

nal faith. With humility and knowledge (“deep . . . as life”), pride and sullenness are replaced by an acceptance of “human” fate, which involves at the present moment the pain of separation in the struggle toward “the human heart by which we live.”

As the recognition, therefore, stanza 9 presents the mode of interaction between the temporal self and the immortal soul, a resolution achieved after the series of separations described in the child’s actions as well as by the lament in stanzas 1–4. The first crisis is birth, which initiates an extended struggle between Earth and God and culminates in the alienation and depression described in stanzas 1–4 when the poet-hero finds that the proud independence toward which the child struggles does not sustain the joy that heaven bequeathed him at birth.

If we think of the last two stanzas as a coda following a completed action and resolution, which is to say the conflict between Earth and God for the child’s soul, a good deal of the ambiguity of the last few lines is cleared up. The child’s struggle *against* joy constitutes something of an analogy to the struggle of tragic heroes like Prometheus and Oedipus, who struggle against Zeus and fate. The striking simile that ends stanza 8, which I have already alluded to (“deep almost as life”), anticipates the poem’s final statement, “thoughts too deep for tears.” What emerges from the tragic struggle against the state of blessedness is a new relationship between humanity and nature founded on a deep ambiguous knowledge of life that resolves the conflict. The mature mind experiences nature *in terms of* humanity. In doing so, it has left behind the spontaneous abandon of childhood and youth along with the transitional state described in stanzas 1–4.

In its transition from the I-isolated of stanzas 1–4 to the I-representative of stanzas 9–11, the self (within the poem, not in any pseudobiographical referentiality) passes through an intermediate state of creative consciousness in stanzas 7–8. But here, as in lines 23–24, creativity implies, or indeed entails, separateness. This separateness, as an aspect of the self, must somehow be absorbed into the I-representative, or more precisely the we-inclusive, of stanzas 9–11. The we-inclusive achieves an identity in both the subjective and the objective points of view. This psychological integration is accompanied by an integration of the physical and spiritual dimensions of being, which is the statement of stanza 9 and is celebrated in stanzas 10–11.

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Chaucer’s Voices

To the Editor:

In “A Poet Ther Was”: Chaucer’s Voices in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*” (101 [1986]: 154–69), Barbara Nolan discovers three voices, but there is no need

for them. Indeed, Occam’s razor prohibits them, and if we sharpen Occam’s razor on the strop of the mythopoeic spring themes that Nolan discovers in the first eighteen lines, we find that there are only two narrative voices in the Prologue, both of them belonging to pilgrims. Moreover, when Harry Bailly takes the floor, the narrator himself reports that Harry is speaking, and thus all of Chaucer’s representations are as oblique as anything conceived in the subtle mind of Virginia Woolf. We, the readers, become eavesdroppers. Either there is one narrator who reports the speeches of the other pilgrims as they speak or there are as many narrative voices as there are pilgrims who speak, as indicated by the changes in diction.

The time sequence of the passage is “Whan . . . thanne . . . Bifil that in that season . . . whan the sonne was to reste . . . erly for to ryse . . . tyme and space,/Er that fether . . . first bigynne,” and that exhaustive sequence occupies not the first eighteen lines but the first forty-two lines. It carries us to the very beginning of the description of the knight. The narrator states that he will tell us of the “personages” on the pilgrimage while he has “tyme and space” (35). Thus the narrator’s consciousness that he is occupying time is similar to the way the early Heidegger’s *Dasein* discovers itself in time. With this perspective on the text we open the textuality to a Heideggerian analysis of time as Chaucer perceives it, a reading that I can only hint at within the limits of this letter but that, as all readers can see for themselves, opens our reading tremendously and allows the sacredness and the profanity of time to mix.

To return to the first-person narration without taking the “tyme and space” to deconstruct Chaucer’s General Prologue, the very fact that the levels of diction are uneven, as Nolan has shrewdly observed, opens the text to an investigation of the reasons for this unevenness. Perhaps (to coax Chaucer to the analyst’s couch) Chaucer has some uncertainty about how to begin his narrative. Perhaps he feels unworthy of the project, perhaps he is unsure whether the narrative voice should participate in the action or remain distant from it, perhaps he is unsure what *fama* will make of him presenting himself as a pilgrim. Will the future make Chaucer a pilgrim-in-fact when, for the purposes of *The Canterbury Tales*, he is only a pilgrim-in-fiction? Does this thought make Chaucer uneasy? Or, to invoke Occam’s razor once again and seek the simplest solution, is Chaucer qua author allowing the first-person narrator to follow the established fourteenth-century custom of beginning with the general and ending with the specific?

I sense that this last question is one to which we must resoundingly answer “Yes!” Scholastic logic requires it. The fourteenth century’s logical prejudice forms the pre-text of the text, which we, in turn, can deconstruct as the occasion for a discussion of logic and time. There is no need to multiply voices here; there is a need to read Chaucer for the uncommonly good writer that he is.

To cast my argument in its simplest terms: Chaucer

opened *The Canterbury Tales* with a literary analogue to the matrix of a syllogism. Thus: *ad majorem*, it is spring; *ad minorem*, “Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (12); *in conclusionem*, “I was of hir felawshipe anon” (32). Nolan’s interpretation interrupts the natural flow of the syllogism to attribute the conclusion to a second voice. Her reading is impossible unless we deny Chaucer the vitality of his rhetorical device.

This syllogism is by no means a strictly developed philosophical one. But my reading allows for literary play, for an adaptation of a syllogism, and for a virtuoso literary performance worthy of Chaucer’s genius. This interpretation also leads us to examine the literary coherence of the General Prologue rather than to discover in it the Gothic ruins of a medieval construct put together willy-nilly by the inept literary amateur who is Nolan’s Chaucer.

But *ratio recta* tells us that Nolan cannot have intended to reduce Chaucer to a ventriloquist and literary hack. Accordingly, an alternative approach suggests itself. The term “voice,” on which Nolan builds her theoretical base, seems hard, almost calcified. Yet it does have a respectable history among medievalists and carries in itself the seeds of exciting insights—as illustrated by the wisdom of many of Nolan’s practical observations. Nevertheless, the term does not serve her well, because it seems to take on a deterministic meaning alien to the sensitive interpretation of literature. Can it be that, methodologically, Nolan’s analysis illustrates a new need among medievalists, the need to join Jacques Derrida’s struggle with the language of interpretation in order to decalcify terms that are strategically useful in communicating subtle ideas but so tangled in the history of criticism that they overstate the case?

If that is so, I suggest that one solution to the methodological dilemma at hand is to place the term “voice” *sous rature* in the Derridean fashion. In postmodern analyses of Chaucer it may no longer be possible to speak of “voice.” Do we need to learn to speak of “voice”?

MICHAEL E. MORIARTY
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Reply:

Let me say first that Michael Moriarty understands my argument very well. Moreover, he puts the critical question posed by my essay in the clearest of terms: “either there is one narrator who reports the speeches of the other pilgrims as they speak or there are as many narrative voices as there are pilgrims who speak, as indicated by the changes in diction.” I would, however, refine his summary in the following way: the “changes in diction” must be strongly marked and must signal a dialogical intervention. I argue, following Gregory the Great’s ingenious description of Solomon’s voices in *Ecclesiastes*, that in

Chaucer’s General Prologue we find one author who speaks in several narrative voices, testing, as it were, the powers and limits of the poet in well-known medieval theoretical terms.

Moriarty, however, objects to a poet who plays with narrative voices on several grounds:

1. Relegating Chaucer to the analyst’s couch, Moriarty prefers to regard him as a writer who “feels unworthy of [his] project,” who “has some uncertainty about how to begin his narrative,” who is “perhaps . . . unsure whether the narrative voices should participate in the action or remain distant from it.”

2. He finds in lines 1–42 of the General Prologue a “literary analogue to the matrix of a syllogism” (critical language that seems to me perilously close to jargon). Chaucer’s concern for his syllogism, in Moriarty’s view, takes precedence over the literary play obvious in the adjustment of diction as we move from line 18 to line 19 of the General Prologue. (Moriarty speaks of unevenness of diction, while I describe the change as an abrupt, calculated, rhetorically based shift in the level of style, designed to delight and challenge the attentive reader.)

3. A Chaucer who plays with voices, who tests medieval literary theory, who challenges the literary traditions he has inherited, must, in Moriarty’s opinion, be regarded as an “inept literary amateur.”

Clearly Moriarty admires “literary coherence” and syllogistic reasoning in poetry, and this is a worthy taste. But in my view, Chaucer, especially in his last great work, is not a poet who aims for scholastic tidiness. Rather, without abandoning the pleasures of logic, he delights, it seems to me, in all the sophisticated, manipulative strategies of the medieval rhetorical tradition. In this predilection, as I hope to show in a forthcoming book, he follows fully in the steps of other learned medieval poets, including Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Boccaccio, whose work he admired and studied.

As to Moriarty’s view that the critical term “voices” is calcified and should be replaced by voices, may I simply call his attention to two precise, flexible uses of my term, one medieval and one modern. Both of them, I think, bear on Chaucer’s technique.

In the first example, from the epistolary *proemio* to Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* (Chaucer’s principal source for the *Troilus*), the poet speaks specifically of “le mie voci” (my voices) as he describes his various poetic responses to his experience of love: “E similmente le mie voci . . . in amorosi canti e in ragionamenti pieni di focoso amore s’udirono sempre poi in chiamare il vostro nome . . . o la morte per fine de’miei dolori, o in grandissimi ramarichii. . . .” ‘And likewise my voices . . . made themselves heard in amorous songs, in arguments full of ardent love, in calling out your name . . . or [calling on] death as an end to my sorrow, or in the greatest grief . . .’ (trans. mine; *Tutte le opere*, ed. Vittore Branca, Verona: Mondadori, 1964, 2: 19). Boccaccio’s sense of himself as a poet who plays with voices in rela-