech has prompted the "riconoscenza"—a term which literally entails the acknowledgement of his sin, but which can also, in this context, be justifiably rendered as a term for memory, a "re-knowing"—of sin that results in his swoon. But a hidden danger lurks in Dante's repentance, just as it did in Augustine's. Beatrice's new spiritual beauty surpasses her old physical beauty, but it is still enmeshed within the same matrix of desire, as indicated by the comparison drawn between the two. The emphatically repeated verb here is

“vincere,” which entails an ascetic logic: Beatrice’s spirituality competes with her physicality, and so upon announcing the full inversion of his desires, Dante falls conquered. The shame prompted by Dante’s recollection of his sins—the exact recollection toward which Beatrice has been goading him—is fraught with an ambivalence about its own efficacy.

Dante’s debasement, like Augustine’s, is preliminary to the action of grace, but it is not directly responsible for his final conversion. For that, more than an ascetic turning away is required—Dante must, in fact, forget both his sins and the even inverse order of repentance, once it has satisfied justice. After Dante’s falls, Beatrice drags him into the river where she finally coos to him in the lover’s refrain: “Tiemmi, tiemmi” [hold me, hold me] (93). Ironically, only after Dante ceases to desire her transgressively does Beatrice fulfill the role of the lover, and only then to draw him into a river that will cause him to forget why he solicited such words from her in the first place. This is not to say that Lethe will eliminate all erotic attraction per se, but only that he will cease to fetishize her as the sole agent of grace in the universe. When he appreciates her beauty after his baptism, it is no longer under the sign of memory, whose experience of presence entails its own loss; rather, he experiences the presence of God that animates her, and that makes her an agent of grace in both senses of the word. Divine grace is figured in the grace of her body; it is this grace that, as Beatrice has just suggested, paradoxically offered Dante his first avenue away from transitory desires. Since he still appreciates her physical beauty—we cannot imagine her shade as anything but a reduplication of her body, a fact which is ironic given her repudiation of that body. This again does not somehow despatialize her, but it recognizes the experience of presence he first understood, and still

understands, through the beauty of her body. This beauty is now, in the afterlife, a consequence of her theological understanding, but to say that her beauty in Paradise is somehow intangible or immaterial surely resists the grain of Dante's narrative. Rather Beatrice allies the two meanings of grace, as she does at the end of Canto 31, when her handmaidens beg her "Per grazia, fa noi grazia che disvele/ a lui la bocca tua, sì che discerna/ la seconda bellezza che tu cele" [For grace, do for us the grace that unveils your mouth to him, so that he might discern the second beauty that you conceal]. The handmaidens beg Beatrice first to turn her eyes to Dante, then to unveil her mouth, again a double symbol of erotic desire and her newly spiritual, discursive nature. The repetition of grace suggests three alternate meanings that Dante condenses into one: first, grace is the grace of God of which Beatrice has been the avatar; second, and relatedly, grace is a favor, gesturing toward the Augustinian superfluity of unmerited grace; and third, grace also aligns with the "bellezza" to suggest the beauty of her physical features. The three become one when read in the context of presence: the grace of Beatrice's figure first led Dante to understand the good, the perfect presence of God from which all being proceeds. That grace is what rescued Dante from his crass, materialistic consciousness; he would have remained lodged within the trammels of a historicized vision of time had that superfluous grace not reflected the experience of presence in God.

Pierre Hadot locates the provenance of such a conflation of grace, oddly enough, in Plotinus. He notes that, for Plotinus, the experience of love first demonstrates the existence of a higher order of Being; we witness in the beloved what Ravaissou termed a "eurythmia," a "movement which does well" (qtd. in Hadot 50). For Hadot, this fluidity of movement gestures toward a supplemental dimension of reality: "There is in love a

‘something more,’ something unjustified; and that which, in objects, corresponds to this ‘something more’ is grace, or Life in its deepest mystery. Forms and structures can be justified, but life and grace cannot” (50). Material bodies, in themselves, never suffice to explain the experience of love; if they were simply the functionalist, historicized vision we often have of them, they could not motivate the experience of desire. They could not captivate our attention if their being did not offer some deeper insight into ourselves and being generally; we would forever remain like the cowards banished from both Hell and Heaven, perpetually running through time but lacking a definite, consequential form through which to manifest God’s gracious present. Dante recognizes the danger inherent in that love: its premonition can cause us to fetishize a single outlet of grace rather than pressing us to realize that grace abounds everywhere, that it manifests a presence shared by every existent. Dante does not repudiate Beatrice’s grace or beauty by forgetting his sinful vision of her in Lethe; rather, as in Paradise, the loss of memory moves him nearer to the perfect presence that beauty—the aesthetic dimension above form and matter—always implied.

### *Dante’s Typology of Irony*

In Canto 1 of *Paradiso*, Dante recollects this baptismal immemorability topos in the Ovidian figure of Glaucus. By extending and reenacting this metaphor, Dante reimagines conversion not as a historical event in which the soul turns away from former sin toward the good, but rather as an ongoing process of transformation that renders the soul more sensitive to presence. Just as they ascend to Paradise, Dante and Beatrice reenact the reflective glance of Canto 31:

Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote

fissa con li occhi stava, e io in lei

le luci fissi, di là sù rimote.

Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei

qual si fè Glauco nel gustar de l'erba

che 'l fè consorto in mar de li altri dèi.

[Beatrice stood with her eyes entirely fixed on the eternal wheels, and I fixed upon the lights in her, removed from that place above. Through her face, I made myself such inward as as Glaucus was made by eating the herb which made him consort of the other gods in the sea.]

Dante sees the lights of heaven through the mediation of Beatrice, who sees them more directly; while his journey through Paradise will prepare him to see grace as Paul did, face to face,<sup>19</sup> at the outset of the poem he returns to the almost infantile state at which he had gone awry in his life—when, at Beatrice's death, he had failed to seek God's preeminent grace. In Canto 31 of *Purgatory*, his repentance had been effected as he gazed at Beatrice, gazing at the gryphon; there he saw the material amalgam of two beastly natures become transmuted into a figure of Christ through Beatrice's allegorizing vision. The recollection of Glaucus similarly reenacts the baptismal scene in Lethe: as Ovid narrates in his *Metamorphoses*, Glaucus was a fisherman who was transformed into a sea god. After hauling in a catch of fish, he laid them out on a certain plot of grass, that had never been touched by grazing animals; much to his surprise, the fish miraculously returned to life and flopped back into the sea. Amazed, Glaucus ate some of the grass that seemed responsible for their resuscitation and immediately began to change into a

<sup>19</sup> On the relationship between *Paradise* 1 and Pauline rapture, see Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*, 198.

sea creature. After flinging himself into the ocean, other sea creatures conducted him to Oceanus and Tethys, requesting that they “mihi quaecumque feram mortalia demant” [remove from me whatever mortal things I might bear].<sup>20</sup> They did so by means of a ritual incantation and a bath fed by a hundred rivers, after which he swooned and remembered no more until he awakened, a fully transformed sea God. Glaucus’s myth combines elements of both Dante’s own, prior conversion and Pauline rapture—Dante subsequently draws on the mortal purgation of Glaucus to wonder whether both body and soul or soul alone journeyed to the celestial realm (73-75). More importantly, however, the analogy recapitulates his conversion narrative without figuring it as a simple reenactment: the effect of this ongoing conversion implies a progressive transformation.

Glaucus’s story is uncharacteristic in Ovid’s corpus for actually changing the mentality of the transformed along with his body. While analyzing Daphne’s transformation into the laurel, Warren Ginsberg offers a more typical paradigm of Ovidian metamorphosis. He notes that, though Daphne’s body is radically altered, her silent trembling indicates a continuity between old and new form that her metamorphosis has failed to alter. The new becomes legible by the vestiges of the old it retains; thus “in Ovid, nothing is completely new. Something of the creature that has undergone the change survives its metamorphosis to upset all efforts to designate anything univocally” (36). Its new form is, in other words, an ironic alteration of the material surface that leaves the substrata of meaning and identity more or less untouched. For Ginsberg, this continuity between old and new forms is what allows Dante to baptize Ovid; Dante adapts the concept of metamorphosis, purging it of its nullifying irony, to articulate Christian concepts, either in the *contrappasso* justly punishing sinners or in the

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<sup>20</sup> All Latin translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

conversions being slowly wrought upon the denizens of Purgatory. Knowledge of the past is central to this adaptation: the punishment that unites all Hell is the deprivation of hope, the knowledge that, whatever transformation their bodies might undergo in the face of God's torture, their minds and wills are fundamentally set.

Though Ginsberg's analysis certainly describes much of the *Comedy* aptly, it is noteworthy that the two Ovidian examples Dante uses to begin *Paradiso*—Marsyas, which I will treat shortly, and Glaucus—require some qualification. In the case of Glaucus, Ovid explicitly states that his mind and will are changed along with his body. Certainly, he retains some memory of his prior history, as he recounts his story to Scylla in his attempt to woo her, but his transformation remains one of the most thoroughgoing in Ovid's text. His change of will occurs first, as soon as he eats the grass in fact: “vix bene conbiberant ignotos guttura sucos,/ cum subito trepidare intus praecordia sensi/ alteriusque rapi naturae pectus amore” [scarcely had my throat drunk the unknown liquids when I immediately feel my vitals tremble within and my chest was seized by love of another nature] (13.944-46). Certainly, the violent connotations of Ovidian metamorphosis are still present in this description, but Ovid depicts the old love of life on land being entirely destroyed and usurped by his new love of the water. Similarly, after he has been cleansed in the waters, he relates that “alium me corpore toto ac fueram nuper neque eundem mente recepi” [I was wholly other in body than I had recently been, and I did not recover with the same mind] (13.958-59). Glaucus's transformation is a total one altering mind, will and body, only a vestigial memory of his transformation remains afterward.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Or, in the medieval parlance used above, his intellect and will seem transformed while his memory remains. Dante excludes the faculty that Glaucus retains just prior to introducing him as a figure for his conversion.

Dante's use of the image becomes more complex in what it suggests about this remnant memory, however. Glaucus's story emerges in the context of his love for Scylla, who tries to elude him. Distraught, he turns to Circe for a love potion, only to succeed in making Circe love him, become jealous of Scylla, and turn her into a monster. Ironically, the erotic attachment that Glaucus conceives for Scylla after his transformation resembles the erotic attachment Dante conceived for Beatrice before his transformation; she was, in the twisting terms of the analogy, almost the Scylla that, as in the case of Ulysses, wrecked the little boat of his intellect. In Dante's prior life, he was the agent of this transformation, however, as he transforms the clearly monstrous corpse into a deceptively monstrous Siren. The inverse conversion of the analogy suggests one of two alternatives: first, it could cast doubt on the efficacy of Dante's conversion, indicating a certain weakness of his vision that still relies on the mediation of Beatrice to see the divine; second, it could imply that the transformation was indeed as complete as both Dante's and Ovid's rhetoric suggests, so complete, in fact, that the dangerous beauty of Scylla has been renovated along with it. That Beatrice continues to serve as guide recommends this latter alternative. Unlike Scylla, she does not flee Dante's pursuit—on the contrary, that pursuit is precisely what becomes the subject of the metamorphosis; and she is not the target of subsequent transformation, but rather its agent.

Dante explains this transformation in the subsequent stanza through an ineffability topos that, in the context of Glaucus's thoroughgoing transformation, more closely resembles the immemorability topos of the first few stanzas: “Trasumanar significar *per verba*/ non si poria; però l'essemplo basti/ a cui esperienza grazia serba” [one cannot signify transhumanizing *per verba*; nevertheless let the example suffice for those to



whom grace reserves the experience] (70-72). I have rendered here, perhaps, the easiest translation—which follows Durling and Martinez’s essential grammar—though the first and last lines admit four possible interpretations in total, all of which are pertinent. The first half can also be rendered “one cannot transhumanize signifying *per verba*,” the latter can take experience or grace as subject or object: “let the example suffice for those to whom experience preserves grace”. Dante deliberately situates both grammatically similar terms next to one another to allow for each possibility. In the first case, Glaucus’s apotheosis recommends “significar” as the main verb to the auxiliary verb “poria,” though the alternative more properly describes the poetic difficulty he still struggles with despite his own metamorphosis. Though his conversion altered his poetics from the earlier, fetishizing model he had applied to Beatrice, he cannot fundamentally alter the conditions of poetic utterance; foreshadowing his eventual resolution, he breaks out of the Italian into the Latin *per verba* to force a surface consciousness of his language. “Words” is ironically the referent, but he forces us to translate from a different linguistic system to make meaning. In the second half of the stanza, placing grace in the subject position indicates the divine provenance of Dante’s experience, but the alternative better describes the content of his Paradisiacal experience. Dante suggests that any of his attempts at exceeding signification will only be successful if his reader has also experienced grace in the world; the fossilized referents of his words cannot conjure that experience unless it can, paradoxically, refer to a transhuman experience in the mind of the reader. The deeply private experience of grace becomes a basis for communication. Dante has transformed his former, sinful experience of Beatrice into a vehicle for

transcendence, but he must ultimately moor the communicability of that transcendence in his faith in an audience.

If Glaucus still retains some vestige of his prior self despite Ovid's seeming insistence to the contrary, Dante's other Ovidian example emphatically does not. In the fifth stanza of Canto 1, Dante begins an invocation to Apollo that will culminate in a comparison between himself and Marsyas:

O buono Appollo, a l'ultimo lavoro  
fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso  
come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.

Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso  
assai mi fu, ma or con amendue  
m'è uopo intrar ne l'aringo rimaso:  
entra nel petto mio, e spira tue  
sì come quando Marsia traesti  
de la vagina de le membra sue.

[O good Apollo, for the final labor make me a vessel of your worth made such as you ask from those to whom you give the beloved laurel. Until this point one peak of Parnassus was enough for me, but it is necessary for me to enter into the remaining arena with both: enter my breast and breathe, as when you drew Marsyas from the sheath of his members.]

Giuseppe Mazzotta has argued that Dante gives voice to the dangerous presumption inherent in his poetic enterprise in these lines. Dante begins, relatively benignly, by conflating Apollo with the Christian God—his affinity with both poetry and the sun make

Apollo an apt, mediatory figure to invoke at the beginning of Paradise. Yet the subsequent stanza shades into a violent metaphor by characterizing the poem as an “aringo,” part of the Roman gladiatorial arena (193). This brief metaphor segues from the invocation to Apollo into the analogy between Dante and Marsyas, the flute-playing satyr who challenged Apollo to a musical contest, lost, and was flayed alive for his presumption. In his recounting of this myth, Ovid centers almost exclusively on describing the torture of Marsyas in gruesome detail; Ovid revels in relating how Apollo denudes Marsyas, how his “cruor undique manat,/ detectique patent nervi, trepidaeque sine ulla/ pelle micant venae; salientia viscera possis/ et perlucentes numerare in pectore fibras” [blood flows everywhere, uncovered sinew lies open, and trembling veins quiver without any skin; you could number the twitching viscera and the transparent fibers in the chest] (6.388-91). The brutality of the torture actually succeeds in making Marsyas renounce poetry altogether. Dante thus seems to be questioning the value and advisability of his enterprise at the outset, wondering if it places him in a contentious, rather than reverential, relationship to God.

Most commentators have focused on how Dante transforms Ovid’s utter destruction of Marsyas into a metaphor of rapture.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Marsyas, Dante first pays homage to Apollo, revering him as the poetic origin from whom he receives his own power; likewise, Dante tames the cruelty of Ovid, and typologically reimagines the story as a sort of conversion metaphor: he introduces a soul/body duality to the tale which transforms Apollo’s violence into a figure of bodily renunciation. Yet though Dante surely typologizes the story as he has others, such readings always feel like an uncomfortable accommodation of Ovid’s text to Dante’s. First, we should note that,

<sup>22</sup> For a reading and good critical summary of this episode, see Levenstein 411-12.

unlike Glaucus—whose conversion leaves some memory, if not his mind or body, intact—Marsyas is simply destroyed. Only his name remains, metamorphosed into a river of tears wept by his fellow satyrs and nymphs. Unlike Daphne—who is echoed here in Dante’s mention of the laurel—Marsyas retains nothing of his former self; he renounces poetry just before his body disintegrates, and his name is reapplied to a river that does not emerge from the substance of his body. Second, Ovid’s Marsyas seems deliberately to exclude the reference to spirit or soul that Dante’s commentators want to find in its revision. The tale of Marsyas presents Ovid at his most ironically nihilistic: Apollo’s cruelty is to reveal that there was no spirit behind Marsyas’s poetry, only viscera, which in the Latin refers to the innermost parts of a living creature. Apollo takes the normal bifurcation of interior and exterior—precisely the one that Ginsberg deploys in the Daphne episode—and denudes it, revealing that inside there is only more matter trembling at its exposure.

Marsyas’s body stands in for the poetic utterance’s claim to reference, its claim to signify something other than its skin of sound. Ovid’s Apollo ironically exposes the fraud inherent in poetic claims to truth—the poetic God unmakes what he should inspire. Apollo should be the soul of the poet, but as a material body within Ovid’s poem, he ironically is susceptible to Marsyas’s challenge; Marsyas exposes his fraudulent claims to divinity before Apollo returns the favor. What remains of Marsyas is the skein of a name that floats across the surface of the text, becoming appended to the river that his tragedy inspires. We can take this as a metaphor of the power of narrative to inspire cathartic pity in an audience, whose collaborative witness of tragedy is the substantial remnant carried over from the wreck—indeed, I want to argue that Dante alters Ovid’s procedure in

exactly this way. A memory remains, even if it is not Marsyas's memory. However, Ovid's own poetic fascination with the cruelty done to Marsyas seems to mock such a transformation-in-reception in the same moment it yearns for catharsis. Ovid reveals here an ironic attitude toward his own text that threatens to undo its capacity for reference, leaving the meaningless sonic metamorphoses of language the real subject of his poem.

Dante's description of Apollo's spiration into Marsyas recollects the overarching dictum of the *Metamorphoses* which, whenever Dante transforms such Ovidian scenes, is never far from his mind:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas  
corpora; di coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas)  
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi  
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen. (1.1-4)

[The mind compels to speak of forms changed into new bodies; Gods (since you changed them), breathe into my beginnings and guide this perpetual song from the origins of the world to my own time.]

Ovid's first line seems to simply announce the subject of his work—the mutability of bodies—but it also cleverly manages to implicate the linguistic vehicle of the *Metamorphoses* in that subject. *Formas* seems as though it should act as the indirect object of *dicere*, yet its case suggests that it is, in fact, its direct object. In addition to speaking *about* forms changed into new bodies, Ovid evokes the technical, grammatical sense of the term as well: he speaks forms changed into new bodies—a new *corpus*, which term also bears textual associations—freshly minted by their grammatical

coordination with one another. In classical grammatical manuals, *forma* is a term often used to describe the grammatical features of a word, particularly of nouns, as it is in English; relatedly, in the rhetorical tradition, it can describe the style of an oration, its level of elevation and frequency of ornate *figurae*.<sup>23</sup> The late antique manuals often use it in this sense, and we can see it used thusly with increasing frequency in the Middle Ages—Diomedis in his *Ars grammatica* speaks several times of the “forma declinationum nominum” [forms of declined nouns] such as the “nominatiui et uocatiui” [nominative and vocative] in his section on nouns. The usage of *forma* from late example stretches back to the more sparsely documented tradition extant in Ovid’s own time; within the first century AD, Aemilius Asper’s *Ars maior* and Probus’s *De nomine* both use the term in a similar sense. Probus, interestingly, also often uses the verb “mutare” to describe the changing of a noun to its appropriate declension. Given these grammatical resonances, Ovid’s first line already gestures toward the irony that will underlie all of his narrative: not only are the beings he narrates caught in an always unstable process of becoming, where identity only exists to register the changes wrought upon it, but the *perpetuum carmen* through which that narrative is articulated is equally unstable. Ovid begins his narrative by making us attend to the way its grammar attempts to restrain an ongoing chaos of sound that, ironically, mimetically reflects the chaos of Ovidian history where every being tends toward its own inevitable dissolution. He thus ensures that, like the meandering stories that populate the *Metamorphoses*, the order that his text imposes on the chaos of sound or visual characters will always be temporary and partial, always

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Quintillian 10.1.10 and 11.1.2; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV.VII.10. In the *Ad Herennium*, the term is also frequently used to describe the form mnemonics take, and it is the root of “conformatio,” the technique of personification.

attended by an uneasy sense of our own animus's attempt to make reference from its tenuously formed speech.

Beyond the grammatical significance of the line, Ovid's invocation of the "animus" as the motivating agent of his narrative subtly deploys an Epicurean materialism to criticize the almost Platonic form/body distinction later in the line.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on Epicurus's own distinction between the "rational" and "irrational," Lucretius famously used the terms *animus* and *anima* to describe the separate functions of the soul. *Animus* operated roughly as the understanding, and was primary in relation to *anima*, the means by which the rest of the body moved. Lucretius argued that both *animus* and *anima* had to be identifiable material forces, since they were capable of moving the body (*De rerum natura*, 3.161.67); mind and soul would be incapable of influencing matter if they were not themselves material. The *animus* resided in the chest while the *anima* was diffused throughout the remainder of the body. The two had to be separable, since, Lucretius argued, mind and body do not always share the same state: at times when the body is injured, the mind can be well as, in his analogy, the foot can feel pain while the head does not. Emotions like fear thus originated in the interior *animus* and subsequently extended through the *anima*, ultimately manifesting as a shiver in the body. The *animus* was conceived as deeply material in Lucretius's philosophy and that basic materialistic impulse undergirds much of Ovid's poetry. The instigating idea that infuses the diverse and often uncoordinated members of his poem is this nullifying materialism that his irony represents on a linguistic level. Whereas in Plato or even Aristotle—who, as we saw above, suggested that form never exists apart from matter, though he still strictly delineates between the two—form or *anima* was the essential, but immaterial thinking

<sup>24</sup> On Lucretius's influence in Book 1, see Wheeler 200-3.

part of a subject that informed his or her mutable matter, the curiously unaffiliated poetic soul<sup>25</sup> that motivates Ovid's work is material through and through. *Formas* is clearly meant to designate the remainder that persists despite the transformations Ovid's characters will undergo—a meaning that is deeply ironic, given the grammatical overtones discussed above—which most classical philosophy figured as the consistent soul that withstood the mutable changes of bodily matter; however for Ovid, it is the Lucretian *animus* that contemplates these metamorphoses from its seat within the material heart. The informing reason of the *animus* is already contaminated with materiality and so the capacity for corporeal change; Ovid mocks the capacity of form to lend continuity and consistency through such changes by using *animus* as the third term outside of this duality. For Dante—who read all such lines typologically, through the lens of scholastic thought on the soul—Ovid's implication would have felt even more dangerous, collapsing the dichotomy that undergirds Christian spiritual life.

When Ovid reaches his invocation to the gods, it already feels somewhat disingenuous, a feeling that reaches its fever pitch in the Marsyas episode. The action of the Gods—whom Ovid goes out of his way to describe as the agents of change—becomes little more than a series of declensions in an unstable grammar of being. The order that governs the *perpetuum carmen* of the material world is as unstable, arbitrary and temporary as that which governs language. Ovid again conflates text and world by asking the gods to inspire his text; the gods are the cause of change, which makes them properly the referents of the work, yet Ovid also beseeches them to “adspirare” the

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<sup>25</sup> Ovid seems to stage this almost as a philosophical inquiry by leaving out a personal possessive adjective “meus” and the direct object “me” surrounding *animus*, though they are implied. He suggests that the mutability of the world should prompt the same materialistic reflection in everyone that it has in himself; he does not specify the *animus* behind the text as his private one, but rather a generalizable or almost universal one.



beginnings of his text. The overtones of breath in this term—redeployed to great effect by Dante in his own invocation—again locate us in a Lucretian cosmos: the gods are imagined as the *animus* who are supposed to breathe *anima* into the *corpora* of his text. But Ovid only asks them to breathe into the beginnings of his text, foreshadowing its loose, free-associational narrative structure: the *Metamorphoses* is a series of re-beginnings that fail to begin anything in particular.<sup>26</sup> Narrative is always structured on beginnings and endings that construct the definable *corpora* of events in time; meaning can only inhere in the bodies that inhabit this space and time when such events delimit the scope of signification, as words only fully acquire meaning in the context of a period. But those events are essentially arbitrary since time exceeds them on both sides. The vastness of the historical project articulated here ensures its unintelligibility. Ironically, Ovid promises to produce a perfectly mimetic text that exactly reproduces the history of the world, but in doing so he exposes the world as fundamentally ahistorical, eventless. The metamorphoses that promise to stabilize his historical record inevitably resolve into free-associational occasions to begin anew in a chain of beginnings that never ultimately understands what it has begun. On the macroscopic, historical level, time gives the lie to events within time; on the microscopic level of passing moments, life, like language, loses the points of reference that anchor our experience, making time's passage intelligible. Ovid's gods ironically inspire the body of his text in their failure to inspire

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<sup>26</sup> In *The Book of the Incipit*, Vance Smith has made a similar argument about *Piers Plowman*, arguing that the work ruminates on the nature of the event by asking how the sequence of occurrences that lead up to it can be begun. If time is continuous, the beginnings and endings we assign to history are arbitrary; I would add that, just as history cannot be reliably segmented into significant events, neither can the event itself be internally parsed. Ovid's Introduction evokes both problems with beginnings and carries this problem into the fabric of his text.

it; they offer a history of time's failure to coalesce into a history as they repeatedly fail to offer an orienting, rationalizing force.

The gods' inevitable failure to offer a stable *anima* to the poem mirror their failure to create order in the world with whose beginnings Ovid begins. Before the world was made, Ovid describes the uniform, fluid chaos of original nature:

Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum  
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,  
quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles  
nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem  
non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum. (1.5-9)

[Before the sea and earth and the sky that covers all/ there was one face of nature throughout the whole world,/ which they called chaos: a rough, confused mass,/ nothing if not an inert weight piled in the same place,/ the discordant seeds of things not well joined.]

Chaos is the essential condition behind the world that precedes anything; notably, the chaos is figured as both visual and sonic. “Quem dixere chaos” refers to a plural subject that the text does not present, making it seem as though the discordant seeds themselves speak their own collective name. Most translators supply a historical subject for *dixere* —“our ancestors called chaos”—and while this makes some sense, it makes the perfect tense of *dixere* sit in an uncomfortable relationship to the imperfect *erat* of the line before. The progression of tenses seems to actually locate the naming of chaos at a point in time prior to the chaos itself, as though the visual manifestation was birthed from a cacophony spoken by invisible voices; the etymological connection of *rudis* to the verb

*rudo* [to roar] in the next line heightens this suggestion. The single, almost uniform face of chaos—which coalesces into an identifiable unity by virtue of the discordance of its parts—mirrors the apprehension of the sort of white noise preceding the world into the unified, significant term chaos. But the scene Ovid poses defies precisely that possibility of transforming sound into referent, mass into face—the discordant seeds of things are unjoined, lacking an ontological grammar to set them in relation to one another. The real chaos that precedes Ovid’s sensible, historical chaos is unimaginable; insofar as its discordant bits move in a coherent temporal progression, they possess a historical organization and so are not primal chaos. Ovid dramatizes our failure to reconstitute that originary sense of chaos, or rather the impossibility of its reconstitution by means of representation; simultaneously, he suggests that the state of chaos offered a more unified state of being than the subsequent order imposed on it. In that state alone, everything was what it seemed to be, because it was nothing in particular—it is the only state of being when form and body are actually unified for Ovid. The pure, atemporality of chaos is a more honest state of being because it lacks being; matter is just the scarcely coherent vehicle for manifesting the constant change that is the precondition of being.

An ironically unnamed god appears to organize the chaos, put form to the changing materiality of the world, but in the attempt to order it he only participates in the chaos, since he must alter and change its form. The god appears arbitrarily from the confused mass, without any explanation of his provenance: “Hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit” [A god better divided this dispute within nature] (1.21). Again, Ovid uses a verbal metaphor to describe the *litem* in nature, making the god appear almost legalistic in his separation. However, though this unnamed demiurge imposes order on the world,

his random appearance seems more to participate in the disorder; the order he imposes is not a prior state of being that chaos degrades, but is rather a transformation of the chaos. The god is the Lucretian *animus* that struggles to inspire the world, but is subject to the same exigencies of materiality, spatiality and temporality as anything else that exists within it. The only difference in the state of the world after his coming is that, whereas in the original state of chaos, there was only a minimal, inchoate form of matter to register the change being wrought upon it by time, the order imposed by the god constructs more complex and nominally stable beings for time to degrade. The God comprises organisms out of the primal matter, restricts relationships between material elements and so creates different scales of temporal being; however each of those scales is only capable of reproducing the chaotic unmeaning of the scales preceding it. The relation established by this grammatical differentiation only succeeds in making its discrete beings representations of chaos; where order should offer them identity, identity itself only records a past that is always threatening to unravel. Identity is a vestigial memory that nostalgically records a prior state in the flux that will never return again; after the god imposes order, makes this memory possible, things no longer are what they seem because they seem capable of resisting the constant metamorphosis of time. Their being no longer seems located in the pure presence prior to the elemental matters that first manifest a basic temporal destiny, but rather in their dogged continuance of the past. The long-lived—but not immortal, as their emergence from chaos clearly shows—gods are the worst offenders in this regard, for the initial order imposed by the god did not remain, immutable—the bulk of Ovid’s text demonstrates instances in which that order is subverted, most often at the instigation of the gods themselves. Ovid subversively

transforms the very attempt to impose order into a participation in chaos, which is why his gods always seem so contaminated by pettiness. Glaucus's tale contaminates godhood by suggesting that it is attainable by arbitrarily ingesting grass, and that the transformation destroys identity even as it constitutes it. Marsyas's tale contaminates it more intensely by showing—as Ovid has shown from the beginning of his text—that the gods operate within the same ontological stratum as every other being, and are subject to the same denial of chaos that must ultimately overwhelm them. They are the *animus* through which the chaos of the world achieves a semblance of reference, but that animus—as Lucretius saw—was itself fundamentally material as well, and so could not offer a stable, transcendent order to other matter.

Seen through this matrix of the divine, Apollo's flaying of Marsyas stands in as a metaphor for the entire idea behind the *Metamorphoses*. It shows the god whom Ovid, in his invocation, ironically beseeched to inspire his poem with purpose and even basic reference denuding the very animus the poet sought; it shows the god who should impose order and being on the world reducing it to the essential flesh of Marsyas's quivering, disordered entrails. Apollo brutally demonstrates that within the poet there is only viscera, and that we can only understand the *anima* moving through poetry as the body's quivering when the god reveals its progressively material strata, when the god dissociates the organs comprising its temporal organism and so sends them quivering into prior temporal scales. Paradoxically, this strange animus is the impulse behind Ovid's poem: the contamination of Apollo and his sadistically forensic desecration of Marsyas both reveal a devastating materialism that undermines Ovid's poetic activity even as it animates it. The *corpora* of Ovid's poem quivers just as Marsyas's exposed entrails, but

it quivers most not at the instability of existence it must relate, but the instability of the poem as a vehicle of that truism. Ovid's *perpetuum carmen* is not just a song about endless change, but is itself endless change; the thoroughgoing ironic materialism that inspires the poem, giving its interpretive gestalt a tenuous meaning and purpose, doubles back upon itself at the deepest level of the text. It begins to unweave the most basic, grammatical presuppositions of narrative and poetry, leaving words that, in their aggregate, try to signify an inert materialism inert themselves. They threaten to become only their near-present state of being, random sounds devoid of the linguistic memory that would allow them to signify. Like the hubristic Marsyas, who challenges the fount of poetry, Ovid challenges his medium and his own identity as a poet, suggesting that poetry—like everything else—can only finally succeed in representing its own denial of the fluid temporality from which it emerges.

In this Ovidian context, Marsyas seems an odd emblem of Dante's own poetic transformation; he seems, rather, to entail the sort of irony that, in Ginsberg's reading, Dante's text silences. The rehabilitation many argue toward cannot fully silence that irony—as Mazzotta suggests, the analogy gestures toward Dante's ongoing, sometimes ambivalent negotiation of poetry and theology. More specifically, the analogy expresses his very Ovidian fear that poetry about the divine can only succeed in contaminating it with an Epicurean materialism. The purpose behind the entire *Comedy* has always been to spatialize and temporalize deity within narrative, not to rely on any of the simplistic bifurcations of matter and spirit that Ovid disintegrates and yet not to desecrate the divine. The analogy seems also an odd figure for divine justice since, leaving aside Apollo's cruelty, the potentially forensic metaphor of flaying results in a complete

dissolution of its object; Dante seems to be asking for a more radical conversion than either of the others we have investigated from in *Purgatorio* and book 1 of *Paradiso*, a conversion in which God's action upon him would leave nothing, neither soul nor body. However, he averts this conclusion in two ways. First, as I suggested above, he rehabilitates Ovidian irony by recuperating Ovid's caustic dismissal of audience reception. In Ovid, the nymphs and satyrs watching Marsyas's destruction can only record his utter dissolution in their tears; the assignation of his name itself to those tears gestures toward Marsyas's identity in the narrative as loss unmoored from a physical form. Yet this subterranean river imagery, situated as it is in Dante's text between two rivers of forgetfulness—Lethe, and the streams that bathe Glaucus not 50 lines afterward—takes on a wholly different resonance. It is, in fact, a deftly concealed immemorability topos. Marsyas's loss of his own identity is figured as Dante's conversion, which entails a very particular loss of memory and identity. His hubristic attempt to narrate and spatialize the divine denudes him of the fetishistic materialism through which he had perceived his experience before; from this perspective, he can truly experience Beatrice's grace which, like Ovid's irony, forces him into the present moment of time's passage where perception can scarcely cohere into memory, language into its referent. But whereas, for Ovid, such an experience could only inspire a nihilistic perception of tragedy in those who witnessed it—a river of tears after whose narration we simply move to the next story in Ovid's free-associational text—in Dante, the reader experiences that loss as a preparation for grace, the tears of Beatrice's attendants that loosed Dante's first penitential tears and so prepare him for Lethe. The amnesia inspired by Lethe actually serves to reintegrate the poet's identity in the present that transcends memory. It does

this, as I have remarked above, by supplanting Ovid's ironic mode of perception with an aesthetic one that finds the ultimate referent of this potentially nihilistic play of signs in the experience of beauty and love. The act of writing his text for a Christian audience becomes not an act of historical autobiography, but a way for Dante to reconstitute his life under the rubric of aesthetics. He can only do this within the liberating confines of literature; when he makes public his disintegrative repentance in the act of confession, his audience, in a sense, produces the river in which he can reconstitute himself. Their witness of the destruction of his past enables the alternate mode of perception through which Dante understands God and Paradise.

Second, Dante averts Ovidian irony by suggesting that, in fact, there was an unrecognized remainder left over from Marsyas's destruction: in fact, the very surface consciousness toward which Ovid's violence orients us. Throughout his invocation, Dante makes use of a container metaphor. It appears first when he asks Apollo to transform him into a vessel for the God's power, the type to which he awards the laurel. He does it again in the lines following the Marsyas reference:

O divina virtù, se mi ti presti  
tanto che l'ombra del beato regno  
segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,  
vedra'mi al piè del tuo diletto legno  
venire e coronarmi de le foglie  
che la materia e tu mi farai degno. (1.22-26)

[O divine power, if you would lend me so much of yourself that I might manifest the shade of the blissful realm marked out in my head, you will



see me come to the foot of your beloved tree and crown myself with the  
leaves of which the matter and you will make me worthy.]

In this latter metaphor, Dante makes his own memory a vessel filled with the images of Paradise; again, he notes that God must lend him divine power if those memories are to find adequate expression. Both of these container metaphors find their rationale in the Marsyas myth; as he did in Hell, Dante's virtuoso imagination outdoes even the cruelty of Ovid, and in doing so, paradoxically recuperates Ovid's nullifying irony. He indicates that Marsyas did not, in fact, fully disintegrate; rather, the sheath of his skin remained, the container that Apollo had stripped away to denude his quivering innards. Apollo, he suggests, uses this skin as an instrument, like some perverse bagpipe: "entra nel petto mio, e spira tue." In Ovid, this would have been Apollo's consummate act of desecration—he would have been punishing, finally, Marsyas's presumption by transforming him into an instrument of the God's own music, viciously parodying Marsyas's revelation of the God's physicality. As I noted above, Marsyas's challenge underscored the physicality of Apollo and the fact that, as a delimited body himself, he could not truly inform anyone; poetry belonged to the poet, he suggested, and Apollo was simply another poet. The search for the abstract, informing inspiration of poets dwindled into obscurity. Apollo, recognizing the implication, would have been reasserting his status as the preeminent poet—albeit not the informing principle of poetics—by violently performing the implication of Marsyas's challenge on his own body.

Dante carries Ovid's image to its furthest possible extent by reimagining the earlier formulation of his poetic activity he had offered to Bonagiunta in Purgatory: "I mi son un che, quando/ amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo/ ch'e ditta dentro vo

significando” [I am one who, when love breathes in me, takes note, and in that mode which is spoken within, I go signifying] (24.52-54). In his *Dante’s Aesthetics of Being*, Ginsberg has described Dante’s poetic self-definition as incarnational. Whereas, in the *Vita Nova*, Dante wears the brutal signs of his love for Beatrice on his flesh, here “Dante is not a sign, but an incarnation of love” (90). He does not simply record love’s action on the medium of his body, but rather both records and perpetuates it. Though he acts as a mediator, stopping short of dissolving the “I” in the “amor” and rather maintaining a separate identity for himself, his being is wholly defined by the fidelity of its transliteration of Love’s breath. His own intellect is subordinated to the informing action of love, inverting the traditional medieval dynamic between the two concepts. Drawing on Mazzotta’s analysis of these lines, he notes the Trinitarian resonance of “spira,” a term that “takes for its model the procession of love in the godhead, which is called spiration and which has as its analogue in corporeal beings the ‘movement and urging of the will of the lover towards the beloved’” (89). Amor thus supplies Dante with the most essential function of the soul—basic mobility, a reason to will—which his poetry attempts to reflect, notably, in its act of signifying rather than the simple artifacts of his representations. Amor’s breath in these lines is, of course, doubly metaphorical—Dante constructs an analogy between his own poetic production and the already analogical figure of the Trinity’s members breathing. Its metaphorical quality shields the divine from the contamination of materiality that its association with Dante might engender even as it allegorically infuses him.

This contamination was precisely the point of Marsyas’s challenge and Apollo’s response; and whereas, in his earlier formulation of his poetic activity, Dante located

inspiration in a safely abstract, allegorical figure of God, in the analogy between himself and Marsyas, he threatens a similar contamination. Yet he answers that threat—and with it the threat of Ovidian irony more generally—by means of the Christian concept of incarnation. His transformation here is even more complete than that of *Purgatorio* 24: whereas in his earlier self-definition, he imagined himself signifying “a quel modo” in which Love spoke, here he asks Apollo to physically enter his chest and signify through him. Dante’s skin becomes the spatial continuum within which the divine takes its form; in a sense, he ceases to be a poet at all, since the slight space of his ingenuity—the “a quel modo”—has been hollowed out from his chest along with all the other viscera to make room for the god within and to allow the instrument of his skin to play that god’s music with more fidelity. In Ovid’s rendition, Apollo viciously punished the presumption of Marsyas and its implication that the two existed in the same ontological stratum; however in Dante, God deliberately seeks to instantiate Himself in a material body, and Dante’s last trace of individual will is to ask to be possessed by Him. The hubris of the god and that of the poet are resolved in this mutual will to become one another that reflects, as nearly as possible, Christ’s incarnation. Apollo’s punishment is ultimately transfigured into the just punishment of Dante’s sins on the cusp of Paradise that made him regret his earlier poetic fetishization of Beatrice; however that dissolution prepares him for the saving action of grace, the spiration of God that overtakes Dante’s broken will and in doing so, repairs it. Thus when Dante crowns himself with Apollo’s laurel, Marsyas’s presumption is contained by the God’s residence within him; God honors his own incarnation (and perhaps Dante’s brilliant structure of poetic self-renunciation) through the instrument of Dante’s skin.

The grace that Dante finds, first in Beatrice's beauty, but subsequently abounding—as grace does—everywhere is the typological recuperation of Ovid's irony. Ovid's nullifying materialism is transformed into Dante's aesthetics of experience; the loss of identity through Apollo's denuding of Marsyas's corporeality is refigured as Dante's immemorability topos that actually locates meaning at the surface of experience. Ovidian irony threatened to undo linguistic reference by making the material world nothing more than a series of signs, as shiftless and changing as the sonic stream of signifiers that articulated them. Dante's God allows for such an apprehension of language, but he forces us to recognize the beauty within it that signals a deeper ontology than that which Ovid would undercut. When Dante equates his poetic activity to that of a musical instrument, he already indicates that we should apprehend it, in some measure, under the rubric of aesthetics. But that aesthetic perception, at the surface, actually offers a deeper sense of being than the reference Ovid forecloses by situating us within the sinuous duration in which those sounds are articulated; such aesthetic perception is proximal to God's divine presence and redeems the crass, historiographical procedures with which we normally perceive the world. That duration is a condition even of irony; Dante reveals the meaning behind Ovidian irony in its attempt not to mean anything, and he instead locates his experience of God where a triumphant Ovid thought—almost two thousand years before Nietzsche—to announce His death. This linguistic presence of immemorability does indeed denude us of the sinful accretions of our history where we thought to locate meaning, but it does so only to offer us a deeper and more secure sense of being and presence. Spatiotemporal experience, far from defying deity, is the inescapable ground through which we constantly experience Him.

### CHAPTER III

#### CHAUCER'S *HOUSE OF FAME* AND THE POETICS OF TEMPORALITY

Dante's afterlife imagines an eschatological space in which historical time is collected without being destroyed; one of the oddest implications of his narration of the afterlife is this disjunction of its own time with lived, historical temporality. In historical time, we understand time's passage through the death of things: organisms on a certain scale of temporal being coalesce, act for a while, then dissolve. Within their dissolution, we are made privy to time's full movement. Georges Bataille aligns this moment with a sacred experience of temporal continuity; describing the collective witness of ritual killings, he argues that

The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a continuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. (84)

As a temporal organism becomes extinct, the continuity of time reveals itself with a poignancy that mundane experience denies us; the organism dissolves into its fundamental parts, ceases to express the integration that manifested its being on its own and the spectators' scale of historical being. The threat of analogy—the revelation of mortality and mutability—renders every spectator simultaneously aware of the unique character of every moment of their continued being and of the durability of time itself,

which seems to roll on whether or not any of the subject positions within it continue to exist.

Dante's afterlife—though its narrativity makes it indestructibly temporal—lacks death; the bodies that populate it, in fact, are the consequences of deaths in the historical world.<sup>1</sup> Death precedes the appearance of every human figure within the afterlife, but no figure is subject to death any longer. The diverse forms of torture that afflict the denizens of Hell underscores this fact: in most cases, the physical acts to which they are subjected would kill a person, but the shades of Hell simply persist in a mangled state, always destined to be subject to the same sort of torture over and over. Dante's afterlife is the end of time, despite the fact that historical time proceeds outside it and narrative time proceeds within it: it collects the totality of history—everything whose dissolution revealed the continuity of historical time—and places them within a single space and time; all beings persist at once in the clear vision of God's judgment. The network of transversal associations through which objects and subjects bring one another into being is imagined, not just in a single moment, but across the entire swath of history; in the afterlife, they inhabit the same essential space: even though they may not see one another, Dante's passage from Hell to Paradise underscores their simultaneity.

Theologically, Dante's project demands this eschatological orientation: a God who does not reign over the entirety of the creation, past and present, isn't much of a God for Dante. But it presents structural problems in Dante's temporal mechanics that he

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<sup>1</sup> Dante does make one exception to this rule on Circle 9 of Hell: those who betray their guests are sent to Hell before they physically die, while a demon is sent back to Earth to occupy their bodies. The same sort of idea as I am advocating here applies, however; Dante figures such a monstrous betrayal as a form of death, an unforgivable sin that determines, finally, the moral content of one's life. It is for this reason that the medieval world called such sins "mortal" sins—in committing them, one had already died, since forgiveness from such a sin was impossible.

never fully resolves: how can beings manifest a narrative temporality if they are not, in some sense, becoming, even dying? If they are becoming—if they change states of being relative to one another—how can the judgement of God be final? If they are not becoming within a time, how can divine presence remain novel, non-coincident with itself? If eschatology collects all the detritus of history into the single, present moment of God, how can Dante install time—and so history—within that presence? The conceit of any eschatology is that temporal moments that seem to pass away do not really pass away: though the passage of history obscures the fact, all such moments for all objects within the world are being collected by God, who will pass judgment on them all in the fullness of time. That fullness of time should, in theory, be the utter end of historical time—just as time did not precede the Creation, time cannot succeed the Judgement; the Judgement is the moment in which all things are once again made present—for a flash—judged, and categorized. Though Christian theology didn't always recognize the implications of the Judgement, temporal becoming should not be able to occur following such a moment: the blessed would not dance about for all eternity, nor would the damned wail and moan. If they all simultaneously inhabit a presence that collects all history, that presence could not admit movement—to do so would be to reinstate historical time. In reality, as we have seen elsewhere, such a perfectly present moment could not really admit identity either, since identity is a historical institution; likewise, the time marked out by the relative movement of discrete, identifiable bodies relative to one another in time would be impossible. The mystery of the Judgement is that it would render the moral bases of human judgement unintelligible.

In a sense, this summarizes Dante's critique of temporal theology: a present moment like that assumed by eschatology would render God sterile; without historical continuity, presence is absence; without death, it is stagnant. Yet in maintaining the judgement motif, Dante's project runs up against many of the temporal and imaginative problems that theologians had resolved by simply dispensing with time at the final moment. Dante's solution to these quandaries is to make his afterlife a series of repeating loops—in Hell as in Paradise, people have been judged and their state has been fixed, but that judgement is manifested as an inescapable narrative repetition of reward or condemnation that they are doomed to replay over and over without end. Only in Purgatory does an authentic temporality still inhere: those who populate Purgatory are still capable of authentic change (though in another sense, they are doomed to that change, it is a foregone conclusion); they are capable of conversion, the death to the old man and the birth of the new one. But Purgatory itself is doomed to end in the fullness of the fullness of time: at the Judgement, some people will be assigned to Purgatory, but after however many thousands of years they take to wander up its terraces, Purgatory will be a vacant space and all will be caught in the repeating cycles of Paradise or Hell. But history still inheres in these spaces: though Dante tries to ignore it, these repetitions are still numerable and the 107th narrative round is, in some vaguely definable way, different from the 107,000,000th. The differences between the historical world and the afterlife thus begin to break down and trouble the conceptualization of Dante's afterlife as a present receptacle for all of history. The eschatological orientation of his space is, in many ways, inimical to his goal of describing the transcendence that persists throughout history.



In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer lodges a further complaint about Dante's eschatology, even more damning than those I have presented above: it does not really gather all of history into the present moment. It takes only a particular scale of temporal organization—the scale of human perception—and reimages the ways it collects a fluid duration into discrete events. In particular, Dante's shades reimage the period of an entire life within a single body; it becomes complicit with history's procedures of event making by so encapsulating its shades. Dante's afterlife purports to record all time in its reproduction of singular bodies that are morally culpable for the entire period of time in which they were unified as organisms; but in many ways, this fundamental gesture belies the sort of sacred presence that all historical beings are supposed to find within the passage of time. It belies the radical allegorization of grace that Dante struggles toward throughout the poem by prioritizing historical organization above presence, and by prioritizing human beings above all other objects. Grace is a transcendence implicit in every moment of historical passage, yet the shades in Paradise arrive there as a result of some more or less arbitrary period of time in which they made more or less arbitrary choices. Dante's text seems almost pulled in two: in one sense, it retains a conventional medieval morality that placed a burdensome significance on certain behaviors willed by human beings on their scale of temporal organization; in another sense, it introduces a morality of grace that would absolutely upend such conventional moralities. If grace can be recuperated out of any desire, no particular behavior is sinful—virtue consists only in becoming aware of the sinuous temporality proximal to presence that an object manifests, and in remaining detached from a fetishism of the object that would render it significant in itself. The transmutation of Beatrice's sexuality is the cardinal instance of Dante's new

virtue. But the very logic of grace that Dante champions seems ill-suited to the sort of historical summations entailed by his shades: if grace renders every moment poignant and every particle within the creation moving through time likewise poignant, then encapsulating spans of time within shade bodies and condemning them to a repetitious, historical judgement would seem to forestall the revolutionary consequences of what Dante envisions.

While the *House of Fame* obviously does not attain the level of genius and intricacy of Dante's *Comedy*, I would argue that it does create a more convincing and fully figured eschatological space; in fact, the ways that it extends the eschatological logic implied by Dante's afterlife and the theological tradition are what ultimately render it an inferior poem. It squares Dante's circle: it reconciles the temporal vision Dante advocates to his eschatological structures by modifying the very idea of eschatology. Granted, it does so sometimes at the expense of coherence; however, the *House of Fame* is absolutely uncompromising—in a way that Chaucer never reduplicates in his career—in its commitment to a single idea: recreating a perfectly present space wherein all of history is collected. By imagining the afterlife, not as the afterlife of bodies, but as the afterlife of sound, Chaucer revises Dante's conception in two primary ways: first, the images that appear in his afterlife do not encapsulate the event of an entire life, but only the event of a particular utterance. Over the course of the poem, the interval of that event becomes progressively smaller until Chaucer imagines every moment of every act that ever produced a sound as a discrete body within the House; in this way, it becomes truly eschatological, reimagining every instant of history as an indestructible, integrated body. Second, Chaucer extends this replication into the afterlife of sounds not only to human-

produced sounds, but to all sounds produced by all bodies. The already infinite number of bodies generated by his omission of interval from the poem is subjected to a further infinity in this move: not only organisms are replicated in the afterlife, but presumably every component of every organism that ever made a sound is also replicated. Every gurgle ever made within an organic cell is replicated separately from the body it inhabits, which must coexist separately with the component parts that comprise it. Bodies are desubordinated from themselves both vertically and horizontally, within their essential structure that exists at any given moment of time and across the infinite succession of temporal moments they all, collectively, inhabit.

Within this space Chaucer composes, history is an illusion perpetrated by the fickle Lady Fame. The mechanics of his afterlife ensures that no moment that has ever existed will pass away; it presents an entire after-image of the creation, but one in which the past does not pass away or change. But Chaucer parodically places Fame in the judgement seat Dante had built for God. Fame defines what will be remembered and represented in a space that ensures her superfluity—the eschatological domain that surrounds her nullifies her function even as it is articulated. Repetition of an utterance in the historical world is unnecessary if it is already preserved in the afterlife of language; what is more, its repetition in the historical world belies what it really is in all its phenomenal particularity—whoever repeats it ultimately fails to fully understand the phenomenon she has attempted to replicate. Only Chaucer’s afterlife which reimages each moment of the articulation of the sound, its full presence, can authentically represent the linguistic moment. Other authors, in paying homage to the famous utterance, actually lose their own moment, surrendering it to a time that has already past and so

chaining the present to the non-being of historical absence; they defer to arbitrarily selected moments in the history of speech, and so surrender their own capacity to generate something authentically new. Fame rules over this charnel-house of history, precariously—we can even say, impossibly—erected within Chaucer’s perfectly present afterlife. Yet, by the terms of that domain, neither she nor her House cannot exist within it since she is not a historical speaker but an allegorical invention. History—that depends on events arbitrarily cut from the totality of temporal duration—is a seemingly monolithic institution that is utterly inexplicable.

It is only through the hubris of human speech that present duration is surrendered to history. While Chaucer extends his afterlife to incorporate all sounds made by all objects, the disintegration of speech into duration possesses a special urgency in his project. For Chaucer, speech divorces us from an experience of duration in two ways: first, it surrenders the presence of sound to historical meaning—it symbolically refers to something other than what it is. The arbitrariness of signification is the precursor to Lady Fame’s arbitrary judgement. Second, in its attempt to mean, speech possesses an inherent egotism—it always asserts the memorability of itself and its listener. Essentially, all speech is rhetorical, and in pronouncing an argument, whatever it is, it proclaims that it should be remembered and reduplicated in others. All speech yearns for the replicative processes of fame, even speech that is explicitly self-effacing or satiric. Chaucer parodies this egotism by making every speech act an image of its speaker rather than its referent; he violently relocates symbolic speech back onto the body, shearing it of its symbolic dimension. Speech, in Chaucer’s afterlife, is what it is: a series of sounds produced by a human mouth. These speech bodies sue at the ephemeral and unstable feet for

remembrance, but they are pulled in another direction as well, toward the House of Tidings that Chaucer announces at the end of the poem. Tidings, for Chaucer, are speech acts perceived in their temporal dimension: Chaucer subjects language to a double deprivation, first excising its capacity to refer to anything else, then subsequently disarticulating its sounds across time as he has done to all other sounds.

In doing so, he stages a strange and unique encounter in his text where he meets himself and we meet ourselves. Chaucer's egotistical, authorial privilege—which is consummately egotistical, here, because he has hitherto exempted only his own poem from the conditions of his afterlife—is finally absorbed into the machinery of the poem. The reader, too, is absorbed into it: all of the sounds she made while reading the poem—whether she overtly read the poem aloud or subvocalized it—are replicated in the final heap. Ultimately, this is the way that Chaucer seeks to position readers in relation to his poem. Critics of the *House of Fame* frequently turn to reader response theories—whether in their modern or medieval variants—to explain Chaucer's seeming incoherence and his suspension of reference. Chaucer, so the theory goes, fragments language and narrative to restore interpretive responsibility to the reader of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> He gives us all the tools of interpretation—analogue, commentaries, etc.—but so configures his narrative matters that any interpretative framework will sit uncomfortably atop them, never finalizing itself. He performs the way in which present texts coalesce out of literary traditions by making his text somewhat defunct, or unable to coordinate the variety of

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of this trend, see especially Laurel Amtower, "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's House of Fame"; Katherine H. Terrell, "Reallocation of Hermeneutic Authority in Chaucer's 'House of Fame'"; Lara Ruffolo, "Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's 'House of Fame': Destruction and Definition through Proliferation"; Lisa Kiser, "Eschatological Poetics in Chaucer's House of Fame". Such studies often cite Sheila Delany's seminal study, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. In Delany's account of the poem's philosophical skepticism, we can see a medieval version of response theory in the injunction to suspend belief.

traditions it invokes; in doing so, he allows us to see our own susceptibility to those traditions and so mobilize our own interpretive wills, which are no longer solely reliant on the will of the author.<sup>3</sup> I maintain that these response theories, while often helpful in Chaucer, sit uncomfortably within the *House of Fame*. He certainly comments on tradition in the way these authors describe, but this critique is far from being the bottom of the rabbit hole he has dug for us. They entail a difficulty that cuts across all such response theories: the author's attempt to free us from authority constitutes another authoritative meaning she attempts to inflict upon us. Insofar as we can contract such an idea into an argument, it has failed in its ultimate, radical aim. We become bound to the ideology of resisting ideology; representation necessarily entails this aggressive posture toward our listeners. But in the final heap he imagines, Chaucer largely escapes this condition of narrative: the narrative itself breaks down as it furiously attempts to re-image the fullness of our own experience while reading it and we—along with Chaucer—are left at the cusp of a present perception of our experience as we imagine the infinitely divisible sounds we make while imagining within the perfectly present space he has constructed.

### *Representing the Pre-representational*

It has often been remarked upon that Chaucer begins the *House of Fame* by undermining the possibility of its interpretation. As Sheila Delaney argues in her seminal study of the poem, the Proem of Book 1 contains wealth of “contradictory information about dreams” which renders that information largely inapplicable (41). It presents numerous dream categories familiar to the Middle Ages, each of which necessitate a

<sup>3</sup> On the poem's relation to its antecedent traditions, see Kean 3.

different attitude toward the text of the dream. Chaucer's dream might be a prophetic "revelacion," a literary or allegorical "avision," or a meaningless "fantome" (7-11).<sup>4</sup> Each of these categories entails a radically different interpretive procedure, but one never knows which to apply to any given dream. These various dream categories stammer on top of one another, in the sense of the term described by Roland Barthes. Barthes notes that, while we very often attempt to revoke an utterance, to erase it from the mind of a listener, we can never actually reverse the fact that we have spoken it. These attempts at erasure are, ironically enough, only additive: "What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it: to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue" (76). We trust the minds of listeners to reconstitute our final meaning from this irrevocable string of words by subordinating and discarding those which we indicate they should. In doing so, we elide the full duration recorded in our memories by surrendering the temporality of its sounds to a single, instantaneous meaning that encapsulates a particular strand of utterances.

Chaucer, however, refuses to give us the cues that would allow us to tame his discourse, allowing it to stammer over itself unchecked by a clear aim. His poem is a thought experiment, wondering what language and narrative would do if its intent were to recuperate the fullness of temporal duration. Spatiotemporal narrative and duration ordinarily resist one another—an intent, or in Chaucerian terms, a *sentence*, is always a summary that compresses and elides a succession of sounds into a single meaning; and similarly, duration ordinarily resists representational narrative in its attempt to present an authentic, and so unintelligible, temporality. The task of the First Book of the *House* is to leave us at the abyss between the two. In his Temple of Glass, Chaucer provides an

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<sup>4</sup> All citations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

image of the procedure of representation, considered in its totality. He attempts to illustrate the manifold elisions that narrative representation effects upon time by drawing attention to the proliferating detail he must leave unsaid in his exhaustive descriptions. By demonstrating the various inadequacies of his text, he gestures toward the deficiency of narrative itself: it always fails to fully reconstitute precisely what it sets out to describe. Though it models itself upon time, it is fundamentally incapable of reproducing it; and, worse, in that incapacity it inflicts upon us a more general incapacity to conceptualize duration. By forcing his text to stammer, and then imagining that stammering in narrative form, Chaucer is anticipating the design of *Fame's* larger domain, where every speech act is preserved indestructibly. *Fame*, he suggests is the faculty of judging the quality of one utterance over another—it allows us to subordinate and organize the ongoing, stammering duration of language—but that faculty resists the grain of his poem, even at its inception.

Chaucer certainly does not prefer any one interpretive avenue offered by the Proem over the others; he is only willing to say that “oure flessh ne hath no myght/ To understonde hyt aright,/ For hyt is warned to darkly—/ but what the cause is, noht wot I” (49-52). Chaucer admits here what no poem should—that it is actually uninterpretable, that the author-dreamer himself does not know what it means, why he should record it, or why we should read about it. But again, read in terms of the poem’s larger design, his admission takes on a different character than we might expect. Significantly, it is our flesh that lacks the capacity to understand the dream—mind never seems to enter into the interpretive equation. The interpretive possibilities he has established will be mediated only by flesh. In the *House of Fame*, mind is always body,



and body is a product of discourse; we cannot reduce the text into any single interpretive system, since to do so requires more speech. Every act of language, however, is transformed into a fleshly body that cannot understand itself, since understanding is effected only through further acts of language, which become bodies, which produce language, and so on. In attempting to fill in the lacunae they always leave unsaid, the bodies in Fame's House fragment themselves further. Meaning is "warned to darkly," but its warning entails a contradiction—as in Modern English, "warne" suggests both an intimation and a refusal.<sup>5</sup> Chaucer implicates, in his poem, every speech act about the poem, every attempt to discern its "cause," which in Middle English is both the cause of an effect and the anticipated object of an action, a motivating aim or end, simultaneously preceding and succeeding action.

Chaucer's dream categories do not frustrate interpretive discourse, but prolong it indefinitely, ensuring that it will continue without really accomplishing anything. All that Chaucer is willing to hope is that "God turne us every drem to goode!" The line occurs twice in the poem, first in the opening line of the poem, and second at line 58, with the substitution of the "holy roode" for God, after he has enumerated the various dream categories. The line thus frames the irreducible interpretive polarities he establishes in describing dreams. It is especially remarkable for its grammatical indeterminacy. At first glance it seems the dream is the object of "turne," in which case Chaucer asks God to turn every dream to good purposes, or into "goodness" itself. The trouble is what we

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<sup>5</sup> In its reference to *Corinthians* 13:12, the line also anticipates the eschatological figuration of Fame's realm. But whereas Paul's line promises that, in the afterlife, we will see God face to face, Chaucer's visionary journey to the afterlife of language only leaves its meaning more opaque than ever. Unlike Dante, his retrospective, autobiographical self does not return from the other world with a renewed capacity to understand and judge aright; whatever conversion is effected on Chaucer by his journey does not permit him to interpret the world any better. In fact, it seems to have the opposite effect: as the bodies in Fame's realm coalesce from a refusal to imagine their referent, so does the retrospective Chaucer attempting to understand his own fiction refuse to offer them any totalizing meaning.

do with the “us.” It seems almost to blur into a possessive modifying the dream, but it is incapable of functioning so. Chaucer could have made it a possessive without disturbing his meter, with the simple substitution of an “oure” whose ending “e” would have elided with “every.” But he did not do so. Two likely possibilities remain for it: it functions either as an indirect object or the direct object itself, in which case “every drem” is an apposition modifying it. In the first case, the line would read “God, turn in us every dream to good;” in the second, it would read “God, turn us, every dream, to good. In this poem, the two amount to the same thing—we are Chaucer’s dream-bodies, reconstituting his narrative in our minds and so becoming captured in its design. As we read the dream, absorbing it in into “us,” we are simultaneously enveloped by it, as Chaucer must have been himself while composing such a monstrosity. Like Dante, Chaucer has absorbed our discourse into his poem by making us speak it again and forever; it will persist, indestructible, in the space that the poem imagines. Reading has more the character of faith for Chaucer—in the sense of conversion that God’s “turning” implies, we can only hope that He will turn these self-engendering linguistic dream bodies to some good end, or that he can transform them into an unforeseen goodness.

Following his Proem, Chaucer makes an Invocation to Morpheus, whom Chaucer associates with memory. Morpheus, in Chaucer’s poems, is always a cave dweller. In the *Book of the Duchess* he lives, as do all the gods, in a valley filled with dark caves; in that poem, also, Juno summons him to reanimate the body of the dead lover Ceyx, which he does in a perversely corporeal representation of memory, by creeping inside his dead body to parade it before his beloved Alcione. In the *House of Fame* also he dwells in a

“cave of stoon” (70) near Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Chaucer summons Morpheus out of concern for his own memory, and he prays that Morpheus

... wol me spede  
My sweven for to telle aright,  
Yf every drem stond in his myght.  
And he that mover ys of al,  
That is and was and ever shal,  
So yive hem joye that hyt here  
Of alle that they dreme to-yere,  
And for to stonden alle in grace  
Of her loves, or in what place  
That he were levest for to stond. (78-87)

Morpheus is to help Chaucer tell his dream “aright,” whatever constitutes rightness in his interpretive dream space. But he goes further: he actually conflates Morpheus with the Christian God, the mover of all. Chaucer leaves the “he” of line 81 indeterminate—he may be again referring to the God he hopes will turn the dream to good, and so interrupting the invocation addressed to Morpheus. Or Morpheus himself might be that God, and so the same God that turns every dream to good, or joy, or grace, or more simply, place. The latter seems more plausible, given the context—dreams stand in Morpheus’ might, as we are clearly told in line 80, and so he is the “mover of al” to whom we would turn in asking that our dreams give us joy. Cumulatively, these images suggest that Morpheus is a God of memory and of dream, but also that the memory of a dream is a kind of forgetfulness, suggested by the appearance of Lethe, which Morpheus

dwells “upon” (71). The grace and movement implicit in love and, indeed, the entire Creation are in his power, and are fully deployed in the dream, but in the dream space they cannot produce a viable interpretation. Chaucer can only hope that they produce “joy” in the reader, whatever semblance they adopt, as they incarnate what “is and was and ever shal,” temporality, in the full and unpredictable duration that memory encapsulates. To tell a dream “aright” is simply to tell it as it appeared to the dreamer, in its full duration, which is precisely what language is incapable of doing.

The relationship Chaucer draws between Morpheus and Lethe also suggest that his poem will attempt to stage a sort of abortive Dantean conversion, but one so twisted as to almost be unrecognizable. While Lethe is, of course, a popular mythological locale used in many poems of the Middle Ages, the direct citation of Dante in the latter parts of the poem indicates that Dante’s Lethe was closest to Chaucer’s mind as he conceptualized Morpheus. As I have remarked, Dante’s use of forgetfulness as a metaphor for conversion alters both concepts considerably: Dante, of course, doesn’t really forget much about his life before or after his conversion, and conversion—insofar as it entails a change—requires memory to become legible. Dante’s conversion reoriented him to a presence whose plenitude outstripped the capacity of memory to record; time is too full, existence too vibrant at each infinitesimal moment of its persistence, for any faculty to really apprehend it adequately. Even as Dante continues to narrate his vision, he thus tacitly protests that he is only recording a spare fragment of the grace that animates every particle of Paradise. Chaucer likewise struggles to outline a poetic structure that will moor a recollective time and space within an immemorability topos. In Chaucer’s parodic version, God himself is eternally forgetful; he is subject to the waters of Lethe

not temporarily, but as a permanent state of being. Where Dante's journey through Lethe briefly rendered him without memory, and so capable of the apprehension of the passing present unadulterated by intellectual recombination, Morpheus resides in that state, only emerging furtively—if at all—to bestow dreams that deliver their dreamer to a similarly insensate state of being. Significantly, Chaucer himself never approaches the river that heralded Dante's final conversion—he remains in incomprehension for not having passed through the symbolic locus of Lethe; but in essence, incomprehension is what Morpheus is supposed to inspire in dreamers. Chaucer's ironic distance from the symbolic Lethe actually indicates that he understands its lesson more thoroughly than Dante did: insofar as Dante emerges from Lethe with a new hermeneutic, he has not authentically imbibed its waters, leaving behind the gestalts that organized his perception and so left him separate from God. Chaucer suggests that, in fact, only God can inhabit that presence, and that humans can only wistfully wish it will descend on them as well—that for a moment they will be able to stand in grace. The uninterpretable dream is the revelatory gift of Morpheus that approximates immemorability, but real immemorability is the provenance of God alone: Chaucer carefully distances himself from the site of Dante's conversion to suggest that he may have overreached in his attempt to participate in divine presence.

As a revised version of the Creator, Chaucer's Morpheus becomes both an incredibly powerful and impotent force in the narrative. The poem's free-associational structure itself suggests that Morpheus is operating within it—*islands of intelligible, recollective narrative* emerge only to be seemingly submerged by tectonic shifts in the narrative. Like God, Morpheus's creative power lies in his refusal to govern the dream-

world he creates: his seeming withdrawal opens the space and time in which beings can possess authentic identities. If Morpheus possessed memory—if he operated within the historical confines of the narrative—his will would be absolute; everything would simply be an extension of his will, mindless parts in the system of his organism. Just as Chaucer, as author, purports to refuse the governance of his uninterpretable narrative, so too is the god he invokes utterly incapable of governing the meaning of the dream-space. Of course, neither Chaucer nor his god succeed in this effort—the effort to remain meaningless instantly, insofar as it is an effort, reinstates an overriding meaning and rationale to the text. But when representation does begin to coalesce into the narrative, it invariably attempts to push us back outside itself, demonstrating the inadequacy or unreality of the procedures we have applied to make the text mean; under the sign of Morpheus, the text asks us to forget itself for a moment, and along with it the entire recollective machinery through which we divorce ourselves from the presence Morpheus alone occupies. This conception of Morpheus hovers at the tattered edges of the entire poem—he is the real *deus absconditus* of the text, not the petty goddess whose name the poem itself bears. It is ironic that, in writing a poem called the House of Fame, Chaucer does not invoke Fame but rather her diametric opposite, a god who rules over utterly subjective experiences and who utterly lacks memory. Fame, in essence, is only memory; she is the arbitrary selective procedure of memory writ across history. But ultimately it is Morpheus who envelops her with her own unreality.

After Morpheus has been invoked as the patron god of the poem, the poem itself unceremoniously stammers to the next manifestation of its matters. The narrator falls asleep, already exhausted by his poetic labors (115-16). We now see his first imagination

of the dream space: the Temple of Glass, Venus' Temple. It is in the Temple of Glass that he most fully undermines the possibility of narrative, though, being Chaucer, he does so in narrative. When he enters, he sees a wealth of memorial images, further reinforcing the association between dream and memory he hints at in Morpheus. Within the temple

ther wer moo ymages

Of gold, stondynge in sondry stages,

And moo ryche tabernacles,

And with perre moo pynacles,

And moo curiouse portreytures

And queynte maner of figures

Of olde werk, then I saugh ever. (121-27)

Chaucer suggests that the whole of literary history is contained within the images of the temple of glass, existing side by side with one another. Mary Carruthers and Beryl Rowland have explored the memorial resonance of these images. In Classical and Medieval mnemonic practice it was common to imagine aspects of a text as memorable *images*, which one placed in their *loci* (Rowland 167). That these images are mnemonic devices need not detain us here—this interpretation is a critical commonplace; what is interesting for our purposes is what this mnemonic technique does to both the text and time. Mnemonic practice, by its very nature, is designed to elide duration, focusing on momentous events in a narrative for ease of retention. The images it creates must be visually impactful, so as to make a deeper imprint on the memorial wax (Carruthers 132). Such mnemonics thus extend the elision effected by narrative upon time—they further truncate and immobilize the lacunae in which time persists. Chaucer encounters these

immobile images in his dream space because, being the consummate reader and author of love poetry but never himself a lover, he has populated his memory with enshrined images that he experienced in their frozen, literary state.

These narratives occur in sequences of images whose figures are “stondyng in sondry stages” as in the Bergsonian flip-book of the intellect. They suggest the temporal lacunae between themselves while attempting to render the motion contained therein trivial—it is always guided by a telos, a “cause” in both senses. Chaucer roams up and down, unable to adequately represent the plenitude of imagery—and in many cases not even trying to do so, letting the mnemonics stand unremembered—until he lights upon a “table of bras,” upon which are inscribed the opening lines of the *Aeneid*, translated into Middle English. He seems to gravitate toward the text because it is text and not image, but after the initial presentation it becomes unclear whether he is reading or viewing images. The opening lines of the poem ensure that we understand it as text—they, in fact, refer us to our own activity as readers, reminding us that we are constituting visual images from text; but the activity comes to seem starkly visual in character, reading being expressed almost without exception here by the verb “sawgh.” This conflation of text and image expresses representation in its perfected form, the word becoming so intermixed with its image that one can not discern between actual sight and its verbal equivalent.

Chaucer proceeds to offer a highly compressed paraphrase of the events of the *Aeneid*. He sees each of these events “graven,” a word that reappears throughout the passage, suggesting both their status as statuesque carvings and dead, immobile narrative images. The inclusion of this particular narrative is patently inappropriate to the poem. Many critical readings hinge around the attempt to reintegrate this episode into the larger



sweep of the poem, as it seems to bear little on Fame's House. In a sense, I would argue that Chaucer includes it only to create a fiction of faithfulness to the memory of his dream.<sup>6</sup> By making the dream appear random, he actually legitimates its status as an actual occurrence rather than as a literary production. If time is to be indestructible in the dream as it is in life, it must always threaten to become illegible. But this interpretive trajectory doesn't really go far, and it doesn't bring much joy. Instead, let us imagine that Morpheus has a plan for us; let us say that the two houses imagine narrative in a radically different way. In the Temple of Glass, Chaucer imagines narrative as representation—the image of glass is appropriate, since we are made to imagine the images that his language conjures, as through a transparent medium. Fame's House imagines narrative as signification—narrative and discourse produces only an image of the body speaking it, rendering its language opaque. In its purely representational aspect, figured in Venus' Temple, language is only capable of conjuring immobile sequences of images. The subjectivity of Chaucer, imaged into the dream, attempts to suppress the dream's duration as he has struggled to suppress the duration of his experience outside the dream: he reads, he imagines narration and so immobilizes the time that swirls around him.

I will not attempt to further paraphrase Chaucer's paraphrase of the *Aeneid*; it really is profoundly—and I would argue intentionally—boring, even when one is familiar with the *Aeneid* and can fill in the gaps, to whatever measure possible. Two aspects of Chaucer's retelling are, however, worthy of note. The first is more easily dealt with: Chaucer's *Aeneid* is frequently peppered with references to the time required to read it.

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<sup>6</sup> Payne intractably argues that “Book I (excluding the Proem and Invocation) has a completely separate existence; it does not suggest anything which follows, and critics have been able to correlate its “sentence” with the rest of the poem only by abstracting to so great a degree as to vitiate comparison” (203). Its irrelation to the other books might lend credence to this sort of fiction of faithfulness.

This will prove to be one of Chaucer's most recurrent device throughout the entire poem: it deliberately refers to its own discourse in temporal terms. A few examples will suffice to indicate the trend here: "And, shortly of this thing to pace" (239); "Hyt were a long proces to telle,/ And over-long for yow to dwelle" (251-52); "And nere hyt to long to endyte,/ Be God, I wolde hyt here write" (380-81). One wonders which Chaucer is interrupting with these truncations—Geffrey the narrator of the dream, or the Chaucer who narrates that narrator. If the later, he has violated his own desire to represent the dream as his memory recorded it, or perhaps more justly, he has begun to acknowledge the impossibility of the task he has set himself. We begin to wonder how populated the temple of glass is with these images, in what level of detail these "sondry stages" record their narratives. Regardless of who truncates the narrative, Chaucer is unable to reproduce it in even its already truncated temporality. Beyond this, Chaucer commits the cardinal sin of any narrative—he actually calls attention to how boring it is, a tactic he will use, in modified form, in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*. In boredom, we experience something approaching the pure passage of time; being bored with a narrative, we cease to read it as a representation. Its mnemonic fails to generate images of significant depth. By writing a boring paraphrase of another narrative, Chaucer already forces us to experience narration as a passage, not by filling up its lacunae, but by making us fill our own, so long as we keep reading. He places us back within our present situation, book in hand, eyes roving across his lines, unable to will them into representation. The text seems not to care whether we continue or not—as Geffrey will later profess, he does not desire Fame and so does not concern himself with the impact of his text.

The other interesting feature of this narration is somewhat more complex. Though Chaucer indicates that he is trying to abbreviate his telling of this already too-long tale, he seems incapable of actually doing so. It is not only the truncated narration itself that he seems preoccupied with, but also the interpretive lacunae, the accreted commentary tradition working to digest the narrative, the allusive webs and analogies to other narrations that might be established, etc. This type of inter-linear narration erupts primarily around the portion of the tale treating Dido. Notably, from lines 300-63 he actually allows Dido to speak—one again wonders whether Chaucer imagines a separate graven image for each moment of the speech, or whether it is all text, or some hybrid of the two almost like a graphic novel. In any case, he afterward breaks into one of his excuses for the length of the narration, referring us to the works of Virgil and Ovid if we want a full recounting, as though any narration of the events could suffice. Though he breaks away from narration, he feels compelled to comment further upon the event, which was one of the moral cruxes of the *Aeneid* during the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> Like the material Chaucer has introduced on dreams, the commentary tradition on the Dido episode was interminable and frequently contradictory. To recollect this truncated tradition, Chaucer first compares the treachery of Aeneas to that of Demophon, Paris, Jason and Hercules, whose stories must also be lurking about somewhere in the House of Glass. All of these he invokes to censure Aeneas' treatment of Dido; however he undercuts his own censure in the brief stanza following these extended comparisons:

“But to excusen Eneas/ Fullyche of al his grete trespass,/ The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,/ Bad hym goo into Itayle” (427-30). This comment on Aeneas' betrayal undercuts everything Chaucer's literary comparison has just accomplished, and it does so only by

<sup>7</sup> See Desmond 226-27.

means of a reference to the narrative it indicted. It recasts the commentary tradition on the poem into a parody of itself, which the text it attempts to read always undermines. Indicting Aeneas requires that we change the narrative, it requires that we read the mandate of Mercurie as somehow resistable by Aeneas, or that we transfer blame onto Mercurie himself; but doing so also entails a judgement on the remainder of the narrative, requiring us to ignore what Aeneas accomplishes in Italy, and so on. The narrative requires an endless succession of interpretive judgements, whose resulting system can never account for the whole, as we can never completely reconcile the pieces of Chaucer's poem (and we cannot believe that they are reconciled in our bland statement that they are irreconcilable—they are too relevant to one another to be so easily systematized).

When he has “seen al this syghte” (468), though not represented it all, he leaves the temple, hoping to find the sculptor who carved all the engravings, or even just someone “that may me telle where I am” (479). The Temple of Venus has imagined the representational system in its fullness. Though it parses time into the narrative images retained by the memory, it threatens to overflow its own mechanisms of containment. Overwhelmed by the vision, Chaucer seeks to disengage with it, emerge into the actual, non-represented world; he seeks a point of reference outside this textual temple that can provide a foothold for interpreting what he has just witnessed. But, of course, in the dream space, even the narrator's interlocutors are internal; as often occurs in allegory, the characters encountered in a dream vision represent some aspect of the narrator fragmented and externalized. However, unlike allegory, Chaucer's dream never allows us to know precisely what faculty is being represented in any given figure. He offers us no

unmediated access to a lived reality outside the text; even in Fame's House, where language no longer imagines its referent but its historical speaker, we still occupy the space of the dreamer's perception. The closest Chaucer can come to offering us an external point of reference is to push toward the mediating agent that we transform into interior representation: sound.

Sound, in a modified, visual form, is precisely what Geoffrey discovers in his search for an external point of reference, though he seems not to understand its significance. When he emerges from Venus' Temple, he finds himself standing in

a large feld,  
As fer as that I myghte see,  
Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,  
Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond:  
For al the feld nas but of sond  
As small as man may se. (482-84)

While many critics have read the field of sand as an image of desolation, inertia and unproductivity—as Chaucer's final word on the possibility of interpretive authority suggested by the commentary within the temple—David K. Coley sees a continuity between the temple's glass and the sand. The temple itself is comprised of reconfigured sand—sand that, through a procedure that seemed vaguely arcane to the Middle Ages, has been rendered clear.<sup>8</sup> While Coley reads the sand as an image of tradition, ground down until it becomes virtually illegible, I would argue that Chaucer articulates in the image a rather clever and opportune pun that anticipates the composition of Fame's House. The “sond” outside is the “soun” from which the representational apparatus of Venus' glass

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<sup>8</sup> See Coley 63.

temple is composed. This reading recommends itself on several counts: as noted, “sond” homonymically gestures toward the Middle English “soun,” and also “sonde,” a revelatory message from God. We will see this pun again in Book 2. Geffrey is mystified by the procedures of representation he has just witnessed. Formally, a pun pushes us toward the surface enunciation of language, disturbing the metonym in which it is spoken and which determines its meaning. The Temple of Venus has pushed Chaucer into an essential awareness of the lacunae that narrative always leaves unimagined. As Geffrey escapes from his representation of the mechanisms of representation, he is left at the bleak point at which the material vessel of sound is transmuted into what it attempts to imagine. His vision has thrust him back toward, if not into, the lived experience of narration; the sand becomes the opaque granules that he can no longer render clear. These granules tend toward the duration of speaking, rather than the duration of the spoken—they are as finely particulate as it is possible for the mind to conceive. Chaucer is going about his vision backward, starting in the midst of representations and regressing backward toward the material word that always accompanies and precedes representation. The puns especially force our own experience of the narrative to stammer at such a moment; Chaucer implicates us in his text by directing us to the pre-intellective sound of a term obliquely referencing the idea of pre-intellective sound.

Though Coley is right to understand the sand as material and spatial, correcting prior critics’ oversimplified reading of its negation, Chaucer does cast it in largely negative terms. He goes to great pains to contrast it to the traditional, lush elements of a dream vision’s landscape.<sup>9</sup> The emptiness announces itself in the mode of a stammered

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<sup>9</sup> In “The Logic of the Dream Vision in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*” Kathryn L. Lynch reads the field of sand as such an inversion. The traditional lushness of the dream landscape may suggest the representational plenitude of the dream from which Chaucer attempts to turn away here.

retraction; each image in the list is concrete and we imagine the things that it names as it articulates them. Only by virtue of the “withouten” are they cancelled while still being substantively articulated. They populate the space in their absence, opening its capacities even as the text forecloses them. If Chaucer had wanted to accentuate the emptiness, we would have expected him to simplify it, using a single, perhaps abstract term to describe it: “nothing” or a similar term would have effaced its substantiality. Likewise, to emphasize its substantiality he could have described the sand, rather than offer a negated set of images for it. Chaucer’s sand is a substantive absence, the stammer made flesh. The sand, like the sound that precedes representation, is pregnant with the images that, in a Saussurian sense, it negates in order to mean. But Chaucer cannot turn back to the eros of representation, cannot force himself to make the sand cohere into a clear glass. Instead, he offers to let us follow him into the erotic play of a new representation, the narration of a space preceding narration.

### *The Fullness of Emptiness*

Chaucer is plucked from the shifting sonic sands of the first book by an eagle whose appearance recalls Dante’s dream of the golden eagle in *Purgatory* 9. As in Chaucer’s poem, Dante’s eagle emerges in an important liminal space—it is, in fact, a figure of the divine lady Lucy who transports Dante to Purgatory proper. Prior to the dream, Dante has been exposed to a unique music in the Valley of Rulers that bears on Chaucer’s redeployment of the image. In the Valley of Rulers, Dante joins a company led by Sordello, a Mantuan poet. At the beginning of Canto 8, one of the members of this group rises at dawn and begins to sing a hymn. Unlike the hymn sung in Canto 7, the

specific content of this hymn seems unimportant to Dante—he names it the “*Te lucis ante,*” but he is unconcerned with its words; rather, Dante records the aesthetic, sonorous quality of the music. He begins “*render vano/ l’udire*” [to render empty his hearing] (7-8) in preparation and after hearing it, Dante says that it “*fece me a me uscir di mente*” [drew me out of myself in mind] (14-15). The music here prefigures the sort of immemorability topoi he will exercise in Paradise and, indeed, an angelic vision immediately follows his empty perception of the song: two allegorical angels descend to reenact the expulsion of the serpent from the Garden. When Dante sees these figures, “*ne la faccia l’occhio si smarria,/ come virtù ch’a troppo si confonda*” [the eye is bewildered by their countenance, as a faculty is confounded by excess] (35-36). The three images share a common, temporal focus—in each, perception is overwhelmed by the sheer plenitude of sensible detail, which results in the stupefied state of the perceiver. Not only do they leave Dante unable to represent the experience of perceiving them to his own readers, but he suggests that they verge on becoming unperceivable, since they unsettle the self who is supposed to be perceiving them, emptying and bewildering him. These sensory experiences manifest to Dante a preliminary experience of divine presence through aesthetic perception; he hears only the physical sounds of the hymn rather than their referent.

Dante signals the importance of this moment with one of his few direct addresses to the reader. Instructs us to “*aguzza qui, lettore, ben li occhi al vero,/ ché l’ velo é ora ben tanto sottile,/ certo, che ‘l trapassar dentro é leggero*” [sharpen here, reader, well your eyes to the truth, because the veil is now so subtle, certainly, that to pass within is simple] (19-21). Dante signals here that something important has occurred in the song,



something which seems, at first, to necessarily preclude our access to it—after all, the only description Dante can offer of song and angel is to tell us that they literally made him insensate—but which Dante insists makes the allegory of his poem more clear here than at any other point preceding it. In reality, our exclusion from the scene Dante imagines is the allegory it has to impart; in our necessary failure to realize the scene Dante purportedly imagines, we are delivered to the same surface apprehension of his language that Dante himself enjoyed. The “veil,” between fiction and truth is so attenuated because Dante has repelled his readers, at least in part, from his narrative, left them stranded in a paradoxical attempt to imagine mindlessness. To identify with Dante’s character, the reader must similarly empty out her own consciousness; but in doing so, the reader who attempted to effect such a self-negation no longer exists and can no longer mobilize the will to identify with Dante. The presence that Dante nears in apprehending the unrelatable song and seeing the unrelatable faces of the angels installs itself in the reader at the moment she is pushed out of the text itself; to pass within the allegory is to, along with Dante himself, pass out of the scene it imagines, pass out of one’s own mind altogether.

Book 1 of the *House of Fame* has left Geoffrey in a similar state: Chaucer has deeply problematized the very representational machinery through which his poem imagines itself, and his proxy is left stupefied in an empty field of meaningless sand-sounds. Chaucer parodically literalizes the emptiness that Dante’s experiences have inspired in him; in fact, the parody offers a subtle critique of Dantean emptiness by suggesting, first, that Dante took a perverse and paradoxical pride in that seeming emptiness and, second, that he cannot actually succeed in pushing his reader out of his

narrative. Dante's rendition of cognitive emptiness deployed a sacred rhetoric to authorize itself; the parodic atmosphere of Chaucer's poem, however, empties Dante's emptiness of its ineffable pretensions. Chaucerian emptiness is an authentic bewilderment that does not really seek to enforce its imitation on a reader. While readers aren't supposed to exactly imitate Geoffrey, Chaucer does cleverly implicate them in the design of the poem. The sounds they make while reading—the subvocalization of the text, the rustle of the pages, even unrelated noises like sneezes that occur while reading—are all collected into the imaginative space Chaucer constructs. But even as he gathers readers into the space of Fame's House, he fragments the continuity of those sounds, making each infinitely divisible sound ever made into a separate body. Even more so than in Dante's text, the more fully we imagine the scene, the more are we repelled from it back into our own bodies, into the passing duration we inhabit while we read. Chaucer places us before ourselves, shows how we—along with Geoffrey, the great reader of love poetry—surrender the literal phenomena surrounding us to the seductive fiction of the world a text imagines. As we watch ourselves unfold, spread like everything else into an infinite number of separable bodies, the text increasingly approximates the presence from which each of those bodies, in its historical moment, persisted.

He begins by foreclosing the possibility of representation—every sound ever made will be imagined, in Fame's domain, as an image of its maker; in terms of language, speech appears as the person who spoke it rather than as the thing it tried to represent. Dante's afterlife did something similar—his shades are sorts of echoes that manifest a life; like Chaucer, he is insistent about democratizing the afterlife, including figures from his private life alongside important historical ones. Chaucer goes even a

step further, in two regards: first, he includes not only every human being but even objects incapable of linguistic speech;<sup>10</sup> second, he makes every individual sound made by all such objects a distinct object within his afterlife. In Fame's realm, it is not people who are judged, but distinct sounds made at distinct moments in time—the fickleness of Fama is both a strength and a shortcoming in this regard. This further democratization of the afterlife of sound offers us one of the key ways in which Chaucer read Dante's poem—as Dante's own task was to extend the grace he found in Beatrice to the whole of the creation, so Chaucer has extended Dante's framing technique to everything that produces sound. He effectively undoes historical identity: where Dante's afterlife recorded a total organism, Chaucer's breaks every such organism into its component part, giving each a strange substantiality that does not depend on its persistence through time. Each sound-body is susceptible to its own judgement, but the basis for that judgement erodes as each sound is broken into its sibillant parts; at the point when they cannot represent a continuous thought, they can no longer be judged by Fama, God or any other authority. They are incoherent, empty but for the substance Chaucer has offered them within his narrative space; Dante's emptiness on the cusp of Purgatory and throughout the Comedy never willingly approaches such an emptiness, as its emptiness is always composed across a history, soliciting an understanding.

Only Chaucer's own language—and by extension, the reader's reconstitution of it—continues to represent; yet Chaucer is constantly seeking, in his design, for a way to unravel even that most basic precondition of narrative. He tries to project himself and his reader into the poem as simply another of its imagined sound bodies, to refer us to our

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<sup>10</sup> This move, in particular, anticipates something like Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, which does not distinguish human objects from other types of objects, or even the living from the inanimate—all alike share a tendency toward integration and identity that defies such delineations.

own duration which we spend attempting to reconstitute his strange and shifting narrative. He will accomplish this aim in Book 3, which we will consider in more detail below, by describing a model of Fame that opposes the scheme articulated by the Eagle in Book 2. Here, rather, he tries to describe a configuration of narrative space capable of expressing what narrative itself has failed to do—to recuperate time in all its fullness. He struggles to find a narrative scheme capable of expressing more than just historicized elisions of time. Narrative, in Venus's Temple, could only serve as a memorial to lost loves, since the grace that animates the beloved can never be adequately represented in whatever its language imagines. Chaucer tries to recuperate that loss by means of a very clever omission of his own—the Eagle's exhaustive description of Fame's realm fails to articulate the period of sound imagined in each of its sound-bodies. Each body might represent an entire work, a paragraph, sentence, word or fragment of a word. By removing its periodicity from language, Chaucer renders language unintelligible, since, to take the sentence level as an example, each word in a sentence would be present simultaneously, making the temporal subordination necessary for meaning impossible. The structures of relation that turns individual words spoken across a period of time into a linguistic organism breaks down in the House so that each strange element in it wakes to itself and performs a danse macabre with every other sound surrounding it, linguistic or not. Within this unintelligibility, Chaucer parodically expresses the temporality of each moment of meaning that language surrenders to time. He tries, oddly enough, to make this pre-representational unintelligibility the site of meaning, and tries also to surrender his own text to it.

However, as Chaucer well knew, it is more difficult to desire to abandon authorial privilege than it is to actually do it. Such attempts to abandon privilege—as the reader response critics have shown—always codify into a new, subterranean form of privilege: the privilege of an author not privileging himself. Chaucer wants to harrow his text more deeply than that, and so it will require several attempts. In his first attempt, Chaucer signals his abdication of his authorial position as he describes his abduction by the Eagle. While standing within the field of sand, the eagle swoops upon Geoffrey and begins to conduct him to the House of Fame. The narrative highlights the violence of this act, and Geoffrey’s lack of volition:

And with hys grymme pawes stronge  
Withyn hys sharpe nayles longe,  
Me, fleynge, in a swap he hente,  
And with hys sours ayen up went...  
How high, I can not telle yow  
For I cam up y nyste how  
For so astonyed and asweved  
Was every vertu in my heved,  
What with his sours and with my drede,  
That al my felynge gan to dede  
For-whi hit was to gret affray. (541-53)

Following on the punning logic he introduced in the previous Book, Chaucer imagines a character within his poem forcibly capturing its own “sours,” its creator. The “sours” literally acts in an instrumental sense—he conveys Chaucer upward through his “soars,”

the thrust of his wings; but Chaucer so constructs his line that “sours” also refers to a material “source” within a prepositional phrase. Both senses were available in Middle English. The Eagle—who will serve as Chaucer’s means for outlining the mechanism by which sound arrives at the House of Fame—enters the narrative as a terrorizing presence, characterized primarily by his vicious claws. The effect of the terror is to impede the narrative—Chaucer imagines his own creation disorienting himself to the point that it frustrates the project he has articulated in the Proem. Chaucer’s reified Thought only had the capacity to tell the dream aright, “Yf any vertu in the be” (526), yet in less than 25 lines, he has imagined his narrative proxy losing every “vertu” because of the violence done to him by a character within the narrative. As a result, Geoffrey’s initial ascent to the House of Fame is obscured; he almost suggests that Geoffrey is transmuted into one of the House’s odd embodied sounds by describing his death to feeling, but his own fear renders the procedure opaque. We only understand this procedure when Chaucer narrates the eagle’s rendition of it.

Chaucer further indicates that he is being absorbed into the House’s machinery in the next stanza. After he swoons, the Eagle tells him “in mannes vois” to “Awak!/ And be not agast so, for shame!” (556-57). Following this direct speech, the narrator informs us that the Eagle also

called me... by my name,  
And for I schulde the bet abreyde,  
Me mette “Awak,” to me he seyde  
Ryght in the same vois and stevene  
That useth oon I koude nevene;

And with that vois, soth for to seyn,

My mynde cam to me ageyn. (558-64)

Several puzzling features present themselves in these lines. Foremost among them is that Chaucer neglects to tell us whom he “koude nevene” in line 562; the description suggests an intimate familiarity, which has led several critics to suppose that Chaucer is referring to his shrewish wife, Philippa.<sup>11</sup> However, the reference to the “mannes vois” of the Eagle makes this at least somewhat problematic; this may be part of the joke, but the subsequent discourse with the Eagle hardly suggests any kind of domestic banter. Conversely, B. G. Koonce reads the line as a scriptural reference to Christ and the apostles who summoned people to awaken from the slumber of sin (143). Such scriptural and theological readings, however, too often feel as though they miss the humor of Chaucer’s text. Its invocations of the Christian tradition are never straightforward or exclusively pious, but rather parodic. If we take the line in the terms the poem offers us, Chaucer seems to be referring to himself in the line. “I koude nevene,” occurs in such close proximity to “by my name” that Chaucer’s name—which is oddly excluded from the Eagle’s direct speech—is on the reader’s mind. He jokingly reminds us that his voice has been usurped by the Eagle who, after flying off with its “sours,” now uses it to summon Geoffrey back to the task of narration. The terms in which he does this are starkly spatial: anticipating the embodied sounds of Fame’s house, Chaucer tells us that Geoffrey “mette ‘Awak.’” Literally, the line indicates that Geoffrey has reinitiated the act of dreaming, “I dreamed that he said to me ‘Awake’”—he dreams what has just been narrated to us, catching up to the Eagle’s dialogue out of his swoon; however, in this poem, the line also suggests that Geoffrey “met” the word awake. This is accompanied by

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<sup>11</sup> See Klitgård 163.

the local personification of his “mynde” which, using another spatial metaphor, comes back to him again. Chaucer’s narrative begins to fold in on itself from the moment the Eagle appears: the design of the poem begins to overtake the act of authoring it.

The violence of the Eagle’s onset also signals that Chaucer is borrowing from Dante. Dante’s dream explicitly alludes to a violent mythological episode: the abduction of Ganymede, whom Jupiter, in the form of an eagle, bore away to heaven. As he does so often through the *Comedy*, Dante Christianizes the sin in this episode, making it a metaphor for contemplation: the soul, chosen by God’s grace, is forcibly conducted back to its source.<sup>12</sup>

terribil come fólgor discendesse

e me rapisse suso infino al foco.

Ivi pareo che ella e io ardesse,

e sí lo ‘ncendio imaginato cosse

che convenne che ‘l sonno si rompesse. (29-33)<sup>13</sup>

[terrible as lightning it was descending/ and it bore me upward to the fire./

There it seemed that it and I was burning/ and the imagined fire so

cooked/ that my sleep was necessarily broken.]

Dante’s Eagle anticipates the process of rarefaction that will occur as he proceeds up the mountain to the terrestrial paradise and beyond; its terror is preliminary to the union that is effected between pilgrim and the company of the blessed in *Paradise*. As Dino Cervigni notes in *Dante’s Poetry of Dreams*, the language of this description is insistently Pauline and Augustinian (106). Particularly in Augustine, the Latin verb “rapere,”

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<sup>12</sup> On this image, see Brownlee 137.

<sup>13</sup> All subsequent citations will be from Durling and Martinez’s edition of the text.



cognate to the Italian “rapire,” is frequently used to describe conversion in the passive and often violent sense seen here.<sup>14</sup> The repeated fire imagery is likewise commonly associated with contemplation and conversion motifs: the uncontrolled, sinful fire of the passions is transformed into a purgative fire that prepares the soul for the beatific vision. The fire here grammatically fuses Dante to the eagle so that in line 31 “ardesse” occurs in the third person singular, rather than the first person plural that we would expect. This compounded eagle-pilgrim is subtly subjected to a further violent uniting, suggested by the verb “cuocere;” Dante literally says that the purifying fire bakes them together.

Chaucer’s rendition of this event devastatingly undercuts its gravity and sanctity. After he reawakens to his dream, Geoffrey nervously recognizes that “I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,/ Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede” (588-89). He imagines himself caught in a contemplative vision resembling that of Dante, or one of the Classical and biblical sources that informed his presentation of vision. Geoffrey imagines that the Eagle, descending from Jove’s palace in circles reminiscent of allegorical falcon imagery and Dante’s *cerchi*, will bear him back to its source, again in the divine sense and as a reference to the author himself. However, the Eagle quickly disabuses Chaucer of his self-aggrandizing notion: “Thow demest of thyself amys,/ For Joves ys not therabout—/ I dar wel putte the out of doute—/ To make of the as yet a sterre” (596-99). Chaucer deliberately distinguishes his vision from Dante’s, who journeyed to the fixed stars and beyond, joining the blessed there. Paradise, for Dante, constituted a perfectly represented space; the difficulty in narrating that vision was not the ineffability of a theological paradise that defied the spatial and temporal categories that are the province of language, but rather the super-effability of a space that constantly manifested the motive grace

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<sup>14</sup> See O’Connell 42.

inhering in its every member. In Paradise, narration—Dante’s grace in language—accompanied and inhabited what it represented. If Dante expresses anxiety over the adequacy of his own, particular representation, this is only to heighten our sense of it as a fully realized space. However, Chaucer’s vision drives toward a thoroughly different, far more insipid, end. Rather than Ganymede’s and Dante’s lofty visions of Jove, Chaucer seeks an authentic, self-emptying befuddlement that will reduce him to the phenomenological experience of wonder: he will watch himself watching himself, seeing every particle of time in his experience until watcher and watch touch briefly and furtively.

Despite the Eagle’s ironic undercutting of the Dantean parallel that produces him, the poem does not simply parody this evocation of contemplation. His Eagle is still an agent of Jove—albeit a pedantic and pompous one—even if it will not bear Chaucer back to him, and Chaucer still deploys many of the metaphors of ascent familiar to contemplative discipline. Yet his attention is turned toward the speech acts that precede representation, and that occur in the historical world, rather than the metaphysical language that attempts—either by positive or negative means—to represent God. Of course, like Dante, Chaucer must still narrate a new metaphysical space into being in order to articulate his critique of metaphysical language; but, unlike Dante, his world always seems to be at the work of unraveling itself, demonstrating the mechanisms by which it is constituted. Chaucer most consistently refers to the aim of his ascent with the term “tydynges,” which the Eagle tells Geoffrey are to be the reward for his all too literary service to Cupid:

Wherefore, as I seyde, ywys,

Jupiter considereth this,  
And also, beau sir, other thynges:  
That is, that thou hast no tydynges  
Of Loves folk yf they be glade,  
Ne of noght elles that God made. (641-46)

Much critical ink has been spilled describing the implications of Geoffrey's lack of tydynges on the poem's concept of authorship; the Eagle here carries on the trajectory of the first book, in which Chaucer understands the world solely through literature. He lacks an experiential basis for interpretation, and so must rely on divergent and contradictory texts and traditions.<sup>15</sup> I want to highlight the explicitly temporal dimension of this key term: the term "tide" primarily designates a span of time in Middle English. According to the Eagle, the narratives Geoffrey has encountered are fundamentally incapable of representing the gladness experienced by lovers. He lacks his own Beatrice, capable of reorganizing his perception of the material world under a renewed rubric of grace.

Geoffrey's reliance on literature for his experience of the world elides his experience of temporal duration and presence; as the Eagle continues, "of thy verray neyghebores,/ That duellen almost at thy dores,/ Thou herist neyther that ne this" (649-51). Language is supposed to facilitate contact between people. It is, in this sense, the primary way in which we express our being in duration. Language is always referencing something that words themselves—the matter of their sounds—is not; yet in facilitating exchanges between people persisting in time, it simultaneously offers a direct experience of "newe thynges" (654), a Bergsonian procession of the new in the present as it constantly remakes itself. Novelty is the primary characteristic of the present—it is why

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Payne 204; Ruffolo 326.

presence can never remain static, even though we always inhabit it. Language, as it is spoken, or spoken in the mind, can facilitate this contact with the present; however, Geoffrey only uses it in its representational function to reimagine, without recognizing the deep temporality of reading, hearing and speaking, what the words he reads are trying to represent. Chaucer casts this as a distinction between oral and written language here: the written language he reads in his study removes him from the moment he inhabits, while verbal contact with neighbors would situate him more fully in that moment. However the poem affirms that this is really more an issue of the representational functioning of any text, written or spoken. To render language transparently into the figures and narratives it imagines removes the reader or listener from her own temporality until she sits, dazed, like Geoffrey: “domb as any stoon,/ thou sittest at another book/ Tyl fully daswed ys thy look” (656-58). Chaucer implicitly extends this threat to the reader of his text as well by imagining himself in a circumstance resembling her own as she reads the poem—after all, the *House of Fame* has frequently left its readers feeling rather dazed. Chaucer uses this metaphor of the “dumb stoon” again in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, where it also describes a sort of graceless state outside duration. As in Dante’s image of the Medusa, stone is incapable of dynamically manifesting its existence in time. It is “dumb,” susceptible, perhaps, to the inscriptions of others, but incapable of speaking itself. Otherwise, the only time it can manifest is its gradual effacement, its wearing away into, as we might expect, sand.

Chaucer explicitly recollects the sand metaphor from the previous book shortly after using the stone metaphor. While describing the impending journey to the House of Fame, he tells Geoffrey to

truste wel that thou shalt here,  
 When we be come there I seye,  
 Mo wonder thynges, dar I leye,  
 And of Loves folk moo tydynges,  
 Both sothe sawes and lesinges,  
 And moo loves new begonne,  
 And longe yserved loves wonne,  
 And moo loves casuelly  
 That ben betyd, no man wot why, ...  
 And moo berdys in two houres  
 Withoute rasour or sisoures  
 Ymad then greynes be of sondes. (672-91)

This breathless list of “mores” continues on until line 698. As Katherine Terrell has argued, the profusion of details that are offered in the poem’s lists “demonstrate at the level of individual words, at the level of nouns uninterrupted by grammatical subordination, his tendency to juxtapose potentially inharmonious objects together” (334). The elements in his lists stammer over one another, irreducible to a logical order that could harmonize them. They are thematized only by the parataxis of the line that spills them out—by the temporality of their narration, not the space they inhabit; their description in this list actually frustrates our capacity to imagine them distinctly in the narrative. But despite this difficulty, as in the first book, this growth results in material metaphors of particulation: the repeated “sondes” pun here, and “cornes in graunges” in line 698. As the Eagle will soon describe, Geoffrey will witness not the referents of all

these tydynges, but the material moments of their signification. Nor will those moments be composed into tidy events, compressing a span of time—Chaucer suggests that Geoffrey will see, spread out within a single space, the particulate sonic matter of which such articulate, literate events are composed.

Following this list, the Eagle begins, at last, to describe where the House of Fame is located. He begins by telling Geoffrey that “first shalt thou here where she duelleth,/ And so thyn oune bok hyt tellith” (711). As he begins to organize his explanation, the Eagle again casts Chaucer as a reader of his own narrative, implicated in its design. Most simply, the line indicates that Geoffrey will recount the Eagle’s description in his own narrative, after the dream; however, the line also seems to indicate that the Eagle’s description derives its authority from the very poem it is unfolding. “Tellith” is not placed in the future tense, but rather the present. Immediately following, the poem does describe the House of Fame’s metaphysical locale:

Hir paleys stant, as I shal seye,  
Right even in myddes of the weye  
Betwixen hevene and erthe and see,  
That what so ever in al these three  
Is spoken, either privy or apert,  
The way therto ys so overt,  
And stant eke in so juste a place  
That every soun mot to hyt pace. (713-20)

The Eagle intensifies this description in the next few lines, adding that any sound

whatsoever “Certejn,... moste thider nede” (724).<sup>16</sup> Chaucer locates the House in the precise center of the cosmos. He seems to aim, here as elsewhere, at a critique of Dante’s metaphysics in so situating the House: his goal is not so high as the *Comedy*’s Paradise. In fact, as the mountain on which Fame’s House is situated will suggest, he seems to think that a space of purgation is the best he can expect from his narrative, and perhaps earthly life more generally. However, he simultaneously suggests that the House of Fame transcends Dante’s project: even the speech of Heaven echoes toward this center, which narrative gesture playfully topples the hierarchical, spatial ordering of the Medieval cosmos. Divine speech is subject to the same conditions as human speech, and even animal or vegetable “speech.” Dante’s afterlife, which he demands we interpret on the pattern of historical exegesis,<sup>17</sup> is subsumed by Chaucer’s design, reimaged in its sonic totality within the House of Fame. The Word itself would be subsumed into this construction; the Eagle’s description suggests that the House of Fame actually becomes the seat of judgement, since its location is so “juste” and clear that sounds necessarily tend toward it.

This description of the House’s location also subtly invokes the two figures to whom Chaucer will explicitly compare his upward journey: Phaeton and Icarus. Chaucer, through his Eagle, will use both of these stories as analogies for his flight, at the moment when his ascent begins to obscure the ground from which it took flight. Both

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<sup>16</sup> The verb in this line is particularly interesting, as it uses an active verb in a passive sense—“nede” is best translated as “be forced,” though it also invokes the modern sense of “need.” Chaucer suggests that the movement of speech to the House is part of its nature and so involuntary, but also an active seeking to remedy some deficiency in itself. This describes, with remarkable economy, the ontological point about representation Chaucer is making here: language arises from a need to make present the object it names, when it always arises from the object speaking, defining her continually renewing being through time.

<sup>17</sup> On Dante’s distinction between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians, see Singleton 78-86.

stories are deployed by Dante in his reworking of Ovidian mythology, and both prominently feature a “middle way” between ruinous extremes. Dante uses these stories as a way of foregrounding his need of a guide. In *Inferno* 17, he references them both in describing his flight on the back of Geryon, the monstrous icon of fraud whom Vergil must trick into aiding their descent. As Teodolina Barolini has argued, Geryon acts as a metaphor for Dante’s project since “the encounter with Geryon dramatizes the text’s confrontation with its own representational fraud, when the text gambles all on being accepted as a ‘ver c’ha faccia di menzogna’” [truth which has the face of a lie] (66).<sup>18</sup> Dante invokes Phaeton and Icarus to express his misgivings about the heights to which he expects his *Comedy* to ascend. Rather than ascending to God, it may become lodged in Hell; the image of contemplative flight is inverted in Geryon so that Dante descends to the harrowing depths prompted by this question. However, his project does not falter here largely through the efforts of Virgil, who knowingly summons Geryon with Dante’s belt at the brink of an otherwise unbridgeable gulf, who enjoins the monster to descend slowly and in wide circles, and who protects Dante, bodily, from the scorpion’s tale that is first obscured by his “faccia d’uom giusto” [face of a just man] (17.10). As Robert M. Durling notes, Virgil’s directions “draw on the advice that Phoebus and Daedalus give their sons” (561); we are made to understand that Dante’s success is possible because he has a paternal model, on which he can pattern the initial descent that will ultimately prove an ascent.

One of the effects of this conceit is to soften the truth claims of his own represented space—as readers, we always imagine what he names in a material way, but Dante simultaneously demands that we remain conscious of the discursive history that

<sup>18</sup> On Geryon as a figure for Dante’s fiction, see also Ferrucci 66-102.



produced those figures. We are aware of them as constructed literary repetitions, reimagined from the earlier texts they inhabited. His afterlife vibrates with its own analogic modes of production, when he situates—as in Geryon’s case—the historical authors who most vividly imaged a narrative figure with the figure itself. Dante’s narrative structure ensures that, the more vividly we imagine his narrative, the more will we become conscious of its existence as discourse, with a generic history that produced it. Geryon’s just face expresses the danger of all narrative—if we simply imagine its figures, the text will become complicit with our escapism and we will defraud ourselves of our own moment; so, while Geryon traditionally had a human face, it is Dante’s exclusive innovation to describe that face as “giusto,” “just” or simply “correct.” He is a liar, almost an allegorical personification of lies, and yet through the conceit of the fiction, his face appears just—it seems what it is not through our imagination of its physicality. The denizens of hell, in their various ways, have fallen prey to this danger of fetishism, failing to self-consciously imagine the objects of their desire as products of the historical discourse that makes them seem desirable. Dante’s text threatens to damn himself and readers if it indulges in this vain curiosity as it describes Hell, Purgatory, and even Paradise. Narrative is capable of surrendering us to a model of time that divorces us from the experience of our own, present duration that language expresses before being transformed into a figure. However, Dante turns this idea inside out, making our act of imagination the mechanism through which we recognize a figure’s textuality; as the reader’s eye, following Dante’s, roves across Geryon’s triple body, pregnant with shadowy allegorical significance, we become aware of his implicit textuality. The tableau of Vergil and Geryon, narrator and narrated, demands that we attend to the procedures by

which Dante fabricates his world. As Dante descends on this creature, he too is overlaid by his own analogues, which render his role in his own narrative comprehensible. Dante is a rehabilitated Phaeton or Icarus not only because he is humble enough to be governed by Vergil's good advice, but also because they submit Dante himself to the analogical structure that pervades his world. His middle way is constituted, in part, by his deliberate lack of invention, his always tenuous submission of his own genius to his literary precursors.

However, as Chaucer suggests, Dante's desire is no less lofty than that of Icarus or Phaeton, despite the careful moderation he exercises in his pursuit of it. The object of the *Comedy* is not the modest middle way that these myths enjoin their protagonists to seek, but rather the same unreachable contemplation that, in the allegorical reading, ultimately results in their ruin. Chaucer reconstrues the middle way—the means of these other journeys—as the end of his own; this gesture is reinforced by his conflation, in the eagle, of the means of transportation with the guide figure. Dante made author and representation coexist beside one another, but Chaucer brackets the possibility of representation altogether; he makes language capable of representing only its irreducible historicity. He references the duration of his reader by implicating our act of reading into what the poem imagines; once we are imagined within his poem, he proceeds to fragment his representation of the instants of our reading into successively smaller interval-images until he pushes us out of the narrative entirely back into our own moment, where words have been coalescing into the forms that Chaucer seems so intent on rupturing. In order to do this, he first renders language inertly material. In one of the most often cited passages of the poem, the Eagle informs Geoffrey that

Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken,  
And every speche that ys spoken  
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,  
In his substaunce ys but air;  
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,  
Right soo soun ys air ybroke. (765-70)

Chaucer's reestablishes the same relationship between language and representation here that he did in Book 1—he violently curtails language's almost mystical transmutation into its referent, leaving its effects only material. His use of air as its medium is significant, as air—like the glass of Venus's temple—is more fundamentally the medium of visual things, the clear space through which we perceive whatever is distant from us. In Ovid's description of Fame's House, both visual and auditory events are transmitted to sue at Fame's seat for remembrance and imitation; however, Chaucer almost makes the two oppose one another. In his poem, sound quite literally "breaks" the air as he reiterates explicitly four times in this twenty-one line passage; his description reaches its fever pitch when he says that, when a musical instrument is played, "The air ys twyst with violence/ And rent—loo, thys ys my sentence" (775-76). Ironically—and likely uncomprehendingly—the Eagle's "sentence" is undercut by what it attempts to mean. His "sentence" concerns the impossibility of "sentence" and spatial imagination. Chaucer suggests that sound, in its most fundamental form, ruptures the visual in order to manifest itself. His poem, in fact, conflates the two: it forecloses the possibility of speech referring to anything it attempts to (visually) apprehend, shunting it back to the speaker. Yet in the *House of Fame*, this very closing off of visual representation is

repeatedly imaged within the narrative. His various attempts to resituate speech outside of his own narrative fail due to the rather obvious fact that it continues to be a narrative.

Chaucer elaborates on this relationship between air and representation as he is conveyed upward by the Eagle. Later in the poem, at line 905, Geoffrey says that the Eagle

Was flowen fro the ground so hye  
That al the world, as to myn yë,  
No more semed than a prikke;  
or elles was the air so thikke  
That y ne myghte not discerne. (904-908)

The Eagle's reference to Icarus follows soon after, when he tells Chaucer that neither Alexander of Macedon, Scipio, Dedalus nor Icarus had flown half as high as this, ironically confusing our sense of his middle way with the lofty height that destroyed Icarus (920). As he rises, the air—again like the glass in Venus's temple—becomes opaque; oddly enough, as he reaches toward the domain where history is preserved, indestructibly, Geoffrey becomes unable to see it. Or rather, Chaucer makes the opacity of language the object of his representation: as he turns upward, away from the world and toward Fame's House, he beholds a new space populated with "eyryssh bestes," air rendered visible and given form. Whether we are to equate these figures with the denizens of the House of Fame is left unclear; Chaucer does call them citizens at one point, but they seem to precede the House itself. Regardless, these beasts announce a new facet to Chaucer's commentary on language: the disruption of vision becomes the medium through which Chaucer effects representation; his narrative makes visible this

rupture in the visual mechanics of signification. In doing so, he circles closer to the narrative mechanism that will ultimately push himself and his reader out of narrative and into a pure linguistic duration.

Reconfiguring his earlier description of sound as broken air, Chaucer subsequently attempts to frustrate his representation by plenitude rather than a reductive violence. The Eagle announces this immediately after his initial description:

Now hennesforth y wol the teche  
How every speche, or noyse, or soun,  
Thurgh hys multiplicacioun,  
Thogh hyt were piped of a mous,  
Mot nede come to Fames Hous. (782-86)

Chaucer finally presents here, the eschatological space in which all of history extends simultaneously in an ongoing present that accumulates all the sonic detritus of the past. But, as Chaucer now introduces, we must understand its extent in two ways. The first is finite, though impossibly vast: every event from the past and every material body that was involved in it is recreated in its entirety in the House. Sound is apprehended in metonymic intervals—the span in which a story is told, for instance, would be reimagined as the storyteller replaying an entire sequence of sound. Dante's eschatology follows this pattern, encapsulating all the various moments of a person's life within the rubric of a single body. It is a fundamentally moral and intellectual vision of time, since moral interpretation requires the compression of duration. However, everything about Chaucer's narrative up to this point asks us to resist this simplistic conceptualization of the House. It asks us also to conceive of language and history in

terms of its duration; only in this sense does it press towards the infinite. Chaucer unchains the event into the multitude of temporal points it compresses, and ultimately, its ineffable present duration.

Chaucer elaborates on this dual model of time and language in his image of the widening circle. The Eagle likens the clear process by which sound comes to Fame's domain to the circles produced by a rock being thrown in water:

That whel wol cause another whel,  
And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,  
Every sercle causynge other  
Wydder than hymselfe was;  
And thus fro roundel to compas,  
Ech aboute other goynge  
Causeth of othres sterynge  
And multiplynge ever moo. (794-801)

At first glance, the Eagle's analogy seems to describe the process by which famous utterances gain their authority. They are spoken or written at a single, local point, from which they spread outward in a series of repetitions and citations. Our own familiar analogy of "circles of influence" derives from a similar metaphor. However, as the Eagle has already said, a sound does not need to be famous to be conveyed to Fame's house; even the piping of a mouse is reconstituted there. Rather, it seems to describe the persistence of the individual articulations that we compress into a linguistic event when we make meaning from sound. While, in making meaning, we must cease to hear earlier sounds in order to apprehend later ones, and to recoordinate them in memory, Chaucer

indicates that the sounds do not actually pass away. Their loss is a trick of our perception, too weak to hear them persist, toppling over one another in the simultaneity of the present that they all inhabit. Past sounds motivate and determine future ones, but they do not really pass away in Chaucer's world; they had being once, and so they always have being regardless of whether or not we have discarded them.

Chaucer's favorite analogy for this ongoing presence of language is the sea. As we saw earlier, Chaucer locates the House in the middle of heaven, earth and the sea, a detail which he draws from Ovid's account;<sup>19</sup> yet, outside of the Classical context, we expect the commonplace tripartite model of the cosmos deployed by Dante. The sea emphasizes the materiality of the House of Fame and its tie to the historical world rather than the world of moral metaphysics. He reiterates this situation at line 846, adding that this locale is "most conservatyf the soun." Chaucer forces us to place the noise of the sea alongside the articulated sounds of speech produced on Earth in so locating Fame's domain. The image of the sea intensifies the conundrums of the House that Chaucer has left unsaid: first, the sea cannot be divided into discernible entities that could be reimaged in the House of Fame; second, its sounds cannot be divided into distinct moments of articulation. What interval of the sea song would be conveyed to the House—each crashing of a wave, each slosh of water against water? And what body would be imagined, when sea sounds are produced by the endless recombinations of water? The infiltration of the sea into Fame's House forces us to imagine language and sound in

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<sup>19</sup> We should note that Chaucer's treatment of Ovid is one point of correspondence between Books 2 and 3 and Book 1. In Ovid, the episode of describing Fame's House is not only quite brief, but is only a rhetorical adornment anticipating news of Troy's invasion. As Chaucer accentuated the lacunae left by Virgil's narrative and the subsequent commentary tradition, the bulk of his poem drastically and comically expands on an otherwise insignificant lacuna in the *Metamorphoses*.

terms of a temporal duration that defies the intellective parsing of time into discrete moments marked out by discrete entities.

As Geffrey and the Eagle near the House itself, Chaucer intensifies this sea thematic. The Eagle asks Geffrey

“Maistow not heren that I do?”  
“What?” quod I. “The grete soun,”  
Quod he, “that rumbleth up and doun  
In Fames Hous, full of tydynges,  
Bothe of feir speche and chidynges,  
And of fals and soth compounded.  
Herke wel; hyt is not rounded.  
Herestow not the grete swogh?”  
“Yis, parde,” quod y, “wel ynogh.”  
“And what soun is it lyk?” quod hee.  
“Peter, lyk betynge of the see.” (1024-34)

Oddly, Geffrey seems initially incapable of hearing the noise of the place because it is so ubiquitous. Despite the volume of the sound—he says that it “is not rounded,” or whispered—the Eagle has to expound on it before it becomes discernible. He calls this ubiquitous noise a “swogh,” which the MED defines as a general “rushing sound, as of water or wind,” or a “murmuring.”<sup>20</sup> Chaucer deliberately characterizes this noise as inarticulate when heard in its totality; the chaos of this white noise is also visual when it seems almost to defy gravity, rumbling up and down. As such, when Chaucer is asked to

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<sup>20</sup> The term seems almost to recall Elijah’s vision of God on Mount Horeb when he sees a powerful wind, an earthquake and a fire, but then only hears God in the “whistling of a gentle air” (*1 Kings* 19:12).



liken the noise to something, he chooses the sea whose noise is already represented within this “swogh.” Most importantly, Chaucer overlays his pervasive mention of “tydynges” with the idea of the ocean in these lines. He reveals the term to be another pun: in addition to its temporal associations, he evokes its association with the “tides” in the modern usage of the word. By compressing these two inflections into the governing term of the poem, Chaucer implies that its aim is the apprehension of sound in its present duration, sound not subject to the recombinative functions of memory that produces language. When every sound ever articulated has its own individual presence, language becomes impossible; the ontological space that it seeks to describe—which we conceive of as the space of existence and presence—is supplanted by a richer idea of present duration, the space in which language is articulated.

In parallel with this likeness between “swogh” and sea, Chaucer reiterates his conception of language as broken air. After articulating the initial comparison, he says

Or elles [it is] lyk the last humblynge

After the clappe of a thundringe,

Whan Joves hath the air ybete.

But yt doth me for fere swete. (1039-42)

Interestingly, in this iteration of the image—again drawn from Ovid—the sounds in the House of Fame are likened to the aftermath of air’s breakage rather than the breakage itself. Chaucer maintains the notion that his poem breaks the representational capacity of language, yet he also acknowledges that the poem depends on representational narrative to effect this breakage. This feature of the poem reintroduces it to the realm of the secondary—the poem can only be an echo of what it attempts to name. Further, it should

be noted that the idea of likening this sound to anything, which task is pursued further in these lines, is inappropriate—as we have seen, the sound itself defies the descriptive, referential power of language. Any likeness can only prove a partial metonym for the sound considered in itself, since both the sea and thunder from the heavens would be represented in it. It is essentially ineffable. However, the sound itself is only a likeness, albeit a perfect one. Chaucer’s narrative trails after the idea that is its generative principle, the clap of thunder—deriving from the Jove to whom the Eagle would not bear Geoffrey—that disturbed the clear air of representational language. No act of language can recuperate that idea, though every act of language manifests it. Chaucer emphasizes the secondary relationship between what his narrative imagines and what it wants to instill in the reader; his text operates on two levels: that of its imagined narrative, and that of the temporality passing as we read the poem. Each moment of the latter is a clap of thunder that renders the former unintelligible and unnecessary, so fulfilling the narrative’s aim and delivering the reader into a persisting presence that linguistic recombination obscures. Chaucer’s innovation is to place narrative at the service of the clap so that its echoes direct us toward their object. The House’s represented space is a simulacrum of the entire creation, conceived as God would witness it from the judgement seat: perfectly present, and so disarticulated from the historical temporality that gave birth to it.

This simulacral relationship is manifested not solely in this thunderous description, but in every sound that populates the House of Fame. Though I have deployed the idea throughout my discussion of the second Book, only at its end do we actually discover that sounds are reimaged as their speakers in the House. The Eagle’s discussion of the machinery by which sounds are conveyed to the House thus far has

been meticulous in its absurd logic. However, when he describes this most important facet of the poem, he offers little rationalization of it, simply calling it a “wonder thyng” and then departing (1083). In his account,

Whan any speche ycomen ys  
Up to the paleys, anon-ryght  
Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight  
Which that the word in erthe spak,  
Be hyt clothed red or blak;  
And hath so verray hys lyknesse  
That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse  
That it the same body be. (1074-81)

As he did above, Chaucer accentuates the “likeness” of these simulacra to the moment in which they were spoken, recollecting their secondary relationship to the sounds that produced them.<sup>21</sup> In the final two lines, the Eagle distinguishes between the historical speaker and her image in Fame’s domain while emphasizing how perfect the image is. Ironically, the *House of Fame*, which forecloses the possibility of speech meaning what it says, simultaneously seems to perfect representation—the representation of Chaucer’s bracketing of representation. However, Chaucer also renders his perfected representations incapable of articulating anything themselves. The dissonance between the praxis of the poem and its idea is most intense here, since Chaucer deliberately

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<sup>21</sup> In *Chaucer Reads “The Divine Comedy,”* Karla Taylor reads the clothing of the embodied sounds as deriving from “black-letter manuscripts with red capitals and rubrics” (34). In so clothing his sounds, Chaucer seems to be describing the relationship between oral and written texts—written texts are reproduced by a host of different voices and so are overlaid with the physical image of the text; in this sense, the image can even describe the reader of the poem who is allowing her voice to be determined by the text.

disarticulates language at the level of sentences, unchaining words from the interval that produced the sentence. Each word is imagined as the body that spoke it, so that, if a sentence, paragraph, etc. was gathered into a single room in the House, they would all simultaneously bleat their part, unsubordinated by the passage of time. Yet there is nothing to stop him from applying this same procedure to the temporality that produces the word itself; we will see him increasingly disarticulate time over the course of Book 3 as his own poem produces a heap of linguistic bodies reiterating their moment in their unintelligible sea-song of *tydynges*.

As William Quinn argues, the deliberately secondary nature of Chaucer's sonic bodies strikingly resemble Dante's shades (184). The embodiment of sound is Chaucer's most striking innovation in the poem—it does not appear in Ovid, whose Fame sits atop a high tower and seems to perceive the world as it is happening. Both Chaucer and Dante invoke the idea of resurrection in such shades, but they both insist on the lack of identification between the shade and the historical person that produced it, which identification resurrection would imply. For Dante, this secondary relationship implies that a shade summarizes and encapsulates the interval of a life. Caroline Walker Bynum has noted that Dante's shades seem to retain the individuality they had in life (295-304); at times, they even seem to have physicality, though at others they distinctly lack it. However, as Dante comes to understand in *Paradise* 14, shades are fundamentally incomplete beings. Even the blessed in Paradise anticipate the time when they will be able to leave behind their radiant shades to return to their historical bodies. They suggest that the light of God which illumines the shade—and by which they see back to their

source—will actually be increased when they regain their substantial bodies.<sup>22</sup> Much of Dante's project works to reintroduce narrative space and time to metaphysics, which his shades impersonate. But though they are capable of expressing their continued temporality as a result, they are nonetheless fixed in the moral universe Dante has composed. A shade compresses an interval, which is judged by God and assigned a state. This is clearest in Hell and Paradise where orders are fixed; but even in the mobility of Purgatory an inevitable trajectory is firmly marked out. The bodily effects that manifest time in the afterlife are more a performance of those effects, since they lack the capacity to produce the new, the capacity to authentically hope. Only the historical body possesses that capacity since it is more fully capable of feeling the effects of other bodies. Presence is relational, and though the shades of Paradise worship God's perfect presence without obstruction, they still lack the capacity to fully represent it in their secondary afterimages. The resurrection will effect a perfect marriage between the body that moves and changes, and the static revelation available in the afterlife.

Chaucer parodies Dante's shades by fracturing the interval that they encapsulate. The coherence of the individual life was central to the *Comedy*; without it, there could be no reconciliation of time and intellect to God's persisting presence. The historical, temporally integrated self was divorced from God, insofar as her present was determined by the past and the future; however, she was also capable of contacting the present in the experience of grace, in the love and beauty that are the very engines of history, whose advent history is always at the work of mourning or anticipating. Chaucer radicalizes Dante's project by fragmenting the subject perceiving and the subject manifesting that

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<sup>22</sup> "per che s'accrescerà ciò che ne dona/ di gratuito lume il sommo bene,/ lume ch'a lui veder ne condiziona" [therefore that gift of free light from the highest good will be increased there, the light that conditions us to see to him] (14.46-48).

grace; he leaves no purchase from which the historically integrated self might read his text. He suggests that any notion of interval projected into the eschatological space is misplaced and dangerous, especially as it might be applied to God. Any God who judges interval must prove as fickle as Lady Fame, and any self constantly reintegrating itself through history must become one of her sycophants. Language is their medium, as the sounds that manifest ongoing duration are surrendered to those that precede and follow them. However, Chaucer suggests that we can inhabit our own fragmentation, place memory at the work of disintegrating itself. We can experience time, not solely in terms of intervals apprehended by the intellect, but as an ongoing duration constantly at the work of remaking itself. His shades remain shades because they are not ourselves: they represent our capacity to inhabit our moment while also instantiating the point at which we have surrendered that capacity.

### *Fame and the Transgression of History*

Ironically, the Eagle's description of the sonic bodies in Fame's House seems to actually invert the normal mechanism of fame—in the concept of fame, a group's representation of a person determines their being and meaning. Yet in the House of Fame, gossip would simply appear as the person who spoke the gossip rather than the person being gossiped about. That speech act itself would be placed before Fame's seat and judged; its resulting fame or infamy would be spread abroad by Eolus's trumpets, which we presume would result in an alteration of the way a person is perceived and talked about in the historical world (though the poem leaves this mechanism surprisingly undefined). This apprehension may be spread abroad, yet as the gossip produced by

Lady Fame returned to her house, it would again be imagined as the person who spoke it, simply as she spoke it in the world. Ironically, none of Fame's inflations or deflations can have any purchase in her own domain. Fame is powerless to alter the image of the person to whom it refers in the House. The representations which constitute the famous, infamous and un-famous alike demonstrate their inability to describe the world; the only being they ultimately uncover is that of their speech-act impotently directed outside itself, and presuming a power to ontologize others which it fundamentally lacks.

Fame, in the poem, describes a very human misapprehension of the temporal space she inhabits. She demonstrates, everywhere, the impossibility of her production. We understand this first by the fact that she is an allegorical figure inhabiting a starkly historical space. In the terms the poem has given us, it is impossible for her to appear—there is no Lady Fame existing in the world who says the things that she does, nor is there a house like hers to make noises capable of being converted into an after-image.

Allegory derives from a moral syllogism, extrapolated from a multitude of similar historical experiences; that syllogism is subsequently articulated by narrative means, making bodies or the interactions of bodies elaborate some facet of the concepts that inform them. But this type of extrapolation is precisely what the *House of Fame* refuses to do—its informing idea is to resituate all speech within history, essentially to undo the compression that allegory, conceived both in the narrower sense of the genre and in the broader sense of interpretation, effects. Second, and relatedly, she is impossible because she is conscious. By the Eagle's account, no act of discourse inhabiting the House should be aware of its existence as a sonic shade: properly, they should be afterimages incapable of expressing new agency or generating new speech. Nor do we see the image of any

non-human inhabiting the House, suing at her seat for recollection. Yet Fame styles herself a judge, and seems to actually confer her awareness onto the other speech bodies that surround her.<sup>23</sup> They become capable of posturing in relation to Fame; snobs and lovers all, they incessantly reflect on their reputations, attempting to reimpose the interval of meaning back onto their shattered bodies. Though Chaucer has been at pains to level language with all other sounds, he suggests that it differs in one crucial respect: the egotism by which it compresses the ongoing duration of sound into an interval capable of being judged by Fame. These sounds sell the moment in which they are spoken—the moment faithfully reimaged in the House—to history; their consciousness is a product of language’s failure to simply exist, so that the non-being of past and future, of interval, inhabit the sound more than the sound itself. Ironically, the fact that Chaucer’s sounds self-consciously clamor for fame does cuttingly imagine what they said, but again in an impossibly allegorical sense. Chaucer reduces all human speech to a vain vying for, or avoidance of, fame that effaces its individual character. The bodies that speak retain their historical particularity, but the speech that produced them is tragically allegorized into this one meaning of all human speech: that it occurs in a present moment that it remains intrinsically unaware of.

Chaucer announces this concern for the temporality of language at the beginning of Book three. He reconfigures the sea metaphors of the previous book into the mountain of ice, atop which Fame’s House sits. When he first approaches it, Geoffrey cannot understand what material it is made from: he discerns some “congeled matere” characterized principally by its clarity. The term “congeled” is particularly interesting,

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<sup>23</sup>As Delany, “Chaucer’s House of Fame and the Ovide Moralise,” 212-13, argues, few of Chaucer’s sources ever cast Fame as a judge figure. This role is usually reserved for her sister Fortune whom Chaucer conflates with Fame as Boccaccio does in the *De Casibus*. See also Boitani 152.



since it denotes a process by which liquid is rendered solid. It is noteworthy, first, that Chaucer does not seem to intend that we understand the mountain as a physical form being reimaged in the House. It is again an allegory in a space where allegory is impossible: the liquidity of the sea of tidings that Geoffrey encountered during his ascent is here rendered static. As it is converted into a more permanent form, it becomes incapable of manifesting the constantly growing, motive chaos of embodied noise that seems to swell up around it. Ironically, sounds seem to become incapable of speaking when they are congealed into the mountain; they are transformed from the historical bodies demanded by the text into something else entirely. The substance's clarity recalls Geoffrey's first excursion in Venus' temple, and the visible disruption of representation offered by the Eagle. Geoffrey sees the names of famous people, engraved on the surface of this calcified sound. Though the ice's clarity suggests that the mechanisms of representation could function through it, that a referent could be seen through the ice, Geoffrey stops short at its surface and the egotistical inscription carved on it. Language is, in its representational aspect, hollow for him—ultimately, he could only see more ice through the ice, see its ongoing attempt at reference—but instead he sees the names of speakers, who attempt to codify a self through linguistic recombination. One almost gets the sense that the ice congeals in order to serve as a medium for their names, as though the act of inscription in the poem can precede its medium by necessitating it.

The means by which the mountain of ice is maintained suggests this twisting of temporal and causal logic. Like Fame herself, the mountain of ice presents a physical object in Fame's domain that is unable to be produced in the terms the poem has given us. Geoffrey tells us that the names etched in the ice are always threatened by the sun, which

melts them back into their liquid form. The names on one side of the hill are effaced in this manner, while those on the other are sheltered by the shadow of the Fame's house. The House of Fame and its "feble fundament" (1132) thus present a conundrum: the mountain cannot congeal without the shade of the House, but the House cannot be built until the mountain exists beneath it. For its foundation to exist, the House must first exist in thin air, or at least it must be adrift on the sea of tidings that it freezes. Chaucer makes this impossibility intensely personal: "Hyt was conserved with the shade/ Of a castel that stood on high—/ Al this writynge that I sigh" (1162). The last term feels as though it wants to slur into a term for sight, indicating the visual mountain that Chaucer has just narrated into being. But it stops short in a sigh, referring us back to Chaucer's own narrative production. The writing that he sighs refers to the names inscribed in the mountain, but it also suggests an affinity between those names and his poem itself, the words passing across the page each of which should be imagined as a distinct Geoffrey, or as an innumerable succession of readers.

As many critics have noted, the mountain also recollects Dante's Purgatory; however I would argue that it more strongly evokes another important mountain from Dante's poem: Mount Parnassus, the poetic mountain said to be home to the Muses, Apollo, and Bacchus. In fact, Dante's poem itself overlays the ideas of the two mountains—Dante's purgation is always a poetic one, an attempt to find a narrative mode capable of representing the divine. His first mention of the mountain occurs at the summit of Purgatory, where he says that the great poets residing on Parnassus may have been able to imagine the prelapsarian garden he finds there (28.139-41). Chaucer has already mentioned Parnassus once in the Proem to Book 2. There, he invokes the Muses

who reside on Parnassus, asking them to help him “to endite and ryme” (519). Chaucer situates the Muses on Parnassus rather than Helicon, a different mountain which was also said to be their home; he metonymically transforms the latter, rather, into a well near Parnassus.

The geography that Chaucer establishes in this earlier mention corresponds well to Fame’s domain. While, for reasons I will speculate on below, Chaucer does not picture the twin peaks of Parnassus, his way up Fame’s mountain it is littered with the image of famous poets, the first of whom is Orpheus, who was raised on Parnassus. The poetic wellspring that Chaucer describes here is also metaphorically recalled in his description of the House of Tidings, which lies in a valley beneath the castle.<sup>24</sup> As he describes the absurd size and construction of the House—it is sixty miles long and made all of twigs—he implicitly contrasts its strong foundations to the House of Fame’s weak ones. Though its timber is “of no strengthe,” Chaucer says that the House of Tidings

is founded to endure  
While that hit lyst to Aventure,  
That is the moder of tydynges,  
As the see of welles and of sprynges;  
And hyt was shapen lyk a cage. (1980-84)

In an odd instance of local personification, Chaucer seems to set up Aventure—who suggests the figure of Fortune that we expect to see in Fame’s seat, but who seems also a personification of simple historical occurrence—in contrast to Lady Fame. However, he undermines the tendency toward allegory in his subsequent analogy; he allies her, rather

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<sup>24</sup> Chaucer may also be referencing Delphi in this description, situated on the lower slopes of Parnassus, though this association is less clear in the poem. Such a correspondence would, however, fit well with Chaucer’s explicit invocation of Apollo, and his inversion of the idea of prophecy.

to his amorphous sea imagery, but also to the wells and springs that were a ubiquitous analogy for poetic creation in the Middle Ages, being associated with the Muses in Classical tradition. Chaucer suggests that this shapeless “Aventure,” which the form of his poem has forced him to name, is the foundation of the House of Tidings, whereas the impossible ice is the foundation of Fame. In this well beside Chaucer’s poetic mountain, the House of Tidings is submerged beneath the sea of sound that is its foundation, the sea that is perilously calcified to raise up Fame’s House. Here, the proliferation of tidings, of temporality reflected in its infinite purity, constantly swell beyond the confines of walls, whose rickety character and monstrous size seem designed to demonstrate the impossibility of effectively caging its contents. Chaucer subverts the idea that poetic fame is capable of conferring more or less existence on the matters it represents; all such events bubble up in the “grete swogh,” the sea of tidings that confers being not on the objects that poets describe, but that manifests the being of the poets themselves.

Chaucer’s description of the sun melting the mountain also refers us back to his Invocation, which contains a further allusion to Parnassus. The Invocation to Book 3 is the most explicit and sustained borrowing from Dante in the poem. In it, Chaucer prays to Apollo, who dwelt atop Parnassus, “This lytel last bok thou gye” (1093). The invocation draws from the first canto of *Paradiso*, in which Dante expresses misgivings about his capacity to represent the divine realm. Though he begins the final leg of his journey with an ineffability topos, he nevertheless persists in his description, asking first for Apollo’s aid:

O buono Appollo, a l’ultimo lavoro

fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,  
come dimandi a dar la amato alloro.

Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso  
assai mi fu, ma o con amendue  
m'è uopo intrar ne l'aringo rimaso. (1.13-18)

[O good Apollo, for the final work make me, of your valor, a vessel made  
such as you ask from those to whom you give the beloved laurel. Until  
this point one peak of Parnassus was enough for me, but it is necessary for  
me to enter into the remaining arena with both]

As he does in the *Convivio*, Dante makes the sun god a figure for the Christian God, asking him for poetic grace in both senses of the term. In the *Convivio*, Dante says that the sun is a particularly appropriate metaphor for God because of the basic analogy between vision and intellect.<sup>25</sup> As light allows our vision to perceive sense objects, so the light of God confers being itself, and not just visibility, in its emanation. Dante uses this same metaphor on the threshold dividing Purgatory from Paradise, in the divine palace atop the penitential Parnassus that has refined his poetics. It has refined his poetry, in part, by making it passive: carrying on his guide motif, Dante now asks Apollo to directly remake him into a new sort of linguistic vessel. This passivity is accentuated by the allusion to Ovid's Daphne throughout the invocation; but whereas Daphne resisted Apollo's advances and so was transformed into the laurel, Dante pictures himself deliberately submitting to the transformative effects of the poetic god. Similarly, Dante likens himself in the next stanza to Marsyas, the satyr whom Apollo flayed alive for

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<sup>25</sup> On Chaucer's use of the *Convivio*, see Minnis.

presuming to compete with him in a singing contest. As we have seen, Dante again transmutes Apollo's violence toward poets as a metaphor for contemplative ascent; he acknowledges his hubris in attempting to narrate Paradise, but suggests that the punishment resulting from that hubris can serve as the vehicle of his transformation.

Scholars have argued over the significance of the two peaks of Parnassus since the first generation of Dante's commentators. In Classical tradition, the palace of Bacchus was on the top of one peak while that of Apollo was on the other. In his commentary on the *Comedy*, Dante's son, Pietro di Dante, reads the peaks as signifying *scientia* and *sapientia*, earthly and spiritual knowledge.<sup>26</sup> I would suggest that, to Chaucer's mind, the peaks similarly represent his common division between poetic pleasure and *sentence*, its moral significance. The debauched Bacchus rules over the one peak, the contemplative sun god over the other. For Chaucer, the challenge in Dante's representation of Paradise is the difficulty of manifesting grace in the visible narrative body without allowing that body to be denigrated into a fetish. The stakes are impossibly high: if Dante imagines narrative pleasure without its theological significance, Paradise itself will revert into Hell via a habituating materialism; if he shunts spatial and temporal pleasures to the margin, as centuries of theologians had done, his Paradise will lack the feature of the material world that motivated him to seek it. Dante must ally the intrinsic and potentially dangerous fascination of narrative space and time to theological insight if he is to adequately represent the continually renewing, poignant presence in which God and the blessed reside; thus he must be inspired by both peaks of the poetic mountain. Chaucer's mountain remains singular, in part to recollect Purgatory—which Dante has overlaid with the image of Parnassus—more forcibly, but also because his poetic ascent

<sup>26</sup> See Durling's note on these lines.

has worked to compress and neutralize the function of both peaks. As we saw while exploring the Eagle, the poem's contemplative *sentence* is its unrelenting reference to the material world, but, in its tiresome references to the time of its own retelling, it renders that world insufferably boring.

As noted, Dante must cast himself as a passive vessel of this union, lest he again practice the perverse resurrective poetics of his *Vita Nuova*. However, in a line that would have been particularly significant for Chaucer, he recognizes that this passivity is itself an authorial act. After finishing his first invocation to Apollo, he seems almost to rebegin:

O divina virtù, se mi ti presti  
tanto che l'ombra del beato regno  
segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,  
vedra' mi a pié del tuo diletto legno  
venire e coronarmi de le foglie  
che la materia e tu mi farai degno. (22-27)

[O divine power, if you would lend me so much of yourself that I might manifest the shade of the blissful realm marked out in my head, you will see me come to the foot of your beloved tree and crown myself with the leaves of which the matter and you will make me worthy]

Dante still couches his self-crowning in a series of subjunctives that surrender his poetic agency to God and the *materia*—the subject and the bodily matter—of Paradise, that his poetry will reflect; and, further establishing the link between his shades and his poetics, he moderates the claims of his *Paradise* by asking only to represent the *ombra* cast by the

place itself. But despite these cautions, he acknowledges the authorial arrogance that will be apparent in his attempt to describe the ineffable realm. Beyond the danger of its subject matter noted above, Dante recognizes a second danger: any attempt by an author to surrender poetic agency expresses a new, subterranean poetic agency. Poets are always crowning themselves, even when they profess to be doing otherwise. Dante attempts to defer the responsibility for this inherent poetic egotism onto the loftiness of what he must address and the god who gracefully enables it; his conceit remains that he is a conduit conveying divine power to language and narrative. He allies his will to God's in doing so, but he cannot eradicate that will as his own violent metaphors of submission enjoined him to do. Poetic pride remains capable of breaking the circuit between his divine subject matter and the source that allows him to speak of it; even his earlier masochism cannot obviate this feature of his poetics. However, in the next two stanzas, Dante suggests that failure to ennoble the poet is, in fact, a greater sin, the product of the "colpa e vergogna de l'umane voglie" [sin and shame of the human will] (30). The poet participates in the mobile grace of Paradise—he is his own, autobiographical "materia"—and so he must celebrate his poetic act along with all its objects, with as little ego as he can muster.

Chaucer's key revision of Dante's Apollo, as I have noted, is that he sets the God in opposition to the poetic mountain that should enshrine him. Chaucer turns poetry against itself; he asks Dante's contemplative god of poetry to render sounds that have been codified into poetic representation back into their purely temporal, liquid form. The Invocation to Book 3 suggests this alteration:

O God of science and of lyght,



Appollo, thurgh thy grete myght,  
This lytel laste bok thou gye!  
Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,  
Here art poetical be shewed,  
But for the rym is lyght and lewed,  
Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,  
Though som vers fayle in a sillable,  
And that I do no diligence  
To shewe craft, but o sentence. (1091-1100)

Chaucer's description of Apollo as the god of science and light suggests his conflation of the *Convivio* and the Invocation of the *Paradiso*. Apollo is the god of the spatial world, whose light, in conferring visibility, resembles God's emanation of intelligibility. However, Chaucer pits the literal-mythological level of the analogy against its spiritual one—Apollo's light is precisely what melts the House of Fame's foundations, the space of knowable "science" in the poem. The visuality of Chaucer's world, again, attempts to render the visible world unintelligible.

Chaucer asks this Apollo to guide the narrative of his little last book, a characterization that belies Book 3's ungentle length; however, drawing on Dante's submissive posture, he asks not to show his mastery of poetic art, but actually to demonstrate his ineptitude. The repeated "for" suggests an uncomfortable parallel construction. The first "for" clearly indicates motive: he does not wish that poetic art be showed in his poem for the sake of an egotistical mastery of his craft. Alternatively, but to the same effect, it can simply be the object of "wilne," with the subsequent line working

as an apposition modifying “maistrye.” The second operates in a different grammatical sense, introducing a clause of opposition—which “though” will do much more clearly and redundantly two lines later; however, it retains an echo of the earlier usage. This is compounded by the seemingly wayward “that” of line 1094, whose antecedent can only be “gye.” He asks Apollo to guide his book, *so that* Chaucer will do no diligence to show his craft, again introducing a purpose clause that defines the motive of his text. In place of Dante’s prayers for a submissive transformation, Chaucer consistently refers his reader to the metrical and grammatical level of his poem, drawing attention to the deficiencies of its prosody. Yet the idea of that transformation echoes from the *Comedy*: Dante’s aim was essentially to be converted into the form of the inhabitants of Paradise. He wanted to read everything in the world as a manifestation of grace, which is always spatial and temporal. Similarly, the attention that Chaucer draws here to each slip of his meter asks us to conceptualize him in terms of the stuttering sonic bodies of Fame’s House. Dante’s concern for the loftiness of his *materia* is here converted into the fear of *Thopas*’s “drasty rhyming;” he is concerned that we will only be able to hear the sounds of the poem’s language due to deficiencies in its craft. But whereas Harry Bailly devastatingly halts *Thopas*, Chaucer here names this purely temporal experience of the poem as his aim. Dante’s desire to represent divine grace runs parodically parallel to Chaucer’s attempt to represent historical people in their acts of representation. He applies the dangers of representing the divine identified by Dante uniformly to all poetic description. Poetry inherently fails to represent the full duration of its objects, which is why both Dante and Chaucer cast their poems as secondary shadows. Yet it also, equally inherently, manifests duration by submitting narrative representation to the constraints of meter and rhyme. Its

internal form refers us back to its vehicle. Ironically, Chaucer attempts to elaborate on this feature of poetry by breaking its rules, then drawing our attention to that breakage. Chaucer's lack of diligence in showing craft is, in fact, the unifying *sentence* of the text, punctuated by its light hexameter and its occasional metric failure. Otherwise, his text has worked to foreclose the possibility of a coherent *sentence*; Chaucer deploys the term as another pun, referencing both an essential meaning, and a simple act of utterance.

In the second half of the Invocation, Chaucer elaborates on his ineptitude, subverting Dante's pretense to poetic elevation. As he continues:

And yif, devyne vertu, thow  
Wilt helpe me to shewe now  
That in myn hed ymarked ys—  
Loo, that is for to menen this,  
The Hous of Fame for to descryve—  
Thou shalt se me go as blyve  
Unto the nexte laure y see,  
And kysse yt, for hyt is thy tree. (1101-1108)

We might first note that Chaucer deliberately ruins the rhetoric of Dante's invocation here by needlessly elaborating on what is marked in his head. The power of Dante's line is in the economy of his expression, but Chaucer's "lyght and lewed" rhyme draws attention to the fact that he has failed to articulate his idea clearly in his translation of Dante. The line itself is a simulacrum that draws attention to its inexactness. Also, whereas Dante names the shadow of Paradise as the direct object he hopes to visually manifest, Chaucer's apposition makes the tableau of himself describing the House the object of his showing.

Dante's representational attempt to manifest Paradise is transformed into a self-consciously linguistic description. To punctuate his failed translation, Chaucer bungles the self-crowning episode; even if Apollo were to bless him, Chaucer indicates that he would not know what to do in the presence of the poetic tree. His kiss is one of incompetent veneration. Part of Dante's justification for elevating himself as a poet was that he shared in the beatitude of his subject, but Chaucer dodges that elevation by sharing in the general confusion of the *House of Fame*.

He avoids poetic honor, also, by debasing poetry itself, along with poets. The mountain of ice provides us with his first image of what poetry and narrative do to its purveyors; as he begins to climb it, he seems almost to begin again, reconfiguring his critique of poetry to center on its status as an imitation. On the slopes of the mountain, he finds Orpheus singing and harping along with several other famous poets, and with a multitude of imitators behind them. His strategy is again that of Dante, using a few famous figures, described distinctly, to metonymically describe a larger group whose members are largely anonymous. However, Chaucer reverses the formula, centering on the "many thousand tymes twelve" (1216) imitators rather than their exemplars. As the lesser poets sit beneath their betters, they "gunne on hem upward to gape,/ And countrefete hem as an ape,/ Or as craft countrefeteth kynde" (1211-13). Chaucer's image of poetic production is of a brutish, unreasoning imitation of ultimately mythological figures; the eponymous poets he names—Orpheus, Orion, Chiron and Glascurion—are so overlaid with the detritus of mythological tradition that they, like Lady Fame, can scarcely be produced here. They only vaguely reflect historical poets capable of being imagined on the mountain, but are as much the objects of song as singers themselves. In

essence, they are produced by the legions of followers that ape them. Poetry, for Chaucer, generates an ephemeral ontology for its famous forebears that legitimates its entire edifice; those forebears partially stabilize aesthetics, such that poets are not forced to commit themselves to the shifting flux of language perceived as pure temporality. But, even more devastating than this characterization of poetic production is its implications for representation itself. Craft counterfeiting kind is as pithy a summary of Chaucer's own poem as one could ask for; moreover, it condenses an entire theory of mimesis that was supposed to provide the *raison d'être* of medieval poetics. Yet Chaucer makes it the second, ancillary analogy describing poets' mindless imitation of their peers. Poetry's mimetic veneration invents the natural world it tries to reflect by parsing it into discrete moments and populating it with discrete objects. In doing so, it actually serves to exile us from the apprehension of time and space that Chaucer implies in the House, the perfectly present vantage point from which God—the Word in its perfect form, before it is committed to a referent—perceives the creation.

After this disastrous critique of poetry, Chaucer can only continue to forge his way up the mountain through a tactic that now feels familiar: he describes profusely the multitude of sounds and figures he sees, then ends by twice referring us to the surface of his text. In this instance, however, when Chaucer draws attention to the simultaneous boredom and impossibility of his description, he more insistently applies his interruption to the reader. He sees on the mountain a great quantity of poets,

Whiche that I kan not nevene,  
Moo than sterres ben in hevene,  
Of whiche I nyl as now not ryme,

For ese of yow and los of tyme.  
For tyme ylost, this knowen ye,  
Be no way may recovered be. (1253-58)

Indeed, at this point we understand the irrecoverability of time from Chaucer's own text—he almost indicates a slight amazement that his reader has persisted so far into his poem here. Chaucer reverses his usual association of poetry with pleasure such that our “ese” depends on the merciful elision of his experience. His narrative does not excite the vain curiosity of its readers, nor is it meant to. He codes the poem as an almost penitential act that must be eased here, not through narrative indulgence, but through omission. The poem seeks to render his reader aware of the time they invest into his narrative, the “lost” time that, ironically, would be preserved indestructibly in the narrative space he has created.

After Chaucer has finished saying that he must leave some of his experience unsaid, he proceeds to continue in much the same way he did before the interruption; however, he shifts focus away from great poets and singers and onto famous magicians. He draws our attention to the fact that we lose time through his narrative, then he proceeds to inflict that loss on us again. The shift to magicians intensifies his conceptualization of poets: magicians attempt to impose language directly on the world. The medium of imagination, where language is composed into the representative body, is excised. Chaucer's own poetic magic violently curtails the possibility of this “magik naturel” quite as much as it curtails the possibility of poetry, ironically curving the linguistic act away from the world and back to its speaker. As in his profusion of poets, Chaucer can only forestall this line of inquiry with the same diversionary tactic: “What

shuld I make lenger tale/ Of alle the pepil y ther say,/ Fro hennes into domes day?”  
(1282-84). As he did with “sigh,” Chaucer slurs a verb of speaking into a verb of seeing here in a parodic reference to the magicians he has just contained. In doing so, he subtly undermines the referential basis of his poem. He no longer describes a prior dream, within which he saw these figures, but his own act of fictional creation. He referentially “says” these bodies into existence, violating the central tenet of his narrative space: namely, that words are reimagined as their speakers. Yet, alternatively, he also acknowledges one of the central features of the poem—he must cease describing the multitude because, in speaking about them, he “says” more bodies into existence. The *House of Fame*, reduced into the system articulated by the Eagle, is an elaborate tautology where language attempts to describe its own act of description. Yet the overwhelming remainder is the rule here—description can, in fact, only produce more bodies. The attempt to reference anything—even oneself, as Chaucer labors toward here—only wastes the duration one manifests, but fails to comprehend, in the attempt. Chaucer jokingly conceives this waste in eschatological terms, because the temporal position God occupies to judge the world is precisely what is lost; the poets who ply their trade on the slippery slopes of Fame’s mountain lose the continually renewing flux swelling around them to the historical narrative composed by fickle Fame. They inhabit an eternal space and time, yet they perversely submit themselves to the exigencies of earthly time, clamoring to be remembered in a space where they cannot be forgotten.

With this second conceptualization of fame untidily wrapped up, Chaucer progresses into the beryl walls of Fame’s House itself. Within, he finds Lady Fame within a house that seems, at first glance, quite tidily ordered. Chaucer’s third depiction

of fame deliberately tries to exclude the disordered profusion he has found everywhere else; the sense of magnitude persists, but it is restrained by the courtly etiquette that fickle Fame necessitates. People are ordered into companies defined by distinctive “vesture” and codified by heralds (1320-25). Oddly enough, individuals never appear alone before Fame, either to be judged or in the ornamental capacity of the companies: they are always portrayed in groups. The mechanism of the House renders language irremediably personal; speech, which is supposed to foster contact with others, proves unable to reach them. Fame is speech constituting the moral ontology of another person. It determines their being. But this speech would be unable to reach its target in the House of Fame. The sound bodies are generated by the desire for contact with others, but their speech curves back to themselves. We expect individuals to appear before Fame, desiring to spread their names into the mouths of others; however, Chaucer reiterates the imitative orientation to fame he introduced on the mountain’s slopes. Famous individuals organize communities, even as communities generate the famous individual. But their mutual imitation elides the distinctiveness of their moment; it inevitably lodges them in a past that is irrecoverable. Chaucer seems on the brink of admitting that community itself is invariably fraught with the problems of fame worship here. Yet his text itself presents a different form of community in its contact with readers. Chaucer recognizes that his resistance to fame, history and representation are a form of contact as well.

The architecture of Fame’s House similarly exudes the order that the rest of her world makes impossible. Only in the architectural features of the place do we see named, individual poets, yet they are rendered static within the house, tasked with the enormous labor of upholding an impossible edifice. Ovid serves as a typical case of these figures:



...on a piler was,  
Of coper, Venus clerk Ovide,  
That hath ysowen wonder wide  
The grete god of Loves name.  
And ther he bar up wel hys fame  
Upon this piler, also hye  
As I myghte see hyt with myn yë. (1486-92)

Only in the famous poets are we able to actually see narrative representation functioning. All of these poets stand atop metal pillars, and are pictured as bearing up their subject matter as a burden. “Beren,” is emphatically the verb Chaucer uses to describe their poetic activity. The burden they bear is the same impossibility running throughout Book 3—the impossibility of referential language in the narrative space Chaucer has composed. The pillars are not merely ornamental, but load-bearing; they structure the inhabitable space within, which is dependent on language cohering into a comprehensible, representative form. Chaucer mixes historians, such as Josephus, with authors of more fantastic, mythological tales like Ovid, indicating that distinctions between types of representation are irrelevant in the present space of the House. Representation is, for both equally, a burden that language cannot bear up. Oddly enough, he omits Dante from these pillars, despite the significant engagement between his own poem and the *Comedy*. The omission seems both encomium and condemnation: he suggests that Dante may escape the fate of prior poets, as Dante had himself hoped in his own narrative; yet Chaucer may also suggest that Dante’s subject would have unequivocally crushed him beneath its weight.

Fame herself participates in this portrayal of referential language: she “on her shuldres gan sustene/ Bothe th’armes and the name/ Of thoo that hadde large fame” (1410-12) such as Alexander and Hercules. Ironically, the line itself has Fame aping the enormously famous lines from the Aeneid, though with a shift in focus from the “man” Aeneas to the “name” of the famous, which should amount to the same thing in her House. The stasis of famous poets seems to emanate from Fame’s throne:

Ful moche prees of folk ther nas  
Ne crowdyng for to mochil prees.  
But al on hye, above a dees,  
Sitte in a see imperiall,  
That mad was of a rubee all,  
Which that a carbuncle ys ycalled,  
Y saugh, perpetually ystalled,  
A femynyne creature,  
That never formed by Nature  
Nas such another thing yseye. (1358-67)

First, we should note that Chaucer reinforces his critique of the impossibility of fame, introduced first in the mountain of ice. Fame is an allegorical figure and so cannot be produced in her own realm; this is emphasized by Chaucer’s final two lines: Fame’s body only exists here in this space.<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey’s own experience in the world cannot prepare him for the vision of her, since no other “femynyne creature” can resemble her.

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<sup>27</sup> The description of the gate of Fame’s House is similar in this regard: “The castel-yate on my ryght hond,/ Which that so wel corven was/ That never such another nas” (1294-96). Chaucer emphasizes that the castle, like its foremost inhabitant, is emphatically not a reflection of some historical castle whose sounds might be represented here.

Yet all bodies in the *House of Fame* are supposed to be secondary shades defined by their absolute resemblance to a historical counterpart.

Second, and equally noteworthy, Chaucer ironically uses the same pun to describe Fame's seat as he did to describe the chaotic noise she restrains. The Latin-derived "see," in Middle English, acquires connotations of sight; this fact is ironic, as Chaucer has deliberately excluded the visual from Fame's domain. As noted above, in Ovid, Fame can hear and see everything from her tower, but Chaucer's Fame can only see sound-bodies from her judgement seat. The pun also takes on a different tenor here—whereas earlier, as "sea," it was a metaphor of the ever proliferating "prees of folk" in Fame's domain, here it is transformed into a term of episcopal and political authority. Before, the metaphor indicated temporal duration, fully extended and embodied in its infinite parts, but here the metaphor is perversely transformed into one of stasis: Fame is "perpetually ystalled" on her throne, perpetually "dwelling," but also "stopped," "stalled," "frozen." In place of Beatrice—who, atop Dante's mountain, most fully manifested the rehabilitated grace he sought—Chaucer finds someone vaguely resembling Dante's Satan.<sup>28</sup> The likeness to Satan stretches credulity less, when one considers Chaucer's transformation of the mountain itself: as in the final circle of Hell, Chaucer has seen names that should be bodies lodged in the ice. Dante's ice is primarily an image of the

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<sup>28</sup> Chaucer's use of a ruby throne may also support this interpretation. In many of the English and Anglo Norman lapidaries, rubies were considered the most virtuous of gems. As Margaret Jennings notes, "the gem conferred grace, favour and joy," even conferring "love between men and God and between man and woman" (533). Similarly, it is associated with vassalage. Fame's sitting atop the ruby is thus an ambivalent image: it first indicates the lord-vassal relationship she enjoys with those around her. Yet it also seems an image of usurpation and presumption. Rubies enjoy a prominent position in the *Paradiso*—when Dante's vision is further refined in Canto 30, he sees a river of souls glinting like gold and rubies; similarly, in Canto 19, Dante likens the angels to rubies on which sunbeams fall, which are then refracted and magnified into Dante's eyes. The image is one of divine wisdom made visible; however, in Chaucer, it is also again an image of stasis, perhaps even of the confinement of divine grace in the eschatological space. Fame's presumption in sitting upon such a throne resembles Satan's attempt to usurp God's authority.

stasis of hell—the bodies held in thrall by it become incapable of motion; they still persist through time but they cannot manifest time or change. At the crescendo of the *Inferno*, Dante most forcibly demonstrates the relationship between Hell and history: the infamous denizens of Hell are lodged inextricably in a moment that has passed. Their being solely, habitually references a moment that has ceased to be and so to become. Dante attempts to recuperate the famous among the blessed by suggesting that their fame is based on their capacity to experience time as grace; their fame within the confines of history echoes a transhistorical experience of time. This is the attitude that allows him to crown himself with the laurel. Chaucer, on the contrary, extends the damnation of stasis to anyone complicit with Fame's project.

However, as becomes apparent, it is much harder to avoid this complicity than one might expect. Chaucer deliberately tells both the Eagle and his unknown Friend toward the end of the poem that he does not seek fame, but rather "tydynges" of love. But as bands of people present themselves before Fame's seat, it becomes unclear how exactly one can avoid seeking fame. First, the groups that come to be judged by fame contain people of "alleskynnes condiciouns/ That dwelle in erthe under the mone" (1530-31). We would expect these communities to consist of like-minded people saying much the same thing, as we saw in the imitative poets on the mountain's slopes. However, the groups that appear before Fame seem to lack a single, distinct goal in their speech. All that seems to unify them is their attitude toward fame: they either desire it, or desire to avoid it. Chaucer again reduces the meaning of speech, this time not to its simple materiality, but to its common egotism. The referent of speech acts seem to be

irrelevant, even for their speakers; reference does not provide a means for thematizing the speech bodies into groups for Fame to judge.

This reduction of speech is compounded by Fame's characteristic fickleness: not only does she show utter disregard for the referent of language when it was historically spoken, she disregards also the speech bodies' wishes with regard to fame. The first three groups who approach her are instructive in this regard. The first asks her, "In ful recompensacioun/ Of good werkes, yive us good renoun" (1557-58). Fame, however, refuses to grant their request, explaining only "For me lyst hyt nocht" (1564). Instead, she says that none will speak of them hereafter. The second and third groups use precisely the same argument drawn from the biblical Book of James: good works merit fame. However, the second group is subjected to Eolus's slanderous trumpet, while the third is granted a fame more emphatic than they originally asked for. These episodes overturn the expectation that fame can operate as a sort of allegorization of the individual. The tradition of fame parallels the tradition of allegorical reading; as Justin Steinburg recently described, fame acted as a commentary on the internal characteristics of a person, contrasted to a simplistic literalism based solely on external appearances (1124). Good fame, in particular, was thought to accurately reflect one's intrinsic nature. As Steinburg notes, Dante had already debunked much of this theory in his *Convivio*, where he argues that the inherent subjectivity of our perceptions colors fame too much for it to reflect any objective truth about others. Chaucer extends this argument in the first three groups of petitioners. Ironically, the author who seems so intent on empowering readers to make their own judgements and interpretations supplies them absolutely no information by which to make a judgement. All of the petitioners construe

their former behavior in the same way, but whether their self-representation is accurate or not becomes irrelevant in the face of Fame's juristic style. We only sense that Fame is fickle because she refuses to give reasons for her assessments. Thus, Chaucer subverts an allegorical model of fame not by offering good appearances to bad beings, but by denying them any interiority that might serve as a basis for objective judgement. Ironically, we cannot see their actions as we should be able to in a space where all sound is recorded as the body that produced it; within Fame's House proper, we only see egotistical self-judgements. Chaucer thereby indicates that we surrender the distinctness and individuality of moments in which we speak to the banal meaning of our own self-images.

This critique extends, however, not only to those seeking fame, but even to those who deliberately try to avoid it. Her sentence having been passed on the third group, two small bands of ascetics approach her seat. The sentiment they express, like the earlier groups, is similar, but their fate dissimilar:

We han don wel with al our myght,  
But we ne kepen have no fame.  
Hyde our werkes and our name,  
For Goddys love; for certes we  
Han certeyn doon hyt for bounte,  
And for no maner other thing. (1694-99)

This ascetic band—whose desire to avoid fame mirrors Geoffrey's ambivalence about it—asks explicitly not to be remembered so that others will not impute the self-interest of the prior three groups as the cause of their good works. However, Chaucer still makes them

ironically appear in the House; he suggests that their desire not to have fame actually expresses a new, subterranean desire for a different type of fame: the fame of being forgotten. Fame grants this forgetfulness to the fourth, but not the fifth group—despite their petition to the contrary, she orders Eolus to trumpet their praise to all the world. Chaucer extends the concept of fame to cover something more akin to pride or self-interest in this gesture, and he reduces all human activity to that one perverse aim. All sounds made by humans have this common self-reference that confines them to Fame's House rather than the shifting duration that persists outside of it. In perhaps the poem's most twisted logic, Chaucer parodically perverts the procedure described by the Eagle in exploring this inherent egotism of speech. Not only is language permanently sequestered from its referent in the House, Chaucer makes all speech attempt to refer to the person who spoke it. Chaucer implies that all speech—even self-effacing speech—arises out of a concern for reputation, for how it will make others perceive us, rather than out of a simple desire to mean what it says. The contact that it facilitates with others always has, as its point of reference, the self that produced it; like the Levinasian “said,” speech, when it tries to referentially mean something to another, invariably attempts to subdue them into complicity with the speaker's self-aggrandizement. Chaucer extends Dante's critique of the subjectivity of perception to the self-serving subjectivity that produces speech, and more broadly, to all human action.

The sixth group further cements this broadening of the concept of Fame, reconfiguring the contemplative desire to be forgotten. In the contemplatives, Chaucer construed a passive desire to be forgotten as virtuous action; their ascetic disregard of

fame promised to, in itself, purify their deeds. The members of next group, however, confess their idleness:

To tellen certeyn as hyt is,  
We han don neither that ne this,  
But ydel al oure lyf ybe.  
But natheles yet prey we  
That we mowe han as good a fame,  
And gret renoun and knowen name,  
As they that han doon noble gestes. (1731-37)

The *otium* of the contemplatives has here been converted into simple idleness. These loafers, however, face what the contemplatives could not: namely, that inertia entails the same self-interested drive for reputation as any other human activity. Their idleness lacks the religious principle that sought to legitimate the contemplatives' leisure, and so their desire for fame appears denuded of self-effacing rhetoric. The desire of the idle is the same as the active, with the sole difference that they were unwilling to physically actualize their desires while still on Earth. However, in the House of Fame, where reference has been foreclosed, actual performance matters little. Fame grants their request at once, presumably voicing a similar ideal of principled leisure as she did earlier.

However, again, the subsequent group that mirrors the sixth is diversely served. This time with remarkable economy of expression Chaucer dispenses with the self-description, having the seventh group say only "Lady, graunte us sone/ The same thing, the same bone,/ That [ye] this nexte folk han doon" (1773-75). The call for justice in fame is expressed most clearly in this entreaty. If the loafers—who seemed, almost, to



lack any interior principle for their behavior—were granted the fame they asked for, fame should be extended to everybody. Though it structures all human action, it seems to utterly disregard the content and motive of that action. This anonymous group stands in for every other; yet, ironically, Lady Fame gives them the ear lashing that she should have given the loafers. She calls them “Ye masty swyn, ye ydel wrechches,/ Ful of roten slowe teches!” (1777-78). She responds to the call for justice with this belated castigation at precisely the moment when Chaucer has most thoroughly disempowered us as readers. We lack even the self-representation that at least situated on the prior groups on a moral grid—while they have asked for the same outcome as the prior group, they have not indicated that they were similar in character. Without intending to do so, Fame has demonstrated the failure of referential language that pervades her domain. In the eschatological space Chaucer has constructed, the only real sin is the misapprehension of time and one’s persistent being through it. This sin is an inherent feature of language, which subjects shifting moments of sound to a past and future not native to them. In attempting to describe being, it removes us from the present in which being inheres; and, worse, all its attempts to describe being mask a frantic, underlying concern to assert and define one’s own being. The being that language posits always resists the permutations of time that makes the present present, that makes it ceaselessly new and poignant. It seeks justice across history—a justice which would legitimate the mode of being that it expresses, and which, in the process, would render time static, comprehending the significance of every moment under a single rubric. History presents a mode of being against time, a mode that labors to domesticate temporal difference and effect a justice on top of that domestication, amongst its congealed fragments of time. But in the seat of

history, Chaucer shows us that we only ever find Fame, language making fickle, inept pronouncements about language, spoken by a figure who can have no actual being. Chaucer asks us to look for justice, instead, in a different place altogether, outside her palace in the clamoring, eschatological sea. He suggests that justice can only occur in the present, where none of the identities that human language organizes and human justice attempts to coordinate can have any purchase.

### *Toward Tidings*

Chaucer's upending of historical ethics concludes with a final twist: another company, admitting their perfidy, asks to become infamous, which request Fame grants. Geoffrey, seeming more dazed than disgusted, turns away from Fame's House, sensing someone behind him. This unknown friend remains unnamed; however, Chaucer intimates that here at last, he is staging the first of his long awaited encounters with himself that the mechanics of the House has necessitated. We understand this first in the verbal echoes that occur between the two characters. When the unknown friend first speaks to Geoffrey, he asks

“Frend, what is thy name?

Artow come hider to han fame?”

“Nay, for sothe, frend,” quod y;

“I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,

For no such cause, by my hed!

Sufficeth me, as I wer ded,

That no wight have my name in honde.

I wot myself best how y stonde;  
For what I drye, or what I thynke,  
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,  
Certeyn, for the more part,  
As fer forth as I kan myn art. (1871-82)

We seem to be offered a very different Geoffrey in these lines. Having learned the lesson that Fame had to offer, he becomes cagey about voicing his name, which the unknown friend assumes is the cause of his visit. Instead, he echoes the anonymous title offered to him, reflecting it back on the questioner. Another such echo occurs in lines 1895-96, where the two mirror an emphatic “noo.” Their mutual anonymity is especially important in the context of the poem, as Geoffrey now takes naming as a theme encapsulating everything that is wrong with fame. He refuses to participate in the ontologizing procedure of naming, and, oddly enough, the unknown friend seems to follow suit. This is particularly odd in Fame’s House, where everyone is concerned solely with spreading their own names across the bodies of others. Yet the Unknown Friend’s first question resists the whole tendency of fame-mongering that Chaucer has just cast as inescapable—he asks for the name of another, and asks his purpose. Chaucer’s entire poem is such a question, a question, first, about how language could possibly congeal its variegated sounds into meaning, and second, about how we might again thaw it, thereby escaping its ubiquitous attempt to codify the self. The inevitable self-reference of speech becomes a question, refracted through the prism of the poem that has preceded it; the encounter with Fame provoked for Geoffrey the question of his intent in visiting the House, and through the mechanism of the House, that question takes on its own sonic flesh here. The

question retains its integrity—its existence as a question—through Geoffrey’s response, which attempts, with all of Chaucer’s considerable art, to resist the pitfall he pictured in the contemplatives. It is perhaps the most honest statement of Chaucer’s poetics that he ever offers, this attempt to resist the self-aggrandizement he sees as all but inherent in poetics.<sup>29</sup> He succeeds in his task, here, only by becoming other to himself; he transforms the potentially self-reflexive question prompted by his poem into a separate entity, whose independent existence he maintains in his refusal to answer.

We should note, also, that Geoffrey is different in his seeming self-assurance. Gone is the hapless dreamer plucked up by the Eagle in Book 2; in his place, we seem to have a fully fledged poet, capable of articulating “The cause why y stonde here” (1885). Finally comprehending the meaning of his own term, he says simply that he came

Somme newe tydynges for to lere,  
Somme newe thinges, y not what,  
Tydynges, other this or that,  
Of love or suche thynges glade. (1886-89)

As he says in the next few lines, “newe thinges” are precisely what he was unable to find in the House of Fame itself. Fame ensures that present utterances will be construed wholly in terms of the past—the aesthetic past that structures the space of the House, but also the simple compression of sound into language that allows the bodies to advocate for themselves. Having seen the procedures of history, Geoffrey yearns for the new, for some meaning that Fame could not anticipate or encompass. As he insisted on refusing the

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<sup>29</sup> On the *House of Fame* as Chaucer’s *ars poetica*, see Payne 198; Shook 341-54; Clemen ch. 2. While I would agree that Chaucer announces a theory of his art here, it can only act as such a statement by effacing the very vehicle poetry usually uses; for a poet of Chaucer’s calibre, this must have been the most bitter-sweet rationale behind poetry.

question of his name, he refuses again to define the thing he expects, since to define it would be to relegate it and himself to Fame's judgement.<sup>30</sup> This new thing on the horizon of Geoffrey's expectation is "tydynges," still language, but rehabilitated language that he deliberately construes as lacking a specific content.<sup>31</sup> These "tydynges" are language perceived in its purely temporal aspect, as the endlessly new, shifting duration of sound; the love they express does not concern some banal affair, which presumably he could have heard about in the House, but the love of the all-embracing present that Fame has shut out, the love of God conceived, not as historical judge, but as the pure continuity of this infinitely renewing presence.

Geoffrey's earlier posture of constant questioning takes on a new and altogether strange light as he becomes capable of answering those questions. In fact, one of the chief ways we know he has staged an encounter with himself is the Unknown Friend's adoption of Geoffrey's earlier, flatfooted persona. Throughout the poem—though most notably in Book 2, in his encounter with the Eagle—Geoffrey has been imagined as a witless wanderer, engaged in a futile attempt to understand his surroundings. The questions asked by the Unknown Friend have a character similar to those asked earlier by Geoffrey; they provide occasions for long, explanatory excursus that do not seem to offer

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<sup>30</sup> In terms of Derridean messianism, the new is not something that can be anticipated as a future event; insofar as it can be anticipated, it is simply an extension and reconfiguration of something in the past. Chaucer also yearns not just for some futurity implied by what has already occurred, but an authentically new tiding that will upset Fame's machinery.

<sup>31</sup> In this sense, David Wallace accurately senses the real potency of the poem when he says, describing Chaucer's reception of Dante, "Chaucer is evidently struggling with something new; something so new, in fact, that the narrator himself can barely grasp or articulate what that something might be" ("Italian Inheritance," 39). It is but a slight conceptual leap from this position to say that Chaucer desires to suspend himself on this horizon of expectation, that the object of his anticipation is the anticipation itself, its nothing in particular. The poem is the expression of his desire not to confine this new something he has discovered in Dante, which Dante likewise sought to leave only partially defined in order to leave his poem open to hope. This ongoing expectancy, not governed by an object, but by the simple experience of time, is central to duration.

much explanation. Geoffrey, on the other hand, takes on the mantle of his authority—he begins to become the Chaucer capable of writing such a baffling poem. Thus, at the end of their interview, the Unknown Friend asks Geoffrey a most surprising question:

“Whych than be, loo, these tydynges,  
That thou now [thus] hider brynges,  
That thou hast herd?” quod he to me;  
“But now no fors, for wel y se  
What thou desirest for to here.  
Com forth and stond no lenger here,  
And y wil thee, withouten drede,  
In such another place lede  
Ther thou shalt here many oon.” (1907-15)

Astonishingly, Geoffrey is now pictured as the bringer of tydynges, the only inhabitant of the poem capable of rendering its twisted logic comprehensible. He becomes the guide figure, while the Unknown Friend behaves as the student who has too long stood gaping at Fame’s House. Ironically, Geoffrey has just informed the Friend that these tydynges are deliberately vague and could be about anything, but the Friend persists in asking after them. This question prompts the journey to the House of Tidings where Chaucer will envision the structure of his own representational act in composing the poem.

Geoffrey leaves the House of Fame with the Unknown Friend, though after line 1916 he is never mentioned again, the two seeming to have again coalesced into a single figure. Outside he sees a new house in a valley, presumably beneath the “sea level” of sound. However, Chaucer’s attempt to localize this house seems to undo itself: “ever mo/

as swyft as thought,/ This queynte hous aboute wente,/ That never mo hyt stille stente” (1924-26). Chaucer geographically situates the House of Tidings, only to render geographical location impossible. Not only do this House’s denizens ceaselessly move, the House itself is characterized by its mobility. Whereas the House of Fame was primarily thematized by stasis, language in the House of Tidings has again been made liquid, such that it is incapable of stillness; it expresses motion, purely, and little else besides it. The geography of the House of Tidings resembles the procedure of the poem as a whole: swift as Chaucer’s own thought—the same thought he invoked at the beginning of Book 2 to help him tell his tale aright, and the same thought that he has just promised to drink down himself—it constantly shifts its underpinnings out from underneath us. Geoffrey is capable of leading the Unknown Friend to this House because the House, now self-consciously, resides within Chaucer’s literary dream space. But the landscape of that space, as we now know all too well, is never allowed to fully cohere. Were a stable geography to present itself here we might forge an interpretation, allegorize its rickety, component parts in terms of their more stable surroundings. But for Chaucer’s House as for his poem, pure mutability is the only geography locale offered to stabilize what the poem imagines.

Chaucer seems to realize that this thematics of mutability and mobility cannot help him escape the problems he witnessed in Fame’s House. It is still a representation, and so cannot actually persist in the world he has composed. He thus uses a similar technique to describe the House of Rumor as he did to describe the House of Fame, and Lady Fame herself: he casts it in terms of superlatives, and compares it to literary structures. First, we see him compare it to “that Domus Dedaly,/ That Laboryntus cleped

ys,” which “nas mad so wonderlych, ywis,/ Ne half so quentelych ywrought” (1920-23) as the House of Tidings. Later, he exclaims that “Certys... in al myn age,/ Ne saugh y such an hous as this” (1985-87). Both descriptions emphasize the ongoing artificiality of Chaucer’s inventions. First, Chaucer suggests that even a comparison to an imagined, literary House cannot account for the wonder—and the sheer intricacy of confusion—on display in this new house. Geoffrey’s subsequent exclamations runs parallel to the description of Fame and her House, the impossibility of both herself and her mountain. Though the *House of Fame* labors to present us with a purely historical space, it violates its own tenets, situating imagined representations alongside historical speech-acts. Of course, the difference between the two is that, whereas the massiveness of House of Fame implied resistance to the scheme of the poem, the House of Tidings seems deliberately constructed to display that scheme. Though the House of Tidings may still be “shapen lyk a cage” (1985), it is a cage that makes its inability to contain its contents apparent.<sup>32</sup> As noted earlier, its ricketiness and its absurd length suggest that it is receptive to the endless swells of sound that beset it; it is a House built, paradoxically, only to be blown apart and recombined.

Geoffrey rightly fears to be lost amidst the general motive clamor of the place should he enter; however, he notices that the Eagle—now almost authorially called “myn egle”—is perched on a nearby stone. He informs Geoffrey that, as it turns out, he is the only mode of conveyance that might grant one entrance to this House:

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<sup>32</sup> In a very interesting paper given at the 2014 New Chaucer Society Conference, Rebecca Davis drew attention to a peculiar metaphor Chaucer uses for the House of Rumor: he likens it to an eel cage. In the Middle Ages, loosely woven baskets with lids were placed in rivers to catch eels that would enter. Davis argues that, in many similar images, the House of Fame seems to capture natural forces—the light in Venus’s temple being another example; in this case, the rickety quality of the House of Rumor both arrests and does not arrest natural flow. Even as it begins to close in on the wily eel of its temporal vision, it must construct a trap for it that allows the fluid temporality of the poem to seep through its cracks.



but I bringe the therinne,  
Ne shalt thou never kunne gynne  
To come into hyt, out of doute,  
So faste hit whirleth, lo, aboute. (2003-6)

The Eagle's reappearance recollects his earlier description of the mechanism of Fame's domain, which has been papered over by Fame's House itself. That description provides the point of access to the poem: only in relief to it can we understand the real violence which language and sound suffer at the hands of Fame. As an agent of Jove, the Eagle figures forth the authentically eschatological character of the place, whose precepts both of the houses violate. The motive duration that he imagined throughout Book 2 is what sets the house of Chaucer's poem whirling through its diverse matters; it is the only conceptual window that Chaucer leaves open to himself or to us so that we might, without simply doubting the poem's intelligibility, discern the tidings he has to offer us in it.

The Eagle does indeed fly Geoffrey up to such a window, where he is able to peer within the House of Tidings. What he discovers there are the endlessly novel recombinations of language that were lacking in Fame's House. The place is filled with an endless whispering and murmuring which reimagines rumors being passed from one person to another, constantly being enlarged and elaborated. As in the House of Fame, the sound-bodies here seem to resist—to a lesser extent—being spread out into the infinite duration of time expressed by their speech. Chaucer imagines them as saying, cohesively, “‘Thus hath he sayd,’ and ‘Thus he doth,’/ ‘Thus shal hit be,’ ‘Thus herde y seye,’/ ‘That shal be founde,’ ‘That dar I leye’” (2052-54). However, we might note three

features of what Chaucer is able to hear. First, these rumours lack the insistent self-reference that characterized all sound-bodies in Fame's House. They seem to actually imagine the historical event that reimagined them here, and so they largely follow the scheme offered by the Eagle. Second, in place of that insistent self reference, they each reference a prior act of discourse that they leave unspoken. Chaucer is thus able to retain the studied ambivalence with which he answered the Unknown Friend's question. They lack specific content, even as they gesture toward that content. Third, and relatedly, the fragments that surface are as brief as they are unintelligible without the remainder of the speech that produced them. Chaucer accentuates the growing unintelligibility of language in his poem by making all the speech that coalesces in the House of Tidings too fragmentary to relate the event that spawned the body which articulates it. The unintelligible murmur of the tide of tidings is the rule in this house; now when language briefly and furtively coheres, it only serves to spawn further tidings that increase the general clamor, making it ever more difficult to discern what any given body is saying.

Chaucer goes to great lengths to accentuate the proliferation that occurs as a result of rumor. He also seems preoccupied with the seeming disregard for truth demonstrated by these gossipers. As in Fame's House, truth content seems largely irrelevant here:

Were the tydynges soth or fals,  
Yit wolde he telle hyt natheles,  
And evermo with more encres  
Than yt was erst. ...  
And whan that was ful yspronge,  
And woxen more on every tonge

Than ever hit was [hit] wente anoon

Up to a wyndowe out to goon. (2072-84)

The truth content of a statement becomes irrelevant, but not as it was irrelevant in Fame's House. There, Fame was set to judge the significance of earthly utterances, and to spread them more broadly throughout the world; yet her judgements were unjust, resulting in the general confusion that besets the fallen world, and which is subsequently reimagined in the House of Tidings, which fly to Fame's House to be judged and so on *ad infinitum*.

Here, the general disregard of the content of language feels less pernicious because no judge is appointed to sort the sound bodies, or to set exemplars for other speakers.

Lacking a judge, their relativity playfully demonstrates a different, overriding sort of truth figured forth in language: the fact of its utterance, its occurrence in time, and its capacity to engender more language conceived in the same aspect.

The "fals and soth compounded" in the place also acts as a metaphor for poetry, anticipating the fruit and chaff of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. The flight of the enlarged tidings inverts Geoffrey's own course through the poem: enlarged, they escape the cage of the House of Tidings not to range freely in the open sea of sound, but to fly to Fame's judgement. Geoffrey, on the other hand, was borne away from the Temple of Venus to Fame's House largely against his will, and in the face of his insistence that he did not desire fame. He ultimately turned away from it without having been judged, and was taken to a window by the Eagle in order to witness the House of Tidings. Chaucer cannot understand why poets, attempting to distinguish themselves from the mass of sound present in the world, try to escape the conditions of language that the Eagle has elaborated, and that the House of Tidings embodies. In their attempt to form a coherent

sentence out of fictions, they submit themselves to Fame, attempting to become one of the massive, distinct figures upholding her edifice, only to be judged as arbitrarily as any other utterance. Chaucer's own trajectory has been to regress this poetic pride, to make poetry serve the conditions of utterance and to gesture back toward them, since it cannot name them. Chaucer stages the trajectory of most poems in the subsequent lines, where two tidings—one true, one false—crowd to escape from the same window. Unable to simply take turns, they first jostle angrily, then settle upon a different idea:

We wil medle us ech with other,  
That no man, be they never so wrothe,  
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe  
At ones, al besyde his leve,  
Come we a-morwe or on eve,  
Be we cried or stille yrouned. (2102-7)

The two then merge forms and fly together to Fame's House. These two tidings, and those who similarly seek escape from the House of Tidings, are notably the only people here who exhibit the same self-reference of Fame's retinue. They fetishize their sound bodies, treating them as literal; of course, we understand from their dialogue that they refer to some combination of ideas on earth, forged into a single utterance. But within the conceit, they treat their sonic flesh as actual flesh, perversely merging two disparate natures. Alone, either would have prevented the other from escaping to seek Fame, but together they join Orpheus and his band in their journey up the mountain. This union seems to imagine the union effected by poetry, in which philosophical and theological truths can be expressed through a fiction; Chaucer emphatically believes that the two

cannot be separated from one another, and may indeed be destined to merge. The perversity here is not in the alloying of truth and falsehood, but in the resultant tiding escaping from its proper house to submit itself to Fame. There, Chaucer imagines them being offered a temporary, historical “duracioun,/ somme to wexe and wane sone” (2114-15), their wings caught in the wind of Eolus’ trumpets; but in the House of Tidings, their existence would be retained indestructible, if indiscernible. Such is Chaucer’s poetic fountainhead.

Chaucer turns away from such folly one last time, preferring the company of the crude pardoners and messengers with their “boystes crammed ful of lyes/ As ever vessel was with lyes” (2129-20). Even his analogies begin to fail Chaucer—we can interpret the second “lyes” as the “lees” or dregs of a wine bottle, but it seems more to simply refer back to the initial image of the analogy. As Geoffrey moves amongst the throngs, gathering various tidings he does not bother to record for us, he suddenly hears a “gret noyse withalle/ In a corner of the halle,/ Ther men of love-tydynges tolde” (2141-43). All the denizens of the House of Tidings begin to clamor and rush toward the new noise, asking “what thing is that?” and replying “I not never what” (2147-48), again, reflecting the Unknown Friend’s questions to Geoffrey and Geoffrey’s ambiguous answers. They collide into “an hepe” (2149) of writhing bodies, reimagining the stagnant stasis of Fame’s frozen mountain as what it always should have been: a motive chaos of sound bodies constantly proliferating, climbing and treading on one another. The House of Tidings has recapitulated the entire poem, but in such a way that the confusion of the earlier sections renders the purpose of the poem clear here: the windows, now lacking

glass and structure, refer us back to Venus's temple; the flights of poetry and poets to Geoffrey's upward flight; the heap of bodies to the mountain of ice.

Atop this freshly conceived mountain, Geoffrey discerns a figure who, at long last, promises to put a point to all these tidings:

Atte laste y saugh a man,  
Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;  
But he semed for to be  
A man of gret auctorite. (2155-58)

It is a favorite game of the poem's scholars to guess at the identity of the "man of gret auctorite" at the end of the poem, and at why he proves unable to speak. I will offer three such guesses, all of which amount to the same thing, namely, that the man embodies the present moment of utterance. Finally, at the end of the poem, Chaucer peers through the veil between his fictional world and the historical world, encoding a moment of pure linguistic passage. Thus, first, the man stages another of Chaucer's encounter's with himself. The concern with naming remains from his previous encounter with the Unknown Friend—he first suggest that he is unwilling to name the figure, then that he is unable to do so. The man of gret auctorite encapsulates the studied ambiguity with which Chaucer has presented the tidings he has to offer readers; at precisely the moment he appears, the poem ceases to be capable of continuing its conceit. As Geoffrey peers into the House of Tidings that promises an alternative poetics to that practiced by the Lady Fame's sycophants, he finds himself already within the House, as he had to be. The poem has, at last, caught up to itself and begun to impersonate the moments of its writing as so many Chaucers, mingled, as they desired to be, in the larger heap of the House of

Tidings. Each crests atop the heap in the fleeting moment it takes for Chaucer's utterance of the poem to be reimagined within it, demonstrating the authorial position from which the poem was penned. It ends in an unfinished silence because it has finally perfected its procedure: each representational word Chaucer attempts to utter elaborating the poem becomes caught in its net, imagined as a body impotently trying to mean. The man of gret auctorite's silence finally becomes capable of finishing the proliferating poem because in it, Geoffrey finally coincides with Chaucer, the interior narrative of the poem brushes against its historical utterance. Chaucer has finally landed upon a construction of language that does not lodge him in another referential landscape, but which pushes himself back to the present duration too often submerged by poetry.

But Chaucer does not reserve this privilege to himself alone; the second likely possibility of the man's identity is the reader who has reproduced Chaucer's poem in her imagination and so shared in its realization. Chaucer has cast himself all along as a reader of his dream, more subject to what it has imagined than in control of it. His readers, too, if they persist so far into the poem are forcibly reimagined into the heap of Tidings, insofar as they have reproduced the language, or even simply the sounds of reading. And, certainly, critics of the poem have converged into the disordered heap imagined at the end of the poem; the man is constructed to be an insoluble crux that spawns an endless procession of interpretations about what he might have said to knit the poem together. In this aspect, Chaucer's man of gret auctorite attempts to offer a form of community different from those presented in Fame's House. Fame attempts to subsume the historical specificity of the individual self in a group consciousness; ironically, the drive of each individual to spread her name across the bodies of others results in a general

lack of identity and distinction. Each person mirrors the posturing of the others before Fame; they must first take on the aesthetics of another before they can inflict that aesthetics, now nominally under their own names, on others. The seeming distinctness of famous figures belies this homogeneity, which is why the truly famous figures who structure the imitation of others are figured as either mythological amalgams of poets, or static figures atop pillars, crushed beneath the burden of what they represent. Oddly enough, historical specificity is only to be found in the last place anyone would think to look for it: the House of Tidings. Chaucer overlays his own authorial image with that of the reader here, not to inflict some allegorical sentence upon them, but to push them back to their own situation while recreating the poem. There, having passed through the latticework of the poem, they become capable of experiencing their own time as a present duration, before language organizes imagines that time into passing particles to be reconstituted. We could, of course, call this yet another sentence that Chaucer has simply dissembled, but it is a sentence that unwinds every other along with itself; and Chaucer maintains its authenticity by refusing to name it, by actually entertaining the possibility that we are the man just as much as he is himself.

Nothing describes both of these possibilities as well as Augustine's discussion of the birth of the word in the soul, which, transgressing Chaucer's ambivalent refusals, I will name my third guess. Granted, having recourse to such a grave theological concept at this moment of the poem might appear to miss Chaucer's joke entirely; however, Book XV, Chapter 10 of *de Trinitate* does offer some striking resemblances to the procedure offered by Chaucer here. Augustine there muses on the relationship between the moral self and the language she produces; he struggles to define a "mouth of the heart"



(15.10.18), a center of knowledge whence arise the various terms we employ to communicate that knowledge. He says that understanding this mechanism is a road to partially understanding God: “Whoever, then, is able to understand a word, not only before it is uttered in sound, but also before the images of its sounds are considered in thought... is able now to see through this glass and in this enigma some likeness of that Word” (15.10.19). Augustine describes a form of language that precedes its resignation to a specific meaning; certainly, such an instance of language still proceeds from knowledge, stored in the memory—all language does—but Augustine asks us to retrospectively consider the point of contact between an idea and its signifier rather than the idea itself. He asks us to consider the possibility of language. His Pauline enigmatic glass is opaque—or, perhaps like Chaucer’s, colored to represent images on the glass’ surface rather than what is beyond the glass, what illuminates its translucence—when we understand language solely in its representational aspect. However, when we attend to the instant of contact between mind and the sonic matter of words, we become capable of seeing some shadow of God. Such a conception of language pushes us toward the irreducibly significant present, not the present as a simple subtraction of meaning, but as a duration where meaning has an ongoing poignance analogous to the spontaneous production of God by God within the eternal presence of the Trinity.

In his groping depiction of the Word, Chaucer offers a last, smirking nod to Dante’s *Paradise*, parodying the final image of the rose within the Empyrean. At the end of the *Comedy*, all the hierarchical tiers of Paradise were revealed as a single unified body gazing at God and singing about Him. God was still infinitely far off from these figures, but their vision was equally infinite, having been refined by their experience of grace in

the world. It allowed them to progressively penetrate toward a constantly renewing vision of God, who seemed infinitely mobile, unchanging in the consistent novelty of the present moment He inhabited. God transformed into a human figure as Dante gazed at it to indicate that renewal of Dante's experience in the world, the grace in matter that the incarnation made perceptible. This progressive vision paralleled Dante's own effort to represent God, which deployed ineffability topoi even as it persisted in its description; in doing so, it drew our attention to the internal form of the words being transmuted into the vision, which became, if Augustine is correct, a more essential metaphor for God than the images they articulated. Chaucer's man of great auctorite figures forth a similar vision, albeit one less loftily conceived. Unlike Dante, Chaucer's stated aim is not to reconstitute a vision of God—in fact, much of his poem has worked to render that lofty goal impossible. However, it has attempted to deliver Chaucer an image of his own, radically present, experience, which, in Augustine, is the first term and only knowable term in the analogy between ourselves and God. Chaucer struggles to see the initial echo of presence into his own historical body; he wants to reduce his perception back to the point at which it births words so that he can see them in their prerepresentational aspect. His poem has set about accomplishing this by constructing an eschatological space, in which the absence of God is deafening. Chaucer's heap of bodies inverts the image of Dante's perfectly ordered rose, absorbing Dante along with all the other authors he had so carefully ordered throughout his afterlife into a single, common condition. This heap of bodies, and not the strictly delimited halls of Fame's House, is the essential state of discourse. It all clamors, as in Medieval theology the whole creation did, to represent God, the transcendental signified whose authority makes sense of the rest of discourse;

however, it only partially succeeds in doing so in its internal form, before it can exercise its representational will. Chaucer leaves us, and himself, exactly at the point when we have changed the word into the man, presenting the central paradox of his poem that runs parallel to Dante's vision of the incarnation, the square he cannot seem to circle. His representation finally conforms to the design of the poem; the man's lack of identity forces us to consider him as the poem has asked us to, as his own word at the moment in which we transmute it into an imagined, represented being.

Every body in the House of Fame imagines that moment; if they fail to understand it, the transgression is their own, the consequence their subjection to Fame and history. Chaucer has bracketed reference not to shunt us into silence, but to show us our speaking selves. He offers to us a different form of significance in language, not constrained into something spoken—as, perhaps, Augustine has done, less deftly but more clearly—but as a word at the moment of its birth. Of course, to do so, he has had to transgress his own laws, representing others in their acts of representation; and he has made us complicit in this transgression of the poem's terms simply by the fact that we have read it. But the entire poem works toward the surrender of that narrative conceit to its own birth, a surrender which it finally effects in the man of great auctorite. If we can recuperate the joke through the theology, Chaucer's man of great auctorite seems to poke fun at his own success: though threatening to become, probably unfavorably, subject to Fame's judgement, as all narratives must, Chaucer does find a configuration of narrative capable of expressing something that fully transcends linguistic imagining, and which does not have to pass through the historicizing mechanics of Fame's House to do so. The man has his authority from another source, and it is of a different character than fame: his

authority is not to dumbly reduplicate the specific utterance he represents in the world, but to be the scarcely seen shadow of every utterance. Though his poem threatens to come apart at every convolution, it ultimately fails to fail. Like Dante, Chaucer is ultimately forced to crown himself with the laurel, to take on his authority; but whereas Dante achieved his laurel by making the representations of authors coexist with their saying of them, Chaucer has made that saying itself into the object of the narrative. As he hoped, he is fully absorbed into the poem's mechanics of presence by its final image, and we are absorbed along with him.

## CHAPTER IV

### BOCCACCIO'S DISTRACTIVE EROTICS

Chaucer's initial response to Dante's aesthetics of experience, as we have just seen, was to essentially strip it of its erotic quality. Despite his self-presentation as a poet concerned with love, the world of fame that Chaucer produces is one that has been radically shorn of the poet's erotic attachment to the object he narrates. For Dante, divine presence could only be approached through erotic attachment to a physical object; the grace of the beloved prefigured a renovated experience of time wherein the lover attempted to perceive the full duration of time in which the beloved was persisting and the entire network of relations that brought her into being. Her most indifferent gesture became the object of intense, fetishistic fascination, as did the intermediary movements that comprised that gesture. On the one hand, Dante suggests that we must invariably return to the spatiotemporal world to experience the presence toward which erotic attachment thrusts us—experience isn't experience without time, but rather a nullifying stagnation; on the other hand, he requires us to still conceptualize such erotic experience as transcending traditional spatial and temporal categories, gesturing toward a presence that does not admit the inherent vestigiality of temporal life. Chaucer—unable or unwilling to reconcile the two movements of Dante's Christian phenomenology—prefers the latter over the former in the *House of Fame*. In the place of Dante's stilnovistic eroticism, he weaves a poetics of befuddlement and boredom wherein the poet is propelled toward an experience of pure presence by being violently relocated within his own, temporally fractured body and out of the world of his representation; in order to accomplish this effect, the poet must be irremediably divorced from the object of his

narration which, in Dante's vision, was supposed to prompt a renovation of temporal experience.

If Chaucer's initial response was to prefer transcendence in Dante's equation, Boccaccio's was to prefer erotic attachment. More than Dante, Boccaccio will insist that the sensuous physicality of the beloved which sparks the movement of desire in the lover is of central importance to whatever spiritual insight she might offer; further, her specificity as beloved is not something to be surpassed at the highest reaches of our awareness as Dante, in whatever measure, diffused his attachment to Beatrice onto the entire cosmos. Without that specificity and physicality, the spiritualization of love threatens to resolve back into a sterile, metaphysical theology. Boccaccio does not fully repudiate the stilnovist project to ally romantic love with spiritual insight, but he does suggest that the particular beloved cannot simply be supplanted at the end of the journey. This is not to suggest that love, for Boccaccio, must be exclusive—indeed, he seems much more a libertine than Dante in that regard—but that every beloved must have her own unique quality that demands the attention of the lover and that does not make her a mere typological duplicate of a prior beloved or, worse, an allegorized mirror of God's divine presence. The insight to be gained by love relationships does not occur through the sort of progressive allegorization of love that Dante offers, but rather through a progressive surrendering to the materialism of sexuality. As pure presence, God may exist outside of spatiotemporal categories, but God too succumbed to a sort of sexual materiality in creating the world; the very existence of objects as objects, to the mind of Boccaccio, testifies to the absorptive attention with which God invested them. Our erotic attachments thus mirror and mimic the act of creation; our eroticized perception of

objects in the world knits them into the ontological weave that defines their being. For Boccaccio, surrendering to the temptation of materialism does not necessarily distract us from the divine, but rather allows us to remake ourselves into the image of God the creator, whose consciousness emerged through an excess of love from His perfect presence to construct the world of time. The experience of the beloved still fosters a temporal awareness resembling that which Dante found in Beatrice, but whereas Dante turned at the last moment toward God in that temporal movement, Boccaccio stares down with God at the graciousness of the particular, voluptuous being who prompted the transcendent movement.

Among his early works, the *Ameto* most clearly represents his attempt to grapple with the implications of Dante's vision of divine presence in these directions—while virtually all of his poems draw upon the resources of Dantean imagery and ideas, the *Ameto* is his most sustained, early reaction to Dante's *Comedy*. Now, to characterize the *Ameto* as a movement away from the Dantean allegorization of love and grace should, at first blush, seem odd, since the work is itself an allegory; at the end of the text, *Ameto* does seem to transcend the particularity of his sexual attraction for the nymph Lia and ascend to a sort of divine bliss. In this sense, Boccaccio actually seems to flatten Dante's vastly more nuanced allegorization of love; the *Ameto*'s imagery of the divine, for instance, draws on a relatively tired visual and sensory repertoire, with a few notable exceptions. However, what strikes most readers of the text is not the putative spiritual program set out by the brief ascension episode at the end of the poem but rather the initial evocation of *Ameto*'s insatiable desire for the nymph and the exhaustively detailed

descriptions Boccaccio allows his character to indulge in.<sup>1</sup> Ameto's eyes rove feverishly over the bodies of the nymphs, always attempting—and ultimately failing—to forensically digest their feminine grace by defining and assessing each minute constituent component that comprises it. The nymphs, in their turn, gaze back at Ameto—Boccaccio's relentless focus on their eyes is one of the most obvious references to the *Comedy* in the text; in their early meetings, they seem almost as lusty as Ameto himself becomes, a detail that the allegory attempts to tame without fully succeeding. Ultimately the poem's genre seems to put it at odds with itself: the eroticized description in the beginning exceeds the abrupt allegory's explanatory force.

As a sensitive reader of Dante, Boccaccio makes the ways in which the description exceed the allegory seem the point—Dante, too, insisted on the continued relevance of the spatiotemporal world to spiritual awareness. Dante allegorized grace, not in the sense that he subjected it to an overly rigid intellectual system, but in the sense that he universalized it, used the temporal experience he found in Beatrice's grace to understand every other object in his world; ultimately, Dante's eyes turn toward that universality—he strives to look through physical objects, not at them. The world of the *Ameto*, by contrast, is unremittingly absorptive; the nymphs—who at the end of the poem

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<sup>1</sup> Even earlier generations of critics who were more apt to accept relatively straightforward allegorical correspondences, express a distinct discomfort with the allegory Boccaccio finally voices in the *Ameto*. Comparing Dante's use of allegory to Boccaccio's in the *Ameto*, F. MacManus concluded that, while Dante managed to understand visible objects as both simultaneously signs and things, Boccaccio “was beguiled by the appearance and forgot the deeper reality, until the last moment” (198); taking a more evaluative stance, Aldo D. Scaglione concludes that “even while Boccaccio was still under the direct spell of his great master,” as he certainly is in the *Ameto*, “his imitations of Dante's sublime allegories was somehow contradictory and out of focus” (109); remarking on the specifically sensuous quality of the *Ameto*'s allegorical women, L. G. Clubb argues that Ameto “is ennobled by the teachings of these voluptuous abstractions... but he nevertheless desires to get his hands on them” (191), and more generally that “Boccaccio parts company with his reverend Dante at the point where love is dehumanized” (190). Somewhat more recently, Luisa Del Giudice has framed this problem as a disjunction between the poem's allegorical and realistic elements. The work is pulled in two directions; toward the real, dictated by the senses, and toward the allegorical, dictated by reason. The spiritual aspirations embodied in this Christian allegory seem to be at odds with the narrative realism” (15).



confess themselves to be mere signs—surpass the interpretive constraints they impose on themselves. Ameto intuitively and demonstrates this before the allegory is realized, thereby preempting and undercutting it. Even if Ameto departs at the end of the poem in some celestial reverie, the reader—along with the narrator<sup>2</sup>—is left with a residue of erotic energy that the allegory failed to satisfy. Ameto's own ascension suggests this fact: in his divine vision, the biblical God is figured as the divine Venus, the most radiant example of beauty the text has yet afforded. Her appearance heralds the culmination of the tension roiling beneath the surface of the poem: God Himself is replaced by God Herself; Dante's third heaven—the sphere of Venus—is made into the Empyrean. The vision that is supposed to supplant the physical female body is itself supplanted when the female body is reinscribed within it. In essence, Boccaccio parodies Dante's beatific vision by replacing the vague, incarnational figure of Christ with a spurned Beatrice.

The very tension that makes the poem interesting also, it must be said, makes it relatively bad poetry—as in the case of the *House of Fame*, the swirl of ideas prompted by Dante's masterwork seems to have left his descendants' early responses to it somewhat uneven in their execution. Both poems ultimately work better as ideas than they do as poetry. But the *Ameto* is particularly important to our purposes here for three reasons: first and foremost, Boccaccio builds this early response to Dante's temporal vision as a frame narrative. Dante's text itself makes extensive use of framing techniques, but Boccaccio amplifies the frame into a further, more fully realized commentary on the relationship between temporal vision and narrative production. The same erotic tension that inheres in the allegory applies to the frame's imagination of language: Ameto experiences the nymphs' tales in two opposing ways. In one sense, he experiences the

<sup>2</sup> See Del Giudice 23-34.

narratives as he should—as realized spaces and times that apply, in various ways, to his own experience. While Ameto doesn't understand their allegorical resonance until the Divine Venus reinterprets the stories for him, he does apply the narratives to himself in a rudimentary, self-centered way as he hears them. But in another sense, he hears the nymphs' language in a way analogous to Chaucer's sound-bodies: he perceives language as a strange sort of music, an aesthetic act that unfolds the temporality of the beautiful bodies before him. Ameto thus frustrates the representational and reformative work of the stories—language manifests the present moment of its speaking rather than the spatiotemporal world it intends to represent, a world through which the speakers intend to instruct their listener. It instead draws attention to the nymphs' mouths, to the tangible sonority of the sounds they have produced, the gracefulness of gesture that accompanies their telling, etc. In doing so, Boccaccio places Ameto, the listener and judge of the stories, in a position that opposes that of the reader—where the narrator's telling of the frame story relied on eros to enact its representation, that same eros resists the realization of the frame narratives themselves. Dante's framed stories had a similar structure—Cacciaguida's incomprehensible language, for instance, entails such a double experience of language—but Boccaccio intensifies the disjunction between the aesthetic apprehension of language and the allegorical one. The *Ameto* appears to prefer the sterility of allegory on its surface, but the text parodically undercuts its own preference.

The second reason the *Ameto* is important to our present purposes is more pragmatic: it prefigures Boccaccio's use of the frame in the *Decameron*, so much so that, in the Cinquecento, Francesco Sansovino called the *Ameto* “un piccolo Decamerone.”<sup>3</sup> As

I will demonstrate in the two sections that structure this chapter, the *Decameron*

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<sup>3</sup> See Sansovino's introduction to his edition of the *Ameto*, folio ii verso.

represents the culmination of Boccaccio's response to Dante that he initially attempted in the *Ameto*. The most striking revision Boccaccio makes to his earlier frame is his use of the plague thematic; whereas the world of the *Ameto* is organized by playful, but generally well-ordered erotic energies, the world of the *Decameron* is bounded by the almost Ovidian relativity of the plague. Spatiotemporal markers unfold, in the *Ameto*, with an effortless grace; the pastoral landscape of the poem delimits a place wherein objects can contract into habitual patterns of relation without friction. The characters and objects that populate the *Ameto*'s world are endlessly fascinating to one another, and through that fascination, they structure the ontological web in which all inhere. Even death, in the *Ameto*, feels erotic—the scenes of hunting prefigure the perceptual darts of love that will pass between Ameto and the nymphs. By stark contrast, the *Decameron* presents a world in which spatiotemporal organization is literally unravelling; the plague has broken the compact between humours that knits together the human body, allowing parts of it to rupture out of the habituated roles that define them. This occurs on all levels of the human temporal scale: the individual body's dissolution is metaphorically reflected in the social body as family relationships dissolve, in the religious "body of Christ" as church officials abandon their charges, in the body politic which lacks the means and resources to enforce even the most basic laws of property, and so on. The effect of the plague is to literally uncreate Florentine society; just as God effected the creation by imposing spatiotemporal markers of varying scale and complexity into a spatial cosmos and setting them into relation with one another in time—allowing them to congeal away from His perfect, generative presenence—so do those progressive layers of organization begin to rescind their complexity, breaking down into simpler forms of temporal

organization. The plague still represents a narrative world, but it is one in which organic particles teem at one another, rebelling against the habitual agreements that transform them into organism-objects defining an ordered temporality until they become rudimentary matter—which, in the Aristotelian sense, is nothing, being pure change.<sup>4</sup> In phenomenological terms, matter begins to insist upon its radical intentionality; each constituent part of a systematized object begins to assert the dimensions of its being that are necessarily ignored by its fellow constituent parts in the constitution of their collective organism. As a result, these constituent parts cease to become parts altogether, as do the parts that formed them; their refusal cascades into increasingly minute layers of temporal organization until they threaten to become nothing, a pure, unmoving flux unable to manifest any discernible ontology.

The plague thus constitutes a parody of Dante's democratization of temporal vision. In suggesting that we must cast the phenomenological vision of the beloved onto the entirety of the cosmos, Boccaccio believes that Dante threatens to unravel that very cosmos. The limitations of vision and sensation generally are what allow the objects that inhere in the world to appear, and so to organize a history from whose vantage point we can prosecute Dante's new temporal vision. If we try to recuperate the universal poignancy of everything persisting in the universe, restoring its radical being at every level of its organization, we threaten to lose the specific character of the very objects we are trying to recuperate in their full temporality. The eroticism that Dante allegorized to arrive at that vision ceases to be erotic, since erotic attachment depends on its own pettiness and limitations—the very qualities that Dante still renounced as sinful even as he tried to reclaim their spatiality. In the *Ameto*, Boccaccio critiqued Dante's loss of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Moevs 4-5.

particular by locating the disavowed female body onto deity itself; this critique, however, doesn't go very far in explaining the danger he intuited in Dantean beatitude. The plague, however, offers a very sophisticated response to the idea of Dantean vision itself: if objects are as Dante suggests they are—radically intentional and durational—then they would simply fall apart. If the goal of human philosophy, intended by the creator, was to allegorize from the particular experience of grace to a universal one, all philosophers would be mad—they would lose the very world they tried to recuperate.

Boccaccio's own world, of course, doesn't fall apart in this way, but those who bear history out of the plague space are not philosophers, but a band of young aristocrats beset by their own limitations. The members of the brigata possess no special insight: what spiritual, philosophical or moral insight they offer in their stories tends to be reducible to conventional medieval ideas; even Dioneo's subversive irony derives from traditions of subversive irony embedded deeply in the medieval world. The members of the brigata are not privy to any special vision or revelation from above; they cannot, in any real sense, confront or counteract the principle of uninterpretability that the plague poses in the world. By framing his frame in terms of the plague, Boccaccio heightens our sense of the absurdity of his choice of subject—the plague seems to demand a different sort of narration, some tragic or wisdom literature; the stakes of the situation lead us to expect more from the brigata than they are able to offer. But it is precisely the conventionality of their thought, their youthful ignorance and indolence, their inability to provide a sufficient allegorization of the plague, the stupid persistence of their erotic preoccupations with one another in the face of universal dissolution—it is these features that, for Boccaccio, makes them suited to indirectly answer the philosophical

ramifications of the plague. They counter the plague by consciously pretending to forget it, by even allowing the reader of the *Decameron* to forget it; they retreat into the easy—albeit now embattled and fragile—pastoral landscape of the *Ameto* and distract themselves into the spaces and times of their stories. They limit the thematics of those stories such that—though they often far outstrip their aims—they can digest and interpret the stories with relative ease, debating the points and lessons they offer perhaps, but doing so within the defined interpretive perspectives the plague seems to dissolve. From the perspective of their relative simplicity, they can recreate the perceptible, historical world which the plague’s radical temporality threatens to destroy. None of this is to suggest that the *Decameron* is itself a simple text—Boccaccio is far too clever an author to allow the brigata’s limited perspectives on their own stories to be the only permissible ones. The linkages between tales alone create an enormously complex texture that far outstrips any design the brigata could invent themselves and this is, in part, Boccaccio’s point: while the perceptible world emerges from our limited perception of one another, the weave that results from those perspectives is far more intricate than any person could ever really understand. But the limitations that create that weave are not something to be transcended; they are, rather, the ineradicable ground of existence; transcendence can only result in the radicality of the plague. Boccaccio instead celebrates the petty limitations of the world’s inhabitants while simultaneously pointing toward an ecology of ideas and objects that, while it depends on those limitations, outstrips them.

The polarity between the plague vision and this ecology of limited perception runs parallel to the textual and linguistic ecologies Boccaccio institutes through his frame. As I have noted, frames structurally embed two different modes of perceiving language

within themselves: words are both sonic objects and signifying subjects. As sonic objects, words are threatened by the sort of dissolution to which the plague subjects bodies, a fact that Chaucer discovered in his *House of Fame*. If every speech act, every moment of phonemic enunciation, is given its own integrity, language dissolves first into a cloud of sounds, then into silence; if the contours of a sound cannot be tamed by the sounds adjacent to it, there is not a reason for its articulation. Moreover, the sound itself, its moment, gets lost in the infinite divisibility of moments such that it can never appear. For Dante, this threat was impersonated by Nimrod and was recuperated by Cacciaguida; Boccaccio, however, makes this threat of linguistic dissolution part of an essential condition of the universe, one which cannot be so easily typologized away. This possibility of linguistic dissolution is one of his most significant conceptual innovations from the *Ameto*; in that poem, the universal condition is eros, and even when Ameto perceives language as an indolent stream of sounds, he does so under the eroticized spell of the nymphs. The plague, by contrast, is the vacuum that opposes eros; the basic erotic energy that magnetizes sounds so that they adhere to one another evaporates and word-organisms dissolve into nothing.

The brigata's tale-telling, however, staves off the plague condition, allowing language to reassemble into words and from that foundational coherence, into spaces and times that bear the structure of history out of the plague space. The words of the brigata attain a different sort of poignancy than Dante's: where language became temporally poignant in Paradise immediately prior to acquiring a specific signification, Boccaccio's language becomes poignant as it signifies, when it is delimited from the cacophony of plague-meaning into some limited, partially conceived and perceived body. The plague

imagines a pre-linguistic space that words—insofar as frame narratives force us to imagine their sonic matters—must inevitably occupy, but which they persist past in order to construct meaning in the mind of a listener or reader. In his reconfiguration of the frame, Boccaccio found a narrative tool pliable enough to reflect his broader phenomenology; the semiology of the text functioning itself testifies to the inadequacy of Dante's universalizing beatitude. As Boccaccio read Dante, he grew increasingly aware of the ways in which the praxis of Dante's text cut against its theory: to make sense of the *Comedy*, one cannot have the sort of breathless vision he describes as its apex. His exchanges with the denizens of the afterworld were more local and specific than that vision would allow, even in Paradise. Boccaccio's extension of the frame narrative allows him to recover the centrality of the local and particular in the context of the universalizing phenomenology he found in Dante.

Boccaccio's response, in its turn, deeply informs Chaucer's own attempts to respond to Dante, at least, after the *House of Fame*. Before I proceed into my analysis of the *Ameto* and the *Decameron*, a few words on this narrative reception are in order—this dissertation is, after all, principally about Chaucer, and unlike his reception of Dante, we are less sure of the specific Boccaccian texts that were available to Chaucer. Chaucer likely knew the *Ameto*; it is more likely that he knew the *Ameto* than the *Decameron*. The most compelling argument for his knowledge of the *Ameto* is his deployment of one of the *Ameto*'s tales—that of Agapes recounting her marriage to an aged husband—in the *Merchant's Tale*. Certainly, Chaucer drew upon many sources for this tale: the pear tree story was a commonplace in Medieval literature, and in general Chaucer seems to have



preferred the narrative structure of other versions to Boccaccio's in the *Ameto*.<sup>5</sup> However, several narrative details indicate that Boccaccio's version here was part of the chorus of sources Chaucer had in mind when he penned the tale. In particular, Chaucer seems to have been tantalized by Boccaccio's rather gruesome depiction of the sex scene. E. Talbot Donaldson argues that, though Chaucer's tale is told in the third person, the text "quietly shift[s] the point of view of the narrative so that we see the wedding night through May's eyes rather than January's" (43); Boccaccio's tale is, of course, told entirely from a woman's perspective, and is possibly the first version of this oft told tale that does so in the Middle Ages. The details recorded from that perspective also mirror Boccaccio's account—specifically, the slack neck skin and the beard imagery seem to borrow directly from Agapes's story.<sup>6</sup> I would add that the husband's self-recollection of his former virility and his argument to Agapes that she should feel lucky to be married to an old man also prefigure January's elaborate rationalization of his choice of a young wife and the ensuing debate that occupies so much of Chaucer's version of the tale, though other sources like Deschamps's *Le Miroir de Mariage* are also sources for this section.

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Helen Cooper accepts *Decameron* VII, 9 as an analogue to the *Merchant's Tale* on account of its combination of "a high-romance style opening with bawdy content" (12). In his chapter from *Sources and Analogues* dedicated to the *Merchant's Tale*, N. S. Thompson accepts both the *Decameron* and the *Ameto* as sources of Chaucer's description. However, the lack of distinct verbal parallels from the *Decameron* makes it suspect as a source, here as elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> This is precisely the sort of detail that would have stuck in the mind of someone trained in medieval mnemonic techniques. As Mary Carruthers has described in *The Book of Memory*, people in the Middle Ages used grotesque and shocking imagery to help themselves store and recall data; they imprinted such images in their memorial "wax," and from these paradigmatic events, recalled the totality of a story or composition. Chaucer demonstrates his interaction with such techniques in the *House of Fame*; while many of the images and ideas in the *Ameto* may not have made much of an impression—lacking, as they do, a sort of shocking, formalist quality that would differentiate them from the tired imagery of other genres—the image of the slack neck skin would be such a mnemonically distinct moment. Certainly, it is possible that Chaucer developed the same image on a parallel trajectory without knowledge of Boccaccio's text; but given the other evidence that he knew the text and the fact that Chaucer derives many of his most memorable images from other sources rather than from his own creative energies, Occam's razor would suggest that he probably recollects Boccaccio's image rather than inventing one so strikingly similar.

There is evidence, too that the *Ameto* was lurking in the corners of Chaucer's mind as he began to conceptualize the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, though its influence on the framework is less certain and widely accepted than its influence on the *Merchant's Tale* in the source criticism.<sup>7</sup> As far back as 1913, John S. P. Tatlock catalogued a number of similarities between the two frames: the springtime setting that occurs in conjunction with religious observances, which causes a company to assemble and tell tales to pass time; the use of a "head" of the tale-telling group who appoints tellers (a fact also true of the *Filocolo* and the *Decameron*); the personal point of view of the tales told by the tellers; the use of headlinks to connect the tales; the structure of the characterization wherein each teller is described, in detail, prior to her tale; and finally, the mutual thematization of marriage in the two frame stories (86-91). Any one of these borrowings, on its own, feels insecure; however, as Tatlock notes, they do have a cumulative effect that—especially when viewed in conjunction with the evidence from the *Merchant's Tale*—suggests that Chaucer knew the text.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that, in her chapter on the frame in *Sources and Analogues*, Cooper more or less dismisses the *Ameto* as an analogue for the frame, saying only that "the evidence is very weak, and the latest scholarship on the subject does not claim indebtedness on Chaucer's part" (6), though her own citations on this "latest scholarship" is rather anemic itself. In reality, few contemporary critics comment either positively or negatively on the *Ameto*'s influence on the Canterbury framework—it seems to simply be a text that has not caught the modern ear, and for good reason. However though she dismisses the *Ameto* as a source, her own catalogue of resemblances between the Canterbury frame and the *Decameron* is scarcely more convincing than Tatlock: her first point, for instance, is that the *Decameron* is the only source in which a "series of narrators" tell their stories specifically as pasttimes (which is, in fact, not true, since the *Ameto*'s storytellers are passing a hot afternoon with their storytelling); her second point is that five *Canterbury Tales* have analogues—without any direct verbal borrowing—in the *Decameron*, but the *Ameto* has an analogue with direct verbal borrowing. Tatlock's list of parallels are at least as convincing—and at times as problematic—as these; both works serve to underscore the problem in charting Boccaccio's influence on Chaucer: Chaucer's works seem too similar in their deep conceptual underpinnings to discount a relationship, but too different in their realization of those concepts to treat them as distinct analogues.

<sup>8</sup> While other sources have also commented on this possible relationship, they generally all emphasize one or two points of resemblance in Tatlock's longer catalogue. One notable essay linking the two works is W. H. Clawson's essay "The Framework of the *Canterbury Tales*." In particular, Clawson is struck by the *Ameto*'s use of a "special religious occasion" (6) as the mechanism that brings the company together and as *Ameto*'s role as a "presiding officer." While the first point does have some merit as a source for Chaucer's pilgrimage motif, it must be said that Harry Bailly bears little resemblance to *Ameto*, nor do the texts seem to conceptualize the role of this figure similarly—*Ameto* is an indolent, love-besotted character undergoing

While he likely knew the *Ameto*, I would suggest that he wasn't particularly struck by it—at least not on his first reading. If I might indulge in a brief interlude of historical imagination, the narrative of reception that seems most convincing to my mind runs as follows: Chaucer probably encountered the *Ameto* when he first encountered Boccaccio's other early works, perhaps on his first trip to Italy in 1372 or immediately preceding it. Indeed, there were only a few of Boccaccio's earlier works that Chaucer didn't seem to know—the *Ameto* was written immediately after Boccaccio's Neapolitan period when he had returned to Florence, and Chaucer likely knew all but one of the works Boccaccio wrote in Naples in the vernacular—Boccaccio's first poem, the *Caccia di Diana*—as well as the early texts written after his return. It would be odd if, sandwiched as it is in Boccaccio's chronology between the *Filocolo*,<sup>9</sup> the *Teseida*, the *Filostrato* and the *Amorosa Visione*,<sup>10</sup> Chaucer somehow missed the *Ameto*.<sup>11</sup> While Boccaccio's other texts evidenced a vibrancy of imagination that captivated Chaucer, thus prompting him to more overt acts of imitation, the *Ameto* probably seemed a rather static and conventional affair. Its final allegory likely felt as abrupt and out of place to Chaucer as it does to most contemporary readers, yet Boccaccio didn't immediately demonstrate an allegorical transformation at the center of the tale; Harry Bailly is a much more liminal figure in comparison, motivating the pilgrimage and interjecting at key moments in the headlinks, but lacking the sort of organizing force of Boccaccio's character. If Chaucer does borrow this structure from the *Ameto*, he alters it into an almost unrecognizable form.

<sup>9</sup> The *Filocolo* is a likely source of the *Franklin's Tale*. On its influence, see *Sources and Analogues*, 213-214; Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*, 39-60; Rajna. Cf. Helen Cooper, "The *Canterbury Tales*," 233-34.

<sup>10</sup> Chaucer's knowledge of this text is uncertain—less certain than the *Filocolo*—but various critics have seen its influence on *The House of Fame*, *The Parlement of Fowles*, and *The Legend of Good Women*. For its influence on the *House of Fame*, see Child 190-192 and Boitani 93-95; on *The Parlement*, see Koeppel 237-38; on the *Legend of Good Women*, see Collette 46-51. Cf. Cummings 14-32 and Fyler's comment in the *Riverside Chaucer's* edition of the *House of Fame*.

<sup>11</sup> On Chaucer's reception of Boccaccio's early works generally, see Wallace, "Chaucer and Boccaccio's Early Writings," and *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*. While Wallace comments on the *Ameto* as representing a developmental stage in Boccaccio's poetics, he does not comment on the likelihood that Chaucer knew or did not know it.

the kind of self-consciousness of this artistic effect that would have appealed to Chaucer; the settings and descriptions, in their turn, likely would have felt rather tired, a bit like the highly conventional Romance setting and characters he would later lampoon in *Sir Thopas*. Chaucer had read more artistically poignant pastoral poems, romance narratives and allegories than he found in the *Ameto*. He would have seen the references to Dante's *Comedy* throughout and perhaps understood the text as a response to that poem, but at first glance the response did not strike him as particularly insightful; his own *House of Fame* demonstrates a radically different, practically diametric trajectory in his own first response to Dante, and the artistic gap between the two texts goes some way toward explaining why Chaucer wouldn't have drawn on its resources for his own poetry. It takes a preliminary and limited encounter with the *Decameron* to prompt Chaucer to reevaluate the *Ameto* as a potential source for imagery and narrative structure.<sup>12</sup>

A similar explanation does not suffice to explain the dearth of direct verbal borrowing from the *Decameron*: Boccaccio's later narrative was precisely the type of text that would have captivated Chaucer's imagination. While a good deal of recent work has begun to more confidently treat the *Decameron* as a source for the *Canterbury Tales*,<sup>13</sup> the lack of any sustained borrowing still makes such efforts deeply problematic. Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> Reading the *Ameto* as an analogue that Chaucer didn't really like solves a number of puzzles posed by source criticism on the *Canterbury Tales*: it explains, first, why there is only one direct verbal borrowing from that work; it explains why Chaucer's frame seems to strikingly lack a firm antecedent—Chaucer draws upon some of the imaginative resources of the *Ameto*, but scrambles them and entirely reimagines the uses to which he will put them; and it explains why the *Canterbury Tales* seems to run parallel to the *Decameron*'s project without directly citing it—Chaucer had to turn to a text he didn't particularly like to help him imagine how Boccaccio had innovated on his earlier use of the frame. After this, Chaucer could plot his own point on that same trajectory, innovating on his own imagined version of the *Decameron* with the *Ameto* as a sort of grudging reference point.

<sup>13</sup> As I have mentioned above, the *Sources and Analogues* of the *Canterbury Tales* has begun to more or less confidently assert the *Decameron* as an analogue; other interesting work in this area includes that done by Harkins, Finlayson, Beidler, Biggs, Heffernan, and Finlayson, among many other critical works. Cf. Severs whose curmudgeonly attitude toward the relationship still seems to me the most reliable starting point.

the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* seems to lack much specific reference to Boccaccio's frame—if Chaucer had thoroughly read it, we can probably assume there would be more overt echoes of the plague motif, some borrowing, perhaps from the narrator's introduction, etc. Chaucer was always deeply struck by the ingenuity of other authors' solutions to philosophical problems, so much so that he sometimes falls prey to a paradigm of imitation and evolution rather than innovation. In reality, his lack of a fuller knowledge of the *Decameron* probably left Chaucer more free to develop an original deployment of the frame, which might have been stifled had he seen more of Boccaccio's text—his lack of specific knowledge leaves him free to fill in the blanks of Boccaccio's framework. In terms of structure and motifs, the similarities to the *Ameto* that Tatlock notes are more convincing than any that could be mounted for the *Decameron*, or really for any other single frame narrative.<sup>14</sup> However, though it is difficult to claim that Chaucer had a thorough knowledge of the *Decameron*, Helen Cooper's suggestion that he might have encountered the idea of it in some rudimentary, summarized form seems entirely plausible and even likely (8-9). In his capacity as Controller of the wool customs or one of his other official posts, Chaucer could easily have come into contact with someone familiar with the *Decameron*; such a reader could have acquainted him with the broad strokes of the work—its characterization of the brigata members (whose depth exceeded virtually all of Boccaccio's precedents), the plague thematic, the pastoral gardens they journey amongst, the thematic linkages between tales, etc. When Chaucer learned of Boccaccio's use of the frame narrative for his greatest work, he might well

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<sup>14</sup> Cooper—after claiming the *Decameron* as the most comprehensive analogue for the *Canterbury Tales*—suggests the A-text of *Piers Plowman* as the nearest analogue for the pilgrimage motif, which is entirely plausible (21-22); however, the parallels she adduces between the two texts are again not much more definitive than those Tatlock notices in the *Ameto*.

have revisited an earlier work he had largely discounted—the *Ameto*—for insight into the opportunities that framed narrative afforded Boccaccio in his *magnum opus*.

In the shift from the eroticism of the *Ameto* to the plague thematic of the *Decameron*, Chaucer seems to have found a poetic mode that would help him to resolve some of the conceptual traps that had impeded him from fully realizing the *House of Fame*'s temporal poetics. I will treat the *Canterbury Tales*' adaptation of the frame in the next chapter; of course, the narrative of reception I have offered above necessarily possesses a great degree of uncertainty—in the lack of more direct borrowing, it is difficult to know exactly how much of either text Chaucer really knew, and even more difficult to discern his attitude toward either text. But even if the above narrative does not represent, precisely, the historical progression of Chaucer's reception of Boccaccio's frames, really only two tenets from it are necessary to my ultimate argument: 1. that Chaucer was familiar in some measure, with the *Decameron* and 2. that Chaucer understood Boccaccio's use of framed narrative as a response to the same sort of Dantean phenomenology he had first grappled with in the *House of Fame*. The *Ameto*'s overt use of Dantean imagery recommends it as a sort of “bridge source” that clued Chaucer in to this deployment of the frame and that Chaucer turned to in the absence of a more complete knowledge of the *Decameron*, but Chaucer could have read this sort of dialogue into the text even without a knowledge of it. Moreover, I will argue in my next chapter that Chaucer engages with the sort of allegorical modes of meaning Boccaccio deploys in the *Ameto*; he had certainly engaged with allegories in other settings, but the *Ameto*'s unique characteristics resemble Chaucer's project in several striking ways. In particular, the way in which Chaucer's *Retraction* reframes the allegorical texture of the work

closely resembles the ironic attitude of Boccaccio's conclusion to the *Ameto*, and I will argue that it is one source of the *Retraction*. However, Chaucer obviously knew many frame narratives, and could have fashioned his dialogue with Boccaccio's use of framing using any number of sources; the above represents what I consider to be the most likely scenario for Chaucer's reception, but my ultimate argument will not hang on where Chaucer got his ideas about framing, but rather how he uses frames. In any case, the *Ameto* was certainly on Boccaccio's mind as he began to compose the framework of the *Decameron*, and analysis of it yields insights into the way he conceptualized the phenomenology of the frame; to such an analysis, I will now turn.

#### *Allegories of Matter in the Ameto*

The *Ameto* rightfully begins under the sign of Cupid, the capricious god of erotic desire—Boccaccio's narrator invokes him with a fanatical devotion, recounting all the positive effect he brings about in his adherents. However, despite the poem's setting in an ancient, pastoral version of Italy, Cupid is far from the traditional god of ancient mythology here; Boccaccio deliberately conflates him with the creator God of the Christian tradition, thereby amplifying the position of erotic desire in his world considerably. Eros is like gravity in the *Ameto*: more than just a principle of sexual attraction, it is what brings objects into relation with one another, allowing them to mutually constitute one another's being. As the narrator informs us, Cupid's

effetti tengono in moto continuo li piacevoli cieli, dando eterna legge alle stelle e ne' viventi potenziata forze di bene operare[.] I quali, se uditi da Creso nel fuoco o da Ciro nel sangue o nella povertà da Codro o nelle

tenebre da Edippo, piaceranno; e Marte, ascoltandoli, o darà all'arme quiete o più fervente l'opererà ne' bisogni. Pallade la dolcezza de' suoi studi, i costui fatti sentendo, d'animo divenuta maggiore, gli lascia alcuna volta; e Minerva robusta si fa mansueta intendendoli; e la fredda Diana ne 'ntiepidisce; e Apollo più focose porge le sue saette. Che più? I satiri, le ninfe, le driade e le naiade e qualunque altro semóne, seguitandolo, se ne abbelliscono ed udendoli piacciono a tutti. (904-5)

[effects keep the pleasant heavens in continual motion, giving to the stars eternal law and the power to act well upon the living. The which, if heard by Cresus in the fire, or by Cyrus in the blood, or in poverty by Codrus, or in the shadows by Oedipus will be pleasing; and Mars, listening, will either give his arms to quietness or use them more fervently at need. Pallas learning of these deeds, abandons the sweetness of her studies for a time and becomes greater in spirit; and robust Minerva, hearing, is made tame; and cold Diana grows warm; and Apollo shoots his hotter arrows. What more? The satyrs, the nymphs, the driads and the naiads and any other demigod, following him, become more beautiful and hearing of him, all are pleased.]

Cupid here becomes the Prime Mover of Aristotle and Aquinas, acquiring a drastically increased theological scope than he enjoyed as the diminutive avatar of infatuation. In medieval cosmogony, the heavens were the part of God's creation that moved in an orderly and rational procession; where the lower, sublunar reaches of the cosmos were subject to all manner of convolutions and upheavals, the stars and planets remained



distantly mechanical. In Dante as in the theologians, cosmic bodies are receptacles of God's love as are all things, but their manifestation of that love is governed in equal measure by God's reason such that they never stray from their courses.<sup>15</sup> It is this constant motion of the spheres that allows us to perceive time as a more or less ordered passage, divisible into the units of calendar and clock. But by instituting Cupid at the top of the universal hierarchy, Boccaccio suggests that the love moving the planets is the same that inspires the capricious and temporary lusts of human beings and even animals. The implications of this move are more startling than they might seem at first: Boccaccio's transmutation of Cupid into God reverses the dynamic of the *dolce stil nuovo's* poetics. Stilnovist poets insisted that erotic love could offer insight into metaphysical and even religious problems. As Dante did, the poet had to largely allegorize his love relationship to understand the veiled, divine message it encoded. The directionality of this allegorization always moved from the human realm to the divine; the particular love was transformed into the universal. At the outset of the *Ameto*, however, Boccaccio begins to transform the universal into the particular; prefiguring the final move of his allegory, he infuses the image of God with a deeply human sense of lust rather than infusing lust with traces of divinity. The most basic universal movements and really the principle of time itself is based on the erotic energy God projects out onto the universe; this energy is not the impassive, patrician love expressed in, for instance, an icon of the Madonna and Child or a saint's martyrdom, but an unreasoning, fetishistic impulse toward flesh. Boccaccio suggests, in this image, that the cosmos shapes itself in response to a cupidic fetishism; love inspired by Cupid's arrows is irremediably specific

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<sup>15</sup> This cosmic theology has as its source Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; see, in particular, XII.7 on the necessary being of the planets and stars as contrasted to the temporary and accidental being of sublunar bodies. For a critical perspective on Dante's use of such astrological imagery, see Cornish 12-25.

to the point of being unreasoning and obsessive. All the desirability pregnant in the universe contracts itself into a single body, a movement opposite to Dante's democratization of desire; but for Boccaccio, this fetishism is the only way objects can appear. And despite being imbalancing, irrational, temporary and particular such desire finds a sort of tenuous equilibrium in the physical world.

In fact, such love seems to inspire a sort of *arete* in those who hear of it—love summons heroes and gods alike to be what they are, but in an increasingly intense way. Boccaccio asks us to understand cupidic desire not simply as sexual attachment, but as the force which spontaneously integrates a being into the unity that defines it; this integration occurs as a response to the external stimulus of a desire that Boccaccio so drastically broadens as to make it virtually synonymous with perception itself. In the line following the equation of Cupid with the creator, we thus see the God inspiriting the great figures of history and of the Greek pantheon with the principle that defines them. Cupid literally gives them all the capacity to “operare bene,” most simply to operate well; he seems to oppose only the principles of inertia and irrelation—the chariness of Minerva and the coldness of Diana. Ironically, the “goodness” of these deeds has been shorn of the connotations of Christian morality with which Cupid has just been imbued: one can hardly say that any of these figures would be exemplars of Christian virtue, yet they are exemplars of the desire that moves the heavens. In the world of the *Ameto*, the energy behind one's desire and the absorptiveness of its object outstrips all other concerns and configurations; thus even as Boccaccio frames the allegory in terms of Christian morality, he shears away its potency—all become more beautiful if they hear of the God of Love, whatever their specific poison might be. Cupid does not reserve his influence for those

who behave in a manner in keeping with his divine directives, but rather stirs everyone in the cosmos to become more beautiful as whoever and whatever they are; his erotic energy structures the ontological substrate of Boccaccio's world, making everything more gracious by inspiring them with cupidic desires.

At the end of his Proem, Boccaccio begins to associate these ecologies of desire with the textual ecologies that comprise his work. Directly addressing Cupid, the narrator aligns his vision of the aesthetic surface of the text with the surface consciousness of grace and the spatiotemporal ecology of the *Ameto*'s world:

e 'l bel parlare e gli atti lieti e snelli  
e l'operata già somma salute  
da voi ne' campi amorosi e novelli  
com'io posso comincio, tua vertute  
superinfusa aspettando, che vegna  
tal che per te le mie cose vedute  
in quello stile, che appresso disegna  
la mano, acquistin lode e il tuo valore  
fino a le stelle, si come di degna  
donna, si stenda con eterno onore. (908)

[and your beautiful speech and your acts happy and elegant and the highest health already worked by you in the fields amorous and new; I will begin as I can, waiting upon the infusion of your virtue from above, may it come such that through you the things I have seen, manifest in that style which the hand now designs, might acquire praise and your merit might

extend up to the stars with eternal honor, if my lady will see fit to make it so.]

The basic contours of this passage come from the poetic self-definition Dante offers to Bonagiunta in the 24th canto of *Purgatory*: like Dante, he awaits the spiration of love to descend upon him. Where Dante goes signifying “a quel modo ch’e’ ditta dentro” [in the mode which Love dictates], Boccaccio’s narrator seems to take more ownership of his “cose” and perhaps his “stile” as well—the owner of the hand designing this style is left ambiguous. But though the things being narrated are associated with the narrator, the speech itself belongs squarely to Cupid as it does in Dante, along with his gracious acts and the natural world, infused with desire and novelty. Both poets imagine themselves as translators of a preexistent discourse of love; however, Boccaccio makes explicit what Dante cautiously left implied: namely that this discourse of love is made manifest in the tangible world. Dante’s Love retains the safe, disembodied quality of deity—he spirates and dictates into Dante; likewise Dante’s poetics, which are ostensibly about the world around him, make no contact with the external world in his own self-definition, aside from, perhaps, the physicality of the text upon which he writes: the abstraction breathes into Dante and he takes note and goes signifying. For Boccaccio, it is this emphasis on the mediation of the sign in both of Dante’s self-referential verbs that seems a bit bloodless, given the phenomenological thrust of the rest of his narration—the most prominent alteration he makes in the passage is to shift from Dante’s symbolic register to an ontological one of physical things, “cose” occupying the spatial grid of the “campi amorosi e novelli.” Dante’s poetic self-definition anticipates his allegorization of the world: to Boccaccio’s mind, he literally sign-ifies the world around him, transforming

everything within it—including himself—into a monovocal sign of divine love.

Boccaccio's Cupid is not such a disembodied figure, nor is Boccaccio's narrator detached from the physical world; the divine source of poetry in the *Ameto* does not shelter behind theological abstraction, but is fully incarnational. Cupid is himself a participant in grace, not just its source—his own acts are gracious, he is both example and source of grace—and it is Cupid's own embodiment that mediates between the two linguistic poles of the frame narrative: the surface apprehension of beautiful language and the perception of a physical narrative space, beautiful in a different sense. The unrepentantly incarnational quality of Cupid locates the source of meaning in Boccaccio's text within the grace-bound body, which manifests in both an aesthetics of language and an ontological aesthetics of bodies. The flexibility of the frame—coupled with the fluidity of Dante's *terza rima*, which Boccaccio uses for the poetic sections of the text spoken only by his framing characters—will render up the surface consciousness of its linguistic aesthetic; this construction of the amorous fields in which spatiotemporal objects appear because they are objects and agents of narrowly defined desires will occupy the narrator throughout much of the frame.

These amorous fields are imagined as an ecology of desire that governs the appearance of all objects within the world of the *Ameto*; that ecology is best represented by the pastoral landscape in which the poem takes place. Pastoral poems generally imagine a rustic, semi-domesticated world wherein the landscape—when the shepherd engages in it with practices of proper husbandry—generously provides for human subsistence.<sup>16</sup> The form, from its early examples in Virgil and other Latin poets, was nostalgically archaic, hearkening back to an imaginary time before the intrusions of

<sup>16</sup> On Boccaccio's use of the pastoral as compared to Dante's and Petrarch's, see Smarr and Padoan.

culture and empire had complicated life. The objects populating the environment, rather, seemed to occur in a spontaneous network of harmonious interaction; the subsistence desires of humans, animals, plants and all manner of living creatures operated within a closed, self-sustaining pattern, each object within the landscape providing and requiring some feature of its fellows. Each being found its form within the context of the other beings inhabiting the landscape, all of whom operated according to an only partially conscious sequence of desire and satiety. Boccaccio explicitly comments on this feature of pastoralism in the debate between the shepherds: there, two shepherds—Achaten and Alcesto—argue about whose methods of shepherding are the most sensible. Achaten pastures his flock in the open fields where they can easily find food, but where they are also prey to wolves; his sheep, as Alcesto argues and Achaten tacitly admits, tend to be fat, lazy and sickly as a result of this easy life. Achaten, however, is unconcerned with the physical state of his sheep—a true entrepreneur, he only points to the vast quantity of his herd as the aim of shepherding. As he describes their subsistence, “come le piace ognuna ha di sé cura,/ vicine a molti rivi, che correndo dintorno vanno a loro, ove la sete spenta, poi la vanno raccendendo” [each one cares for itself just as it pleases near the many rivers which run around them, and when their thirst is spent, then they go off to reignite it] (937). Alcesto, by contrast, pastures his sheep in the hilly country surrounding the fields; both his life and the life of his sheep is harder as a result of the terrain they must navigate—he must actively force them up the slopes with his crook and be more careful in seeking out places offering good provender. His flock tends to be small as a result, but his sheep also tend to be hardy due to the physical strain of the landscape. They are also not prone to being eaten by wolves.

There's a sort of proto-Darwinism at work in the debate between the shepherds—Alcesto actively shapes the genetic destiny of his sheep by placing them in more demanding environments, while Achaten's *laissez faire* shepherding subjects his sheep to the more random depredations of wolves and the general fat that plenty brings. As Achaten himself argues, the desires of his sheep are easily evoked and sated on the abundant plains—his sheep casually cycle between thirst and fulfillment with scarcely an interval between the two; one would imagine the same holds true of the wolves, who sup on the sheep easily and often. Alcesto's sheep, by contrast, are subject to more demanding conditions; their desires—for rest, food, water and the like—are evoked by their treacherous movement through the hills, but they are not so easily sated. Rather, they must engage more thoroughly with the landscape to maintain their subsistence. Alcesto's form of husbandry knits the animals and himself more intricately into the landscape that birthed the animal, and as a result his sheep are somehow more real—more ontologically stable—than Achaten's; Achaten's sheep become subject to the entropic forces of disease and predators which dissolve the sheep's identification as a discrete being. Of course, disease and depredation are also elements of any ecology—they shape the form of an animal as much as any other force—but in this case, these forces don't seem to shape the form of the sheep, only to entropically prey upon a degraded version of an unrealized form. Even when they appear in the fields, their fat, diseased state anticipates their dissolution: it is only by dint of numerical magnification that Achaten's perversion of the sheep can be sustained. The nymphs unanimously approve of Alcesto's practices and quickly quiet Achaten's protests. In valuing Alcesto's shepherding, Boccaccio defines the pastoral landscape as one where intense physical

exertion and interaction defines a collective ontology wherein stable objects delimited by a total ecology can appear. The broadly defined Cupid of the opening reigns over the dialectic of intense desire and satiety that characterizes this landscape wherein objects summon one another into being. The pastoral landscape of the *Ameto* is a perceptual weave in which sensory experience structures the ontology of the objects inhabiting that landscape; they persist within a harmonious matrix that, even if it is not easy, summons malleable matter into distinct forms.

Prior to the shepherds' debate, *Ameto* emerges out of this landscape—specifically located in Etruria, the same region in which the *Decameron* will take place—not as a shepherd, but as a hunter; his initial depiction characterizes him as a perfect exemplar of the hunter, skilled in all the practices of the chase and always carrying game home from the abundant landscape he inhabits. At first, the predatory connotations of hunting would seem in conflict with the pastoral landscape; but the Proem's invocation of Cupid has recast the cardinal tool *Ameto* uses—the bow and arrow—as an implement of desire. Even at this early point in the allegory, *Ameto* is conceptualized as a type of Cupid who fails to comprehend his own significance; yet he still responds to the world he appears in with a sort of uncomprehending reverence. As Boccaccio describes his appearance,

Era di piacevoli seni e d'ombre graziose la selva piena, di animali veloci,  
fierissimi e paurosi; e in più parti di sé abbondanti fontane rigavano le  
fresche erbette. In questa selva sovente *Ameto*, vagabondo giovane, i  
fauni e le driadi, abitatrici del luogo, solea visitare; ed egli, forse dagli  
vicini monti avuta antica origine, quasi da carnalità costretto, di ciò  
avendo memoria, con pietosi affetti li onorava tavolta, perché egli,



favoreggiato da loro, le timide bestie per li nascosi luoghi del monte, mentre sopra la terra dimorava Appollo, con sollicito passo furibondo seguia; e rade erano quelle, che 'l suo occhio scorgesse, che per velocità di corso o per volgimenti sagaci, o che dal suo arco no fossero ferite o da' cani ritenute o ultimamente vinte dalle sue insidie e nelle sue reti incappate, in breve da lui si trovassero aggiunte: per la qual cosa di preda carico tornava sovente alle sue case. (909-10)

[The wood was full of pleasant glades and gracious shade, of swift animals most proud and fearsome; and in many parts of it abounding fountains drew lines in the fresh grasses. In this wood Ameto, the vagabond youth, would often visit the fauns and the dryads—the inhabitants of the place; and he, who perhaps had his ancient origin from the nearby mountains, having memory of it as if compelled by carnality and, sometimes honored them with pious tenderness, so that he, favored by them, would pursue the timid beasts through the concealed places of the mountain with eager and furious step while Apollo dwelt above the earth; and few were the beasts his eye detected which, either through running speed or wise turning, would not be wounded by his bow, or held by his dogs or ultimately defeated by his snares and caught in his nets, that were not quickly caught by him: for which reason he often returned to his house laden with prey.]

As he introduces us to Ameto, Boccaccio figures him as a type of Apollo, whose hunting has more destructive connotations; however, the mention of his keen eyes anticipates the

use he will make of vision once he sees Lia—his predatory vision will be turned toward the object of his affections who will, in turn, refract that consuming vision back onto him, intensifying it in the process. Prior to his encounter with Lia, Ameto is solely predatory; his hunting knits him into the landscape—few activities require the sort of sensory acumen that hunting does—and it elicits desires—hunger, bloodlust—but his arrows kill their targets where Cupid’s inspire them with a manic desire. Uncomprehending of love, Ameto understands his desires as one-directional: the arrow of his desire has a target, but that target is not capable of reciprocating that desire and so redoubling it in the hunter himself. The objects that Ameto desires can only flee at his coming, as Apollo’s own nymph, Daphne, flees from his relentless onslaught; but one way or another, they will be subjected to the desire they avoid and, in doing so, they will manifest the being and personality of Ameto within the destruction of their bodies. Hunting is the matrix through which Ameto, initially, interacts with his environment.

Perhaps even more interesting in this introduction to Ameto is its subtle reference to Dante; the “selva” that forms the perceptual matrix from which Ameto seems to spontaneously arise is characterized by its materiality, as the natural deities that inhabit the place and the reference to Ameto’s “carnalità” indicate. Moreover, the wood is dappled with “ombre graziose;” these details collectively associate the passage with Dante’s wandering through the “selva oscura” at the beginning of the *Inferno*. As has long been noted, Dante’s term “selva” is related to the term “silva,” the Latin term that translates the Greek “hyle,” or matter.<sup>17</sup> In Dante’s allegory, the *selva oscura* acts as a non-allegorical space; it is the material world Dante inhabits before his initial summons,

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<sup>17</sup> Landino’s commentary on the *Comedy* is the first text to note this association; for a modern critical application of the concept, see Hallock.

one which—even if it is pregnant with symbolism—Dante is unable to read. The *selva oscura* is an allegory of its own uninterpretability. Dante is trapped in this materialistic worldview by the death of Beatrice’s physical body; only when her spirit summons him can he begin the long interpretive trek back to her. Boccaccio also begins his text in a dark, deeply material forest, but unlike Dante he does not code this locale as negative; the pastoral impulses of the poem precariously cross its Dantean references, validating the simple primitivity of Ameto. Most criticism of the *Ameto* and the figure of Ameto in particular focus on his movement from a primitive “bestiality” to a Christianized “humanity” at the end of the allegory,<sup>18</sup> but that limited trajectory runs contrary to the pastoral impulses we can note here. The unprepossessing engagement of Ameto with the natural world results in an uncluttered ontology—Ameto is birthed spontaneously from the plenty of the wood that surrounds him. He even yields a primitive sort of reverence to the local deities of the place, not for any theological insight they might offer, but for his simple cousinship with the place that summoned him into being. Even if, for a Christian audience, these might be the wrong gods, the reverence they inspire in Ameto is not reproved here, and even seems to be validated; and ultimately, even the rarefied Christian God that intrudes at the culmination of the allegory is crossed with the image of the local, cultic goddess Aphrodite. The terror of Dante’s uninterpretable matter becomes, for Boccaccio, a precondition of our appearance in the world; the basic sensory engagement of Ameto in the pastoral landscape is what defines the contours of his being—the physical contact of hunting is what has shaped both his own body and the bodies of his prey. While the *selva* admits a number of allegorical interpretations—in fact, reading it as a symbol of uninterpretable materiality is itself allegorical—Ameto’s initial

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<sup>18</sup> For a contemporary reading of the *Ameto* that views its allegory as authentic, see Poole.

engagement with it is not interpretive but simply perceptual, and this is not a feature of the forest that the narrative censures. Ameto is not so much rendered bestial as all human beings are rendered up to the material conditions that structure their being.

Boccaccio draws attention to this renovated materialism in describing one of Ameto's curious customs shortly after the passage just cited. After a particularly rigorous hunt, Ameto "alle soavi aure aperse il ruvido seno; e, cacciatisi dal viso i sucidi sudori con la rozza mano, l'arida bocca rinfrescò con l'umide frondi delle verdi piante; e ricreato alquanto, colli suoi cani, ora l'uno ora l'altro chiamando, cominciò a ruzzare" (910) [opened his coarse chest to the sweet air; and, chasing away the dirty sweat from his face with a rough hand, he refreshed his arid mouth with the moist leaves of the green plants; and having rested somewhat with his dogs, calling first one then another, he began to romp.] The sumptuousness of the description again seems to provisionally validate the primitivity of Ameto—we see here a spontaneous conjuration of desire born of Ameto's hunting that now results in a very pleasant seeming rest. Boccaccio characterizes that rest as a re-creation, a bodily rejuvenation brought on by a new set of physical interactions with the landscape surrounding him. Yet Ameto moves fluidly from one set of desires into another; as soon as he is re-created, he arbitrarily wishes to play roughly with his dogs. Boccaccio goes on to describe this play for some time, detailing how their playful tearing of his clothes inspires an angry energy in Ameto. Ameto's romping again underscores his relational physicality; his being within the landscape is formed from a series of tangible relationships that flow seamlessly from one to the other. Even in his play, Ameto evokes the same sort of energies within himself as when he works at his hunting; he is a purely material being, and his materiality arises through the diverse forms

of physical contact he engages in and feels in a level of detail Boccaccio's description can only approximate.

Though we can hardly call Ameto bestial, he does possess that pristine primitivity endemic to the pastoral. Boccaccio's real challenge in the poem is to wed the ease and simplicity of that unconscious primitivity with the interpretive self-awareness of allegory. He wants to retain the simple materiality of Ameto and the world he inhabits, but he also wants to render that materiality profound both to his own character and his audience. For this, he deploys the same essential tactic as Dante: tangible love, the most perfect expression of the perceptual ontology implicit in the world surrounding Ameto. As Ameto romps with his dogs, he hears an otherworldly music from deep within the forest; he recognizes the song as divine, speculating that only goddesses could make such a sound. The divinity of the singers manifests itself in an intensification of the environment: Ameto says that "i boschi più pieni d'animali si sono dati che non soleano e Febo più chiari n'ha pòrti i raggi suoi, e l'aure più soavemente m'hanno le fatiche levate e l'erbe e i fiori, in quantità grandissima cresciuti più che l'usato testimoniano la loro venuta" [the woods were given a greater plenitude of animals than usual and Phoebus offered brighter rays, and the breezes, more softly, have taken away cares from me and the grass and the flowers, grown in greater quantity than usual, attest to their arrival] (910). Certainly those who sing this song are Cupid's creatures; they inspire the same ontological intensification of the pastoral landscape that the narrator associated with the God of desire in the Proem. Like the song of Beatrice, their song seems to simply inspire a deeper fullness of being in the world in which it unfolds and to which it refers; the simple multiplication of animal and plant life testifies to this, but Boccaccio inflects that

multiplication, first by the use of sun imagery, and second by his casual slip into a Christian religious register. In the first case, not only are there more perceptible objects in the world as a result of the divine song, but they somehow become more visible; the light of Phoebus—characterized as a sort of visual medium here—is simply brighter and clearer, objects within it becoming more perceptible. These tangible effects act as testimonies to the divinity of the singers. Ameto’s simple habitation of the pastoral world inspired a sort of prevenient worship of satyrs and dryads, but the song and its attendant intensification of the environment become proper objects of worship; as such, the song here already foreshadows the conclusion of the allegory that Ameto can only dimly and unwittingly sense here.

The beauty of the song is such that Ameto must see its singer; indeed, sight is the operative sense, for the desire inspired by the song is quite explicitly drawn as a visual one. As Ameto characterizes it, “Io non ne vidi mai alcuno; e, desideroso di vederli, se così sono bella cosa come si dice, ora li andrò a vedere, il sole guidante i passi miei” [I have never seen any god; and, desirous to see them, if they are such a beautiful thing as is said, I will go now to see them, the sun guiding my steps” (911). Lest there be any doubt of the physicality of the goddesses, Boccaccio refers to them three times as visible bodies. In one sense, Ameto’s insistence on the visibility of the goddesses is a consequence of his crass materiality. As a creature fashioned from a distinctly visible world, Ameto can only conceptualize the divine as visible. But in this case, Ameto is actually correct, though for all the wrong reasons; as was the case for Dante in a somewhat more qualified sense, the principal way human beings experience the divine is through sensory experience. The Dantean reference is clarified by the final image of the

sun guiding Ameto's footsteps—particularly in Purgatory, the sun is an important symbol of the divine realm, and footsteps are a recurrent symbol of Dante's journey throughout the *Comedy*. The rumors of divine beauty Ameto has heard will prove true in a way he cannot possibly envision before experiencing it; feminine beauty will renovate his experience of the sensible world he has only half-consciously and habitually inhabited up to this point. The beauty of the nymphs will disclose the supplemental dimensions of being of which Ameto has been hitherto unaware; it will enmesh him in a new perceptual matrix that does not end with the destruction of its object, but the progressive intensification of it.

Again like Dante, Boccaccio registers a sense of foreboding at the way he has conceptualized his project—this project of rendering the divine visible entails a deep threat of transgression. The threat is even greater for Ameto, since he encounters divine being directly before he has had any instruction; Dante had his journey through Hell and Purgatory—as well as Vergil—to prepare him for the task of spatializing Paradise, but Ameto lacks all such resources. For this reason, he is simply stupefied when he sees the nymphs for the first time. Ameto again relies on unwitting acts of worship rather than the theological rationalizations of the *Comedy*: “ne più tosto le vide che, loro dee stimando, indietro timido ritratto, s'inginocchiò e, stupefatto, che dir si dovesse non conosca” [no sooner did he see them but, judging them goddesses, he retreated timidly and knelt down, stupefied, such that he did not know what he should say] (911). The longed for sight of the nymphs outstrips all of Ameto's expectations; upon seeing them, he immediately registers his presumption in seeking them out and resorts to worship. He falls into a sort of humble, ineffable prayer; Ameto's own ignorance becomes the means by which he

overcomes his own presumption. Whereas for Dante, the ineffability topoi of *Paradise* 1 require the massive theological mechanics of the prior two books, Ameto falls into them unwittingly as he does everything else. The experience of the nymphs themselves supplies its own appropriate response. Understanding his hubris, Ameto attempts to withdraw, but the nymphs' own dogs prevent his retreat. Deploying an Ovidian reference we might not have thought him capable of, Ameto likens himself to Actaeon, the hunter who witnessed Diana bathing and so was transformed into a hart and torn apart by his own dogs. Like Apollo in the contest with Marsyas, Diana resents being rendered visible, being denuded by the eyes of Actaeon in such a way as to disclose her flesh. And like Marsyas, Actaeon has his own fleshliness imposed on himself viscerally as the dogs tear him apart. But the nymphs are unlike Diana—rather, they silence their dogs and console Ameto, welcoming him into their fellowship. The nymphs, in fact, revel in their own visibility—Ameto's hubris is principally overcome by the divine's own celebration of its tangibility than by any act of reverence on Ameto's part.

Within the group, Ameto is able to more clearly hear the song that compelled him to see the nymphs. The song is sung by Lia, who recounts the tale of her violent birth to the group: as she tells it, her father was the river Cephissus, who fell in love with the nymph Liriop. Liriop did not reciprocate his love, but Cephissus, with startlingly little attempt at courtship, “co' suoi ravigliamenti vinse e prese/ con nuova e disusata maestria,/ e sì per lei di Venere s'accese/ che, totale la sua virginitate,/ non valendole prieghi nè difese,/ m'ingenerò, la quale tante fiata,/ quante io veggio onde, tante son costretta/ di mio padre onorar la deitate;/ avvegna che ciò ch'in esse riguardando/ mi rendon la mia forma leggiadretta” [overcame her in his twists and turns and seized/ her



with new and seldom used mastery,/ and he was so enflamed with Venus for her that, taking all her virginity,/ her begging and defenses availing her nothing,/ he conceived me, so that every time I see waves, I am constrained to honor the deity of my father;/ it since happens that looking in them they return to me my graceful form] (912). Perhaps the most startling fact of this narrative is that Lia doesn't seem to resent the fact that she was a product of rape—she doesn't even really register that she could be resentful. If anything, the fault seems to lie with her mother for resisting her father—Cephiſſus correctly perceived her beauty and so naturally gravitated toward it. Cephiſſus's conquest of Liriop is tacitly celebrated in the mildly incestuous honor Lia offers to the waters; unlike her mother, when Lia looks at the waters she perceives her own beauty—significantly through the tempestuous motion of the stream—and thereby becomes complicit with her father's erotic attachment to her mother. She sees herself in the way Cephiſſus saw Liriop and so recognizes a sort of perverse justice in rape—to withhold beauty from the sensory experience of its admirers is a deeper sin than seizing it against the beautiful being's will in the world the *Ameto* constructs. Such a refusal defies the erotic texture that summons everything into being within that world; while Cephiſſus's rape is rationalized, Liriop's attempt to withdraw from him is not—she simply attempts to refuse the erotic energies with which she is herself infused. As a result, she is forcibly reintegrated into that texture—within this world, everything takes part in the erotic play that discloses the sensory quality of the objects and subjects occupying it; if they fail to do so willingly, they are destined to be forcibly reintegrated into that play as mute objects of another's erotic fancy rather than as willing participants in it.

We should note that the violence within the story of Lia's lineage contrasts jarringly with the beauty Ameto finds in the song. Nowhere in the poem does the inherent metrical beauty of Dante's *terza rima* feel so out of place as it does when it describes the scene of Lia's conception. Now, the beauty Ameto finds in Lia's song could be a consequence of the masculine wish fulfillment it entails—Lia becomes complicit with her father's violence, and so gives sanction to all unmeasured masculine desire. However there are clues, which we will explore shortly, that Ameto doesn't really register the deep complicity her tale involves; he doesn't really seem to register much of her story at all. Rather, Ameto's experience of the song as beautiful implies that he doesn't really imagine what its words represent; he enjoys the sound that Lia makes while singing, enjoys watching her mouth make the song's sounds, but becomes so engrossed in the present situation that he can't devote any attention to much else. This disjunction between form and representation is Boccaccio's first deployment of the linguistic structure of the frame narrative; for Ameto, the language of this framed poem is first and foremost a material manifestation of Lia's beauty. Only at the end of the poem—when the Divine Venus is revealed—does Ameto register that he has attended to her song here. His distractedness participates in Lia's veneration of herself—it proves that she could say virtually anything and still captivate Ameto with the music of how she has said it.

Of course, the danger of Lia's reflective self-worship is that it could conceivably become self contained—it is in this sense that she is both the literal and metaphorical sister of Narcissus. Both were born of the same act of violence, as she goes on to describe in her narrative; but where Narcissus becomes the sole, fetishized target of his own erotic gaze, Lia, in admiring herself, actually offers herself to others. Her veneration

of her own beauty entails a realization that it should be available to others who share in that veneration. Lia thus announces herself as available to her admirers in a way that likely would have disturbed Boccaccio's medieval audience:

Chiunque fia per sua virtù colui  
che degnerà al mio bel viso aprire  
gli occhi del core e ritenermi in lui,  
io gli farò quel diletto sentire  
che più suol essere agli amanti caro  
dopo l'acceso e suo forte disire.

Nè per me sentirà mai nullo amaro  
tempo chi con saver la mia bellezza  
seguiterà come già seguitaro  
color li qua', dopo lunga lassezza,  
lieti posai appresso i loro effetti  
nel ben felice della somma altezza. (913)

[whoever it is who through his power will deign to open the eyes of his heart to my beautiful face and to contain me in it, I will make him feel that delight which is most dear to lovers after its kindling and its powerful desire. Nor will he ever feel any bitter time on account of me who with wisdom will pursue my beauty as those who have already pursued it and, after a long period, afterward I placed their contented effects in the happy good of sublime fulfillment.]

Lia explicitly makes herself sexually available to Ameto in this passage; what is more, she also states that she has made herself available to others in the past—she refuses to make her love exclusive to one man, but welcomes all who will pursue her with “saver” to her delights. The allegory will eventually attempt to tame the implications of Lia’s speech here—after the revelation of the divine Venus, the narrator tells us that “con vista serene conosce l’udita prima canzone della sua Lia [with serene vision he understood the first song heard of his Lia] (1051). As a type of the active life,<sup>19</sup> this allegorization suggests that Lia’s sexual freedom was only a cloaked metaphor of a neutered vision of grace. Like Dante, Ameto’s vision is rarefied until he sees sexuality as a metaphor for the universal duration that inheres in all physical objects. But this allegorization ultimately fails to satisfy the explicit sexuality of Lia’s first song, nor does it answer that song’s complicity with her father’s rape of her mother. Lia’s generation from a literal act of rape is hard to square with any allegory the end of the frame might expound—the Christian type of active love is supposed to emerge from an act of lust by a divine being unable to control himself with his reason; Lia’s complicity with that love suggests that Christian love has to condone unbridled lust or to convert it in an allegory so rarefied it would vitiate its own symbolic mode. The allegory attempts to purify the sexual connotations of the song, but ultimately the song contaminates the allegory more than the allegory purifies the song. The allegorical generalization of grace applied by Dante to the universe is reimagined—to put it in the tasteless terms Boccaccio demands here—as a sort of celestial orgy wherein many lovers are allowed to enjoy the full, sumptuous

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<sup>19</sup> The biblical characters Rachel and Leah were types, respectively, of the contemplative and active lives of clergymen. This association stems from the story of Jacob in Genesis, in which Jacob works for his Uncle Laban for seven years in order to obtain Rachel as his wife. On the night in which the marriage is consummated, Laban substitutes Rachel’s older sister Leah; Jacob only discovers the duplicity in the morning, and must subsequently work seven more years to finally obtain Rachel.

charms of a single beloved. The bitterness and continually reimposed distance that acts as the engine of medieval romance is effaced by Lia's explicit promise—the lover need not experience the dithering self-doubt that sustains romance. Lia offers herself up for total perceptual contact; as in the pastoral space she inhabits, perceptual contact is what defines the ontology of both lover and beloved, and so Lia freely makes her surfaces available for mutual perception—as she says, she makes fully sensible what the vision of her beauty only implies.

Lia thus reimagines love as a sort of reciprocal narcissism: where Narcissus appreciated his own beauty only through the uninspired mirror of the river, Lia appreciates her beauty in the mirror of her lovers' eyes. Those eyes recall her father's overmastering lust in the phrase "ritenermi in lui;" the preposition "in" imagines the sort of drowning containment within the lover's heart to which Cephissus subjected Liriop. The eyes of Lia's lovers are the mirrors that recall her liquid father; but unlike the placid waters in which Narcissus perceives himself, Lia perceives those eyes first as the media of desire before seeing her own reflection in them. She perceives those eyes perceiving her, and within the desire she witnesses there, her own desire is redoubled. The result is a complex matrix of desire that Boccaccio's pastoral world could only tepidly shadow forth: Lia desires herself through others and thereby desires the other as well; the other desires Lia desiring herself through their eyes, and so desires his own desire. Both Lia and her lovers are mirrors that intensify the eros that constantly circulates between them. Where traditionally medieval romance conceived of consummation as the end of this process of circulation, Lia reconceptualizes it as the beginning; the beloved is not exhausted in the sex act—she is not fully used and experienced such that she loses the engrossing novelty

that characterized her; rather, sexual contact intensifies this mutual gaze, allowing perception to pass across more surfaces and so progressively disclose the bodies of both lover and beloved. This sort of complete perceptual contact, to Lia's mind, was best imagined in her father's total containment of her mother—disturbingly, his liquidity would have allowed him to become a complete negative of her body, all its nooks and crevices included. But even as those bodies are disclosed, rendering them progressively more known to one another, the limitations of perception itself are also disclosed—in perceiving more of the beloved, we come to understand our prior acts of perception as somehow deficient, and so suspect that our current ones are similarly deficient. As in Dante, perception becomes the asymptote approaching the complete and infinite presence of the beloved; but whereas in Dante the lover's gaze must ultimately turn toward God at the limit point of that asymptote, Boccaccio's and Ameto's gaze will remain fixed on lovely female figures.

Thus, in addition to being a beautiful target of male affections, Lia becomes herself an agent of those affections; she bends the gender roles of the love situation by really becoming the aggressor trying to spur Ameto into a Romantic encounter.<sup>20</sup> Lia can do this because she sees herself as a man sees her—Boccaccio suggests that Dante's perception of grace must be cast upon the self first in a consummate act of narcissism that structures all other perceptions of grace. The other becomes engrossing because we are first engrossing to ourselves; this mutual attachment that progressively reveals the grace of the beloved is what knits us into the perceptual matrix in which we become more fully

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<sup>20</sup> In the terms of Madeline Caviness's *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, Lia turns a masculine "scopic economy" back onto Ameto—in becoming complicit with the male objectifying gaze, she challenges Ameto's failure to readily deploy it. But where in Caviness's work, as in so many feminist readings, objectification can only be understood as a negative, patriarchal act, the *Ameto* demonstrates how both objectification of the other and the self is a precondition of perception.

what we are; it defines the subject position from which we can effect perception of the other. While Lia occupies the traditionally male perspective, Ameto himself is relegated to a more feminized position—as though completely missing the literal import of her song, he dithers endlessly about whether or not he is worthy to pursue her. Lia is a mirror for Ameto, but in her beauty Ameto is only able to perceive the unworthiness of his own crude appearance; he reimposes the distance from the beloved that structures Romance despite the fact that Lia has just collapsed that same distance. That distance structures the space in which Ameto becomes self-aware of the dynamics of love; he intuitively understands that his own desire finds a paradoxical rest and intensification in Lia's eyes as they watch him watching her: though new to matters of love, Ameto

già conosce il suo disio dagli occhi di colei ricevere alcun conforto. Per la qual cosa, più e più fiso mirandoli, credendosi forse porre fine a quello col riguardarla, più forte gli apparecchia principio e più l'alluma; e non sapendo come, bevendo con gli occhi il non conosciuto fuoco, s'accende tutto. E, sì come la fiamma si suole nella superficie delle cose unte con subito movimento gittare e, quelle leccando, lecate fuggire e poi tornare, così Ameto, colei rimirando, s'affuoca; e, come da lei gli occhi toglie, fugge la nuova fiamma; ma, per lo subito più mirare, torna più fiera. (915)

[already understands that his desire receives some comfort from her eyes. So that gazing at them more and more fixedly, he thinks perhaps to put an end to his desire by looking at her, though the more strongly the source of his desire nears him the more it inflames him; and not knowing how, drinking with his eyes the unknown fire, he ignites entirely. And, as a

flame rushes along the surfaces of oily things with rapid movement, licking them, and having licked them, flees and then turns back again, just so Ameto, watching her again, is set aflame; and, when he removes his eyes, the new flame flees; but, looking again immediately, it returns more fierce.]

The operative word in this passage is “più”; by staring at Lia’s eyes, Ameto’s own gaze undergoes a sort of agitated intensification that is only provoked when he temporarily and furtively removes them from her. Where Ameto looks for a final satisfaction in subjecting Lia to his gaze, he finds instead a deeper desire than that which prompted him to look in the first place. Ameto’s initial gaze is predatory: in the medieval physiognomy of sight, the eyes shot rays that probed the contours of whatever they looked at, imprinting them in the memorial wax; these rays are much like the huntsman’s arrows, piercing a material object that they render inert, colonizing the object within the memory.<sup>21</sup> But Apollo’s arrows are here replaced with Cupid’s, for Ameto sees Lia seeing him; it is this reciprocal sight that progressively ignites Ameto’s desire. He sees in Lia’s eyes not a target for his gaze, but a reflection of that gaze which constitutes Ameto as he has constituted the world around him through his particular angle of vision on it. Their vision of one another is a mutual act of self-constitution wherein both lover and beloved appear and are defined by the perceptual activity of the other.

Lia’s eyes are also another transparent reference to Dante, who was similarly obsessed with the eyes of Beatrice. However, Beatrice’s eyes were forensic in a way that Lia’s aren’t; Dante’s interest in Beatrice’s eyes entailed a sort of masochism, since her

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<sup>21</sup> On medieval theories of vision see the entry on Optics in *Medieval Science Technology and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*. Most medieval thinkers ascribed to various theories of “extramission,” believing that the eyes must emanate rays that contact the body being perceived in the outside world.



penetrating perception violently denuded him in the Earthly Paradise. While in Paradise proper those eyes turn to smiling, they never lose that forensic quality as Beatrice instructs Dante in his moral and philosophical shortcomings. Lia's spiritual predecessor is, rather, the Siren that Dante encountered in canto 19 of *Purgatory*. As I have noted earlier, the Siren imagines Beatrice's physical body, which Dante had fetishized in his early years; upon her death, that fetishization of her earthly flesh prevented him from prosecuting the sort of allegorization of her beauty that forms the philosophical backbone of the *Comedy*. When the Siren appears to Dante in a dream, she refers invariably back to her own physical body; Lia's reflective self-desire does much the same, using whatever mirrors are available to narcissistically celebrate her own beauty. But where the Siren represented the consummate threat Dante had fallen into—the threat that, in essence, stranded him in the *selva oscura* in which he begins the poem—Lia's self-reflexivity is the very essence of the material allegory Boccaccio attempts to prosecute. He collapses the figure of Beatrice and the Siren; the poignancy of the material relationships that Beatrice forces Dante to disavow are the substance of what Lia has to offer Ameto; it is within the progressive unveiling of those bodies by constantly renewed acts of perception that Ameto will discover the grace-bound object of his desire.

Or we should say, rather, objects, since Ameto's love—like Lia's—is far from exclusive, though each new love possesses its own poignant particularity. While Ameto will return to Lia as the touchstone of his amorous education, he diverts the same attentiveness he has offered her onto each of the other nymphs as they come onto the scene. The majority of the frame narrative is, in fact, devoted to long, painstaking

descriptions of the physical characteristics of all the nymphs. One such description will suffice to demonstrate the larger trend:

E, poichè così ha detto, lasciando il tutto, a considerare le particolarità di lei si rivolge.... E la non coperta fronte dalla ghirlanda di bella grandezza e di luce commenda; della quale nella estremità inferiore, di colore di matura uliva, quanto conviensi eminenti, sottili e partite, non diritte ma tonde due ciglia discerne, soprastanti a due occhi ne' quali, quanta bellezza dipinse natura già mai, tanta in quelli ne giudica Ameto, pensante, quando volessono, alle loro forze non potere resistere alcuno iddio; e se, con soavissimo moto verso di sé li vede levare, tanto, quanto a lui fissi sopra dimorano, gli pare gli ultimi termini della beatitudine somma toccare; credendo appena che altrove che in quelli paradiso si truovi; li quali neretti, soavi, lunghi, benigni e pieni di riso tanto a sé il tengono sospeso che le bellissime guance, nelle quali con bianchi gigli miste si dirieno vermiglie rose, il dilicato naso, a nessuna altro stato similie, e la vermiglia bocca con grazioso rilievo vermiglietta mostrandosi, e ciascuno per sé solo potente a fare maravigliare ogni uomo che li mirasse, quasi nol muovono a riguardarsi. (943)

[And, since he has said these things, leaving the whole, he turns to considering her particularities.... And he commended her forehead, uncovered by the garland, for its beautiful size and light; in its lowest extremity, the color of a ripe olive, he discerns two eyebrows agreeably high, thin and parted, not straight but rounded, placed above two eyes in

which Ameto judged was as much beauty as nature ever painted, thinking that, when they should will, no god could resist their forces; and if, with sweetest motion he sees her raise her eyes toward him, so long they stayed fixed on him, he thinks he touches the ultimate end of the highest beatitude, scarcely believing that there is another place in which paradise is found; the eyes, black, sweet, long, benign and full of laughter hold him so suspended that the most beautiful cheeks, in which one would say white lilies were mixed with scarlet roses, and the delicate nose, which was similar to no other, and the vermilion mouth showing itself in gracious crimson relief, and each in itself alone powerful enough to make any man marvel who gazed on them, almost did not move him to attend to them.]

The above passage represents only a fraction of the description of this particular nymph, and each nymph has a good deal of description devoted to her; the effect is a bit like Chaucer's lists in the *House of Fame*—conceptually these descriptions have a number of interesting features, but artistically they are quite monotonous. The monotony of the description, ironically, belies its purpose in the narrative: namely, to describe not only the nymphs themselves, but the engrossment Ameto feels at the sight of them. After describing the general effect of her beauty, Ameto begins to anatomize it in an attempt to discover its essential grammar. This movement itself is interesting—the intensification of Ameto's gaze has the effect of slowing the narrative to a crawl, placing the audience in the same position as Ameto as his perception of the nymph tries to approximate the grace within her, the temporal duration she makes manifest.<sup>22</sup> The details of her appearance

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<sup>22</sup> The shifting verb tenses of these descriptions also bears some comment: whereas much of the narrative in the *Ameto* uses the preterite to reflect occurrence in the past, these moments of intense feeling often shift into the present. In a sense, they collapse the various narrative shells Boccaccio has erected between

pile on top of one another toward the end, crowding his ability to perceive and describe them; each new feature Ameto witnesses discloses his alarming near-failure to perceive it as a result of his engrossment in the last one. Each feature is capable of an indefinite attention in and of itself; what is more, we can assume that each feature is divisible into sub-features that are equally worth of attention: the curve at the edges of the nymph's smile, the plumpness of her upper left-hand lip, etc. This progressive attention to the parts of the aggregate nymph are what push Ameto toward an experience of presence: the fear of missing the poignancy of some feature terrifies Ameto into focusing his attention more perfectly on her existence through time. That duration is again manifest in the "soavissimi moto" of her eyes being raised to perceive him; whereas Ameto's description of the mutual gaze he experienced with Lia was fairly static, he has begun to dwell more on the aesthetics of motion.

As such, his gaze shifts into an artistic and religious register here; whereas in earlier portraits Ameto dwelt more on simple physical description, here he assesses the composition of the nymph's face as a sort of natural painting. In the same movement, he also describes his perception of her in terms of ecstatic, religious adoration; Ameto's rather bombastic rhetoric here far outstrips any rhetoric Dante applied to Beatrice and it further contaminates the poem's ultimate allegory: while Ameto's perception of the nymph is, in one sense, a failure to imagine true beatitude, he nonetheless establishes his lustful, materialistic perception as a form of ecstasy in opposition to the bloodless religious ecstasy of the poem's ending. Before Ameto has acquired a religious understanding of the significance of his own story, he already begins to shift into a

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himself, his narrator, Ameto and the reader; his intense descriptions place all perceivers in the same temporal moment that Ameto himself occupies.

religious register; but instead of foreshadowing the allegory, it suggests that the purpose of the narrative is already being fulfilled, that ecstasy is already being achieved without the help of any *deus ex machina* or *ex caelo*. Ameto makes this explicit with the seemingly unnecessary contrasts he draws—no “other” paradise could compare to this one, its beatitude being the “summa” of all possible beatitudes. Ameto’s perception of the nymphs—which his secondary description can only approximate, just as that perception itself can only approximate the actual ontological reality of the nymph—already succeeds in bringing him to a much more concrete revelation than the allegory could ever provide. It enmeshes him within a perceptual web in which he, like Dante, gets to witness the grace in which objects persist and are constituted from perfect presence; but unlike Dante, Ameto gets to witness objects persisting in time; he retains the partiality and intentionality of vision through which he himself appeared. Like Dante’s vision, Ameto’s is intensified, but it is not thereby rarefied or abstracted such that it is only fit for peering into an infinite, obscure deity.

While his description of the nymphs distracts Ameto from the ultimate allegory he is supposed to participate in, it also distracts him from the framed narratives of the nymphs (though after reading a fragment of that description, we might excuse Ameto for being otherwise occupied). The two, really, are synonymous—like Lia’s initial song, each of the stories told by the nymphs supposedly possesses some didactic purpose which ultimately leads Ameto to a proper understanding of love. However, again like Lia’s song, Ameto continually fails to really attempt to interpret the nymphs’ tales; so, after Agapes’s tale, “Ritornato s’era Ameto a’ pensieri dolci; e in quelli, con non meno diletto che mirando le donne, si stava contento” [Ameto had returned to his sweet thoughts; and

in those, with no less delight than in seeing the ladies, he was content] (1008). Ameto almost undoes the project of the allegory in his admiration of the bodies of the personifications; he is occupied by his own, self-reflective thoughts as his initial Lia would likely want him to be. When he does return to the tale telling, he uses Agapes's story only to express his fear that he will be abandoned by these particular ladies—he laments his fate that he was not present at Agapes's wedding so that he could have married her instead of her aged husband. Ameto's response is a perversion of allegory—he does reassemble the story by applying it to himself, but rather than taking a generalized lesson from it he vainly inserts himself into its particular circumstances. Even when Ameto imagines the narrative of the story, he still refers it back to his present circumstances, in the overmastering presence of these beautiful women. His representational awareness is almost as superficial as his indolent distraction; the language of the nymphs can only be part of their particular aesthetic existence. The grace of the nymphs shears that language of its allegorical force and instead associates the tangibility of the signifier instituted by the frame with the temporal experience of grace.

This particularized grace is the real allegory of the *Ameto*: after all this ornate and intense machinery of desire, the final allegorization the text provides feels abrupt and deeply inadequate. After Lia tells the final tale, Ameto becomes agitated that the nymphs will soon depart. In the midst of this fear, all look up at a strange battle ensuing in the sky between seven white swans and seven storks. Ameto remains unable to interpret this celestial sign, so a pillar of fire descends from the heavens and begins speaking to the group in a soft voice. While the battle of the birds remained within the symbolic lexicon of the Greek pastoral world, the intrusion of a patently Hebrew symbol of deity sits in an

incredibly uncomfortable relationship to it. For one, it is theologically untenable—the poem takes place in a mythological setting well before the birth of Christ and so salvation would have been unavailable to its characters. Only a choice few prophets from the Hebrew Bible were destined to be saved before Christ’s coming, and only because they exhibited great virtue and played a substantial part in salvation history. Ameto has none of these qualities, and yet seems to receive a revelation beyond that which even Moses receives: the light reveals itself as the Trinity, which the Hebrew Bible never formulates (1046). Moreover, it tells Ameto that “Chi di me parla, alle cose superne/ la mente avendo con intero core,/ spregiando il mondo e le cose moderne,/ ch’hanno potenza di trarre in errore/ gli animi puri,/ io son sempre con loro,/ loro infiammando più” [For those who speak of me, having their minds on higher things with a whole heart, despising the world and modern things which have the power to draw pure minds into error, I am always with them, inflaming them ever more] (1047). The injunction to despise the world here feels very odd considering the erotic web the rest of the poem has been at pains to draw, and with the deity’s reconceptualization as Venus; the rest of the poem has demonstrated that the world appears as the result of Cupidic desires shaping and disclosing beings to one another, but at the end, Venus herself instructs Ameto to turn away from such desires. She promises to inflame him even more, but Ameto’s flames have been stoked all along by the description of material bodies and at this point we can hardly imagine how a disembodied trinity could occupy his attention more than the sensuous form of the nymphs or the pastoral space they inhabit, teeming as it does with life. Pairing this traditional *contemptus mundi* motif with an injunction against “moderne cose” is equally baffling—for the world Ameto inhabits, the stale patristic doctrine

expounded by the pillar of fire would be a modern thing. In the Renaissance ideology Boccaccio eventually adopts in his own life, the ancientness of the pastoral is, in a sense modern; but Boccaccio's God asks us to break from the internal logic of the poem for the sake of the tired Christian truisms which that God has to offer.

In the midst of his poem, Boccaccio has staged a Dantean ascension, but he has done so not to authentically recapitulate Dante's doctrines, but rather to demonstrate a tension beneath the surface of the *Comedy's* phenomenology. That he has Dante's final ascension in mind is quite evident in the imagery he uses—Ameto's deficient sight becomes progressively purified by gazing at a luminous divine being. Throughout the *Comedy*, Dante attempts to ally the sensuousness of the material world with the transcendence of the divine. Boccaccio's pastoral landscape has reproduced the sensuous quality of the world so central to Dante's vision; but Boccaccio makes the theological allegory of the poem seem shrill, intensifying the natural conclusions that Dante tries to deftly skirt. The allegory is a profound non sequitur, missing the point of the poem entirely and trying to pretend that the reinterpretation it so jarringly enforces is somehow philosophically important. The foremost of these Dantean disjunctions is his abandonment of Beatrice in the upper reaches of Paradise; ultimately, Boccaccio demonstrates that, when Dante had to choose between his sensuous phenomenology and his immaterial allegory, he chose the allegory. Though he retained a sensuous space and time within the Empyrean itself, in the final moment Dante turns to look upward at a sort of empty space. He sees an incarnational body within the infinite reaches of that highest heaven, but it is ill-defined, hardly capable of manifesting the grace that his Beatrice does down in her place in the divine congregation.



Boccaccio's God is similarly vague at first, being described as a "luminoso corpo, vincente ogn'altra chiarezze" [luminous body, conquering any other brightness] (1047); but as the divine Venus, this God is also coded as feminine. As Boccaccio's vision becomes more capable of peering into her light, he sees not the insubstantial opposite of his earlier material description of the nymphs, but the greatest exemplar of the feminine beauty he began to examine earlier. The highest divinity is a jiggly, broad-foreheaded Venus sparkling with a sort of divine jewelry like a solid gold dancer. The light metaphor, which for Dante signalled the abstraction of deity as the precondition of visibility but not a visible object itself, here renders the Divine Venus more material. Where Dante turned from Beatrice to a vaguely defined divinity at the end of his journey, Boccaccio looks through divinity back to his Lia and all the other nymphs that had been so poignant for him. By transforming God into an embodied, feminine figure, Boccaccio has referred us back to the engrossment of the material world; the rhetoric of material abandonment cuts against this feminization of deity. Boccaccio provokes the same crisis as Dante's text, but Ameto's eyes never swerve from the feminine form—deity becomes more a medium through which to perceive the grace of that tangible form. While Ameto professes to love that form only intellectually after being transformed, the text itself offers few resources for understanding what an intellectualization of love could mean; Dante offers a similar intellectualization of love, but he spends the bulk of *Paradise* explaining what it means, how love implies theological truths, what it reveals about God and the world, etc. The *Ameto* has excised the transitional space of *Paradise*; the erotics of his earlier love have not been eroded away by theological speculation and so the interpretive foothold they offer into the text remains more stable than the half-hearted

allegorization offered by the ending. The God who reigns over that allegory herself feels like a part of the erotic texture introduced by Cupid in the beginning; she and Ameto constitute one another through their mutual perception of one another and as that perception becomes more and more engrossed in the physical quality of the bodies it roves over, it increasingly approximates the experience of time as a graceful duration in which both bodies move. Boccaccio and Ameto will not turn away from those bodies at the last moment to contemplate their medium; rather they will gaze, along with whatever God might inhabit that medium, at the aesthetics of his creation, appreciating their infinitely generative complexity.

*From Passion to Compassion in the Decameron*

While eros is the essential precondition of the world's appearance in the *Ameto*, the *Decameron* opens by showing the dissolution of ontological structures that occurs when that eros is withdrawn from the world. Eros describes an inherently limited form of perception; in becoming erotically attached to an object, we bring certain features of it to our present awareness, but, as Heidegger noted, in doing so we also render ourselves unaware of every other feature of the object—its total valence. At the limit point of erotic attachment, we attempt to recuperate as many features of this fetishized object into the simultaneity of present awareness, but as Ameto's eye discovered while roving over the bodies of the nymphs, perception must leave more unsensed than sensed. This is not, as Heidegger suggests in his critique of presence, a lamentable condition; rather, it is the only way objects can organize themselves into objects and then appear in the world. All ontological structures depend on objects perceiving the being of other objects in limited

ways; otherwise, they cannot contract into the habitual patterns of relation that organize progressively larger object systems. The only way to bring the totality of the beloved into absolute simultaneity is to allegorize the grace inhering in her as Dante did; but in doing so, all of the additive particularity that perception originally sought to arrest, all at once, is abandoned by being abstracted. For Boccaccio, Dante could only ever stare up at God—his putative return to the world at the end of the *Comedy* is a sham. Even if he moved through the world, all the objects persisting through it would only be transparent symbols of God's presence, lacking any visibility and specificity of their own. Boccaccio insists that it is God, rather, that must become transparent so that, peering through the looking glass of grace, our senses can rove over the world along with God.

Boccaccio's immature response to Dante's phenomenology is to replace a supple Beatrice in the very Godhead itself. But as he dwells more on Dante's text, he realizes that the abandonment of Beatrice isn't the only or even the cardinal sin Dante commits in allegorizing grace. His offense refracts to every corner of creation; by democratizing Beatrice's grace onto the entire creation, he undoes the limitations of erotic attachment which structure that creation. By allegorizing the beauty of Beatrice, Dante found a way of apprehending the meaning of every part of her, of every minute gesture she makes as she persists through time, all at once; but in finally reaching the simultaneity that beauty always promised, Dante loses sight of that very beauty. Every particular of the beautiful object can be interpreted in a single way, as can every component particular that structures the progressive organisms of the beautiful body. Dante's radical vision of beauty harrows every fiber of the material body of Beatrice, transmuting them into an infinite number of mirrors reflecting divine grace; but the mirror Beatrice can no longer

really appear, no longer act as Dante's fetishized muse. God becomes Dante's muse, or rather the Love that narcissistically spirates through him without a discernible target beyond its own divine source. Dante's vision becomes a contagion that infects the entire cosmos, rendering up to every object and every component object its full grace. The Dante who returns to the lived world must necessarily be left bereft of the rituals—the automatic habits of perception—that make the world cohere.

While Boccaccio will always admire Dante's breathtaking allegorization of the world, he refuses to be swept away in it. His mature response to the dangers of Dante's vision is the plague of the *Decameron*; the plague represents a world that has been denuded of all its rituals, a world in which the progressive levels of material objects discover their radical being and so refuse the compacts that knit them into organisms. Boccaccio's description of the plague indicates that he understood the nature of a cancer long before medical science: in a cancerous system, the component parts of an organism cease to function in their usual, habituated patterns with the other component parts of the body. They become narcissistically autonomous, replicating their own experience uncontrollably; they perceive the materials around them in new ways not conducive to total, organismal health. They swell into new and strange forms that the logic of the organism cannot anticipate and so it falls apart. Its decay is the retraction of its component organisms to a prior scale of temporal organization—they become independent objects possessed of the radical being that their participation in the organism denied them, or at least bracketed. In Boccaccio's plague this decay moves in two directions: first, the materials that compose bodies are reduced to primal matter in the Aristotelian sense; their component parts break down into independent objects whose

component parts similarly break down into independent objects on down the line of physical creation until they dissolve into a perfectly present nothingness. Second, the social organisms that coalesce when autonomous human beings agree to perceive one another according to ritualized patterns begin to break down, reflecting the more elementary decomposition of matter; Boccaccio systematically describes the way in which the plague dissolves religious, legal and familial relationships. None of these organismal institutions has the resources to interpret the plague or to counter it; the plague demonstrates the fallacy of the particular angle of vision they open upon the world, showing how the moral and behavioral patterns they authorize are temporary assemblages with no ultimate grounding in reality. As a result, the members of these groups become themselves cancerous—they fend solely for themselves, realizing that the conventions which they believed structured their identities are really immaterial. When those ritualized conditions break down, human beings become capable of doing anything, perceiving the world in new and strange ways, but the consequence of this opening of vision is that the subject position from which they perceive is eradicated, being susceptible to the same opening up of radical being that afflicts the entire world. Boccaccio’s plague demonstrates that when the habituating bonds that limit perception are opened up and we see everything thrumming with its own strange music, the world ceases to be; if every fiber of the cosmos perceived every other fiber in the same way, they could never knit themselves together into any larger organism.

But before we dive fully into the dark waters of Boccaccio’s plague, we must begin where he begins: with the autobiographical self-depiction that positions him in relation to his text. At the poem’s outset, Boccaccio’s narrator announces a curious

thematic that will govern the entire work: “Umana cosa è aver compassione agli afflitti” [It is a human thing to have compassion for the afflicted] (3). As Teodolinda Barolini has argued in her reading of the *Decameron*’s frame narrative, this line “signals its non-transcendence... locating us in a rigorously secular context and defining its parameters” (521). Against Dante’s claims to have found the transcendence inherent in the physical world, Boccaccio modestly opens his masterwork with his preoccupations over human things, the diverse afflictions to which people are subject. As Barolini suggests, the compassion that Boccaccio introduces here is a master trope for the entire text; but in order to serve as a guiding principle for such a polyglot text, the scope of this virtue must be expanded considerably. The tales which the members of the brigata will tell each have their own topic, and they can hardly all be said to depict compassionate characters even in an oblique or cautionary sense;<sup>23</sup> what is more, the plague describes a radical loss of compassion in the world, and the brigata’s abandonment of the city is, in some sense, a failure of compassion however much they might prevaricate about it.

For Boccaccio, compassion is the literary virtue par excellence; it is the preeminently ethical faculty that allows us to invent and inhabit other perspectives within a narrative. As a form of empathy, compassion is a reflection of our representational capacities, or perhaps a precursor to them—in exercising empathy, we inhabit the subject position of another person, we reconfigure the world of our own perception into the world of another's perception, replete with the significance they have attached to the

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<sup>23</sup> Robin Kirkpatrick describes the way in which the *Decameron* seems to repel totalizing interpretive schema: “At no point does Boccaccio offer or even seek the whole truth—which Dante is always confident he can find—even about the phenomena that the author is most interested in. Love, Nature, Fortune and Magnanimity are themes that are all proposed in the *Decameron*. Yet none is ever brought to a final definition” (207). Only a literary virtue like compassion can subsume the multiple thematics the frame brings to the fore.

objects which afflict them. It is precisely this virtue which allows a sequence of words on a page to reassemble themselves into a character, invested not simply with the crass perspective of the person reading, but with her own animus, her own separate integrity as a subjective object perceiving a world that surrounds her. Literary empathy activates that subjectivity, inhabits it not to infect that subjectivity with the reader's own preoccupations, but to authentically experience the imagined subject's own preoccupations, its angles of vision, habitual object-relationships, etc. Of course, the reader remains trapped, to some degree, within her own hermeneutic—as Boccaccio notes, compassion is primarily conferred when people “già hanno di conforto avuto mestiere, e hannol trovato in altrui” [have once had need of comfort and have found it in others] (3)—and that palimpsest of our own hermeneutic underlying our experience of the narrated subject's hermeneutic renders us aware of the constructedness of both. The detachment engendered by such awareness is, paradoxically, a precondition of empathy, since to attach true empathetic significance to the objects a narrated subject perceives we must first relativize our own perceptual hermeneutic; we must recognize that the significance we attach to objects differs from the way other people and things perceive those objects and certainly does not approach the ontology of the object as it is in itself, but only approximates a particular angle of vision. As we will see shortly, Boccaccio's narrator possesses precisely such a detachment. But though we remain trapped in our own hermeneutic, the twin movement of empathy—the initial detachment from our own perceptual angles of vision and our reattachment to other angles of vision—broadens that hermeneutic without allegorically effacing the objects perceived thereby; unlike the plague, empathy leaves its target's preoccupations intact, along with all the unreasoned

rituals through which that target identifies herself. Fully realized, this empathetic awareness would result in the God-hermeneutic, the capacity to simultaneously witness the total valence of each object enmeshed in the ontological web on every scale of its organization, to inhabit those almost-infinite perspectives without collapsing them and yet remain detached from them.

Boccaccio's narrator is uniquely capable of accomplishing this literary aim: he has himself "dalla mia prima giovanezza infino a questo tempo oltre modo essendo accesso stato d'altissimo e nobile amore" [from my earliest youth until the present time been set aflame with a most high and noble love" (3) for a woman whom he significantly describes as rejecting him on account of her "crudeltà." This term reappears to describe the ravages of the plague once the narrator begins the frame; as Barolini goes on to note, "*Crudele*, the word contrasted with *compassione* throughout the plague description, signifies for Boccaccio a destructive autonomy, an inhuman desire to preserve the self at all costs" (522). The Boccaccian narrator's beloved is pictured as the diametric opposite of Lia from his earlier frame narrative; whereas Lia engaged freely in the love acts that defined both lover and beloved, the unnamed beloved of the *Decameron*—probably Fiammetta, if we take the narrator's story to be autobiographical, as Boccaccio usually encourages us to do—refuses that relationship and also the demands of the barest compassion. She is unable to even identify with the suffering she causes the narrator; like the plague, she is indifferent to human structures of feeling, occupying only her own subject perspective and so becoming cancerous. Of course, in a sense she participates in a relationship structured by medieval discourses of courtly love; however Boccaccio is unusually unrelenting in decrying her pitilessness. The narrator's response is to become



likewise cancerous in his passion: Boccaccio describes his love as being wholly without measure—it “a niuno convenevol termine mi lasciava contento stare” [will not let me rest contented with any suitable goal] (3), but rather causes him a continual pain. The love Boccaccio’s narrator describes bears some striking resemblances to both Ameto’s love and to Dante’s love for Beatrice, especially as it finds expression in the *Vita Nuova*; though Dante’s love differs in being thwarted by the death of his beloved rather than her willing refusal, it is similarly out of measure and threatens the paradoxical death of the lover. In both texts, the desire that is supposed to summon the lover into a distinct identity threatens to erode the bodily basis of that desire; in perceiving his beloved, the lover should enter into the reciprocal self-identification that Ameto found in Lia, but the autonomy of her body—equally cruel in either death or willing acts—refuses the rituals of courtship.

As I have noted, Dante’s response to the unreceptivity of the beloved is allegory. Though Boccaccio clearly understood this tactic and his love is similarly consuming, he avoids it here. Rather, he tells us that the only thing that prevents his death is “i piacevoli ragionamenti d’alcuno amico e le sue laudevole consolazioni” [the pleasant reasonings of some friend and his laudable consolations] (3). Boccaccio finds consolation in the compassion of friends who simultaneously identify with his state, but remain separate from it.<sup>24</sup> Their reasoning is the reasoning of all literature—they empathetically identify with the afflictions of the subject, Boccaccio; they reconfigure the world, to an extent, to see it as he sees it with a cold Fiammetta at its center, but remain themselves and not

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Hollander argues that Boccaccio’s friend here is an admittedly oblique reference to the “alcuno amico” in the *Vita Nuova* 23.6 who informs Dante of Beatrice’s death (101). The phrase is surely common enough to make such an identification somewhat suspect; however, if Boccaccio is deliberate in this invocation of Dante’s text, it would be opportune: the diametric reversal of the role of the friend corresponds well with the ways in which Boccaccio responds to Dante’s vision of love in the text.

Boccaccio; they remain detached enough to reason about the harm such an erotic attachment causes. The Boccaccian narrator can, in his turn, inhabit their perspectives as they work to empathize with him. His narration indicates that it was not so much the content of their reasonings that he found helpful, but the good sentiment behind it and the distraction it provided him from his consuming passion. He recognizes that other angles of vision onto his situation are limited—they can never perceive his beloved with the same devouring, fetishistic gaze that Boccaccio himself did; the fact that they can still reason about her indicates that they aren't sufficiently empathetic, offering the platitudes and commonplaces in circulation within their world to counter an experience that, by its very nature, transcends the commonplace.<sup>25</sup> But it is their very ploddishness—the inadequacy of their attempts to empathize—that is comforting to a love-lorn Boccaccio; their good natured detachment renders his overmastering desire another more or less trivial concern in a world full of trivial preoccupations. It disrupts the impending allegory of love and locates him back in the petty history of Florentine society.

History is, in fact, what ultimately rescues Boccaccio from his love rather than the well-meaning advice of his friends. As the narrator recounts it,

Ma, sì come a Colui piacque, il quale, essendo egli infinito, diede per legge incommutabile a tutte le cose mondane aver fine, il mio amore, oltre ad ogni altro fervente, e il quale niuna forza di proponimento, o di

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<sup>25</sup> In reading the *Decameron* as a sort of encyclopedia of conventional medieval wisdom, I follow Charles Singleton and the older tradition of criticism on the novel, which more or less takes the narrator's Proem at face value; later generations of critics have more often read the Proem as ironic, concealing the philosophical and ideological depth betrayed in the novel's interrelations of tales—in his recent study, *Boccaccio's Naked Muse*, Tobias Foster Gittes provides a succinct defense of this position (though his rendition of the older criticism is something of a straw man). Certainly, Boccaccio, like Chaucer, makes his tales outstrip the intents of their utterers, but that does not necessarily mean that we have to read the Proem as ironic; distraction and compassion, in the wake of the plague, become the work's most substantive philosophical investigations, and the cardinal way in which the text reacts to Dante's *Comedy*.

consiglio, o di vergogna evidente, o pericolo che seguir ne potesse, aveva potuto né rompere né piegare, per sé medesimo in processo di tempo si diminuì in guisa, che sol di sé nella mente m'ha al presente lasciato quel piacere, che egli è usato di porgere a chi troppo non si mette ne' suoi più cupi pelaghi navigando. (3-4)

[But, just as it pleased him, who, being infinite, set down as an incommutable law that all earthly things would have an end, my love, fervent beyond any other, and the which no force of argument, or counsel, or obvious shame, or the danger that could follow from it had the ability to either break or bend, by itself diminished through the process of time, such that at present it has left of itself only that pleasure in my mind that it usually extends to those who do not start navigating too much on its dark waters.]

Boccaccio's self-presentation here contradicts his earlier presentation as someone who has loved from his earliest youth to the present; the temporal position of this passage is central to his response to Dantean love. Dante's allegorization of love resulted in a progressive intensification of presence that ultimately, for Boccaccio, threatened to unmake the physical world. But Boccaccio implicitly counsels his readers to not embark upon this sort of allegorization—his comment on love's "cupi pelaghi" may be a veiled reference to the "pelago" of *Paradise* 2.4, which Dante cautions his reader against sailing on in her "piccioletta barca" [little boat]. Boccaccio's God has decreed the ultimate decomposition of love along with all other historical structures—this, and not the plague, is the real image of death Boccaccio offers in the *Decameron*. Death is a historical

process operating within the divine scheme of creation; it acts upon a world that preexists it and that remains afterward, a world whose objects have already appeared and engaged in erotic patterns of perception that shape other objects within the world. No such object is eternal—the angle of vision it opens upon the world is only one of many possible angles and so must ultimately be subsumed to make way for the new; it thus wanes, withers and eventually dies out altogether. The plague, by contrast, is a condition of a chaos that threatens ultimately to prevent the appearance of anything; it is the threat of the sterile present wherein perception has no limitations and so no intentionality.

Dante's God decrees a similar death—it is Beatrice's death that forces Dante to stop fetishizing her alone and discover the principle implicit in her beauty; however, that death is ultimately undone by the vision of presence that grace affords Dante. For Boccaccio, the necessary and healthy decay of his love occurred through the additive processes of history that underwrite death; history piles new experiences atop old ones, generating a constantly new parade of sensations that, even if they are less intensely felt than the fetishized beloved, nonetheless have their own limited beauty. The narrator catalogues the little, distractive rituals that men undertake when suffering through love: after, astoundingly, saying that amorous afflictions “il che degli innamorati uomini non avviene” [do not happen to men who are enamored], Boccaccio recounts the various diversions they have to distract themselves. They are able to “andare attorno, udire e veder molte cose, uccellare, cacciare, pescare, cavalcare, giocare o mercatare” [walk around, listen and see many things, hawk, hunt, fish, ride, gamble or conduct business]. The superficial mundanity of these pastimes hardly seem sufficient to counter the love that Boccaccio professed earlier—and now seems almost to disavow—or the Dantean

love it invoked. They are the petty, distractive rituals one imagines the narrator's earlier friend advising him to engage in; while each has the potential to be entertaining, none offers the same sort of engrossment of the love they are supposed to remedy. However, they have power in their very mundanity; they all entail forms of perception and physical engagement that interrupt the fetishization of the beloved with a self-contained activity to which she is irrelevant. These pasttimes implant the lover in ritualized, habituated patterns of behavior with the world surrounding him, a world whose meaning and beauty has otherwise become contracted only to the body of the beloved. The lover becomes, again, an organ in a functional historical organism; the very intellectual quality of historical time that, for Bergson, constituted a sin against duration becomes the cure for the threat that temporal vision entails. These pasttimes force new, historical engagements to be reimposed on the lover, adding a progressive series of perceptual experiences whose very overlapping assures that none will ever become consuming. They integrate the lover back into a compassionate world, one in which objects coalesce spontaneously into organisms, where the lover himself participates in those organisms by failing to perceive the objects around him as he perceives his beloved, and finally, where the lover can remove himself from the love world in which he is enmired and empathetically reorganize his interests around different sets of arbitrary, signifying bodies in these mundane games of identity.

It is this compassionate distractiveness that the *Decameron* takes as its stated aim; the narrator now occupies the position of an empathetic reader of love, detached from lovers' afflictions but still deeply sympathetic to them. He is explicitly non-Dantean—where Dante dictates Love's spiration, Boccaccio's fictional surrogate says that the ladies

to whom he writes should “ad Amore ne rendano grazie, il quale, liberandomi da’ suoi legami, m’ha concesso il potero attendere a’ lor piaceri” [let them render thanks to Love, who, in liberating me from his chains, has given me the power to attend to their pleasures] (5). The position from which Boccaccio writes his narrative is one of detached concern; that concern may be fueled by the narrator’s experience and the empathy deriving from it, but it can only take place once his bondage to Love has ended. Like Dante, Boccaccio writes to reduplicate his experience in others, but his experience does not allegorically colonize the mind of the reader as does the *Comedy*; rather, it opens the reader to the multiplicitous pleasures of the superficial. Boccaccio wants the reader’s eye to rove across many variegated surfaces, to dip temporarily into imagined worlds and the ideological debates those worlds imply without becoming overly engrossed in them; the frame structure Boccaccio deploys throughout the *Decameron* is perfectly suited to do this, since it draws readers into stories—into limited empathetic engagements—but then overlays those stories with other ones. It builds the detached empathy Boccaccio sees as the mandate of literature into the form itself: it imagines the word as a material object being used by people to empathetically imagine spaces and times that are not their own. The materiality of the word gestures toward the constructedness of those narratives without foreclosing their capacity to represent; unlike in the *Ameto* and even in the *Comedy*, the word-as-object does not signify the lover’s absorption in the gracious world that surrounds him, but rather her lack of an absolute, destructive absorption in the world the narrative imagines; it signals the compassionate absorption of literature. In this movement away from the absorption in the beloved, Boccaccio finally repudiates the allegory of love that is the hallmark of stilnovist doctrine and that came to its fullest

fruition in the *Comedy*; he favors instead the little, limited desires that structure the sensible world and the history that moves through it.

The audience most in need of these pleasures are, Boccaccio says, love-lorn ladies, since

dentro a' dilicati petti, temendo e vergognando, tengono l'amorose fiamme nascose, le quali quanto più di forza abbian che le palesi coloro il sanno che l'hanno provato e provano; e oltre a ciò, ristrette da' voleri, da' piaceri, da' comandamenti de' padri, delle madri, de' fratelli e de' mariti, il più del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano, e quasi oziose sedendosi, volendo e non volendo in una medesima ora, seco rivolgono diversi pensieri, li quali non è possibile che sempre sieno allegri.

(4)

[within their delicate breasts, feeling fear and shame, they have concealed the amorous flames; how much more force they have than those which are exposed, those who have tried and experienced love know. Besides this, restricted by the wishes, by the pleasures, by the commandments of fathers, of mothers, of brothers and of husbands, the majority of the time they live confined to the little circuit of their rooms, sitting in seeming leisure, wishing and not wishing in a single selfsame hour, they turn over within themselves diverse thoughts, the which cannot possibly always be happy.]

Boccaccio suggests that the desires young ladies keep pent up within themselves are actually more intense than those which threatened to kill him; unable to find any expression or release, that desire circulates uncontrollably within the composed body of

the young lady, intensifying until it devolves into a sort of mania that wholly envelops her. The fact that such ladies are contained, both literally and metaphorically, only further serves to exacerbate the problem: as the lady is progressively confined either by rules of decorum or physical walls, her opportunities for distractive perceptual experience narrow drastically. They are thus almost coerced into the fetishism that opens upon the allegory of grace because they cannot participate in any other organisms of meaning; not even able to share the intensity of their desire with friends, their unexposed afflictions lack even the most basic form of compassion—the awareness of one’s suffering by another person. Such ladies likewise cannot exercise their own compassion, since they are unable to see any narratives taking place within the world; they lack the empathetic habitation of other perspectives that distract from love and foster a healthy detachment from one’s own schema of feeling.

At face value, the task of Boccaccio’s work is to supply a literary supplement to these ladies’ experience; the act of reading alone—of transforming the words that a frame literally imagines into embodied perceptual entities—already begins to force the sort of empathetic engagement that acts as antidote to consuming love. Now, to most readers, this seems like a rather inadequate, maybe even ironic goal to set at the outset of a work as complicated and rich as the *Decameron*; further, we can hardly imagine that Boccaccio could have truly become so engrossed in such a limited project—the undertaking alone demands a deeper rationale than Boccaccio’s narrator is willing to give. The plague also seems to set the stories as possessing an almost cosmic poignancy, as though the members of the brigata are somehow rebuilding an embattled civilization with their tale-telling. Ultimately such intuitions are true, but they should not lead us to believe that



Boccaccio is being disingenuous in his initial formulation of the *Decameron*'s purpose. The consuming love that infects these ladies is, at least in the narrative's logic, the direct antecedent to the plague; it liquidates the subjective world of these ladies by organizing it around a single beloved who is, for whatever reason, unavailable to them. As it did for Dante in the *Vita Nuova*, the absence of the beloved produces a direct inversion of the grace within the ladies: whereas time becomes an endlessly fascinating duration in the presence of the beloved, it becomes an endlessly dreary duration in his absence. Time becomes unbearable; everything becomes only capable of representing its continuing difference from the beloved. Structures of meaning break down in an inversion of beatitude—the objects that populate the physical world cease to really be objects, cease to be themselves in the eye of the distraught lover. Nothing within them can force the sort of mindless, habitual relationship that makes them coalesce into distinct objects from the cloud of particles that comprises them; their meaning thus disintegrates in a cascade that leaves the lover inhabiting a vacant presence. In reality, the shift in one's angle of vision required to discover a Dantean beatitude is fairly minor—it requires only a turn from a fetishism to allegory; but both leave the world vacant of its particularity. Boccaccio's work does set about recuperating a sort of civilization for these ladies—as its title suggests in recalling the *Hexameron* motif of Ambrose, Basil and other patristic authors, it recreates the perceptible world from the ravages of pure temporal division.<sup>26</sup> In writing

<sup>26</sup> Boccaccio's alternate title, of course, is "Principe Galeotto," referring to both the Lancelot-Guinevere legend and to Dante's Paolo and Francesca. As Dante did, Boccaccio seems to conceptualize Galehaut as a figure of representation—in recounting her tale, Francesca says that the book she read with Paolo served as a Galehaut to their love, motivating a disastrous first kiss. By exercising a compassionate imagination too much, Francesca completes the work of mimesis, actualizes the represented world of the text, and falls into sin. But for Boccaccio, the progressive imagination of multiple such episodes—and their compassionate imagination in the mind of the reader—is the antidote for the consuming passion the text itself can inspire; so long as the Galehaut of the text keeps pressing the reader into multiple scenes, each with their own distractive erotics, no one scene can become too engrossing.

it, Boccaccio looks down at the world along with the God in *Genesis*; he gazes from the perspective of presence his own consuming love has afforded him and recreates the world through the material word that the frame exposes even as it enfleshes that word with representation.

The plague is thus Boccaccio's metaphor—albeit an exceptionally vivid one that cannot be fully contained by its metaphorical identity—for the world devoid of desire, a world produced when the lover is separated from her beloved. Robert Hollander has noted the connection between the Proem's conceptualization of erotic desire and the plague; the term that Boccaccio uses most frequently for both is “noia,” a term Hollander calls a pervasive “demon of the *Decameron*” (97). The term recurs throughout the entirety of the work, insinuating a relationship between “sexuality and pestilence.”<sup>27</sup> Under the plague's influence, the various scales of temporal being fall apart as objects and component objects radically fail to desire one another. In this sense, it is the anti-*Ameto*: the *Ameto*, perhaps naively, assumed that a constantly circulating erotic energy would spontaneously produce the perceptible world within it; objects would naturally coalesce into habituated, perceptual organisms at every scale of being, developing certain rituals of interaction whose shape is determined by instinctive desires. Human erotic love is the apex of this play—it brings the fetishistic vision of the particular to beatitude, to the vision of temporal grace that ignites all these various scales of being into relative motion. At its Dantean limit point, Boccaccio sought to preserve the particular within the allegory, and so to preserve the stilnovist insight brought about by intense love. But the

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<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Hollander also notes that “noia” is also the term used by Vergil to recall the wayward Dante from the *selva oscura* in *Inferno* 1.76; Boccaccio's Proem translates the pestilential metaphor of Dante's wood into a literal reality. If the *selva oscura* describes a purely material world left devoid of the grace of the beloved, Boccaccio's plague transforms this subjective phenomenon into an objective, historical one.

time between the *Ameto* and the *Decameron* is precisely the distractive time Boccaccio's narrator describes: within that span, Boccaccio seems to have gained a fuller appreciation for the threat of Dante's temporal phenomenology that he only provisionally demonstrated in the *Ameto* without really solving. Both the *Comedy* and the *Decameron* have the same starting point—the world devoid of meaning, which is to say devoid of individual grace—but Boccaccio ultimately came to conclude that Dante's allegorization of grace ironically brought him back to the *selva* he began in; that forest is no longer a *selva oscura* but a *selva luminosa*, yet it is equally empty, each object within it having been liquidated by its transformation into divine presence from the presence of despair. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio sets out to repopulate that space; to do so, he recognizes that the aim of his work cannot be, as it was in the *Ameto*, the vision of grace, but rather vision without grace, the partial, habituated, superficial and almost unthinking encounters with the world that distracts one from the vision of presence and that distracts all objects from the presence in which they inhere. From the absorptive erotics of the *Ameto*, he arrives at a more measured ethics of compassion which retains the basic structure of desire, but seasons it with detachment.

Boccaccio's use of the plague thematic to frame his tales thus derives from the critique he offers of stilnovist love poetics and Dante's vision in particular. That he has Dante in mind in his development of the plague is made quite clear at the outset of its description: "questo orrido cominciato vi fia non altramenti che a' camminanti una montagna aspra ed erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia riposto, il quale tanto più viene lor piacevole, quanto maggiore è stata del salire e dello smontare la gravezza. E sì come la estremità della allegrezza il dolore occupa, con le miserie da

sopravvegnente letizia sono terminate” [this horrid beginning will be like nothing short of walking up a mountain rugged and steep, beyond which a most beautiful and delightful plain is secreted, which becomes to them more pleasurable the greater the difficulty of the ascent and descent. And just as the extremity of happiness involves pain, miseries are concluded with unanticipated happiness] (7). The reference to *Purgatory* here is quite transparent: in particular, Boccaccio’s use of the verb “camminare” to describe the ascent recalls Dante’s ambling way up Purgatory. The “bellissimo piano” that is hidden at the end of the climb recalls Dante’s Earthly Paradise and the mixture of happiness and pain at the limit point of Purgatory recalls his experience of seeing a shrill Beatrice again for the first time. Purgatory, in particular, was the otherworldly realm wherein Dante purified his desire; Purgatory is the divine machine that produces the beatific vision from the various fetishistic pleasures of sinners. Its contrapasso is to lodge sinners within the material preoccupation that prevented them from seeking the divine, but to locate it on a continuing road; where the sinners took their fetish to be a sufficient end to existence, the ongoing road indicates its participation in a larger allegory whose terminus is not the particular fetish. The phrase “dello smontare la gravezza” gestures toward their particular fetishization—it refers to the gravity of their sin, its literal weight which Augustine uses as a metaphor for sin throughout his works.<sup>28</sup> The materiality of their preoccupations locates them in a particular locale within Purgatory; but the dead end of that weighty desire which caused their fall becomes a waypoint on a larger road that stretches up to divine presence. The fetishism of sin obtains, in *Purgatory*, an exit from itself that repurposes that very fetish into an element of the allegory of grace.

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<sup>28</sup> See especially Book 7 of the *Confessions*, 23-27.

Boccaccio thus associates the plague space with the purged vision of Dante; the plague literally and metaphorically liquidates desire from the world, demonstrating the ultimate, putrid destiny of all material objects. The plague reveals that no material object is what it is—rather, it is a fragile compact between organs that must tacitly desire to remain within their organismal configuration. But while Boccaccio associates the plague with *Purgatory*, the “bellissimi piani” to which the *Decameron* leads are of a wholly different character than Dante’s Earthly Paradise; in the Earthly Paradise, the *contemptus mundi* learned on the difficult ascent up Purgatory is supplanted with the allegorization of the fetish. Once material objects are purged of their absorption, the Purgatorial pilgrim can begin to recuperate the physical world and the presence that their sinful experience of beauty implied; for Boccaccio, the purgation of these particular desires creates the plague space, the limit point of the *contemptus mundi* tradition in which matter begins to hold itself in contempt. The plague allegorizes the evacuation of desire from the world that the Purgatorial pilgrim has been forced to effect by divine justice and that Boccaccio’s ladies have been forced to reduplicate by the absence of their beloved. The *Decameron*’s gardens, however, are hardly the Earthly Paradise; they offer only distractions, relocating the pilgrim who has climbed away from their fetishistic desire within the superficial, preoccupied spaces they just left.<sup>29</sup> While they evoke the pastoral world of the *Ameto* along with its erotics, that eros is now conceptualized as an embattled island in the chaotic sea of the plague. Moreover, there does not seem to be any possibility of

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<sup>29</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta reads the gardens as places where “catharsis can occur” (117) as a sort of restitution for the plague; the tragedy of the plague is reintegrated into a world of play that lifts its burdens. Rather than acting as the penitential restitution for sinful desires, the *Decameron* allows those desires reign to playfully undercut the idea of penitence; the threat of death becomes a part of the stories the brigata tells to stave off the chaos of the plague.

transcendence within these pastoral settings—perhaps as a result of the plague’s ravages, simple continuance now seems an act of transcendence. In a world where things are falling fantastically apart, the distraction of inhabiting a space that seems to exhibit ecological harmony within a limited web of erotic desires seems preferable to the sort of purgative vision Dante is subjected to atop his mountain. The erotic play of these pastoral spaces does not foster object absorption but rather distraction from such attachments.

The plague demonstrates how perilous such attachments can be: it reveals the tenuous conditions of the bodily strata to which we affix our desires. The objects of our affections are temporary assemblages that manifest different scales of time; as such, they depend on the interpretive and perceptual schema that the objects surrounding them have applied to shape the textures of their being. But the plague specifically dissolves all such schema; it demonstrates the basic uninterpretability and imperceptibility of primal matter. This is evident from Boccaccio’s initial description of the plague: “o per operazion de’ corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali, alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata, quelle d’innumerabile quantità di viventi avendo private, senza ristare, d’un luogo in altro continuandosi verso l’Occidente miserabilmente s’era ampliata. E in quella non valendo alcuno senno nè umano provvedimento” [either through the operation of heavenly bodies or through our iniquitous deeds from the just anger of God for our correction sent on mortals, beginning some years before in Eastern parts, an innumerable quantity of the living having been killed, without rest, it extended miserably, continuing from one place to another across the West. And in this no judgement nor human prudence mattered” (7). As all the residents of Florence will do, Boccaccio begins his narration of

the plague by attempting to read it allegorically. He turns to transcendent structures of meaning like astrology and religion for resources that will allow him to comprehend the plague within some ordered interpretive schema. He even turns briefly to mathematics, searching for a way to describe the tragedy. But the number of the dead is innumerable; the platitudes of human foresight and common sense have been of no avail in hindering its progress. The plague does not kill everybody at once, but that only makes the lives of those who remain more senseless—there seems to be no set law to why some survive and others do not. If the plague has some obscure divine origin, it must necessarily proceed from an unjust God, since its misery does not respect the attempts of the righteous and humble to assuage that God; it does not even respect the division between Orient and Occident, heathen and Christian. The plague inflicts a sort of penitence, but it is one that does not respect moral categories; the plague is the penitential demand of ontology, whose structures of being persist away from perfect presence.

Most of Boccaccio's narration of the plague explicitly aims at describing its uninterpretability. It renders all the spheres of human action unintelligible; it is within those spheres that the objects that populate the human world should appear, defined by the habitual perceptual patterns in which they become relevant. Even the life of moderation—a mainstay of pragmatic wisdom literature—comes to seem immoderate in the face of the plague:

Ed erano alcuni, li quali avvisavano che il vivere moderatamente, e il guardarsi da ogni superfluità, avesse molto a così fatto accidente resistere; e fatta lor brigata, da ogni altro separati viveano; e in quelle case ricogliendosi e rinchiudendosi dove niuno infermo fosse e da viver

miglio, delicatissimi cibi e ottimi vini temperatissimamente usando e ogni lussuria fuggendo, senza lasciarsi parlare ad alcuno, o volere di fuori, di morte o d'infermi, alcuna novella sentire, con suoni e con quelli piaceri che aver potevano si dimoravano. Altri, in contraria opinione trattie, affermavano, il bere assai e il godere, e l'andar cantando attorno e sollazzando, e il soddisfare d'ogni cosa allo appetito che si potesse, e di ciò che avveniva ridersi e beffarsi, essere medicina certissima a tanto male. (9)

[And there were some who advised that living moderately and keeping themselves from all superfluity might have done much to resist this accident; and they made a brigata and lived separate from any other; and recusing themselves in those houses and withdrawing where there was not a single sick person and in order to live better, employing very temperately very delicate foods and excellent wines, avoiding any luxury, without permitting themselves to speak to anyone, or wishing to hear anything from outside, any news either about death or the sick, they dwelt with music and with those pleasures that they might have. Others, holding the contrary opinion, asserted that drinking heavily and enjoying themselves and walking about singing and amusing themselves and satisfying any thing for which they might have an appetite, and laughing and joking about anything that happened was the most certain medicine for such an evil.]



In this description, Boccaccio does not contrast two polar opposites—an ascetic lifestyle and a profligate one—but rather makes moderation itself seem ascetic. The moderates withdraw themselves into enclaved communities, significantly termed “brigata,” like monks fleeing the evils of the world. They take pains, not only to avoid luxury, but to avoid the avoidance of luxury as well—Boccaccio’s description seems to cross itself when he describes the luxurious food and drink enjoyed by these people but then suggests that they avoided all excess. The overwhelming impression of this first portrait is of avoidance: these people avoid any extreme such that they even contradict themselves. The consequence of their cloistered lifestyle is that they close themselves off to the distractive experiences that will be the remedy of novel’s signature brigata: they close themselves off to all external stimuli, retaining only those sensory experiences they have brought with them into their seclusion. Their music and undefined pleasures operate within the distractive logic of Boccaccio’s proem, and they remain an important counterpoint to the brigata, constantly reminding us of the threat of the plague even as the text encourages us to forget it; Pampinea’s initial speech to the ladies of the brigata will recollect the moderate response evoked here, placing the brigata under the same threat. But whereas these *brigate* emphasize their withdrawal from the world, the brigata will emphasize their engagement with the pastoral spaces in their gardens. They foster contact with external stimuli, surrounding the enclosed space of their storytelling with a vibrant, if ordered, natural world. Boccaccio does not necessarily foreclose that possibility here, but he places the moderate solution’s emphases elsewhere, in detachment and seclusion rather than engagement.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Joan M. Ferrante, who argues that “the *Decameron* exalts love and related virtues in a well-regulated order, and condemns all excess. This is a morality directed more towards life in the world than towards salvation” (85). Given Boccaccio’s description of the moderate reaction to the plague, it is hard to say that

Another important feature of this passage is the way it frames these alternatives in the terms of medieval disputation; even the reckless response to the plague constitutes an attempt to rationally respond to it. The verbs “avvisare,” and “affermare”, to advise and to affirm respectively, frame all responses in terms of a debate in which propositions are advanced, reasoned through, challenged and judged. This disputational logic was the foremost method the medieval world used for resolving interpretive problems: it allowed them to categorize phenomena into convenient syllogisms. The cavalier, ironic attitude of the second group would seem to hold such disputations in contempt, but Boccaccio emphasizes that irony is a rationalist interpretive schema just like moderation. The plague does not, therefore, depict the sort of ironic Ovidian chaos we explored in Dante, but rather precedes that chaos; it reveals Ovidian chaos to be an interpretive schema applied to bodies. While the plague recalls Ovid’s chaos from the *Metamorphoses*, that chaos is depicted as just another rationalist response to the material condition the plague represents. Ovidian irony still supplies an attitude and a set of behaviors; it still structures a basis for habitual engagement with the objects in the world, one in which the perceiver contemptuously understands the impermanence of the world surrounding her. Ovidian chaos is still structured by desire, however—the changes through which Ovid expresses universal flux are products of desire like that Apollo shows for Daphne, or Cephissus for Liriop—and so it really bears more in common with the erotic space of the *Ameto*. The *Decameron*’s physical dissolution occurs through the loss of desire, and so reduces the world—through a chaotic procedure—to a pre-chaos, a void presence in which the most vestigial form of matter cannot summon itself into historical being; it

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the novel condemns excess, or really that it condemns anything—the plague throws all worldly and spiritual morality into chaos.

thus, cannot even manifest the change of Ovidian metamorphosis, since such motive change requires a historically organized body to render itself legible.

No such behavioral response has any impact on what the plague represents, or it would be better to say, on the plague's failure to represent. As Boccaccio goes on to note: "che questi così variamente opinanti non morissero tutti, non per ciò tutti campavano; anzi, infermandone di ciascuna molti, e in ogni luogo, avendo essi stessi, quando sani erano, esempio dato a coloro che sani rimanevano, quasi abbandonati per tutto languieno" [not all who variously opined these things died, and not all lived; in fact, many from each group got sick, and wherever they were, having given the example, when they were healthy, to those who remained healthy, they were likewise left to languish] (10). Again, Boccaccio does not simply dwell on the fact that all these various behavioral assertions can result in death, but rather he also emphasises that continuation itself becomes senseless in the wake of the plague. Those who survive recognize, however tacitly, that their action had no impact whatsoever on their survival; the plague thus entails a radical loss of will, since all acts of will were proven arbitrary and purposeless in the context of the plague. In the absence of will, the world of desire dissolves; the tragedy goes beyond the designation of tragedy, since it unwinds the very generic patterning through which we understand something as tragic. The result is a profound indifference that resists tragedy, an indifference that counters the compassion that opens the *Decameron*; that indifference manifests itself, in the social organism, by the simple abandonment of social ties, the radical failure of Christian charity in which people will not even witness one another's suffering. The limit point of this indifference, for Boccaccio, is parental neglect: "il padri e le madri i figliuoli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano" [fathers

and mothers their children, as though they were not, they were disgusted to visit and to serve] (10). The compression of the two subjects and their object in Boccaccio's clause structure underscores how tightly knit they should be—they should comprise a single group subject, but one member is forcibly converted to an object by the subsequent grammar. The “quasi loro non fossero” which indicates something like “as though they were not their own,” actually enforces the ontological dissolution that precedes the familial one—it describes the loss of familial identities in which mothers, fathers and children cease to be defined by these roles and so lose their being entirely. Basic interaction becomes repulsive as the familial organism dissolves; its members do not simply refuse these essential forms of contact, but they are actively repulsed by them. That which they should instinctively desire—the familial bond upon which their foundational identities are structured—instead acquire a motion antithetical to that desire; centrifugal becomes centripetal and the family falls apart.

This dissolution of the family results in a cascading failure of social institutions:

“le più delle case erano divenute comuni, e così l'usava lo straniero, pure che ad esse s'avvenisse, come l'avrebbe il proprio signore usate; e, con tutto questo, bestiale, sempre gl'infermi fuggivano a lor potere. E in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissoluta tutta, per li ministri ed esecutori di quelle, li quali sì come gli altri uomini, erano tutti o morti o infermi o sì di famigli remasi stremi, che ufficio alcuno non potean fare; per la qual cosa era a ciascuno licito quanto a grado gli era d'adoperare.

(9)

[most of the houses had become common property, and so strangers frequented them, who had just happened upon them, has their own master used to do; and with all this bestial intent, they always avoided the sick when they could. And in such affliction and misery of our city, the reverend authority of the laws, divine and human alike, had almost dissolved and collapsed entirely, for the ministers and executors of them, who just like other men, were either all dead or sick or so short of help, that they could not do any duty; for which reason was everybody free to to act in whatever way he wished.]

The institution of property is perhaps the most essential concept of the law; even injunctions of physical violence are grounded in the assumption that the body is one's own property. Property links the concept of space to that of will; the owned space should become a reflection of the movements of the owner's will—property is shaped by its owner and reciprocally shapes that owner, giving her will a set of perceptible objects on which to act. But during the plague, the wrong people are in the wrong places. The habitual relationships that are manifested in the owned space do not proceed from the appropriate will that originally shaped them; strangers who obviously do not respect the concept of property enter into it, and their lack of respect for the concept becomes a lack of respect for the object shaped by that concept. The tragedy of the commons destroys the space. All such legal institutions in Florence have begun to decompose; the law establishes patterns in how human beings can relate to others and to the world around them, but those limitations have been suspended by the plague. All such laws are revealed as temporary and human institutions—even the divine law is exposed as reliant

on human enforcement when the enforcers are subjected to their own material condition. The language Boccaccio uses to describe the law reflects the physical bodies afflicted by the plague—an anthropomorphized law is “caduta e dissoluta” just as a human body, fallen from its erect posture, begins to decay.

But the plague does not cause these social institutions to simply dissolve: it makes the human elements within those institutions become explicitly repulsive to one another. The social contact that usually facilitates those institutions now becomes solely a mechanism for communicating the plague:

“E fu questa pestilenza di maggior forza per ciò, che essa dagl’ infermi di quella per lo comunicare insieme s’ avventava a’ sani, non altramenti che faccia il fuoco alle cose secche o unte quando molto gli sono avvicinate. E più avanti ancora ebbe di male; chè non solamente il parlare e l’ usare con gl’ infermi dava a’ sani infermità o cagione di comune morte, ma ancora il toccare i panni o qualunque altra cosa da quegli infermi stata tocca o adoperata pareva seco quella cotale infermità nel toccator trasportare. (8)

[And this pestilence was of such force that it was communicated from those sick with it to the healthy who came into contact with them, not unlike the way a fire does to dry or oily things when they are brought very close to it. And its evil went still further; not only speech and customary contact with the sick yield sickness to the healthy or the cause of common death, but also touching the clothes or any other thing that had been touched or used by the sick seemed to transport this sickness to the person touching.]

Boccaccio significantly reuses a metaphor from the *Ameto* in describing the plague's transmission—that of fire consuming oily surfaces; but what, in the *Ameto*, was a Dantean metaphor of consuming desire has here transformed into a metaphor of terror. In the *Ameto*, the metaphor describes the progressively intensifying desire that Ameto feels for Lia; as his eyes rove over her body it ignites a flame that spreads quickly to vivify his entire being like a rapidly spreading fire. The fire and oil metaphor described the positive consequences of perceptual—and specifically sexual—exchange. It is the paradigm instance of the erotics of the *Ameto*, the moment that most defines who Ameto will become after his experience of love. But in the *Decameron*, that very erotics has become a source of contagion; the lack of control over the fire leads that form of intense erotic contact to consume the entire world. Every object within the world becomes impregnated with it—any simple touch from a sick person installs the plague within that object. Boccaccio again inverts Dante's democratized vision of grace into an image of the contagion that is instilled into objects by intense desire. Dante's allegory inspired every vibrating fiber of the world into a transparent medium for grace; in the *Decameron*, all of those same fibers—by their very status as particulate fibers—become carriers for the plague.

Even language—the most essential medium of human perceptual interchange—becomes a transmitter for the plague. The brief image of linguistic transmission constitutes an existential threat to the world of the *Decameron*; it impregnates the very words we read with the contamination of the plague. Boccaccio obliquely recollects Dante's temporal vision as applied to speech, which made the sibillant phonemes of Paradisiacal speech significant moments of presence in their own right. Speech, before it

represented its object, signified the beatific joy of the speaker; every instant of sonic enunciation vocalized a present that ultimately marginalized whatever it intended to say. In Dante, this actualized the aesthetic quality inherent in his verse form—his *terza rima* always pressed its listener toward a surface apprehension of itself that accompanied the representations of the poem. For Dante, this aesthetic language manifested the presence of the divine throughout the entire world imagined by the poem; the shiver of grace was the manner in which God could be said to present in Hell without actually being imagined there. For Boccaccio, this was the consummate act of violence effected by grace; while supremely beautiful, Dante's poetics always threatened to liquidate the perceptual spaces his poem imagined. While Boccaccio experiments with *terza rima* in the *Ameto*, by the time he writes the *Decameron* he has moved to prose as his exclusive mechanism for representing his poem. His prose—while at times very beautiful—imagines itself as its representational targets with less friction than poetry; it is capable of distracting readers more readily into the spaces and times it imagines. The contamination of language is relegated to an image, written within that prose and occurring within the imagined world. It still constitutes an existential threat to the poem: as delimited objects, language too is subject to the material conditions the plague unmasks and therefore breaks down into its inert substance. Just as human beings lodged in their social institutions spin apart, all forms of temporal organization begin to dissolve, losing their identities as independent objects and becoming mere signs of the plague and its imminent threat. But the prosaic quality of that world already enacts the distractive remedy that will be the brigata's antidote to the plague's ravages.



Unlike Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, the members of the brigata have no special insight that can help them to counter the threat of the plague—they are not philosophers or theologians, artists or poets; they are not even, as we might expect, particularly good lovers—while the male characters are enamored with several of the female characters, they can hardly be said to profess the same sort of absorptive, debasing love that afflicts the narrator and his ladies, or even Ameto. Pampinea’s speech that inaugurates the formation of the brigata sounds suspiciously like the conventional wisdom that the plague defies:

“e fuggendo come la morte i dionesti esempli degli altri, onestamente a’ nostri luoghi in contado de’ quali a ciascuna di noi è gran copia, ce ne andassimo a stare, e quivi quella festa, quelle allegrezza, quello piacere che noi potessimo, senza trapassare in alcuno atto il segno della ragione, prendessimo. Quivi s’odono gli uccelletti cantare, veggionvisi verdeggiare i colli e le pianure, e i campi pieni di biade non altramente ondeggiare che il mare, e d’alberi ben mille maniere, e il cielo più apertamente, il quale, ancora che crucciato ne sia, non perciò le sue bellezze eterne ne nega, le quali molto più belle sono a riguardare che le mura vote della nostra città.”

(18)

[and fleeing like death the dishonest examples of others, we should go to stay honestly at our country houses, of which each of us has a great number, and there we should take that merriment, that happiness, that pleasure that we can, without surpassing in any act the sign of reason.

There the birds are heard singing, the hills and plains are seen growing

green, the fields full of grain rippling just like the sea, and a full thousand types of trees and the heavens more openly, which, even though they still may be angry, nevertheless do not deny us their eternal beauties, which are much more beautiful to see than the empty walls of our city.]

Pampinea tries to displace the threat of death onto the responses others have advanced to the plague, but she essentially proposes one of the failed responses we have already seen. While she is careful to note that none of the members of the brigata have any family members left whom they would abandon, the compact that binds them together feels suspiciously like the other solutions that unknit social institutions and foster disengagement from the perceptual world. Other responses to the plague have participated in its reduction of bodies to their material strata, and the brigata's will do this too in a sense, by allowing them to avoid witnessing the ravages of Florence. Yet Pampinea insists on its practical difference from others' responses, and in essence it is her specious naivete that constitutes the brigata's response to the plague. The brigata's members are consummately distractable; they situate themselves in a space that is explicitly designed to distract them from the plague: in the lost pastoral gardens of the *Ameto*. The pastoral space is now an embattled island, but it still possesses the erotic pull it did in Boccaccio's earlier poem. In it, objects are engaged in dynamic processes of mutual identification; Pampinea describes its essential ecology without ever becoming too absorbed by one element of that ecology. Even the heavens—the planets and stars of Dante's *Paradise*—become an element of this distractive ecology, capable of amusing the Florentine youths for a moment before they move on to new pleasures. None of those pleasures, as Pampinea comically insists, can transgress the sort of conventional

reasoning the novel has radically called into question; the brigata will stubbornly, and somewhat ironically reimpose the basic standards of Florentine society.<sup>31</sup> So Filomena, immediately after Pampinea's speech, will insist that they be accompanied by well behaved men, based on the misogynist medieval commonplace that women can't get along without men to keep them rationally ordered. It is this stubborn denial and avoidance of what the plague has unleashed into the world that allows the world to become perceptibly ordered again; while Boccaccio will always hold his brigata in a semi-ironic regard, he approves of their general strategy.

That strategy manifests itself, primarily in the framed narratives they tell to one another. Boccaccio has already allied the absolute dissolution of the plague with a surface understanding of language, and it is the plague that forms the backbone of the novel's frame. As I have suggested elsewhere, framed language automatically entails the sort of present apprehension of language that so occupied Dante and subsequently Boccaccio; frames imagine acts of language as material objects, and so they threaten to unwind their coherence as integrated objects just as the plague does. The brigata shows little consciousness of this fact—as, given their general tactic for resisting the plague, they shouldn't—though the plague thematic itself indicates that Boccaccio was thinking in these directions; but the threat that the plague poses to language makes their tale-telling externally poignant, even when it is not internally poignant to the members of the

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<sup>31</sup> Unlike Chaucer's pilgrims, the brigata's reinstatement of culture is remarkably harmonious; as Janssens notes, "here is an astonishingly high degree of obedience and agreement among the ten narrators involved. They agree without any discussion with the proposal concerning the story-telling as a very useful pastime during their deliberate exile in Paradise on earth. They agree also in a remarkable way with the anthropological views underlying the stories" (140). Where Chaucer will develop his microcosm of late medieval culture through additive discord, Boccaccio effects his through an almost unrealistic concord that defies the cancerous quality of the plague.

brigata itself. The continued speech of the brigata shows material acts of language, but rather than dissolving, they cohere into progressively more complex temporal units. Where the plague reduces the word to its material conditions, the brigata's feckless, distractive tale telling begins from the material word only to delimit it as a grammatical object, coordinate it with other such objects, and use them to reimagine the world that is falling apart around them. They do not try to recuperate Dantean vision as the *Ameto* did, but rather they show how the limited materialism that Dante's text so stridently resists can itself be poignant. For Dante, that materialism was the *selva oscura* that threatened a meaningful perceptual existence; for Boccaccio, the allegorical vision of grace threatens an incoherence that a simplistic materialism can resist.

In one sense, Boccaccio takes the pedagogical orientation of the frame narrative genre and turns it on its head: the brigata's tales are mere entertainments that distract the group from the moral quandary of the age. Where a pedagogical frame narrative should try to assemble some allegory to counter and interpret the plague, the brigata avoids it. But to say that the tales are merely distractions is reductive; many readers of the *Decameron* have the intuitive sense that more is going on in the text than Boccaccio's narrator will admit. Their tales invoke an exhaustive, practically encyclopedic set of commonplaces about medieval life and social organization; they comment on the social institutions that the plague has already rendered moot. In this sense, the brigata bears the essence of culture out of the plague, and a core part of that essence is its ability not to probe too deeply into the dark waters of phenomenal experience. They fluidly inhabit a world that depends on a sort of cosmopolitan ignorance; they have no real philosophical desire to probe the uttermost underpinnings of ontology; they are content to briefly view

the realities that come before them in the ways that those realities are conventionally constituted. They may question certain aspects of those representations, but they accept their general contours without thinking. They are precisely the sort of materialists that Dante would probably decry. But though they never experience the sublime heights of beatitude, neither do they have to undergo the ravages of the beloved's absence. Such experience is simply not in their vocabulary. But for Boccaccio, it is their limited, automatic mode of perceiving that is the groundwork of perceptual existence, and not the profound vision of grace offered by Dante and the theologians.

## CHAPTER V

### GROTESQUE TEMPORALITY IN THE CANTERBURY FRAME

Frame narratives imagine, within their structure, both audiences and authors that differ from the work's actual audience and author. It is a critical commonplace to say that the internal audience of a frame acts as a sort of proxy for the narrative's actual audience; Bonnie Irwin notes that frames embed a residue of oral traditions by imagining both author and audience directly within the work's imagined space. The audience, in this conception, acts as a bridge between the reader and the author; the response of particular members of the work's internal audience is supposed to cue the literate audience in how its own members should receive the text. By imagining this internal audience, frames can partially restore the vast amount of nonverbal communication that occurs in an oral performance which guides audience response (27-28). Such a theory works admirably well for the vast majority of frame narratives Chaucer likely knew; Boccaccio actually makes it explicit in the *Decameron* by naming his literate audience as ladies in need of distraction, then imagining an internal audience of distractable youths. In other frame narratives, this bridge function of the internal audience usually aligns with the frame's didacticism; so in allegorical frames like the *Ameto*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and, to the extent that it is either an allegory or a frame narrative, the *Divine Comedy*, the internal audience of a framed narrative learns the lesson that the author wishes to impart to a reader. Other allegories that use framing techniques like the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* and even *Piers Plowman* deploy a similar structure; the main character in such works impersonates both the author and the audience; the author himself becomes the audience of allegorical narratives being

performed in front of him which he is supposed to assimilate into his own understanding. In all such cases, the rhetorical aims that drove the author to include a particular framed narrative are enacted within the internal audience of the frame itself; the potential polyvalence of the narrative is, to whatever extent, contained and directed by our explicit witness of a response to that text. In a sense, the frame responds to its own texts often before a reader has herself fully responded. We can say, especially in the cases of the *Decameron* and *Piers Plowman*, that a sense of the polyvalence of the text's stories is restored by the inadequacy or incompleteness of the text's own, supplied response—indeed, the internal audience itself often registers a vague sense of this incompleteness—but the internal audience's understanding still forms the basic groundwork of the reader's complication of it.

If such a theory helps to explain the framing techniques of Chaucer's sources, it is doubly striking that it fails utterly to explain his own text. We cannot say, even in the most oblique sense, that the internal audience of the *Canterbury Tales* models the way in which Chaucer wants the texts contained within it to be read; the angles of vision they supply onto any given tale are too specific and idiosyncratic. As Jill Mann has demonstrated, the Canterbury pilgrims rely on estates satire for their characterization; as such, they each embody a stereotyped member of a particular social class.<sup>1</sup> As stereotypes, they lack the ideological plasticity that would make them a suitable proxy for a reader; they present caricatures, albeit detailed and vivid ones, who are largely

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Mann argues that the characterization of the pilgrims derives from both "idealized" details and "normal" details; that is, certain features derive from a type figure while others derive from the way in which real, normal practitioners of an estate fail to embody that type. However, in his recent article "The Universality of the Portraits in the *General Prologue*," Gerald Morgan has called this distinction into question, arguing that ultimately all of the details of the portraiture derive from universalized types—the "normal" characteristics of the pilgrims arise from equally extreme depictions of an estate, they are simply not the positive features of that estate. The pilgrims are thus types through and through; any reference to realism in the portraits is out of place.

incapable of moderating their stock ideologies to see from any other point of view or to be persuaded by any of the other pilgrims. Estates satire, as a form, tended not to represent a functioning social organism, but rather lamented the disfunctions of the medieval caste system; it did not present sympathetic versions of its stereotypical characters, but rather took the various ideologies and interests that more or less typified a particular group to their extremes (8). Besides being unsympathetic, such characters are emphatically not exemplary—they are cautionary, examples of how one should not think and behave. Chaucer essentially mashes together two genres with antithetical aims: in estates satire, an author presents characters meant to caution the audience against becoming like them while in frame narratives, characters are supposed to serve as proxies within the narrative. Estates stereotypes are next of kin to the allegorical personification, which presents a character so possessed by its own manic idea that its body can register no other idea, at least, not willingly. The principle difference between an allegorical personification and an estates stereotype is that the personification represents a single idea from a coherent philosophical system while the stereotype can possess multiple, sometimes even contradictory, ideologies; those contradictions, far from opening the stereotype to the possibility of other ideas and arguments, usually make her dogged persistence in a set of rigid ideologies all the more marked.

Though Mann effectively demonstrates that Chaucer did deploy the stereotypes of estates satire in his frame characters, she never fully explains why he would do so. It is a mystery that bears some comment, first because it creates an internal audience that is very atypical for a frame narrative and second because it must have pained Chaucer to commit his stories to some of his pilgrims. For Chaucer, the *Canterbury Tales* must have



been a work of sighs, as much as laughter; in writing the *Tales*, Chaucer takes a vast store of his literary output and commits their generation to lesser lights. Such a move would have, I suspect, been somewhat painful because it made his intensely complex and polyvalent narratives proceed from intellects that had vastly narrowed their concerns. In their passage through the mouths of the pilgrims, Chaucer's stories are reduced to whatever dogmatic perspective the estates stereotype opens within them; their internal reception by the other pilgrims does reopen them to a certain extent, but only insofar as they are digested into another, equally narrow and typed interpretive pattern. Though many critics have lauded the "realism" of the Canterbury pilgrims,<sup>2</sup> they ultimately lack the sort of plasticity that is the hallmark of the human mind; though the text is obviously charged with rhetoric, its audience lacks the most basic precondition of rhetoric: the willingness to change one's mind.<sup>3</sup> As such, we can scarcely even say that the point of the text is to demonstrate the inadequacy of the perspectives it opens into itself: though

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<sup>2</sup> While earlier generations of Chaucerians praised Chaucer for his realistic characterization of the pilgrims, subsequent critics have more commonly labeled him a nominalist, though, as Robert Myles has shown in *Chaucerian Realism*, Chaucer did not subscribe to the sort of extreme nominalism many associate with the term (6-10). It is ironic, however, that though many have ascribed nominalist sympathies to Chaucer, few of his pilgrims could be called such; the ironic nihilism of the Pardoner and the Manciple may betray a sort of relativism associated with extreme nominalism, but Chaucer forecloses the possibility of such a nominalism by establishing the intentionality of objects in his world. Ultimately, even the nihilistic characters on the pilgrimage contribute to this intentionality. It is one of the paradoxes of the *Tales* that, for the fictional world to seem realistic, the characters who perceive it must not seem realistic, not fully human.

<sup>3</sup> In rhetorical terms, the text most obviously resembles the medieval form of the *disputatio*, in which people with opposing viewpoints debate before an audience. However it differs from the *diputatio* form in three ways: first, the purported audience of the disputation are also the participants in it; Harry Bailly is a sort of judge arbitrating between the various poles of the argument, but he can hardly be said to be a reliable arbiter. Second, Chaucer presents a sort of headless disputation, a disputation without a clear goal in mind; the contest promises to reward the "best" tale with a fancy dinner, but the very definition of what would constitute the best tale is under constant redefinition within the *Tales*. Disputation is supposed to discover a synthesis between the most reasonable points raised in the course of the argument, but the *Canterbury Tales* doesn't move clearly or invariably toward such syntheses, preferring to let the irreconcilability of its perspectives remain intact. On Chaucer's use of disputation, see Delasanta 149 and Laskaya 104-111; for a more general exploration of *disputatio* as a form, see Novikoff.

Mann refers us to estates satire, the *Canterbury Tales* itself can hardly be called satirical;<sup>4</sup> Chaucer rarely works to explicitly undercut any of his pilgrims, and the sort of tolerant, if sometimes ironic, inclusiveness of the *General Prologue* seems to forbid our supplying such a critique of our own. And unlike even the more polyvalent frames mentioned above, Chaucer's internal audience rarely registers that it might be missing something, that the text might exceed the interpretive constraints that the pilgrims struggle to place on one another's tales; when the text does register that possibility, it is usually through wordplay that seems to outstrip the intentions of the character uttering it.

A brief look at the example of the Nun's Priest's epilogue suffices to demonstrate the point: at the end of his infinitely complex and productive tale—wherein Chaucer, among other things, articulates an entire theory of his art—the Nun's Priest announces “Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles/ And necligent, and truste on flaterye” (VII.3436-37). The Nun's Priest's pronouncement is laughably reductive: the tale itself accomplishes so much more than this simple caution against recklessness and flattery. The tale—as all of Chaucer's poetry—is not reducible to a singular “moralite;” it is, as many critics have noted, about the chaff, the necessary generativity of the sign that exceeds its narrowly defined signified.<sup>5</sup> The Nun's Priest says as much: he tells his listeners to “taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille” (VII.3443); fruit and chaff are, of course, both exteriors to a seed that never appears, and the pun on “stille” leaves us questioning whether the chaff should remain intact or fade into a quiet stillness. The Nun's Priest's pronouncement is

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Morgan is likewise uncomfortable with this characterization of Chaucer as a satirist, arguing that, though Chaucer often uses irony to poke fun at the follies of his characters, this hardly makes him a satirist (“Rhetorical Perspectives,” 133).

<sup>5</sup> E. Talbot Donaldson provides the most oft cited rendition of this argument when he pronounces that the fruit of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, “is the chaff” (150); Peter Travis likewise argues that the tale is, in many ways, designed to frustrate our critical impulses to explain it—the allegorical metaphor here thus points to an interior that only refers us back to its exterior (4-5).

thus perfectly appropriate to his tale and yet in seeming tension, if not outright contradiction, with his earlier, limited moral. The fruit and chaff metaphor is more a mistaken maxim that greatly outstrips its speaker's intent; Chaucer leaves open the possibility that it has no content at all for the pilgrims, that its depth of meaning might be discarded by all the pilgrims as a datum irrelevant to their narrower agendas. The bland prayer with which the Nun's Priest ends the tale further suggests that his insight has been accidental: "Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,/ As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,/ And brynge us to his heighe blisse!" (3444-46). The sentiment of this brief prayer bears only the loosest relevance to the tale or its limited moral about recklessness; it suggests that the Nun's Priest is unaware of the deep insight he has just offered into his own text, that he only meant to make a pious, and perhaps a bit nervous, summary of its import from his own, similarly limited perspective. Unable to account for what he has himself said about his own tale, he stutteringly tries to reassert the nervous, reductive and conventional piety that he originally applied to the tale, but read through the matrix of its accidentally deeper moral, that piety comes off as general and bewildered. As his metaphor suggests, he tries to allegorize his own tale, to find the wheat within the chaff, but in doing so he inadvertently reveals that it is not susceptible to his, in this case rather crass, allegorization.

Chaucer deliberately embeds the sort of interpretive narrowness the Nun's Priest displays into all his pilgrims;<sup>6</sup> while Mann terms them "stereotypes" when describing this feature of their characterization, for strategic reasons, I will be calling them "grotesques"

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<sup>6</sup> The only two pilgrims who escape the characterization I offer here are Chaucer himself and Harry Bailley; they do display a sort of plasticity and receptivity to the ideas, arguments and aesthetics raised by the other pilgrims. Their function within the Tales is complicated enough to merit a separate chapter, which will be part of the longer project stemming from this dissertation.

here, invoking both sense from classical drama and the modern sense deployed by Sherwood Anderson in his novel, *Winesburg, Ohio*. Where a stereotype is more aptly the recipient of someone else's limiting characterization, the grotesque is an agent projecting a limited angle of vision into a narrative space. Anderson uses the term to refer to people who dogmatically adhere to a singular vision of the world around them; they take a limited truth and refract it onto every situation that demands interpretation, whether that truth is well suited to the situation or not. In its Greek tragic roots, the term "grotesque" describes that reduction of the infinite emotional and ideological plasticity of the human face to a single, particular grimace; the mask worn by the grotesque freezes her face in a single attitude, rendering it capable of expressing a limited perspective on the matter playing out before her. Grotesqueness describes a deliberate artistic restriction of range such that, wherever the grotesque appears, we instantly understand her attitude toward whatever matter is being played out on the stage. A grotesque still, of course, requires interpretation—historical distance, for one, can render its grimace less legible, such that we must learn the attitude it represents before it can serve its function within the text. But the interpretive act it necessitates is of a different order than other interpretive acts; for a reader who is a part of the culture that produced it, the grotesque is understood before it presents itself, and only recognized rather than interpreted when it appears.<sup>7</sup> As such, it is not styled as an an object to be interpreted, but as a subject position embedded within the text from whose vantage point we can witness other events and objects within the text. Though the grotesque offers readers a vantage point into the text, the very fact

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur terms this sort of pre-narrative understanding *Mimesis*<sub>1</sub>, arguing that certain figures that narrative later borrows are organized by a sort of automatic reference to experience. We do not have to reflect on such figures, because they imperson some intrinsic aspect of "the sign system of a society" (Dowling 3). Chaucer's reversion to this sort of effortless narrative should stand in stark contrast to the *House of Fame*, where he deliberately obstructed this sort of automatic mimesis.

that a reader can accommodate multiple grotesques simultaneously within her mind signals an essential difference between the two: the reader retains an emotional and ideological plasticity, while the singular grotesque does not. The grotesque expresses a common mode of intentionality toward the text, even as it participates within the text; it disallows indifference or meaninglessness at the expense of plurality—interpretive plurality can only be achieved by populating the text with more grotesque figures.

One of the most salient pleasures of reading the *Canterbury Tales* is inhabiting its various subject positions as the tales are being told, imagining how the Wife of Bath would scowl at the Man of Law, or the patrician facade the Knight must present to the Shipman, or even—to refract these perspectives further—how the Wife would respond to the Knight’s response. We imagine their responses, not so much because we wonder whether or not they will be persuaded by the implicit ideas represented within the tale—their persuasion, or better their affirmation or denial, will be determined by how well a given tale can be assimilated within their preexisting belief structure—but because we already know, more or less, how they would respond, and that knowledge gives us multiple points of access into the tale being told. They form a microcosm of medieval English culture only insofar as they represent its various grimaces, the prefabricated response patterns that, in their totality, comprise any culture. The ways in which these grimaces play across the texture of a tale is incalculably complex, not only because of the multiplicity of perspectives available, but because—as in the Nun’s Priest’s epilogue—Chaucer builds ambiguous and duplicitous details into his texts that threaten the ability of any given grotesque perspective to account for them; just as the most ideologically driven text exceeds and betrays the intent of its author, so do the pilgrims’ tales exceed the

grotesque perspectives of their speakers and listeners. And though particular details can be received in radically different ways based on the interpretive vector each grotesque pilgrim offers, some details seem to exceed and defy all the interpretive resources provided to us by their various grimaces. To the pilgrims, such moments are almost always accidents and embarrassments, moments where their grimace is, for a brief moment, transformed into a look of bewilderment.

The kinship between these grotesques and allegorical personifications is ironic, since the rhetorically based criticism that has dominated *Canterbury Tales* scholarship over the past fifty years began as a reaction against allegorical readings of the Tales. Earlier generations of critics like D. W. Robertson argued that the pilgrims and their tales proceeded from medieval delineations between vices and virtues. Subsequent critics have justly challenged such reductive systems, exploring in various ways how the text voices other perspectives that often subvert the dominant ideological paradigms that were institutionalized in allegory. Reader response critics like Leonard Michael Koff and Stewart Justman argue that the strenuous rhetorical appeals voiced by the pilgrims leave readers in a unique position of authority and judgement. Historicists of all stripes have explored the historically situated arguments embedded within the text, puzzling out its participation in theological, political and other social disputes in the Middle Ages. Poststructural critics have, in a somewhat different direction, argued that the conflicting codes articulated within the poem announce a new relativistic understanding of the world; Robert M. Jordan explicitly calls this Chaucer's "rhetorical poetics," which term describes his vision of poetry that struggles to expose the conventionality of language and, by extension, of all lived, social experience (25). All such approaches share a basic

conception of the reader Chaucer imagines for his *Tales*: a deft, intelligent, learned, and perhaps even a bit cagey reader who is above all open to all the overlapping perspectives voiced within the text. Chaucer's text is constantly at the work of disclosing its polyvalence to us, the same polyvalence that the pilgrims themselves seem so intent on ignoring.

But if this rhetorical strain of criticism has outlined the type of reader Chaucer's text demands correctly—and I think it has—it has failed to answer, or largely even to ask the questions that such an open reader begs in relation to the *Tales*: why would a poet who is so sensitive to the complex rhetorical and interpretive dimensions of human experience—and who is so notoriously evasive about pronouncing his own agenda in the poem—make the primary, tale-telling characters in his greatest work so dogmatically rigid? Why would he attribute such demonstrably polyvalent texts to characters whose most basic conception requires them to ignore polyvalence in their own text and any other they hear? Why would Chaucer imagine the intense hold that the pilgrims' various ideologies have on them while seeming to curtail the power those ideologies can exert on others already possessed of their own ideology? Or, to put these various questions more simply, why is the sensitive and receptive reader the *Tales* as a whole seems to demand so devastatingly absent from its world? The *Canterbury Tales* gives voice to myriad ideas and opinions, becomes almost, as many of us have intuited, an incomplete compendium of medieval perspectives on life; it is a text about the ways in which language and narrative express those perspectives, making meaning arise from the otherwise lifeless matters of words, objects, people and ideas. Yet just as insistently as it voices those particular opinions, it curtails their power to have any real effect within the text itself;

Chaucer certainly does not advocate any of the ideologies he allows to be voiced in his text, and his pilgrims—each possessed by her own ideology—seem virtually incapable of being really persuaded by one another. If Chaucer’s text were about remaining open to the discourses that surround us—if it took even that most nebulous of ideological groundworks as its base—we might presume that Chaucer would provide us with better exempla of this behavior, or with a clearer indication that he is offering us negative exempla. But Chaucer doesn’t really censure or sanction this static quality of his pilgrims: it is a means in his text, rather than an end in itself.

These questions that the *Canterbury Tales* poses to readers are not easily solved, and I want to stress that the answers I propose to them here are by no means exhaustive. This disjunction between the internal and external audience of the poem could provide much fruitful tillage for future criticism. The conceptual narrative I have been laboring toward throughout this dissertation, however, does go some way to explaining the conundrums Chaucer has presented us with. The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer’s reconstitution of the project he set out upon in the *House of Fame*: its frame renders us aware of the pure, sonic passage of language that thrusts us toward an authentic presence, but the limited perspective imagined by each pilgrim onto that language forces it to cohere into a fully imagined narrative. The static, limited quality of the pilgrims ensures that readers will never lose sight of language’s intentionality—there is too much at stake for the pilgrims in these transactions, and they react too violently to one another. Even the irony of a character like the Manciple or the moral nihilism of the Pardoner come off as sincere in this structure;<sup>8</sup> as another grimace being communicated into the poem’s

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<sup>8</sup> In his chapter on the Manciple in *Chaucer’s Italian Tradition*, Warren Ginsberg argues that the Manciple’s irony does not threaten to undercut the possibility of meaning within the Tales, but is rather folded into the procession of different meanings offered by different pilgrims. No pilgrim—not even the



internal audience, it loses its relativistic potential and becomes another intentional mode in the poem's chorus of grotesques. The urgency and consistency with which the pilgrims articulate those perspectives into the poem makes all of its matters thrum with significance. The objects that populate its world are constantly being perceived, with certain of their features being foregrounded according to the trajectories offered by any given pilgrim. Chaucer avoids, however, the stagnant, settled quality that would normally accompany such concrete acts of perceptual imagination by making them overlap and stutter over one another; the ideological perspective that any given pilgrim would posit onto an object, theme, etc. is unsettled—but not undermined—by the perspectives of the other pilgrims. The settled quality of those perspectives is thus Chaucer's means to unsettling them; by inhabiting each perspective, we ultimately gain an overriding sense of the strangeness of everything that populates the text, the way it exceeds whatever interpretation we apply to it. This strangeness intimates the supplemental dimensions of their being, the transversal associations between objects mutually defining one another across an indivisible time; any given act of perception can only witness a single facet of an object's total being, yet as they aggregate, they orient us toward that totality. As we begin to see the overwhelming interest inspired by these textual matters, we glimpse the shiver of grace that animates them, underwriting their fiction; we begin to experience everything that populates its world as a fetish, inhabiting the temporal horizon leading to presence.

By thematizing this sort of narrative strangeness in his text, Chaucer struggles to effect a reconciliation between Boccaccio's insistent focus on the distractive particular

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Parson—can really have the last word in the poem; every perspective onto the poem is relativized, but not nullified, by the framing structure's use of multiple grotesque perspectives.

and Dante's allegorization of grace. As I argued in the previous chapter, Boccaccio must ultimately repudiate Dante's stilnovist understanding of perceptual experience; for Boccaccio, Dante ultimately resorts to the same sort of allegorical tendencies that he himself criticized in the theologians; Dante's project was to recuperate the experience of beauty in the material world, to make space and time the primary categories through which we understand the divine. He demonstrates the sinuous way in which all beings distend from God's presence; their persistence through time cannot be reduced to a series of broken, functionalist events. Dante showed how an engrossed attachment to the physical world pushes us into the infinitesimal spaces between moments in which God resides; when each object within the world achieves the self-sustaining rationale of the fetish, their lover enters into an ecstatic experience of time that breaks upon the mystical vision of the divine. But, to the love-sick mind of Boccaccio, Dante's new vision only really pays lip-service to the physical world; its crass totalization of the physical world as "the physical world" is precisely the problem—Dante's revaluation of physical objects renders them all univocal. Fetishism, ironically and paradoxically, transforms into allegory and so things lose the particularity that should make them engrossing. The only solution is a literary ethic of distraction that must struggle to keep this allegorization of grace from erupting into the world and so liquidating everything within it. In essence, he resorts to something akin to the Heideggerian solution with an entirely different emphasis—he presses presence back into an unconscious background so that he and others can continue to operate within it. The tales told by the brigata's members are conceptually complex in a way that outstrips their utterers' intentions, but the emphasis in Boccaccio is on the ways in which they are rendered intelligible to and by members of the group.

Chaucer learns Boccaccio's lesson well and he will himself take this emphasis on interpretive intelligibility to a much further extreme than Boccaccio did—whereas the members of Boccaccio's brigata are generally plastic and pliable as characters, Chaucer's grotesques much more vividly depict interpretive work. But in radicalizing Boccaccio's procedure, he curves it back to something more closely resembling Dantean grace: he realizes that, in showing the often dogmatic and limited ways in which people reduce one another and the world around them into an easily digestible ideological pattern, he can progressively reveal the deep particularity of those objects, the deep particularity that Boccaccio believed was ultimately unrepresentable and certainly irreducible. As these partial perceptual schema begin to overlap and stutter over one another, they simultaneously demonstrate the fallacy common to all such perspectives—their incompleteness—while also still progressively disclosing some feature integral to the object's ontology. Chaucer realizes that ideological contradiction—the narrative ingredient that Dante suppresses with his starkly monologic universe and that Boccaccio largely ignores in his search for an ontology of distraction—is capable of synthesizing the seemingly opposed temporal phenomenologies of these two authors. The grotesque contradiction implicit in Chaucer's frame reveals the narrative objects of his world as strange: it establishes certain clearly unified poles of exchange, discloses certain features of those poles that help us to define and perceive them, but it equally renders each of those purportedly definitive conceptions incomplete. Objects and ideas—words—become phenomenological artifacts which people clamber over one another to understand and appropriate; they become fetishes all, slowing readers' perception of time as they begin to realize the vast complexity of the object passing across the surface of the text.

Yet those objects do not thereby lose their particularity; in fact, it is the particular ways in which the pilgrims perceive them that disclose their renewing strangeness to us. Though a full awareness of any such object remains wholly beyond our capacities, they do not thereby become ineffable but hypereffable.

In what follows, I want to prosecute this essential argument through a reading which, for reasons of space and time, I have confined to the *General Prologue* alone. First, I will examine how Chaucer self-consciously opens the time and space of the poem within the first 34 lines. From the outset of this introduction, Chaucer is thematizing strangeness in his poem—he begins by describing the natural world through a very strange pattern of relation and interaction that defies our expectations. All the traditional elements of a description of Spring are present, but they do not unfold in the way we expect: rain falls upon flowers, but wind inspirits them rather than the sun; the sun is removed to the cosmic sphere of the zodiac instead. By evoking then disrupting traditional patterns of association in these images, Chaucer gestures toward the strangeness in them that both incorporates and exceeds those patterns. Second, I will examine why Chaucer disrupts this time and space to construct his characters synchronically outside the narrative. The pilgrims' characterization does not occur in the Tabard Inn, but rather outside a consistently imagined time and space. Finally, I will argue that these extra-temporal portraits reflect the procedures of temporal recombination required to create a historical self—it is for this reason they are not elaborated within the frame chronotope itself. They arrest duration into paradigmatic events to convey the grotesque angle of vision that codifies those events. We understand the pilgrim's grimace because we see typical moments of it in a rapid succession that at once summarizes the

pilgrim and renders us conscious of the temporal procedures through which we have understood her. The portraits demonstrate how each pilgrim's organism is formed through a series of limited perceptions in the past that culminate in her grotesque perspective on the poem. In this sense, the portraits act as a microcosm of the *Tales* as a whole, whose alternating narrative levels incite the same surface awareness of their language. But the text neither leaves us lodged at the babbling surface of the text, nor within some puerile, grotesque perspective; rather, as it renders us conscious of our constitution of progressively defined objects within the poem, and of the various perspectives which open a perceptual angle on those objects, we begin to glimpse a narrative world enlivened by its own strangeness. As we aggregate those perspectives, we begin to experience the full, ecstatic temporality of his world that pushes us toward its transcendently novel presence.

#### *Aprille's Consonant Dissonance*

From its beginning, the *Canterbury Tales* sets out to thematize strangeness as a preeminent concern in the narrative. The frame narrative that he initiates from the poem's first "whan" generates a time and space within which objects thrum with their own, multifaceted natures. Frames always force us to attend to the conditions of an object's production, which conditions intimate their supplemental dimensions. Frames construct a historical grid that mimics the way we construct history in lived reality. They subsume disparate acts of narrative imagination into a single timeline, filled with hermeneutic linkages and allegorical resemblances. As all narratives do, they open a space wherein we can imagine objects into being; they open a time by setting those

objects into motion relative to one another. Each of these interrelations, however slight or tangential, whether they are explicitly voiced in the narrative or only implied by two objects' coexistence, mutually defines the contours of each object's being. Typically, for such narrative objects to become convincingly imagined, they must mimetically draw upon the habitual patterns of relations that characterize their counterparts in lived reality; an author, thus, does not need to recount every minute interaction between objects as they define one another, but can leave a vast majority of the activity occurring within her world unspoken. In Heideggerian terms, the objects populating a narrative must remain tools; their assumed patterns of relation must remain beneath the surface of the narrative, lest its world fall into the abyss or become so absorbed in the minutiae of constituting itself that it accomplishes nothing.

This insight into the tool-being of narrative objects reveals a temporal dimension to their imagining as well: the interrelations between narrative objects—and subsequently themes, ideologies, etc.—are events that contract spans of time into paradigmatic instants. Were we to try to imagine the full being of any one of these objects, the narrative would paradoxically halt—an author would become bogged, not only in describing the contact occurring between an object and all its fellows in a single instant, but also its radiation outward through time, in the infinitely divisible moments in which those objects approach one another. Even beyond this, the relations between the organs and particles that comprise the object would have to be described in a likewise infinitely receding particularity. A text like *Alice in Wonderland* demonstrates these principles in violating them to an extent: Carroll restores a radical strangeness to every object inhabiting his world by never allowing it to persist in its expected pattern, by forcing

transversal associations and interactions between objects that forces us to glimpse the potentiality of what it could be—but never is—in our own lives. He unravels the habitual patterns of relation that define an object such that it can no longer simply inhabit that background of narrative tool being, but rather must be regarded as a unique existent fraught with supplemental dimensions of its being to which we have no access; these supplemental dimensions, perceived in their totality across time, locates that object on a temporal horizon that unwinds the very being it manifests, that reveal the inherent illusory quality that suffuses Carroll's Wonderland.

Of course, no narrative ever approaches this limit point of absolute presence, nor do they really attempt to do so. Even the *danse macabre* of Carroll's characters assumes a minimal temporal awareness where their strangeness is manifested in the contracted and calcified events of the text's internal history; it can thus only suggest a radicality of awareness that it never achieves. As we have seen elsewhere, narrative, as a mode, is antithetical to the philosophical discipline that would lead to presence; the entire apparatus of any narrative renders perceptible certain features of its world and certain events wherein those features are manifested while marginalizing others. In other words, they reflect the pragmatism of perception, its categorical denial of the radical strangeness of an object that allows it to appear both in space and time. Narratives are microcosms of the machinery of history, and so they must invariably ignore the ontological point of presence from which they proceed. Frames, however, orient us to this procedure of narrative production concurrently with whatever they imagine; they install an awareness of the presence that exceeds their text and undoes its various fictions within the superstructure of the text itself. As we have seen in Boccaccio, frames make words

imagined objects as well as agents of further imagination; it is their materiality as imagined objects that the plague threatens. In a frame, the word represents itself to us first as a word, operating within an imagined space and time to produce other spaces and times. It restores to the imagined objects that populate it their grammatical dimension, which is synonymous with their radical being, their persistence through an infinitely divisible time. The diverse contractions of sound into grammar through which an object is knit into an integrated being become the first layer of our imaginative consciousness; words are not simply intermediaries that convey some imagined object into another mind, but are themselves the objects of their own mediating action; they are perfectly onomatopoeic, representing exactly what they are. Frames discover a mimesis beyond mimesis in making the mechanism by which they are produced both their mediating subject and object: they change only media, transforming from letters on a page to letters proceeding from a mouth. Each grammatical particle has its own, integrated, material existence as a voiced sound within the imagined space; like any narrative, they define their being in relation to other sounds, by resemblance and irresemblance, by their mutual action upon one another. Those material sounds contract into various grammatical organisms that, in their turn, interrelate on larger scales of interaction. Frames reveal that any narrative encodes within itself, first, the narrative of its own transformation into its imagined world, the narrative of its words interrelating as objects themselves. Every word—and every particle of every word—has its full strangeness restored to it at this signic waypoint, as it is poised to mean something particular within the text yet resides also in its own imagined space, with its own inherent materiality.



For Boccaccio, this sort of perfect mimesis was the plague condition of language—it imagines the word as a divided, disunified body; one cannot say, in an onomatopoeic mimesis, that the word coheres into a unit at all, since each moment of each articulation fully accomplishes the work of representation it tries to effect. If the brigata's members make something more of that material language, it is a result of their infinite and partially laudable capacity to be distracted. Such perfect mimesis is also what Chaucer had sought in the *House of Fame*—it uses the very linguistic and narrative means by which we normally calcify temporal succession into historical events to effect the dream of a perfected experience of time. But where, in his earlier poem, Chaucer restored temporality to the speaker at the expense of the object spoken, in his frame, he resituates the narrated object itself within its temporal horizon. When we transform any word into its final referent in the framed tale, we remain aware of the intermediate layer of voicing that composes whatever object or action is being imagined; the objects that comprise the framed narrative are not merely physical beings, but are the products of speech acts, imagined simultaneously with their referents, that have been subjected to the rigors of grammatical subordination and coordination. Boccaccio enforced a similar meditation in his *Decameron*, but he did so largely to distract his reader from the plague-ridden preconditions of linguistic recombination; the coherence of words into discrete unities was poignant but devastatingly tenuous. For Chaucer, however, the frame's exposure of the linguistic preconditions of narrative are actually what enforce their coherence as discrete objects. The interactions by which any object's being is defined in the narrative are overlaid with this consciousness of the conditions of their production; their bodies are suffused with the acts of grammatical coordination that render the linguistic sounds or

written representations of sound that compose them into a harmonious, enfolded unity. Those conditions of an imagined object's production run parallel to the historical grammar through which we apprehend objects and the moments through which they persist. Even if the object or character narrated is oblivious to this linguistic dimension of its composition, and even if it acts in a fashion wholly consistent with its habitual patterns, it becomes strange again to us through this forced meditation on the linguistic transactions that produced it. It regains those supplemental dimensions of its being that narrative—in relating particular, limited perceptions of that object by its fellows—inevitably elides to some extent, that is relegated to an invisible tool-being. Our sense of the strangeness of an object relies on recognizing the strangeness of all its component parts, each of which has had to deny its own strangeness in order to contract into some larger organism acting on a more complex scale of being; frames explicitly code this component strangeness into themselves by making the linguistic matters of which their worlds are composed appear.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer announces this sort of strangeness as a preeminent theme from the outset; his effortlessly enigmatic introduction opens upon a scene that would be trite, were its expression not so odd:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth

The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. (1.1-12)

Chaucer's initial "whan that" accomplishes two ends: first, it forces a self-conscious reflection on the narrative's opening of a time—from its first word, Chaucer renders us aware of the referential procedures through which we spontaneously generate an internal time within his narrative;<sup>9</sup> second, it introduces a hypotactic clause that will culminate in the "thanne longen" line. However, the culmination of the clause is interrupted by four paratactic clauses that almost re-begin the hypotactic clause. In essence, Chaucer confuses the expected associations between the paratactic elements of the sentence and aligns them with a seemingly unrelated association in the final then clause. The image of April showers was wholly conventional even in Chaucer's England; its generation of flowers likewise describes a habitual pattern of relation between rain, earth and flower. The space and time introduced in the *Canterbury Tales* thus, in its first image, seems to rely on commonplaces from our own experience that we can easily reflect into its imagined space, creating a simple set of agents and limited causal relationships between them. But in his second, paratactic "whan," these simple associations are deeply

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<sup>9</sup> Katherine Slater Gittes, citing Ralph Baldwin, remarks on the explicitly temporal nature of the opening lines: "Chaucer makes interesting use of various Western grammatical and rhetorical devices so as to enhance the sense of motion, the passing of time. As Baldwin observes, the first two words of the *General Prologue*, 'Whan that,' place the pilgrimage in time. This initial temporal clause fixes at the outset the idea that time will play a significant role in the work.... Moreover, the sense of movement implicit in the pilgrimage is enhanced by the Prologue's sketches of the pilgrims riding on their journey, although they have not yet actually embarked" (124)

unsettled. The second “whan” itself is stark in its refusal to relate the breath of Zephyrus to the natural scene introduced immediately prior—clearly the wind is a component of the same scene, but it is not subordinated into the hypotactic logic of the initial clause instead introducing a second hypotactic clause still lacking the then clause that will make sense of each. In general, hypotactical grammar—which subordinates one clause to another so as to clearly announce their relationship—tends to produce more coherent, or at least detailed, narrative spaces and times within a narrative. It relates the objects and actions introduced by one clause to another in a more specific way than paratactic grammar, which tends to simply use “and” to string sentences and clauses together. Chaucer had experimented with an extreme form of parataxis in the lists of the *House of Fame*: there, at the limit of paratactic coordination, naming objects actually frustrated our capacity to imagine them. Chaucer introduces them into the same space, even the same pile of interrelating objects, but their bare coordination didn’t imagine a specific engagement between any two, and the proliferation of undeveloped relations actually frustrated our capacity to imagine them. Here and throughout the *General Prologue*, Chaucer uses a play of hypotactic and paratactic arrangements not to disrupt his world’s imaginative potential, but to break the objects he sets in motion out of their habitual patterns of action and put them, instead, in relationships of indefinite potentiality. We are left to fill in the gaps that his parataxis leaves intact, to imagine the relationship between the scenes introduced and the objects inhabiting them.

These paratactic elements do relate—they do, after all, inhabit the same space and act upon one another within the same time—but after the first image of April rains, they relate only to disrupt one another’s habitual associations. Rather, their habitual patterns

of behavior are confused and transposed onto one another. Zephyrus takes on a role that would be traditionally associated with the sun: inspiring the tender crops in every holt and heath. The sun imagery should participate in the engendering of initial flowers, should, in fact, be the co-agent with the April rain in producing the flower; but Chaucer—taken, perhaps, by a free association on the Latinate verb “inspired”—displaces the sun and puts a seemingly irrelevant wind into its place. Inspiration is no longer conceived as generation as it was in the first image, as the harmonious mingling of elements into a Platonically informed flower;<sup>10</sup> rather, the inspiration of the plant world is transformed into an image of wind moving through them, manifesting their casual persistence through time. Even in the natural science of Chaucer’s day, wind is almost ancillary to a flower’s generation when compared to rain, sun or the once draught-ridden earth. Its inspiration, rather, is to set the imagined plants into motion, to restore an aesthetic dimension to the utilitarian “croppes.” Like the images of the sea from the *House of Fame*, this tangential image of moving grain briefly encodes the sort of random movement that most closely imagines duration; it does not allow us to fix on any event, any particular stalk rubbing on one of its fellows, but still suggests a sinuous time. From the manifest generation of his world using conventional, natural associations, Chaucer has slid into an image that, at once, unsettles those habitual interactions and re-renders them in terms of an aesthetic perception of time. Perhaps what is most surprising about this effect is that he uses conventional imagery to unsettle the conventions by which we usually understand their

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<sup>10</sup> In the *Republic*, Plato likens the sun to the Good (508 B,C); as the sun casts light onto sensible things, thereby rendering them perceptible, so does the Good make intelligible things intelligible. This relationship to a Platonized divinity was a commonplace in Medieval thought, transmitted principally through St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius; Dante makes frequent use of it, delineating between the physical and spiritual sun in Paradise. While Chaucer’s line is too brief to really invoke the perhaps cumbersome apparatus of this symbolism, his deliberate choice to disassociate the sun from the inspiring action of the wind testifies to the pains he is taking to disassociate his imagery from its conventional associations.

component objects: the wind blowing across a field of grain is almost as conventional as the rain birthing flowers in Spring, but its situation in the paratactic assemblage of images here render it again poignant and unexpected.

The sun imagery introduces a further tangent to this mix: where we would expect it to participate in the natural scenes previously imagined, Chaucer instead relocates the sun into a larger, cosmic grid; this image would be conventional as well, were it not for the earlier scenes that constructed their objects using earth-bound interactions rather than cosmic ones. The scope of these heavenly interactions actually makes the sun—which Chaucer has led us to expect from practically the first line—a non sequitur, indifferently moving through the zodiacal heaven that dictates fate from afar, with little regard for the very particularized scale of being which the initial flower or the subsequent bird inhabits. The procession of the sun through the heavens, instead, marks out a cosmic and calendrical time whose scope starkly contrasts the minute duration imagined in the wind-blown wheat. While its “and” is a less stark conjunction than the previous “whan,” its irrelation to the world of wind, rain, flowers and crops is almost more poignant: its being is defined in relation to the outermost reaches of the cosmos, the fixed stars. Yet despite this poignant detachment from the earthly sphere Chaucer has just described, the sun is unexpectedly anthropomorphized as a young runner; the stars, likewise are named in their zodiacal, allegorical forms as analogues of earthly beings. These analogical images are enough to tie the sun’s scale of existence to the more minute creations it should inform, but it only does so indirectly, without explicitly voiced, narrative relationships between the two objects. The effect is, again, that Chaucer renders us aware of facets of the sun’s being as an object that the earlier images would have elided; those associations still exist

—if the flower is to grow, the sun must light upon it—but those habitual patterns of interaction are not how it is introduced into the narrative. Rather, another conventional, but unexpected aspect of its being—its movement through the larger sky—is imagined to make us again aware that the sun’s being exceeds the narrow constraints of the earthly organisms in which it takes part.

The final image of the open-eyed birds would likewise have fit quite harmoniously with the initial flower imagery, were it not for all the intervening material. It could even serve as the much-awaited “then” clause to either of the initial “whens.” But especially after the cosmic scale of the zodiac-traversing sun, the little birds seem like another non sequitur, abruptly pulling us back to a scale of being and temporal organization that we had just as abruptly left. Chaucer, in fact, explicitly establishes them as a non sequitur by detailing their odd custom of remaining open-eyed during sleep. This descriptive tidbit takes us to a scale of narrative detail not approached even in the rain-soaked flower—we must imagine not just the group of birds singing and sleeping, but the component parts of an individual face of an individual bird. Yet Chaucer explicitly draws attention to the inexplicability of this detail, and he does so in the very natural terms whose causality has generated everything else in his world up to this point. Causal interactions occurring in the natural world have defined the contours of every named object in the space Chaucer has opened to this point, but the final detail characterizing that world seems to have no explicit cause; it is a facet of the birds’ being that exceeds any of the relations that have or could be articulated within the narrative. Instead, it is chalked up to a vaguely defined, allegorical Nature. But Nature itself, in this case takes on a dual significance: Nature, as the totalized organism of interconnected

entities in the world—the same Nature that permutates a flower out of rain and, implicitly, earth, wind and sun in the second line—might motivate this behavior, but equally it is an inexplicable, uncaused feature of the bird’s own internal nature, its individual quiddity. Nature, in this latter sense, is an extremely odd allegorical figure, since it does not relate the idiosyncrasies of its appearance to a larger conceptual system as allegories usually do; in fact, it does precisely the opposite, sequestering the physical form the bird takes from any other system of relation by making it a circular consequence solely of its own nature. In this final image before the then clause, Chaucer has created an odd allegory of strangeness where allegory normally constrains an object into habitual patterns of behavior understood by a limited interpretive perspective; this is confirmed by the bird’s irrelation to the prior images: rather than explicitly situating the birds among the flowers or crops, in the rain, blown by the wind or warmed by the sun, the birds only “maken melodye,/ and slepen al the nyght with open ye.” These birds fit well within the various scenes described, but their description gestures toward the ways in which they exceed the scenes that they inhabit. While their relations with one another may shape the being of each object named, it does not exhaust that being—in Chaucer’s narrative, as in lived reality, they exceed the ways in which they are perceived by one another and ourselves.

Critics who have associated the introduction to the *General Prologue* with the *Genesis* account of creation are thus, at once, entirely right and entirely wrong to relate the two stories.<sup>11</sup> Chaucer is self-consciously meditating on the temporal creation that he

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<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, Nitzsche and Willard. The association with Genesis may be a nod to the *Decameron*, itself a play on patristic “Hexameron” literature providing exegesis on the *Genesis* creation story. Not knowing exactly why Boccaccio selected that title, Chaucer might have understood it as a self-conscious meditation on artistic production and so opened his own work with a similarly reflective allusion.



effects with a few casual and sparsely related terms organized into progressively larger images inhabiting a cohesive space; but whereas the *Genesis* creation details the construction of the various scales of time from the top down and in a very ordered fashion that proceeds from the basic creation of spatial directions to the generation of different kingdoms of living beings, Chaucer jumbles the various scales of creation around to make their habitation of the same space poignant and miraculous. The *Genesis* account of the Creation essentially describes the emanation of the varying scales of temporal organization from God's presence. The cosmic scale of time is imagined in the creation of heaven and earth, and light from darkness; this act defines the most minimal spatial grid through which cosmic objects can move and thereby manifest time. The earthly scale is imagined in the separation of ocean from land, which creates another spatial grid within the larger cosmic one for beings to manifest a different scale of time. The various plants and animals that populate the earth install their own temporal scale on progressively more local levels. Finally, Adam and Eve introduce the specifically human scale of time and the beginning of the span of human history. Where the *Genesis* account is remarkable for the order with which it sets out these scales of being, Chaucer's brief revision of the creation meditates, instead, on their cohabitation of the same time and space, their mutual persistence through a common duration. Where objects that are typified by a particular scale of temporal organization must be perceived in terms of their habitual patterns of interrelation, those objects nonetheless exceed those narrow patterns and manifest a being that impinge upon other scales, and that exceeds any given perception of it. Chaucer's carefully composed jumble of associations and narrative images imagines the strangeness of the objects that inhabit his world rather than their

habitual patterns; his space and time is suffused with this strangeness through which they all manifest a sinuous, unfolding time.

A more interesting, if less certain, creationist analogue to Chaucer's opening lines can be found in Boethius's *De Institutione Musica*, wherein he likens the harmony of a musical composition to the constitution of material objects.<sup>12</sup> In the first chapter of that text, Boethius takes great pains to describe the moral consequences of music: complex, inharmonious music can incite listeners to all manner of perversions, while simple, harmonious music generates individual and social harmony. For Boethius, the behavioral consequences of music results from the intrinsically musical nature of our being; as he notes of the Pythagoreans, "they knew that the whole structure of our soul and body has been joined by means of musical coalescence" (7). The physical, behavioral, and moral attributes of a person are tantamount to the notes that, when perceived in their totality, converge into the whole of her being; if those elements are consonant, there will be a harmony and unity in the resultant form, if they are dissonant, the form will be inharmonious. I will return to the application of this principle to the human individual in a moment, but more pertinent now is Boethius's notion that this musical logic coheres in other naturally occurring objects as well. In describing "cosmic" music, Boethius asks

if a certain harmony did not join the diversities and opposing forces of the four elements, how would it be possible that they could unite in one mass and contrivance? But all this diversity gives birth to variety of both seasons and fruits in such a way that it nevertheless imparts one structure to the year. Whence, if you imagine one of these things which supply such

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<sup>12</sup> Chaucer's description of the "music of the spheres" in the *House of Fame* very likely refers to this text, though the idea was widespread by Chaucer's time; moreover, the jumbled effect of the House's music seems an early predecessor to this more measured and coherent presentation of ontological harmonization.

diversity taken away, then all things would seem to fall apart and, so to speak, preserve none of their consonance. (9)

In this statement, Boethius succinctly describes the contraction of component objects into organisms persisting through progressively larger scales of temporal being: every such object thrums its own music into space, parts of which resonate with other notes from other objects. As these consonant musics blend, they form new movements within the larger opera of the creation itself; they define one another's contours as varying cells determine one another's function. The component parts of this music are infinitely divisible, even past the level of the unified note: "one should not think that when a string is struck, only one sound is produced, or that only one percussion is present in these numerous sounds; rather, as often as air is moved, the vibrating string will have struck it" (11). But insofar as they remain constant, exposing particular facets of themselves to particular facets of their fellows, they can contract into unities that form the constituent parts of progressively larger unities: notes, refrains, movements, compositions, etc. Boethius's music articulates the contraction of duration into the instant that is the basis of material bodies.

If we are to understand the true import of Boethius's musical creation, however, we must not imagine the creation as a single song, the pattern of whose notes is clearly discernible to the knowing listener. Rather, the music of the spheres is a multiple music, a music where a single note can participate in many compositions simultaneously. This is the mystery of existential music that Chaucer grasped so thoroughly throughout his poetic career: any given note-body possesses a host of transversal associations simultaneously; as a given note can operate in a virtually infinite number of harmonious relations between

other notes in different musical pieces, so too do objects within the world emanate a being to which any other object can only partially respond. We rely on processes of perceptual selection to make the note cohere exclusively into the music it takes part in; such a note must be divorced from all the other noises surrounding it, the embarrassed cough from an audience member at a concert for instance. We must elide the relationship between those two sounds in order to make the desired relationships that constitute the musical piece function. No single song ever captures the radical potentiality of the notes that comprise it; if they attempted to do so, they would paradoxically become cacophonous, each note struggling to become all notes such that all relations would be present at each moment within the singular song. Clearly this is absurd: a given note only begins to achieve its potentiality across the entire history of musical composition, and even then it is not exhausted. Just so, the varying organisms in which an object participates account for only a small facet of its total being; but its mystery is not lost, since even as it participates in one song, one organism, it can simultaneously participate in others that go unperceived; its tool being resides in the indefinite musics it participates in, even though no single music can understand its multiplicity without becoming cacophonous. These transversal relations occur at every scale of temporal organization and, conceived in their totality, constitute the strangeness of the object, its constituent parts, and its larger organism-objects.

The space that Chaucer opens is of this Boethian, transversal order; its brief, episodic images are notes sounding within the texture of a larger creation. Those notes participate in harmonious organisms, but Chaucer does not let us simply constitute those organisms on a particular, fixed scale of temporal being. Rather, his beginning opens

onto several different melodies whose lateral consonance is deepened by the text's witness to the diverse and varying compositions in which they take part. The music Chaucer announces is a music of the multiple, a music that will knit together a larger creation by showing the inherent strangeness of the notes which comprise it. That strangeness cannot be constituted as I must, of dubious necessity, attempt to constitute it myself: strangeness cannot be theorized within a totalized, abstract term without making the term a caricature of what it attempts to represent. Rather, the strangeness that leads to fuller temporal awareness can only be approximated by showing the limited habitual patterns in which any object participates; it is expressed by dint of the multiplicity of these limited perspectives, which multiplicity does not make any given relation somehow more ephemeral, but actually more substantial. The transversal musics in which those notes take part—even when those musics might seem antithetical to one another's purposes—expose the supplemental dimensions of that object which make it a unified object; it likewise implies the strangeness of every other song and component part of every song that, in their unimaginably complex totality, form the weave of being. When each song, note and percussion of each note achieves its own special resonance without detracting or distracting from the resonance of its fellows, our attention, rapt in their infinite meaning, peeks beyond the temporal horizon they all inhabit to glimpse the superabundant presence behind them.

All this Chaucer's opening intimates before it has even reached the "then" of its first hypotactic clause; the deferred expectancy of all these paratactic "whens" is part of how Chaucer generates his staggering vision of the creation he has opened up. When we reach its actual "then" clause, it too feels almost like a non sequitur: the above causes

seem to have little to do with the idea of pilgrimage, aside from the tenuous fact that pilgrims traverse the natural world, and so prefer to walk about once the weather has brightened up. In reality, Chaucer plays the same trick he has been playing for the past 11 lines, confusing expected hypotactic relationships by placing them with paratactic ones. We learn a few lines later that English Pilgrims wend especially to Canterbury, “the hooly blisful martir for to seke,/ That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke” (1.17-18). Ultimately, this detail should be the when clause: when pilgrims have recovered from illnesses that the martyr of Canterbury helped to cure, then they long to go on pilgrimages. This rather dull rendition captures a much clearer habitual logic behind the social organism of pilgrimage: its music is that of a rather bloodless piety, easily digested and soon forgotten. But Chaucer, instead, puts the detail at the end of another series of paratactic clauses that seem only to reiterate and elaborate upon the line that spawned them:

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,  
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
And specially from every shires ende  
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende. (1.12-16)

Though these details about the longing folk from line 12 are again placed in a simple, paratactical correspondence with one another, the details that each elaborate seem again to stutter: the palmers seeking “straunge strondes” and the “ferne halwes” of “sondry londes” accords well with the vision of springtime recounted above, but seems to conflict somewhat with the relatively local, national pilgrimage site of Canterbury toward which

so many of them tend. The “straunge strondes” thematizes a sort of wanderlust appropriate to the strange description of springtime offered initially: what summons the pilgrims from their mundane, habit driven lives is the inherent strangeness of objects in the world; that strangeness is most accessible once we have escaped our familiar surroundings, which are encrusted with our preconceptions of them.

Pilgrimage thus describes the urge for a deeper perceptual experience within the material world. In most of the religious literature of the time, this model of pilgrimage was censured as inspiring a transgressive *curiositas*;<sup>13</sup> the physical journey of pilgrimage was supposed to be a metaphor for one’s journey toward deeper religious understanding in life—it subordinated all of the experiences one had on the road to their function as guideposts to a singular site of religious significance. In its metaphorical aspect, pilgrimage articulates an essentially ascetic form of spirituality: it reduces the being of the objects one encounters on the road, transforming them from superabundant things into singular signs; in its most intense, fatalistic aspect, events occurring on the road could be “read” in spiritual terms, as they are in a text like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In that later allegorical work, curiosity was, in a sense, the only form of transgression; Christian’s journey is only diverted when he himself forgets to read the world around him in terms of its allegory. When he treats the obstacles he encounters as physical beings within the imagined space of the world, they prove insurmountable; but when he reads them as limited signs pointing to a renovated, transcendent awareness—when the pilgrimage site itself, is only a sign gesturing toward a spiritual awareness that fully surpasses the material world—he tends to progress rather painlessly.<sup>14</sup> Christian’s

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<sup>13</sup> See Dyas 151; Zacher 4.

<sup>14</sup> On this use of allegory in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, see Hill 160.

pilgrimage most fully articulates a model of pilgrimage that had been operative hundreds of years before Bunyan wrote his text, from almost the inception of the social practice of pilgrimage: namely, that the spatial journey of the pilgrim is, in itself, meaningless; the objects encountered along the way are purposeful, only insofar as they can be subsumed within a larger interpretive context that transcends awareness of the material world.

In this institution of pilgrimage, Chaucer had thus found a succinct way of framing the problem that Dante's entire physical-metaphysical apparatus labored to pose: why must signs exist if their only purpose, their only being, is to point toward something they are not? Pilgrimage offers Chaucer a way to explore the inherent absorptiveness of material objects in the space and time he has created, as the eros of Beatrice had led Dante to a renewing fetishism of the entire cosmos. In other words, Chaucer's text presents a renewed vision of curiosity: it treats every object and idea that populates his world as a relic. The relic, in essence, summarizes the problems of pilgrimage: it offers transcendent understanding only insofar as it prompts reflection on and imitation of the life of the saint to whom it belonged. Saints are considered holy largely in proportion to their transcendence of the material world; the worship of relics is thus paradoxical, if not outright contradictory, since they became holy by surpassing their material bodies and possessions, which objects pilgrims worship by fetishizing. The relic embodies the internal struggle of interpretation that resides in every object: we venerate it for instantiating a religious point of view, yet its very appearance signals the existence of supplemental dimensions of its being that have nothing to do with that point of view. We must suppress the strangeness of a relic to transform it into a sign, yet its apparent materiality is what makes it so valuable as a religious artifact. Chaucer's ultimate goal in



the *Tales* is to make the maligned materiality of the object itself sacred, or rather to make the relic not sacred at all, but strange. Whatever the Pardoner might say to the contrary, the materiality of relics, of the pilgrimage site, or any of the objects encountered along the way do not render them meaningless. We are not simply duped when we locate meaning within these objects, dressing up, as Harry Bailly will suggest, turds. Rather, we participate in the miraculous generation of their strangeness, they in ours; we organize a scale of temporal existence that manifests the transcendent novelty of the presence through which we persist. The spiritual dimension of the relic does not lie in its particular, historical relationship to a saint, but rather in the fascination that it prompts, the experience of time that it provokes within us as we try to absorb its full, incarnational radiance. Like the eros of Beatrice, this radiance is not confined to any single relic, nor is its alternate experience of time: it is inherent within everything.

Chaucer's palmers—incited by the renewal of a strange spring—seek out these unfamiliar sites so that they can bask in just such a radiance. The nebulous quality of Chaucer's "straunge strondes" and "ferne halwes" allows him to distill strangeness into a narrative theme where his earlier, disjointed grammatical relationships had only been able to imply it. However, as I have noted, strangeness itself should never be formulated in the abstract, or at least, it should only be so formulated with a consciousness of the violence one does to the concept. Strangeness, in reality, should not have a name in itself, since its entire rationale is based in the particular; its conceptualization must not frustrate the very absorptive attention to an object's being that it should prompt. It is this allegorization of grace that Boccaccio found so problematic in Dante. In Chaucer's *Prologue*, announcing strangeness as a theme tends to efface the particularity of objects

when it should prompt a more studied consideration of their particular attributes; we run the danger of rendering all objects contradictory signs of their own strangeness, which again reduces them. Just so, Chaucer stutteringly reframes his strange conception of pilgrimage into something wholly local, explicable and particular. But in explaining the impulse to pilgrimage that his hypotactic structure has promised from the very beginning, he deliberately suggests an explanation that does not exhaust all possible reasons for embarking on a pilgrimage; notably, it does not seem to explain the rationale prompting any of Chaucer's own pilgrims to embark on their own journey toward Canterbury. Rather, it presents a particularly intimate relation between pilgrim and shrine that the text seems to explicitly sequester from universal significance. The pilgrims prayed to their patron saint for simple bodily sustenance—for the continuance of their embodied lives rather than the escape from them which we would expect from a metaphorical pilgrimage. The saint "hath holpen" them, aids them not in the showy terms of a miracle, but in the mundanely intimate terms we might expect from a kind neighbor. Chaucer refuses to even say that the holy blissful martyr cures them, that his miraculous intercession had a direct historical effect visible to all; rather, he suggests that the faith they placed in him—the meaning with which they invested his image—sustained them in whatever fashion. Chaucer does not exclude the miraculous, but he certainly does not insist on it.

The almost domestic feel of the interaction between pilgrim and saint makes the pilgrimage irreducibly personal; the explanation hardly suffices for all pilgrims, and those who do journey for this reason seem to do so, not so much to venerate the saint's awesome, cosmic powers, but rather to express gratitude for a particular event which

made that saint personally meaningful to them. The local pilgrimage shrine dedicated to that saint offers the pilgrim a physical locale at which she can consecrate this singular meaning she has generated; it allows that meaning to become visible, not as a total expression of the saint's power or an all-encompassing explanation of why pilgrims journey to his shrine, but as a singular, particular aspect of that saint's meaning.

Pilgrimage, in this sense, also becomes an overarching metaphor for the social construction of the meaning of an object or agent, but Chaucer forces us to attend to the particular events that comprise that totalizing concept. The saint's meaning is the totality of its effects upon the world; like any object, his relationships define his contours—more so, in the saint's case, since he has no physical body but only fragmentary relics—but those relationships cannot be abstracted without losing the particularity that defines them. The “straunge strondes” sought by the palmer will be empty without the personal dimension of the Canterbury pilgrim; their strangeness consists not simply in their defiance of expected, habitual patterns of relations, but in their engaging in many habitual patterns of relation, none of which exhaust the totality of their being.

Within the first eighteen lines of his poem, Chaucer has deftly announced a local and particular strangeness as a preeminent theme in his text; it is the theme that undergirds all poetic creation, since it describes the miraculous qualities of space and time. The lines following this opening seem, by contrast, positively utilitarian:

Bifil that in that seson on a day,  
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay  
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage  
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,

At nyght was come into that hostelrye  
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye  
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle  
In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,  
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde. (1.19-27)

Chaucer's "bifil" again almost seems to re-begin the *Canterbury Tales*, running parallel to his initial when; but this beginning presents a scene that is much more coherently imagined. The same play of paratactic and hypotactic elements that made the earlier images stutter atop one another here function precisely as they should, almost as though a virtuoso Chaucer has shifted into a mundane narrative mode to set his earlier lines in relief. Like the earlier "whan," "bifil" introduces a temporal hypotactic clause, though Chaucer here starts with the "then," the result of an action to be described. His paratactic "in" clauses situate us within an easily defined time and space, reconfiguring the complex "seson" described earlier into something much more explicitly functional. Chaucer's proxy appears as the "I" within the text, offering an explanation for the scene being described through his well-defined motives. After these wholly explicable, paratactic explanatory clauses, Chaucer simply fulfills the promise of his initial "bifil" in describing the pilgrim group that has coalesced in the Tabard "by aventure." Chaucer allows a more simple narrative mimesis to shape the images within the scene he defines now; the objects and agents within the narrative contract easily into the habitual organism of the Tabard Inn, which structure was built for such occurrences. After pulling his reader between various scales of temporal organization and suggesting transversal associations between seemingly irrelevant objects within his world, Chaucer settles more comfortably

into the scene imagined by his frame. However, the earlier material is enough to send a shiver of strangeness even into this casually imagined scene; the “by aventure,” in particular, suggests the same sort of tangential relations that have typified the introduction up to this point. The pilgrims are chance companions, each with a particular angle of vision they open onto Chaucer’s world. Only the happenstance of occupying the same relative space and time knits these characters into an organism; they do not all proceed from a single, monolithic, institutionalized background that might homogenize the way they perceive their shared road.

Within such a group, transversal, conflicting, overlapping perceptions are inevitable; the space they occupy will thrum with its own strangeness, now, by virtue of how thoroughly we invest within the consistent scene he imagines. Chaucer shifts modes here to avoid a sort of poststructural bind: were he to persist in fostering the sense of strangeness about all his narrative objects, they would, paradoxically, not cohere very well into objects. Chaucer’s genius is to make the grammar of the imagination break us out of the habitual patterns of thought which that grammar itself fosters. His earlier conceptualization of pilgrimage is sufficient to fracture the scene he imagines by virtue of making it more comprehensible; if pilgrimage describes a journey toward any meaning—if it is a matter of a fetishizing curiosity—Chaucer will have embedded many worlds into the single, cohesive space he opens here. Insofar as a fictional character perceives the world she inhabits, she will open up a particular angle of vision upon it that overlaps, without simply duplicating or negating, the angles of vision opened by all her fellow characters and objects; this is simply inherent in the structure of a narrative that creates space by defining different perceptual positions within itself. But in his pilgrimage motif,

Chaucer manages to codify and calcify those angles of vision to put them into sharper relief with one another; the pilgrimage site is a foil for the total schema of the journeying pilgrim that forces her to clarify and systematize, to some extent, the basic tenets by which she perceives and interprets the world around her. By organizing his frame around pilgrimage, Chaucer essentially transforms his characters into grotesques perceiving aspects of the people, objects and institutions around them while ignoring others. In the aggregate of their particular logics, they intimate the way in which their world exceeds them; they even partially give the lie to one another's limited identities by transplanting one another's modes of meaning into different registers, the Knight's chivalry into the Miller's fabliau. It is to the text's grotesque portraiture we must now turn to develop a more nuanced understanding of how Chaucer composes these limited, but well defined angles of vision upon his world.

### *Arrested Time*

Given the lengths to which Chaucer's opening has gone in order to imagine a convincing time and space, his next move in the narrative seems inexplicable: he arrests the very time and space he has composed. The frame narrative essentially derails into the *descriptions* of the portraits, which do not take place in the cohesive time and space imagined by the frame.<sup>15</sup> Chaucer makes this explicit, while simultaneously drawing attention to the spatiotemporal thematics that preceded the break:

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,

Er that I ferther in this tale pace

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun

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<sup>15</sup> On Chaucer's use of the literary and rhetorical technique of the *descriptio*, see Mann 176-86.

To telle yow al the condicioun  
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,  
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,  
And eek in what array that they were inne. (1.35-41)

We should pause for a moment to consider the road Chaucer has not taken, the compositional road that he in fact leads us to expect, only to swerve from it at the last moment. The Tabard Inn would have provided a sensible and simple vehicle for introducing the pilgrims within the narrative time and space that Chaucer has already composed; in fact, though he explicitly tells us that he is breaking from that narrative, many readers still retain some sense of Chaucer the observer, digesting barroom conversations into his portraiture (though he includes many details that he couldn't possibly have gleaned from such encounters in his portraits). The device of the Inn seems almost explicitly designed to allow Chaucer to adhere to the unities of time and place while still producing a portrait much like those he actually writes.

But Chaucer does not take this opportunity he has supplied himself; he instead steps out of that narrative space, carving out a unique role for himself in doing so. Chaucer's casual commonplace, "whil I have tyme and space," actually places him in the position of the creator, a position he has assumed since his originating "whan;" as he often does, Chaucer uses an almost trite platitude—what my advisor once lovingly termed a "throw-away phrase"—to articulate some of the most important ideas running through his text. This recurring strategy runs parallel to his initial description: it takes a phrase that something like Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" would deplore, a phrase simply that acts as unthinking mental gum gluing one canned phrase to another,

and locates the deeper significance of the narrative within it. In a sense, such phrases are simply compositional tools—they are usually situated within the tectonic shifts of the narrative as it transitions from one important section to another; they are almost automatically digested into the narrative’s machinery, easing the friction between one element of that machinery and another. But Chaucer offers this compositional glue deeper dimensions if we slow down to look at it; these most basic tools—which generally have little or no imaginative potential in themselves, serving rather to segue between other acts of imagination—have their own strangeness that mimics the strangeness of the objects represented in the text. Of course, this is true of any word whatsoever in a broad sense, but Chaucer takes special pains to make these canned phrases, whose component words seem to have very set relationships with one another, exceed themselves and the patterns that have joined them together.

In this particular instance, his throw-away phrase identifies the spatio-temporal generation of his narrative with the surface level of its grammar; “time” and “space” here are understood first as the time and space of Chaucer’s composition, the physical space on the pages in front of him and the time it would require to read or write a consistent line of text. This sense is reinforced when Chaucer makes “pacing” a textual image: his literal pacing imagined in the pilgrimage frame is accompanied by an authorial pacing across the page. While his first introduction locates us immediately within the creation that the *Canterbury Tales* imagines, Chaucer here redacts its narrativity to enforce a brief recognition of the conditions which undergird that creation’s production. In a sense, he briefly enforces another frame that enframes the pilgrimage itself: the image of Chaucer with blank sheets of parchment spread out before him. This textual sense overlaps with



the image of Chaucer as a creator figure who literally has the imagined time and space of his fiction under his command at its outset, before it has taken on the habitual patterns of its genre. Even the narrative imagined within the frame—which will unsettle our capacity to imagine the tales spoken within that frame by enforcing a simultaneous, dual imagination of speaking pilgrim and tale told—is itself unsettled by this awareness of our constitution of that frame narrative from words on a page. This same tactic will recur in later mentions of the textuality of the *Tales*, perhaps most famously in Chaucer’s interruption of the Miller’s Prologue wherein he instructs readers directly to “turne over the leef and chese another tale” (1.3177).<sup>16</sup> Such seeming interruptions actually just extend the logic prosecuted by the frame at large: they use single terms to enforce multiple, simultaneously imagined scenes. They implicate each linguistic act within multiple imagined scenes, using each imagined scene to imagine a further one within itself. In doing so, they not only render us aware of the procedures by which they are produced, but they reveal the multiple nature of the words used to compose them. They draw us back to the physical word on the page as it begins to coalesce into the progressive grammatical units that give us meaning. However, unlike the *House of Fame*’s word bodies, they do so by enacting multiple levels of imagination; likewise, as

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<sup>16</sup> Such scenes run parallel to what Donald Howard has called the “unimpersonated artistry” that occurs occasionally and at varying intensity within the *Canterbury Tales*. Howard notes that many lines that are purportedly spoken by a pilgrim actually seem to reflect the ideas and attitudes of Chaucer the author or narrator; the frame seems to deliberately break its fiction, making the words that proceed from a characters mouth unlikely or impossible for them to actually speak. H. Marshall Leicester has justly criticized a too-frequent recourse to this solution, arguing that very few such moments unequivocally break the fiction, but even he admits that there are moments within the tales when the narrative shell of the pilgrimage becomes more translucent, as it were, allowing us to see the shadow of the author manipulating his characters. In reality, this does not break the fiction at all—it simply reinstalls us at a prior shell that the text itself has imagined, the frame of Chaucer sitting before his papers while he has time and space. The *Canterbury Tales* is continually at the work of reminding us of its narrative shells, never allowing us to become comfortably situated in any one of them; these techniques of implausibility recollect the frames that surround the frame proper, not taking us out of the poem’s imagined space but reminding us that the imagined spaces of the tales are multiple and simultaneous.

we imagine the objects populating the narrative world, we remain aware of the perceptual grammar we apply to them and the ways that they exceed that grammar.

Thus, to say that Chaucer has really arrested the movement of his narrative in this moment is already too great a claim; to say that time is ever arrested or calcified is likewise too great a claim, though its floes and eddies do vary in different places and at different depths. Every object, imagined or real, is fraught with the varying frames which render it strange; framing describes a multiplicity of perception and possible perception operative in any imaginable world; it indicates that the most basic temporal grammar by which we compose ourselves and others into coherent entities implicates us in other potential modes of imagination, other lives, other spaces and times. A singular narrative tends to prioritize one such grammar at the expense of others (though no narrative can ever fully consummate the singularity of its grammar); the radical strangeness of the object can of course be intimated in other literary modes, as in Realism's tip-of-the-iceberg aesthetics or Postmodernism's aesthetic of incoherence, but generally such approaches frame that strangeness as something ineffable, something which narrative constitutionally cannot incorporate within itself. In this sense they align with Heidegger's refusal of presence within his tool-ontology: Heidegger essentially refuses the narrativity of the world, making its true ontological core some vastly incomprehensible mesh of relations. Once we have picked at a single strand of that mesh, we have lost "sight" of the whole; insofar as we can compose the narrative of any given set of relations between objects or within a single object, we have restricted the being of each object we have defined. The philosopher, like the mystic, can only operate by dint of silence, by a refusal of narrativity. Most literary modes, when they self-

consciously reflect on the ontology of the objects they compose, imply their strangeness by one of these two extremes: by making them exceptionally concrete, thereby gesturing toward the limitations of the way we have conceptualized their concreteness, or by rendering them almost incoherent, frustrating our capacity to imagine them in the first place. Both operate on an apophatic methodology that leaves the supplemental dimensions of the object not just unsaid, but unsayable.

Frames, by contrast, operate on a logic of the hyper-effable; certainly, they leave much of the strangeness of their objects unsaid, but they do not thereby suggest that they are unsayable. On the contrary, everything about them is radically effable; they are shot through with their own narrativity, and each angle of vision opened up through their narration is affirmed, though none ever exhausts their being. Frames assume the virtue of pragmatic perception while also demonstrating that simple perceptibility itself implicates the perceived object in a larger network of relations that exceeds the individual perception. The ascetic logic of ineffability, on the other hand, results almost in a covert form of nihilism, where the radical being of objects marginalizes any single relationship between them. But if we deny that the narrativity of objects is central to their being, we are left with nothing, or rather with an unbridgeable epistemological gulf between the ignorance of pragmatic perception and the inaccessible inner life of everything around us. But objects are what they are by virtue of their partial exposure to other objects; they themselves admit as much by contracting into habitual organisms that defy the radical strangeness of their most basic physical and temporal building blocks. Frames assume the narrativity of their objects—their knowability—but they make that very narrativity the means by which objects exceed the narrow confines set for them by any given

narrative pattern of relation. Any enframed object is implicated in a mesh of imagined scenes each governed by its own sustained temporality; the word becomes the object *par excellence*, composed into various literal and imaginative grammars that do not exhaust the word's simple materiality at any level of its organization: beneath it, the syllable, phoneme and lesser linguistic particles; above it, the sentence, paragraph, work and so on. The word is not just imagined as a literal object by itself, but it is imagined as multiple literal objects implicated in multiple scenes; the word's phonemic matters cohere by virtue of these scenes' intelligibility, but that intelligibility is superceded by the other equally intelligible scenes which coexist simultaneously with it. Each particle of language thrums with its own strangeness, but that strangeness does not manifest itself as incoherence—incoherence is the Boccaccian plague that would fully frustrate the limited, habitual organism into which these particles contract, but in rendering them inertly material, it would frustrate another aspect of their being, precisely their significance, their grammatical narrativity. The frame leaves those phonemic patterns of relation intact, but it demonstrates that the grammar binding linguistic particles together can itself be used to imagine multiple, simultaneous scenes. Each such particle discloses its radical being by means of this simultaneous imagination.

Chaucer breaks from the temporality established by his initial frame to expose the grammar of its objects; he renders the strange objects populating his brief world yet stranger by enframing them with the imagined scene in which they are themselves imagined.<sup>17</sup> The very linguistic matters by which they are composed betray a multiplicity

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<sup>17</sup> Leicester notes that this surface consciousness of the poet behind the fiction persists throughout every moment of the tales by the simple fact that the pilgrims' allegedly impromptu tales are told in a premeditated verse ("Art of Impersonation," 213). But while Leicester sees this again as an instance of unimpersonated artistry in the *Tales*, I would argue that it participates in the larger framing action of the poem: Chaucer does not somehow escape narrativity with such contradictions, but rather makes the

of meaning that exceeds their use in imagining even the complex patterns of relation that open the poem. Chaucer thus introduces language and grammar as itself a master trope for poetic imagination and the procedure of temporal recombination effected in any object. He begins to establish this outermost frame in his succinct association of the text's imagined world with his authorial action. Time and space shift from the natural world to the material page itself, across which Chaucer paces. Following this metaphor, Chaucer fully announces his departure from the temporality of the opening by articulating an alternate "resoun" than that which governs the opening: the reason of the portraits, which self consciously construct the characters whose relations will define the temporality of the frame. As Chaucer puts it, this alternate resoun is "To telle yow al the condicioun/ of ech of hem, so as it semed me,/ And which they weren, and of what degree" (1.38-40). From his deific position as master of time and space, Chaucer makes a promise only God himself could hope to fulfill: he promises to disclose the full valence of each pilgrim, everything about each of them. Almost as soon as he has offered this promise, he tempers it by acknowledging his own subjectivity—only their seeming to Chaucer himself will be disclosed by the portraits; yet he cautiously reasserts it with the bland ontology implied by "which they weren." Their "degree" places them within some limiting, comparative rubric, but it fails to inform the reader what that rubric is, whether their degree is determined by social standing, religious merit, or some other metric. The mention of their degree anticipates Chaucer's vestigial ordering based on social class—a

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imagined scene a framed palimpsest wherein we see the ghosts of other imagined scenes hovering through whatever scene we are currently imagining. Were we to simply turn our attention to that frame, the spatiotemporal narrative of Chaucer laboring at his desk composing lines of verse, the other imagined scenes would themselves become the ghosts; Chaucer wants the language through which we activate some imaginative event to only be a partial perception of the total activity of that language. In the Canterbury frame, we retain a vestigial awareness of the scenes we must push into the background in order to bring one particular scene into the foreground; in this sense, the poem is constantly enacting the partiality of perception.

remnant from estates literature—whereby he begins the portraits with the Knight, but that ordering is quickly muddled into a more or less random pattern; the order of the portraits becomes a Rorschach test wherein we see what we want to see. Chaucer announces the logic behind his portraiture with this impossible promise, whose impossibility is, as it were, underscored by his admission of his own subjectivity. He promises to achieve what his opening could only intimate: to describe the total strangeness embodied within the characters that will populate his narrative.

Yet in the same word he uses to announce that promise—“condicioun”—he again undermines it; a “condicioun” is also a restriction in the logical sense, a precondition or qualification upon some rule. A “condicioun,” in Middle English as in Modern, is the “if” clause anticipating a subsequent “then” clause; it describes a restrictive prerequisite to the truth of its counterpart which will, if its condition is not met, rob the “then” of its force. Chaucer has invoked this logical sense by announcing the new, rational order of his narrative. It is within this sense of condition that Chaucer first articulates the grotesque logic that will govern the *Canterbury Tales*: the condition—the state of being—of each pilgrim is tantamount to the conditional perception they will open upon his world. The pilgrims are restrictions placed upon Chaucer’s world that render it perceptible; each provides a limited “if” clause that organizes all of that world’s diverse matters into a cohesive and limited “then.” Such conditions are inherently grotesque: they take a collage of objects linguistic, physical or otherwise and set them in a fixed pattern of relation wherein each defines the others; they begin to narrativize experience by defining the basis for an ontology that will restrict the radical being of those objects. No such condition is, in and of itself, final within Chaucer’s world—not only are they

enframed by other ways of imagining them, but even within the single imagined space of the frame, they are divulged simultaneously with other, complementary or antithetical conditions. Ultimately—even beyond the grammatical logic outlined above—Chaucer might diverge from the temporality of his frame solely to ensure the simultaneous application of those perspectives to his narrative world; were they to unfold within a consistent space and time, we would be perceiving something within that space and time without the full benefit of those overlapping perspectives; the strangeness of his world would seem to be developed and unfolded over time rather than present at every moment of that time, preexisting time and everything that persists within it. No single condition ever needs to be countered or challenged within his narrative: it is always already implicated within a framework that absorbs it into something larger than its limited truth. The condition announced by each pilgrim must be limited, lest Chaucer's world fall into the veiled nihilism of ineffability; yet the limitation that outlines the contours of its narrative can never seem final. Rather, it must direct us toward the general perceptibility of what it discloses without simply abstracting away the particularity of the acts of perception that constitute it.

For Chaucer, such conditional points of view arise from a process of temporal selection and recombination: a consciousness is reciprocally shaped by the events it defines; a discernible personality subsequently prioritizes those defined events in relation to one another, integrating them into the historical pattern of a self. These procedures are not necessarily arbitrary—in fact, they generally conduct a highly complex pattern of relations that, should we try to trace it, recedes into the dim mist of our earliest histories; they are, however, incomplete, overlapped by other patterns that have shaped other

personalities from similar materials. The matters from which we compose ourselves—the events we define and our prioritization of them—are limitations of duration and strangeness that could be reframed indefinitely; any given historicization of that duration is carried forward by its own inertia, which bubbles up into a personality that instantiates it.<sup>18</sup> It is precisely this process of recombination that Chaucer shows us in his portraiture; his promise to disclose “al the concicioun” of the pilgrims recollects the attempt of the *House of Fame* to show a speaker as she distends through time—Chaucer knows too well that the total vision of any object or agent is the temporal vision of them persisting in an indivisible duration. But in the redefined project of the *Canterbury Tales*, “al the condicioun” becomes precisely the limited angle of vision that each character reductively imposes on the perceptible world, or the collage of events that have structured a pilgrim’s grotesque viewpoint.

Thus, even as Chaucer suspends the time and space of his frame, he generates a dizzying succession of other times and spaces in the narrative details elaborated by the portraits; these rapid-fire narratives are the paradigmatic events that have calcified into the personalities of the pilgrims. The portraits do not simply construct their characters by progressively unfolding details of their material appearance—such a mechanism would be able to operate within the frame narrative which Chaucer has disrupted. Rather, they narrate brief details of their characters’ past lives, constructing furtive narratives that often only persist for a line or two before breaking onto a new narrative detail. Chaucer

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<sup>18</sup> This inertia follows an Augustinian logic of habit; for Augustine, habit was the mechanism through which the will became enslaved to sin. Habit has both a historical and personal face: historically, the sin of Adam ensured that we could never singlemindedly desire God again—it introduced another motivating rationale to human behavior, precisely our will to self-constitution; personally, the actions that we engage in without any real purpose acquire their own persuasive force. The story of the pear tree in the *Confessions* is Augustine’s clearest articulation of this personal manifestation of habit, though he more commonly expresses it in his ungovernable sexual impulses.



summarizes the details of these brief narrations into pithy *notationes* that abstractly define his characters' moral qualities; they articulate—often through the ironic optimism that discloses Chaucer's own character to us—the settled perspective that typifies the pilgrim, defining the grimace she casts onto the world around her. That grimace, for Chaucer, arises from the character's own limited perception of her past; the definition and prioritization of certain events from the unbroken duration of that past—events populated by strange objects and agents that exceed the pilgrim's narrow understanding of them—reinforces itself as it is applied to subsequent events. It achieves its own inertia that assures its reapplication; when that reapplication becomes automatic, the character has fully contracted into a habituated organism, a grotesque whose patterns of relation to and conceptualization of the world are foregone conclusions.

As grotesques, the Canterbury pilgrims are inversions of the readers that Chaucer wants us to become; their bodies encapsulate a predefined personal history, a past that has been calcified into paradigmatic moments of time, whose objects and agents have been given strictly defined valences they cannot transgress. None of his pilgrims perceive the world in which they sojourn, the strange world of the opening that pulses with supplemental dimensions of being, transversal associations between objects and the multiple frames that encompass them. But in another sense, they are the only way that we can read: the strangeness of his world is an aggregation of limited angles of vision, not a refusal of them; Chaucer asks us not so much to transcend the petty preoccupations of his pilgrims that bends and distorts the world around them into a more or less coherent vision as to fully inhabit all of them simultaneously. Chaucer's framing strategy is a more specifically elaborated form of Dante's fractured fetishism, which sought to

recuperate the temporal experience of his desire for Beatrice in everything around him; through his reading of and reaction to Boccaccio, Chaucer extends this logic to suggest that objects should be comprehended not just as targets of an allegorical, universalizing desire, but as targets of multiple simultaneous desires that interpret it in radically different ways. To effect this vision, we must become complicit with each interpretive pattern presented to us—we must ourselves become grotesque. We must fully enter into each character's transgressive, limited mode of perception; as Dante did, we must intensify transgression until the fetishized object of our affections presents a renovated vision of time. But in Chaucer's framed world, we must simultaneously fragment such transgressions as we intensify and enact them within the imagined space; like Boccaccio, we must become compassionately complicit in their partial, puerile, specific concerns. In simultaneously impersonating these perspectives, we transcend their inherent limitations without undermining their particularity; our transcendence of them, in fact, will be in proportion to our intensification of them, since they will imbue the passing matters of the text with a significance that increasingly approximates its radical strangeness. The conventional modes of perception that Husserl bracketed, that Heidegger decried and that Bergson atomized will become the very mechanism of the temporal vision they all, in various ways, struggled toward. As we begin to perceive the strangeness of Chaucer's narrative world, we will begin to experience the durational time that thrusts us toward presence; we will do so, however, not by dint of the disintegration of the object, but by virtue of its superabundant integrity; duration itself will seem insufficient to disclosing its superfluity.

*The Eventful Grimace*

As Chaucer recounts the carefully selected narrative details of the portraits, he thus asks us to become complicit with their temporal recombination even as we remain aware of the conditions under which those recombinations are effected. But Chaucer's characters are not constituted for us in the way that they have presumably constituted themselves: the process of temporal recombination that required a fictive lifetime to effect is represented, to us, in a few spare lines of Chaucer's textual time and space. He does this, first, because those events do not require a full duration as the pilgrims have constituted them; as we can see more fully in a tale like *Sir Thopas*, any genre, once it has perfected its tendencies, paradoxically renders the details of its narration unnecessary. We can preunderstand the perfectly generic text, anticipating the destiny of any character or object who comes onto the scene. The pilgrims themselves have already encapsulated the significance of their past lives into events, codifying them into their grotesque genre. But beyond this pragmatic rationale, Chaucer requires readers to enter and exit fleeting temporalities with such dizzying rapidity that he almost frustrates our ability to actually imagine any one of them; we have no time to settle into the casual patterns of relation that structure the narrative, to populate its world with objects defining one another's contours. Rather, the rapidity of these narrations and their removal from a consistent space and time again renders us aware of the conditions by which the characters they inform are produced; it approaches duration from a second direction, by demonstrating the integrity of the surface level of the text that occurs simultaneously with our imagination of the characters defined there. The imaginative blur of the portraits delivers us, again, to the surface of the text where the grammar of the pilgrim's being is defined.

This rapid narration, in one sense, intensifies the scheme of the frame at large—it situates us within a narrative world for a certain period, then draws us back to a different world that coexisted with what we have imagined, an alternate world constituted by precisely the same stream of words; but the portraits have no frame outside them except the textual space and time described above. They are proximal to this physical and grammatical dimension of the text itself; only the narrative of words cohering into progressive units of meaning enframes them when we are shunted out of one narrative and into another.

Perceiving the strangeness of Chaucer's world entails seeing its radical being at each enframed level of its organization; we must sustain our grammatical awareness of the words of the text in concert with the scenes they imagine, just as we must simultaneously imagine a pilgrim's speech and the tale it imagines. Chaucer's tactic of rapid narration intensifies our imagination of his text by partially frustrating it: he makes us imagine the text as text alongside the text as pilgrims. At this surface level of the text, the pilgrims have restored to them a measure of the strangeness which Chaucer has denied them, and that, within the fiction, they have denied themselves. They exceed the narrow definitions which they have set themselves; they exceed the condition they put upon the world even as that condition is represented to us.

Three examples will suffice to demonstrate the different ways in which these patterns manifest themselves within the text: the Knight, the Prioress and the Miller. In the Knight's case, the catalogue of wars he has participated in provides a dizzying series of narrative details that define his character:

A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,  
That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.  
Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,  
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,  
As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,  
And evere honoured for his worthynesse;  
At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.  
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne  
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;  
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,  
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree. (1.43-55)

The Knight's portrait begins with Chaucer's total evaluation of him: the sum of his life experience is embodied in the term "worthy" and its complex of related ideas. In its broad sense, the term introduces the pattern of grotesqueness that governs all the portraits; it simply describes a generic, value-driven behavior: any action is motivated by a desire to be perceived as worthy, as meritorious. Worthiness, however, looks different within different genres and registers: the Miller's parodic value-system opposes and upsets that of the Knight, though both equally frame their practitioners as grotesque. It is in this sense that Terry Jones's reading of the Knight as mercenary is permissible, if not particularly plausible—the economic sense of worth derives from its protean character and its connection to a merit-driven will. In the next line, however, the specifically political dimensions of the term overtake the broad sense. The Knight's model of worthiness is that of the official, medieval political culture.<sup>19</sup> This elaboration of the term

<sup>19</sup> For general background on the model of worthiness Chaucer's deploys here, see Brewer 65-68.

is the portrait's first micro-narrative: Chaucer elaborates on the Knight's specific vision of the world by locating us back in his most remote youth. It imagines a young man riding on a horse, playing at knighthood—an image whose inertia is carried into the portrait of his son, the Squire; the abstract values that define the knight's worthiness—"chivalrie,/ Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie"—are presented as the juvenile ideologies of a child, struggling to compose an identity. This brief narrative arrests the knight into his grotesque personality; it already begins to suppress the details of his life that do not conform to the perceptual pattern authorized by those ideals. The Knight, like the rest of Chaucer's pilgrims, is incapable of suffering any great existential crisis because his history literally begins at the time when the chivalric value system produces him; he becomes integrated as a character at this primal event that effaces any detail of his youth that does not pertain to the courtly ethic. Chaucer's presentation of the Knight presents the caricature that the Knight has made of himself—the Knight perceives the world and everything within it in terms of the secular values of the official culture.

Such values act both prospectively and retrospectively, and always at the same time: the young Knight's playing at chivalry determines his participation in future events; it makes him perceive the time he occupies from a proposed point in the future in which he would be looking back on that time, composing it into events based on its conformity to his chivalric value system. This is, in a very real sense, the only way to perceive time—our reaction to any given event is determined by our extrapolation of the self who will retrospectively compose that event into a personal history. The event itself cannot be defined unless we remove ourselves from its duration and project a future self who, having behaved according to a consistent pattern of action and perception, understands

what that span of time and the objects moving within it meant. Chaucer's tableau of the worthy knight and the callow, ideologically driven youth imagines this temporal compression: it makes the physical character of the Knight a projection of his past self that reciprocally imposes a chivalric understanding of his life's duration. As all the pilgrims will, the Knight becomes an apparatus for defining a vision of history; his self projection fixes a particular perceptual identity on everything he encounters, opening a highly conditioned angle of vision upon it. Such histories define the identity of the objects that populate them without exhausting the radical being of those objects. In the portrait, this procedure of historical production the Knight embodies is almost exclusively rendered in terms of international politics: the official culture that he impersonates quite literally carves up the world, setting boundaries upon it, effecting a vision of its rule by destroying or dominating anything that does not reflect that vision. A nation is a clear instance of the types of organism I have described above: it circumscribes a space wherein all objects and agents collectively engage in a process of mutual definition; each object and person within the nation is subject, in however loose a way, to its total vision of the world, the ideologies through which it constitutes itself; in the phenomenological sense, they are united by a tendency to perceive one another in limited, habituated ways. As they carve up space, they also carve up time, defining the almost mythical historical events that will project a future from which the present can be retrospectively understood.

The Knight's participation in the international wars described in the portrait—which his youthful complicity with the chivalric code has made a foregone conclusion—imagines this scene of international politics on a personal scale; it encapsulates the procedure by which a nation contracts into an organism by portraying a man who has

made himself fully complicit with its vision, who has become grotesquely unable to perceive the world in any other way. Incidentally, it is this feature of his character that makes him so suited to reconciling Harry Bailly with the Pardoner—at the point when the pilgrim group is closest to fracturing, the Knight reinscribes the relation between its members that makes them a unified organism. In his portrait, the same, strange world that has been represented in the opening—the world populated by flowers, rain and singing birds who exceed their relations to one another—is reimagined as a series of stark proper names; history, likewise, is typified by the events at which those names were constituted or reimposed. Those events hold a singular significance for the Knight; they are a series of temporal contractions that define the organism of the Knight's character, which in turn is subsumed by the organism of the nation and its chivalric ideal. The Knight carves the indestructible duration of his life into these events. Yet though we see this process of selection and become complicit with it, insofar as we imagine his character, the rapidity with which we imagine these various wars rob them of the singular significance the Knight attaches to them. The very means by which these events are constituted and contracted into a history makes the vision they impose seem almost trite; the ceremonies honoring the Knight's worthiness collapse into one another; the name of one nation blurs into the next, Pruce into Ruce. Each name draws us into an entire narrative world, as the winning of "Alisaundre" imagines an epic struggle for control of Alexandria; it invokes an entire genre along with its patterns of relating characters to the people and objects around them. The entirety of those narratives are, however, exhausted by their contribution to the Knight's honor and worthiness; the narratives, as the Knight has recomposed them, do not even need to be told, since all their details would reflect



that single, grotesque truth. We are left, instead, with an epic catalogue of narrative details that resurrects Chaucer's strategic use of boredom from the *House of Fame*—even as they draw us sequentially into their narratives, the duration of their worlds is exhausted by a chivalric mode of perception. The rapid narration locates us back at the surface of the text even as it opens imagined worlds; the place names that define the Knight's identity shift fluidly into one another as the single pattern that undergirds all these events, compressing them into the totalized event of the Knight's life. The pattern that effaces the particularity of these events—the strangeness of the objects that populate them that could push a perceiver toward a vision of their full duration—is precisely what inflates the Knight's skin. Like an allegorical character, he impersonates an ideal; but unlike an allegorical character, he has had to effect that ideal through history, by struggling to tame the continuity of time and the multiplicity of the object.

Of course, though the narrative details here are exhausted by the Knight's conditional perception of the world, that does not mean that his character is exhausted along with them—on the contrary, their tiresome unfolding is the means by which he appears in the world. The narrative details of the Knight's portrait require very little elaboration; they draw upon generic competencies that allow us to almost preunderstand them. Even as the unfolding of those details refers us back to the surface of the text, they starkly define the character of the Knight, offering a clear pattern for how he will relate to Chaucer's world. The preunderstanding elicited by these details will hereafter form a particular angle of vision onto Chaucer's world and the stories told within it, which angle will seem almost automatic; by and large, we will know what the Knight thinks about any passing textual matter without the bother of asking him. The very fact that the Knight is

not queried for his perspective, though we know that perspective is constantly instituted on every passing matter, signals a core feature of the design of the *Canterbury Tales*: the intentional patterns of perception that shape the objects of his world are allowed to recede into the background after they have been raised within the text; we retain a vague sense of the fact that each passing matter is being digested into interpretive paradigms that our minds cannot fully constitute in their simultaneity. We must inhabit a single perspective while remaining eerily aware of the eyes that lurk behind us. We can instantaneously shift to any other such perspective because they are so precisely defined. Especially for a person living in Chaucer's time, the template of the Knight's chivalric ideals can be superimposed onto any event within the narrative; it can interpret those events, laud or censure elements within them. Its defined angle of vision will, in fact, be partially responsible for contracting such events into events from an unbroken duration. He will provide a condition upon the world, acting as an "if" that necessarily entails a "then." But as we shift perspectives, we invariably force other perspectives into the background; the intuition of that radically intentional background demonstrates the partiality of any act of perception we effect within the text. This tableau of shifting foregrounds and the background from which they bubble to the surface is how Chaucer discloses the vibrating temporal strangeness of his narrative world.

Certainly, even the Knight's portrait escapes Chaucer's limited characterization of him and his limited characterization of himself—when Chaucer says that he is, "of his port as meeke as is a mayde" (1.69) he transgresses the standard characterization of a knight by conflating him with his lady; this feminine meekness contrasts starkly with the martial virtues embodied in worthiness, demonstrating an inconsistency at the heart of the

chivalric code that intimates the strangeness its practitioners try to suppress. It is ultimately that strangeness that Chaucer will try, through the aggregation of grotesque perspectives like the Knight's, to recuperate in his world; a tale will be produced by one grotesque perspective, but will simultaneously have all the others applied to it even as it unfolds its limited vision. In doing so, it will restore duration to the narrative world; unlike the narrative details of the portraits, its tale will have to be told, since the textual matters that comprise it will ultimately admit to multiple angles of vision upon them. The objects, agents and events within the enframed narratives will become charged with meaning as they are fractured into these different modes of apprehension; but this fracturing itself will effect the unification of those objects into objects, selves into selves, by making them loci of the different patterns of relation that each grotesque mode organizes. Grotesque modes of understanding do not unite the object into a perceptible whole, but the strangeness that overwhelms and incorporates those modes of understanding does. Perceived in their full strangeness, such objects unfold in a pure temporal duration, defining the constantly new unfolding of a presence that surpasses them.

Chaucer's selection of narrative details in the Knight's portrait seems entirely complicit with the details the Knight would likely use to typify himself; the knight thus presents a rather simple picture of the process of temporal recombination required to effect a grotesque persona. Unlike many of the Canterbury pilgrims, he seems to lack an existential crisis—he inhabits his own courtly paradigm without any self-conscious dithering about its ultimate worth or whether he has adequately followed its precepts. The Knight simply is what he is. In many of the portraits, however, Chaucer picks

narrative details that demonstrate the pretense of the persona the pilgrim attempts to display. Such personae never quite feel comfortable—their practitioners don't seem entirely comfortable in their own skins; their outlook seems a mask composed atop deeper insecurities. The ascending sequences of events that ultimately typify them feel less ideologically secure; they seem petty expressions of a petty ideal, whose integrity they undermine as much as they legitimate. For that reason, their personae become all the more grotesque: as common experience will attest, the most rigidly grotesque, unilateral people are those who are somehow insecure about their philosophical outlook; their unsurety leads them to prosecute that outlook all the more vigorously, as though the performance can legitimate its patterns for understanding their experience. They wrap themselves in a caricature because, ultimately, they know they are not that caricature; their own strangeness and that of the people and objects around them threaten to overwhelm the strict perceptual schema they apply to the world. The events that characterize them are always threatening to unwind as events, and so they must tidy them up.

The Prioress is a good example of this type of grotesque portrait. Despite Chaucer's fawningly complimentary *notatio*, the narrative details he includes partially gives the lie to the urbane, devoted figure she professes to be. Most critics who have explored the Prioress's portrait have centered their discussion on the incompatibility of her portrayal with even the most lax monastic codes of the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup> The narrative details Chaucer selects derive almost exclusively from French Romance, and so sit in an uncomfortable relationship to her relatively exalted ecclesiastical position. Certainly this

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Daichman 140. By contrast, in his article "The Living Witness of Our Redemption," Lee Patterson has argued that the Prioress's emotional orientation actually stems from the type of piety she is supposed to practice (509). I will comment on this seeming contradiction below.

is a fair appraisal, and one that Chaucer wants to evoke; however, his mood here—as it is throughout the *Canterbury Tales*—is not one of censure so much as inclusive indulgence. The point of these inconsistencies is not to inspire distaste for her hypocrisy or critique an effete clergy, but to highlight the grotesque seeming she effects within her own character. Her romantic sentimentalism is not undercut by the deep ideological inconsistencies in her character;<sup>21</sup> on the contrary, that sentimentality is only intensified by her rather superficial religiosity: her religious status consecrates that sentimentality while curtailing any attempt to interpret it further. Sentimentality comes to seem sacred, which is the dream of any grotesque—to render its perspective beyond reflection, to make it a matter of irreproachable faith. The Prioress's simplistic piety shares much in common with her sentimentalism from this perspective: the sentimental object is imbued with a largely unspecified emotional intensity; like the object of faith, its integrity depends on our willingness to not entirely know it, to cease our inquiry at a certain point and simply become complicit with its constructions. The opposite pole is a nihilistic mockery of the object of sentiment that casts it as inert. Her tale ultimately demonstrates her unwittingly deft synthesis of the two, seemingly opposed ideologies invoked by her portrait—her precious presentation of the little clergeon depends on our lack of reflection upon it, particularly its bigotry. That presentation begins to unwind when we press on it: little Hugh sings the divine service without any real idea of what it means; his miracle is to continue parroting the song even after he has lost all capacity for rational thought; he manifests this miracle from within a toilet, in which his body must be covered in filth. But if we don't press on it—if we take the Prioress's portrayal at face value, becoming complicit with her sentimental faith—the figure is imbued with an intense emotional

<sup>21</sup> For recent studies on the Prioress's affective characterization, see Calabrese 77. Cf. Eaton 496-98.

energy that is made all the more intense by our refusal to think too much about it; Hugh only coheres into an object of our sentimentality when we become at least provisionally complicit with the Prioress's unreflective mode of perception.

Chaucer cannot disavow her sentimentalism because the faith it requires makes it a sort of shadow of the strangeness within his world; when we push too hard on objects or their relations, any pattern will ultimately begin to unravel. All of the pilgrims seem, from a certain remove, ridiculous; their jostling, overlapping ideals, in one sense, ensure that they cancel out the urgency of one another's grotesque ideologies. Even within the Prioress's own portrait, we might say that her combination of sentimentalism and the sacred renders both absurd: both become overwrought in the presence of the other. But Chaucer's attitude in the *Canterbury Tales* is not the ironic nihilism of Ovid; rather, the humorous dimension that such conflicting ideologies expose is productive, not destructive. The people, objects and events that populate his narrative world do not become an empty, chaotic swirl simply because no single perceptual perspective can fully comprehend them; on the contrary, they become ontological loci because they admit to so many perspectives, so many patterns of relation. In its limited way, the Prioress's sentimentalism stands in for this feature of the *Tales*: she seems to move through the world simply and unreflectively, investing everything around her with an unspecified emotional intensity. As Chaucer's *notationes* put it, she is "charitable" and "pitous," full of "conscience" and "tendre herte" (1.143-50). She devotes weeping to the mean things of Chaucer's world, to "a mous/ Kaught in a trappe" (1.144-45), or her "smale houndes" (1.46) when she finds one dead. Both of these animals are characterized by their lack of utility: the mouse is explicitly considered vermin, while the small hounds she keeps are

“toy” dogs, the yipping companions of the wealthy who can afford to maintain useless creatures. In their lack of utility, they are cousins to the open-eyed birds of the opening—their relation to the world is unspecified, despite their appearance in it. That lack of utility, on the one hand, makes the Prioress’s regard for them laughable; but in another sense, it shadows the strangeness of Chaucer’s world, the appearance of objects that cannot be reduced to a single pattern of understanding. Such objects do have a sort of sentimental energy attached to them, but rather than leaving the nature of that energy unspecified, Chaucer shows how it is generated by disseminating an object’s significance into the manifold perceptual patterns that, in their unimaginable aggregate, comprise it.

But even more than her precious concern for the small things of the world, the Prioress’s sentimentalism is characterized by her adherence to ritual; these rituals appear, ironically, not in the Christian idiom but in the idiom of manners and etiquette. The Prioress is fastidious where manners are concerned; the first narrative details we are offered note “that of hir smylyng [she] was ful symple and coy;/ Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy” (1.119-20). The coy manner of her smiling immediately and unreservedly removes the Prioress from the religious register, casting her rather as a demure, perhaps even coquettish Romantic lady; the coyness of the smile almost evokes a sexual dimension to her character, which would fully transgress her religious identity. However, Chaucer redirects this transgressive potential into her petty oath. Much critical ink has been spilled over the incompatibility of this oath, in particular, with the Benedictine code of conduct.<sup>22</sup> However, perhaps the more interesting incompatibility the line presents us with is internal to the portrait—the narrative detail seems a non-

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<sup>22</sup> For an excellent summary on the critical history of this line—with particular emphasis on the identity of Sainte Loi—see the note on it in the Variorum Chaucer’s edition of the *General Prologue*, 126-30

sequitur to the line that immediately precedes it. It playfully exchanges the transgressive sexuality that the coy smiling intimates and submerges it beneath a minor transgression. This non-sequitur is heightened by its reference to Seinte Loy, whom most scholars identify as St. Eligius, the patron saint of smiths and carters. Clearly, the Prioress has only the loosest association with such a figure—her retinue would be called upon to handle most of the trials that would necessitate such a pragmatic saint’s intercession. This transgression of monastic code begins to seem more a prefiguration of her weeping over mice and dogs: it betrays a mannerly investment in the physical world and the events occurring in it that monastic discipline is supposed to excise. The erotic charge of that investment, though, is absent from the petty oath, and now is absent from the coy smile as well; the carefully placed non-sequitur scrubs the potentially intense, conflicting erotic energies from the figure of the Romantic woman, leaving only her air-headedness, her vapid obsession with appearances and the observance of form. Chaucer’s “ful symple” inscribes a sort of ritual intensity, ironically immediately before the “coy” alters its register—she fully and unreflectively inhabits her persona, even when she must do so within the confines of the seemingly incompatible ritual systems of the convent. Her smiling thus foreshadows the superficial formality with which the subsequent narrative details of her portrait are concerned.

All of these narrative details are typified by their fastidiousness: the Prioress “soong the service dyvyne,/ Entuned in hir nose ful semely” (1.122-23); she speaks French “ful faire and fetisly,/ After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,/ For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe” (1.124-26); “At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;/ She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle” (1.127-28). The first detail takes the core religious ritual she



should participate in—the liturgy—and makes the rubric by which its performance is judged aesthetic rather than devotional; Chaucer applies—perhaps with tongue slightly in cheek—a social standard to the music that values a nasal sound. The sound produced is “semely,” as her colloquial French is spoken “fetisly;” both adverbs emphasize a superficial adherence to the customs the Prioress knows. She puts on the airs of her “countrefete cheere” (139), even though—in the case of her French—those airs themselves often betray her lack of urbanity even as she tries to seem urbane. However, the point in these brief narrative images is not that the Prioress is faking a sophistication that is ultimately beyond her. Her seeming doesn’t hide something deeper within it, but rather describes her sentimental attachment to the world of appearances, the world in which the petty rituals of table manners hold an urgent, inexplicable significance. The details of her table manners stretch for a full 10 lines after the two cited; they occupy 12 lines of her 44 line portrait, taking up over a quarter of the space devoted to her. Such narrative details betray an insistent sensitivity to the mundane—whereas the Knight was typified by the grand, starkly defined events of battle, the Prioress shapes the most humdrum details of her daily existence objects of intense, ritual significance. Such rituals are the habits which bind together temporal organisms at each scale of their organization; they define the objects and agents around them, constraining each into its ritualized role. In this sense, they restrict the capacity of their participants to see the radical being of those ritualized objects—a ritual, like a habit, fixes a particular perceptual schema, defining a certain pattern of relation between objects. The ritual thereby constitutes an organism from objects and agents agreeing to perceive one another in a particular way, to bracket one another’s strangeness; it fixes a particular identity onto

each participant that integrates it into a unity. The ritual thus also defines a temporality, imbuing defined patterns of action with a sacred significance that justifies itself within the hermeneutic circle of the ritual itself. Unlike the Knight's portrait, the Prioress's fixes our attention on the details of the ritual event's performance; it takes us inside the ritual organism she operates within, showing the minute events that comprise it as they unfold and contract, progressively, into that organism. The Prioress's simplicity thus presents the grotesque, sentimental particularity with which we must read the *Canterbury Tales*; her ritualism is an analogy of reading, which also constructs a world out of matters that unravel when we press on them, when we attend too much to their materiality and not their simple narrativity.

Of course, we run the risk of missing the joke in reading the Prioress's portrait thusly—certainly, her portrait parodies the urgency with which the Prioress engages in her petty rituals. However, the parodic elements of her description do not so much undercut her ritual sensitivity as they playfully frame it; Chaucer's mode is, as ever, parody, not satire.<sup>23</sup> Chaucer's parody, in the Prioress's portrait, enacts a certain indulgent objectivity that can coexist with the Prioress's naive sincerity; in fact, for parody to do its work, such sincerity must remain intact. This parodic attitude in her portrait suggests what Chaucer wants to accomplish in the *Tales*: he wants to allow the grotesque, ritual sincerity of his characters to infuse his world with overlapping, superabundant meaning; he wants overlapping modes of meaning to be generative, not conflicting or nullifying.

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<sup>23</sup> In the sense of parody Mikhail Bakhtin develops in *Rabelais and His World*, parody is generative while satire is destructive; parody reduces the airs of cultural rituals to their lower material bodily stratum; it demonstrates their basis in the same matter that comprises everything else, and so denudes the sanctification placed on them by the official culture. However it is from that lower material bodily strata that everything emerges, and so parody really rejuvenates the ritual's form. Satire, by contrast, denudes the ritual only to leave it nullified and demonstrate its purposelessness (75).

In doing so, he will inspire his poetics with a mimesis deeper than mimesis, a mimesis that uncovers a strangeness within his narrative objects that runs deeper than any particular mode of perceiving the world. The aggregation of these grotesque perspectives must not efface their particularity, but rather must press us to inhabit particular modes of vision simultaneously. In so doing, we perceive the object in its indivisible temporality, on the horizon of presence wherein all those objects persist, where they aggregate and disintegrate into temporal organisms. The Prioress's naive sentimentalism is only a type and a shadow of this authentically temporal vision; while her obsession with purely formal, superficial rituals thrusts her toward certain minutiae of time—causing her to attend to passing circumstances and parsed events—and while she invests those minutiae with an unspecified urgency that intimates their strangeness, such obsession can ultimately only open one, singular grotesque perspective onto the ritual objects it perceives. It is a model of a particular vision, but not the strange, aggregate vision Chaucer aims at in his frame as a whole.

If there is one character in the *General Prologue* who resists the sort of temporal reading I have offered of the Knight and Prioress, it is surely the Miller; as the *Miller's Tale* opposes the Knight's chivalric idiom, so too does his portrait resist the narrative patterns of his predecessors. In many ways, it constructs the Miller much more simply than the other characters: Chaucer elaborates his character by sequentially describing his physical features, constructing an image of the materials that make up his body. Earlier portraits have offered a physical image of their characters—the Knight and the Prioress do so—but that physical image always emerges from the rapid narrative details that define the pilgrim. In both the Knight's and the Prioress's portraits, we are not offered

any sustained *effictio* until the end of the portrait; we have already had to situate a body within a shifting sequence of events before we know exactly what that body looks like. The body and character thus emerge from a pattern of temporal and narrative relations, contracted into brief, paradigmatic events. Certainly Chaucer includes brief narrative details in the Miller's portrait: "at wrastlynge he wolde have alwey the ram," (1.548), "Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre" (1.550); likewise, some of the descriptions use narrative analogies: "His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys" (1.559). But to say that our sense of the Miller's identity arises from these compressed narratives would vitiate the analytical tools we have been using to this point.

Rather, the Miller derives much more of his personality from his inertly physical characteristics. From the beginning, his portrait calls him "a stout carl for the nones;/ Ful byg he was of brawn and eek of bones" (1.545-46). Unlike the other portraits, the Miller is simply represented into being in the *General Prologue*; we do not begin to understand him through a network of physical relations taking place in time, but by a simple, one-to-one correspondence of word to thing. Chaucer emphasizes this by constructing him from the inside out, describing the physical innards of his skeleton and musculature that comprise his stoutness. His brawn and bones are not fundamentally narrative details—they do not operate in a moving time, but rather in a frozen moment of perception; more than any other character, Chaucer uses simple expressions of the "to be" verb in the Miller's portrait, saying only that certain physical features exist amalgamated in his body. As a result, the Miller seems to lack event; he is not composed by the procedures of temporal recombination that typify the other portraits but through a simpler, less self-conscious narrative mode. When his body is put into relation with other objects, the

resulting narratives seem to only emphasize its crass materiality—in both his wrestling and his breaking and entering, the Miller makes contact with the world around him in the most literal fashion imaginable, by crashing the stuff of his body into other stuff. These instances constitute events of sorts, but only as rocks crashing into one another constitute an event—they manifest the materiality of two objects, but they do not place the resulting bodies in any sort of interpretive context; such objects seem to lack genre, or a perceptual schema through which they attain some sort of significance.

The Miller's portrait elaborates on this strategy throughout: after the brief narrative, the portrait returns to simple physical description. As Chaucer tells us,

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,  
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.  
Upon the cop right out of his nose he hade  
A werthe, and thereon stood a toft of herys,  
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;  
His nosethirles blake were and wyde. (1.552-57)

The descriptions here do place the Miller's physical features into a metaphorical relation to the world around him, especially the animal kingdom; however, it explicitly refuses to compose temporalities for those metaphors. Vivid as they are, the metaphors reinforce the static inertia of the Miller's physicality—Chaucer could have easily integrated these details into brief narratives as he did others, but he simply doesn't. Instead, they produce the Miller as a static mass within the narrative, one that can certainly be set into motion, but which does not begin in motion. In a sense, the portrait's incessant refusal of narrativity presages the threat he poses to the pilgrim group: his willingness to break their

“foreward” in his Prologue is anticipated by his failure to be composed in the same manner as the others. He resists not only the Knight’s overblown chivalric idiom, but the entire procedure of event-making that makes it possible; the brawny Miller is a materialist who strips away the significance from all objects until they are nothing more than their physical mass. For the true materialist, the event cannot be produced—there is no ritual significance attached to any object, so the system of their relations is ultimately just a meaningless relative motion. Time is a chaotic amalgam of matters that blur into one another—without clear, ritualized roles, objects cannot be defined as interactive unities. Thus instead of the narrative details that have typified other pilgrims, we are left with metaphors that statically exchange the Miller’s substance with some other substance without placing the two in temporal relation; there is nothing that delineates his physical mass from that of animals or anything else for that matter—even as the vivid metaphors help us to imagine the Miller, they rob him of a specific identity, even a bodily one. We get an overwhelming sense of his substantiality; we know there is some thing birthed into being here, some rough, slouching creature; we are even given a gruesomely detailed account of its physical features. However, those features are elaborated through metaphors that exchange his substance with something else entirely such that the two images are overlaid with one another. The bestial imagery is so sustained and vivid throughout the portrait that it dominates the way we imagine his body—it almost becomes more than a metaphor. Though the Miller is overwhelmingly material, down to his most minute tuft of hairs, his refusal to assign ritual significance to any of the objects around him leaves his materiality inert.

Of course, the Miller is not nearly so inert as his portrait might lead us to believe; on the contrary, his materialism produces some of the most memorable events recorded in the *Tales*. Chaucer reserves for the Miller's tale one of his most ingenious comic devices—the dual climax described so well by Thomas D. Cooke in his classic study of the tale. The Miller is unexpectedly deft at constructing a precisely crafted narrative; he coordinates the events of two separate fabliau such that the climax of the one precipitates the climax of the other. His deftness at coordinating narrative events is an open question posed by the *Tales*; the inert materiality of his portrait should preclude such a capability—the Miller might resemble the Shipman, for instance, who largely lacks that capability—but Chaucer restores narrativity to him, along with the unique pattern of perception that narrativity requires. Certainly, the events he narrates only exist to demonstrate the foolish, deluded manner in which their characters have constituted themselves; in the dark night of that climax, Alisoun is exchanged for the Knight's Emelye, Nicholas for Alisoun and John, ass for lips. Each character in the tale is fluidly substituted for the others, just as the metaphors of the portrait substitute one configuration of matter for another. Such materialistic exchanges confound the generic patterning through which each character seeks to define the events within the tale. John thinks himself in a retelling of the Bible in which God's wrath will finally culminate in a second flood; Absolon thinks himself in a Romance until he feels the bristly touch of Alisoun's nether-beard; even Nicholas thinks himself in a parody until he is viciously scalded in the toot. The Miller is relentless in his undermining, not solely of the Knight's chivalric elevation of women, but of all the ritualistic procedures through which identities are constructed and events are made. The elements of those rituals always betray their participants;

against the Prioress, the Miller suggests that the inert materiality of the ritual object will always give the lie to those relying on it for their identities—at precisely the moment when they hope to consecrate those identities, the ritual object will betray them, exchanging itself for something else in a nullifying metaphor of its materiality.

Chaucer's genius, in this particular problem and throughout the *Tales*, is to fold insights that seem to threaten his project, to threaten the possibility of narrative even, into the texture of his fiction; the Miller is such a capable storyteller because his materialism itself constitutes a grotesque angle of vision upon the world surrounding him. In vigorously disabusing the other pilgrims of their airs and pretenses, he installs meaning into the void he thought to discover within them; relativism becomes a coherent position with its own metaphysics of vacancy; nihilism becomes allegory. The objects that populate the world are representations of that vacancy, but in order to be representations at all, they must first be integrated into coherent objects. Only from this position of coherence and integrity can they mobilize the materialistic nihilism the Miller prosecutes through his narrative. Thus, in seeming to differ from the other pilgrims the Miller actually becomes like them: he becomes another grotesque in Chaucer's chorus of grotesques.. Even as he uses their narrative mode to critique the possibility of meaningful narrative, his anti-ritual takes on its own life and exceeds its ideological mandate. Chaucer's seeming refusal to comprise his personality from paradigmatic events itself constitutes his angle of vision upon Chaucer's world; the incessant reference to his physicality itself constitutes his response to the other pilgrims' rituals of significance. As a response, it becomes a ritual—a parodic ritual, to be sure, but a ritual nonetheless. Otherwise, the Miller's materialism would render the language of which he



is composed inert along with everything else—the Miller, in this sense, stands in for the *House of Fame*'s model of inert language. This is true of him especially because he is a literary creation, but it is true of materialists in general—their ideology, taken to its radical extent, unwinds the rationale behind its prosecution. In divesting people and objects of their culturally inscribed significance, he would seem to lead back to a purely unfolding temporality in which the relations between things are no longer contracted into events; but in reality, the materialist world is static because it dissolves the object even as it tries to name its substance. No materialist—not even the Miller—can be so radical however; as a codified “ism,” it becomes a perceptual mode competing with others to effect a significant vision upon the surrounding world. Even as it sets out to unmask the grotesque perspectives of others, it ironically collects into a new grotesque perspective.

For time to authentically move, such grotesqueness is necessary—we cannot expect to remain captive at the surface of a narrative and gain anything from it. The *House of Fame* attempted to recuperate a vision of presence through such a certain negation and ultimately was only marginally successful in doing so; it had to constantly strain its own vision, privileging its own language as simply representational in order to bracket all other language. By subtracting meaning from language, Chaucer did locate readers in a sort of fluid temporality, but without representation, his project always threatened to collapse into the static materialism promised by the Miller. The frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, takes up many of the same phenomenological problems, but with an entirely novel solution to them. Chaucer's strategy in the *General Prologue*, as throughout the *Tales*, is to distill every perspective that might undermine his poetics—whether through its seriousness, preciousness, outright falsity or inertia—into its most

grotesque form then fold the threat they pose into his world. He refuses to refuse in his *Tales*; any mode of perception is open in his world precisely because any perception constitutes a part of the strangeness of the objects that populate that world. Even an ideological schema like the Miller's that reduces everything to its most base form places a perceiver in relation to a perceived object; such reductive ideologies begin with the integrated object, which they must then disintegrate and disavow. But ironically their own assignation of the object to its base materiality possesses its own urgency; the Miller's parody infuses his inert materiality with a life and purpose he should not be able to muster. It has a certain sentimentality and nobility to it because it opens him onto a world that the pilgrim group collectively constitutes. This world is not primarily a social construct, though, but a phenomenological one, a strange world wherein every object achieves an indefinite resonance that can only be intimated, not fully defined. Particular patterns of perception and interaction must aggregate within those objects without losing their poignant particularity. Tales must unfold across the surface of the text, the matters of their words and images, themes and ideas being simultaneously refracted across all those patterns; at the center, objects will begin to cohere, persisting in their own potency and participating in larger, contracted organisms of perception. When the world of the *Canterbury Tales* begins to thrum this way, we are transported to the temporal vision Chaucer groped toward throughout his career, but this time through a superabundance rather than a dearth of meaning. He restores a Dantean vision of time to a world disfigured by limited visions of time that parse it into truncated events, and he does so using the very means of its original disfigurement.

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