

Morality Ovidized: Sententiousness and the Aphoristic Moment in the Nun's Priest's Tale

INTRODUCTION: APHORISTIC WRITING AND MENIPPEAN SATIRE

In ways we still do not fully appreciate, modern consciousness has been shaped by aphorisms. Montaigne, Bacon, Nietzsche, Emerson, and Wittgenstein all have recourse to them, as do some of our greatest poets: Blake, Dickinson, Valéry, Rilke, Stevens. In the hands of such writers, the aphorism has been, among other things, an important catalyst in the convergence since the Renaissance of philosophical and literary ways of knowing the world.

Aphoristic style in the modern era becomes more central to philosophical discourse as the latter moves towards its own boundaries, exploring areas of interface with other perspectives: autobiography, empirical science, poetry, and ordinary language. These explorations find their answerable style in the aphorism's non-linear logic, self-isolating brevity, or startling inconsequence—traits for which Bacon offered such tropes as “a knowledge broken” and “a doctrine of scattered occasions.” The aphorist's often anti-philosophical stance is ombudsman-like; paradoxically, it has philosophical value. In this it resembles Menippean satire.

Menippean satire tests philosophical abstractions by exposing them to situations in which they may suddenly appear silly or naïve. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Laputian “projectors” communicate by holding up objects carried around in sacks: Swiftian imagination demonstrates that a crude realism of the referent cannot bear very much reality. When philosophy entails impossibilities, literature invents impossible tales, to show that Reason is being unreasonable.

Aphoristic philosophers seem to have internalized the Menippean attitude. Wittgenstein, for example, assimilates philosophical “nonsense” to slapstick comedy, speaking of “bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.”¹ Just when the metaphysical mentality is ready to leap into

generality, Wittgenstein trips it up at the level of concrete examples whose meaning is coextensive with their use: “Don’t think, but look!”²

A strangely analogous serious play takes place in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. If the modern aphorism explores the poetics of philosophical language at the latter’s Menippean margins, this tale comically humiliates sententious rhetoric, reducing it to a kind of broken knowledge or aphoristic scatter. I propose to read the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* as a primal scene of Menippean laughter in the Renaissance, and to consider Chaucer as a proto-aphoristic poet running sententiousness to earth—troping it, that is, into more humanly available contexts.

I. APHORISM AND THE TRADITION OF SENTENTIOUS RHETORIC

*O insen sate cura de’ mortali,
Quanto son difettivi silogismi
Quei che ti fanno in basso batter l’ali!
Chi dietro a iura e chi ad amforismi
.
quando, da tutte queste cose sciolto,
con Beatrice m’era suso in cielo
cotanto gloriosamente accolto.*

[O insensate care of mortals! How false are the reasonings that make you beat your wings in downward flight. One was following after the laws, another after the *Aphorisms* . . . the while, free from all these things, I was high in heaven with Beatrice, thus gloriously received.]³

Looking down on the earth from his celestial eminence, Dante in the *Paradiso* sees aphorisms as part of the blind scatter of human existence when given over to the pursuit of worldly power through merely pragmatic knowledge. The *amforismi* he has in mind are those associated throughout much of the Middle Ages with medical science, particularly with the “Hippocratic” *Aphorisms* (the earliest known work to bear that title). It is during the Renaissance that usage of the word widens to include, as the OED has it: 1) “a ‘definition’ or concise statement of a principle in any science”; and, by the end of

the sixteenth century, 2) “any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim.”

“Is not thy common talk sound aphorisms?” says Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus to himself. If Bacon’s own aphorisms have their Faustian qualities, a later aphorist like Lichtenberg is as likely to express bemusement with the march of Enlightenment as to cheer it on. In exploring the inner world and the colloquial subtleties of language, post-Enlightenment aphorists owe as much to Montaigne’s introspective digressions as to Bacon’s punctual counsels of technical opportunism. Sustained struggle with a dual inheritance of science and poetry, the general and the particular, tends to gravitate toward a form that bears the lineaments of unresolved conflict as if these were its Heraclitean birthright.

The modern aphorism is nothing if not versatile, tracing an elusive path between rule and anomaly, concept and trope, demanding that we respect its peculiar liminality. Partly to counteract a critical tendency to overemphasize the conceptual side of the equation,⁴ I will emphasize the role of poetry and poets in the formation of this influential and chameleon-like modern form—specifically the role of Chaucer. For though the modern aphorism and aphoristic essay begin to emerge fully only in the writings of Montaigne and Bacon, both of these writers could have said that the poets were there before them. A close look at the interplay of trope and narrative strategy in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* may shed light on a genealogical question: How do we get from the medieval *sententia* to the modern aphorism?

A short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import. . . . Sound as this definition is, it is also hopelessly general itself, applying as well to a number of other forms: proverb, maxim, apophthegm. Divorced from context, aphorism is a neutral entity, not intrinsically limited to any particular discourse, whether of religion, science, law, philosophy, or poetry. Being something of a hybrid, it mediates between (in the broadest terms) philosophy and poetry, allowing both to engage in mutual redefinition. If Stevens can say of poetry that “It Must Be Abstract,” aphoristic philosophers practice a kind of “concrete” philosophy. As poets become more “sentimental” (in Schiller’s sense), philosophers discover the heuristic value of a conscious epistemological naïveté. In Friedrich Schlegel’s terms, poetry becomes “transcendental . . . both poetry and the poetry of poetry,” while the philosopher learns to “talk about himself just as the lyrical

poet does.”⁵ Much earlier, Erasmus may have advocated the study of classical adages precisely in order to reconcile the rival claims of rhetoric and scholasticism.⁶

What makes aphoristic forms like the adage so suitable for interdiscursive encounters and rapprochements? The answer, again, has to do with their almost hermaphroditic qualities, which allow them to appear alternately as the most philosophical aspect of subphilosophical discourse and the most popular aspect of technical philosophy. Not surprisingly, rhetoricians have traditionally expressed ambivalent views on the nature and function of aphoristic forms, at times emphasizing their conceptual content, at other times their aesthetic form.

From Aristotle to the Pardoner

Aristotle treats the aphorism (or *gnome*) as the choicest part of the enthymeme, or incomplete syllogism.⁷ Concerned in the *Rhetoric* not with logical necessity but with the pragmatic art of arguing persuasively for or against actions and eventualities,⁸ Aristotle relaxes his philosophical standards and almost treats the meaning of gnomes as equivalent to their use: Even “Know thyself” may be controverted if doing so enhances the *pathos* of the speech and the *ethos* of the speaker.⁹

Unlike Aristotle, Quintilian treats aphorisms less as forensic tools than as verbal ornaments. Though he translates *gnome* as *sententia* on analogy with Senate decrees (perhaps ironically, the Senate being a rubber-stamp institution in his day), Quintilian emphasizes the aesthetics of *sententiae* as “striking reflections.”¹⁰ Elsewhere he calls them “the eyes of eloquence,”¹¹ a tellingly ambiguous metaphor: Do we imagine these eyes *physically*, or think the concept they figure (the meta-concept, perhaps, of the dominance of conceptual tenor over linguistic vehicle)? Are they organs of rational vigilance or blind ocelli on a verbal peacock’s tail?

Perhaps more telling than Quintilian’s trope is the fact that he tropes at all. Quintilian sets something of a pattern for later rhetorical handbooks with the copiousness of his metaphors for the *sententia*’s form and function. Medieval and Renaissance rhetoricians describing *sententiae* tend to recur to certain tropes: the disposition of objects in a painting (*sententiae* must not overcrowd the discursive canvas), stars in the sky, patches on a garment. . . . Such tropes assimilate the *sententia* to poetic imagination and open-

endedness even as they attempt to underline its conceptual governance over discourse. Why in such descriptions do we seem to be given not a choice *of*, but a choice *between* imagining and reasoning?

“[T]he one class of things we say can be seen but not thought, while the ideas can be thought but not seen.”¹² Thus Socrates posits a dichotomy, destined to define intellectual seriousness for millennia, between the visible scatter of things and the invisible unity of the conceptual thing in itself (*kath’ auto*), an otherworldly Form (*eidos*). Aristotle differs from Plato in preferring a more worldly rationalism of Forms somehow *in* things. Aristotelian Form, as the defining boundary (*horismos*) around otherwise chaotic matter, both causes its existence and renders it intelligible to the mind (itself the Form of Forms).¹³ *Eidos* (Latin *species*) in Homer meant the look of *this* thing, the features on *that* face. What sort of look have we seen when we speak of the Form of humankind as such? A sort of residual glimmer shading into an invisible idea? The text’s sententious *eidos* shares in this liminal trembling between visible and invisible. If the *sententia* is the conceptual Form of the linguistic material, conceptual Form is perhaps the sententious principle that assigns meaning to the text of the world.

The medieval rhetorician Geoffrey of Vinsauf is Aristotelian in his division of words into mind and body: “First examine the mind of a word, and only then examine the face; do not trust the adornment of the face alone.”¹⁴ But as Geoffrey’s own use of metaphor suggests, it is difficult to posit such metaphysical priorities without figuring them in the seductive body of language. The *sententia*’s dilemma is that it is not sure whether it is the major premise of a syllogism or the eyes of eloquence, and this problem is itself ambiguous. (Is it a logical difficulty or a strange poetic fact?)

Viewed under the “maxim” of the concept, the *sententia* as material entity evaporates into the general economy of “moral philosophy.” What Quintilian considers primarily a rhetorical ornament becomes in medieval usage the sober tenor of a text, as is brought home to us by the semantic range of the Middle English word *sentence*, signifying among other things: statement; maxim; doctrine; wisdom; faith; edifying subject matter; and simply (textual) *meaning*.¹⁵ Alpha and omega as well as omphalos of rhetorical asceticism, the sententious element gravitates toward the beginning and end of certain

kinds of medieval poetry,¹⁶ but can also exert its timeless authority in the middle of a discourse, as Geoffrey allows.¹⁷

In both classical and medieval rhetoric the *sententia* is often inseparable from the more concrete example or *exemplum*.¹⁸ In Aristotle the example (*paradeigma*) has an inductive character, drawing on historical precedents to judge present events (a powerful politician gathering a bodyguard) and to predict or recommend future outcomes.¹⁹ Tied to an active and ongoing civic life, the *paradeigma* is a gnome still under construction, wavering between a principle and a hunch. (“All those plotting tyranny first seek a bodyguard.”²⁰ Perhaps.)

The example, writes Aristotle, enjoys less prestige than the enthymeme;²¹ the gnome in particular has the virtue of dazzling the less educated with specious self-evidence.²² Chaucer’s Pardoner has not just a sack full of bogus relics, but an armory of authoritative *sententiae* like *Radix malorum est cupiditas* (334, 426); (435-36).²³ If in Aristotle even the gnome partakes of the inductive hazardings of the example, in medieval clerical usage the *exemplum* tends to be a brief, stereotyped narrative subserving the *sententia*’s deductive logic.²⁴ Thus the Pardoner interrupts his own *exemplum* with sententious apostrophes, driving home the moral with an amoral élan.

The Pardoner could not play on the sententious style’s credibility without playing to a sententious credulity that is satisfied, in Johan Huizinga’s words, “with judging each case by referring to the authority of some proverb”—a mentality for which “every event . . . tends to crystallize” into “a standing instance of a general moral truth.”²⁵ As extant early- and later-Renaissance manuscripts attest, numerous editorial devices served to guide readers more expeditiously to the sententious prominences where these truths shone forth: the *guillemet*, for example, or the finger in the margin pointing to the instructive point.²⁶

The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (above and beyond its send-up of Geoffrey of Vansauf) seems to be taking generous revenge on such sententious redundancy. Rhetoric takes on a life of its own as the motley-colored “character” of the tale, and sententiousness is devalued through an exuberant inflation of its own currency. With strategically misplaced concreteness, the text turns the medieval tendency toward abstract formalism against

itself.²⁷ Chauntecleer personifies “pride” so vividly that he exceeds the economy of the *exemplum*: Personification becomes personality, and the *sententia* is brought to its senses.

II. CHAUCER: COMIC SENTENTIOUS SOLEMNITY AS SERIOUS APHORISTIC JOKE

We are close to waking when we dream about dreaming.

—Novalis

Donald McDonald was perhaps the first critic to point our attention to the comic uses to which Chaucer puts sententious rhetoric in the *Canterbury Tales*.²⁸ McDonald calls *sententiae* and *exempla* a tale’s “monitory elements” (454). Taking advantage of the “prevalent attitude of respect” toward these elements, he suggests, Chaucer “recognizes the possibilities for comic incongruity that arise when an expression of ostensible wisdom. . . is enlisted in support of a flagrantly erroneous premise” (455). The comic effect hinges on a strategic inappropriateness in the assignment of sententiousness to characters: John the Carpenter in the *Miller’s Tale* comically misapplies proverbs, the Pardoner twists them to cynical ends, the Wife of Bath turns them upside-down to declare her independence from sententious authority as such (455ff.). Chaucer, in other words, gleefully exploits the *sententia*’s contextual instability, its damnable iterativity.

Thus a silent skepticism emerges from the total weave of the tales, inferred from a patient attention to the vicissitudes of a given *sententia* or proverb as it travels across the tapestry, picking up its own store of experience from each context in which it touches down. Seen against this background, *sententiae* not only tell on their sayers but betray “human” qualities of their own: mutability, a kind of psycho-history, and a certain vulnerability to the parodic effects of incongruous gestalts. “[P]itee renneth soone in gentil herte” describes Theseus’ chivalrous solicitude in the *Knight’s Tale* (1761), but also May’s salaciousness in the *Merchant’s Tale* (1986)—and drops, furthermore, from the beak of the lovelorn hawk in the *Squire’s Tale* (479), suggesting that the sententious habit extends all the way down the Ladder of Being, perhaps even to the tiny, nasal proverbs of flies and mosquitoes. Conversely, it is those tales in which sententiousness predominates entirely, allowing no room for human maneuvering, that we find least

sympathetic. In the *Parson's Tale*, narrator, *sententia*, and character conflate only to disappear into the doctrinal exposition of the sermon.

In the *Knight's Tale*, characters are given room to maneuver only to demonstrate their lack of freedom, their subjection to rigid allegorical paradigms. The laws of allegory require noble but demonic protagonists either led or dragged by the Fates.²⁹ Aeneas becomes more and more demonic as the *Aeneid* progresses, perhaps out of exhaustion with the emotional toll exacted by struggling against destiny. Palamon and Arcite, for their part, are moved from situation to situation like knights on a chessboard, manipulated by two personified abstractions of love and war, Venus and Mars. Viewing the images associated with their respective guardian deities at Theseus' amphitheater, the two youths confront the emblematic materials out of which they are made. In a poignantly recursive moment, allegorical figures peruse allegorical figures, in contemplation certainly, but also to refuel at a kind of iconographic pit stop, or to touch base with their two-dimensional matrix—perhaps finding there the sort of consolation Aeneas feels in contemplating images of his own and his people's suffering: the mortuary consolation of knowing that one's story will one day embellish the stock of archetypes from which it emerged, decorating a temple wall to evoke past glory and *lacrimae rerum*.

The many *sententiae* in this tale only enhance its pageant-like formality. The “monitory element” is as much in its element in this allegorical romance as it is in the Parson's sermon: The former bends the *sententia's* paratactic *logic* into the syntax of ritual repetition, ringing anaphoric changes on the Stoic themes of chance and necessity; the latter bends the *sententia's* paratactic *syntax* into syllogistic logic and the laborious articulations of the treatise. In the *Knight's Tale* sententiousness accrues, perhaps inevitably, to a father-figure's father-figure, Theseus' superannuated sire Egeus, whose bitter metaphysics is summarized in “This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro” (2847-8). In this piously depressing super-*sententia* Chaucer's pilgrims are shown their reflection in the most dogmatically otherworldly mirror. Gloomily authoritative, the saying is a center of *gravitas* on which the most conservative sententious impulses in the *Canterbury Tales* converge (parodically, perhaps).

Chaucer's imagination is liberated when it evades the sententious radar of the high style and touches ground among the characters of *fabliau* and fable, who seem endowed with a curious freedom and gaiety denied to the "gentil" characters. Here *sententiae* themselves are liberated, or at least energized, Antaeus-like, by being put into contact with earthy incongruities and grotesque parody, given over to the carnival spirit. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the act of looking for sententious kernels becomes the ironic kernel of the story: *Sententiae* appear with a frequency nearly equal to that of Chauntecleer's and Pertelote's copulations, together with as many invitations to engender a sententious meaning on this seductive text, perhaps "twenty tyme," if we have the stamina—but the effect of such frequency is to produce an *anti-* or perhaps a *meta-*sententious discourse. Looking for the "moral" becomes as sexy as the sexy parts of Ovid. (We might call this game *Morality Ovidized*.)

The game proposed to the reader might also be summarized as Find the Fruit in this Chaff. Charles Muscatine's seminal reading of this tale as a sublime *jeu d'esprit* placed a large warning sign in front of the text (modernist counterpart of those officious pointing hands in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts), to steer critical priestliness away from the temptation to wake the sleeping rooster of laughter³⁰. But the warning signs are already there in the comic bristling of *sententiae* that, inverting the Biblical proverb, threaten to stick like so many thorns in the hands of the excessively sober. (The tale certainly has too many moral to serve as a traditional fable.³¹)

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* owes its effect in part to sheer placement, to the bracing contrast between its polychromatic vivacity and the tired sepia of the preceding *Monk's Tale*. The two in fact resemble each other in their lack of a clear moral. But if in the former the lack is positive, an effect of excess energy as the narrator scrambles to moralize an *exemplum* that has taken on an Ovidian life of its own, in the latter it is merely neutral, reflecting a toneless apathy: Is this tale about tragedy, or sinful pride, or bad luck? (Do we care?) The Monk is as neglectful of his storytelling as he is of his monastic duties—both tale and monastery are marked by his absence. At a *lento lugubre* narrative tempo, solemnity shades into somnolence, lulling us into surprise at what follows: a *presto* of remote connections falling into place. (The Monk is an inverted Sampson whose isometric indifference allows his tale to collapse.) The humorless

decadence of the Monk's attitude and the entropic equilibrium of his perfunctory *exempla* cause sententious elements to float in solution, slackly, as if awaiting the reagent that will energize them into *creative* chaos, complex mutations. In its own way the *Monk's Tale* too is excessive, positively provocative in its dullness (as the Knight's response attests). Thus boredom sets the scene for bursts of color. Things look brightest after the yawn.

Fruit and Chaff

The magic of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is also an effect of the barnyard setting it slips deftly under its own metaphysics (the scholarly dispute over dreams between Pertelote and Chauntecleer, the narrator's worrying of theological niceties). This feat of legerdemain is the literary equivalent of pulling the tablecloth out from under the china, leaving the place settings intact and in place—but set in a strangely different place: here, a homely fable landscape, touched up with a mock-epic garishness of azure and scarlet red. Suddenly, hosts of clichéd semantic kernels and stylistic husks are not so much literalized as drastically *physicalized*, their figurative force not stripped away but restored.³² Through a certain revitalizing of figures gone to seed, the text restores to rhetoric a certain Aristotelian persuasiveness—except that here, rhetorical extravagance implicitly argues against all apodictic pretensions of the *sentential*.

Thanks to D. W. Robertson's erudition, we can see what a venerable history such kernel-and-husk metaphors already had when they came into Chaucer's hands—and how ripe they were for parody. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* commits genial mischief against the tradition of allegorical interpretation—which can betray its own furtive erotics. If all texts must be submitted to allegorical threshing in order to conform to doctrinal requirements, the threshing process also grants access to all texts, including pagan poetry, provided one reads *per integumentum*, peeling away the “literal” sense to reveal the spiritual pith.³³ (The most frequently “interpreted” of all Biblical texts during the Middle Ages was the *Song of Songs*.)

The invidious difference between textual surface and inner meaning was commonly imaged in the homely metaphorical pairings of a Christianized georgics: husk/kernel, rind-pith, *cortex/candor*. Robertson lists other synonyms for doctrinal substance: *fructus*, *nucleus*, *farina*, “all of which,” he adds “have considerably more force than mere figures

of speech.”³⁵ Or perhaps considerably *less*. But though these are pasteurized figures for the *erasure* of figuration, they are figures nonetheless. Having lain around too long, they have begun to rot—perhaps to ferment. Submitted to imaginative distillation, they can be resurrected as an intoxicating poetry of earth (which is never quite dead, even in a dead metaphor).

Menippean Satire, Hermeneutic Hunger

E. Talbot Donaldson notes that “the real moral of the tale is in the chaff—the rhetorical amplifications which make of Chauntecleer a good representative of Western man trying to maintain his precarious dignity in the face of a basic avian (or human) nature which fails to cooperate with him.”³⁶ This remark assimilates the fabular aspect of the tale to the Menippean tradition, in which the point is to spread out the multiplicity of philosophical perspectives before us like a peacock fan, rather than reduce it to any one doctrine.³⁷ Menippean satire (philosophy’s Fool or monitory court jester) conveys not a formal idea but a fully rounded image of our human predicament as intellects and animals squared off against a mysterious otherness that both eludes and invites interpretation. The method consists not in philosophical thinking but in thinking *about* philosophy, poetically, from the margins, amassing a panoramic view of philosophers philosophizing (as in Lucian’s *Philosophies for Sale*) against a backdrop of cosmic indifference. Fixating on any one set of abstractions would only numb us to the (Menippean) truth, which emerges from the shock of shifting perspectives.

We can, for example, seek a conceptual resolution of the learned debate between Pertelote and Chauntecleer over the cause of the latter’s dream, evaluating their *sententiae* or the relative merits of the authorities they quote, judiciously weighing the prophetic motions of the spirit against sluggish bowel movements: Thus we heedlessly ignore Muscatine’s magisterially sensible observation, “that they are chickens.”³⁸ We do what comes naturally, and go pecking for “sentence” even in an ambiance of comic grace that seems beyond such gross appetite.

Our hermeneutic hunger is imaged for us in the figure (monitory indeed) of Chauntecleer himself, the pompous citer of authorities and the ravenous little beast who “chukketh whan he hath a corn yfunde” (3182). (What are we critics and scholars doing

when we think we have a new insight into an author's ideological motives, a new theory, a new reading of a received text? Chucking, when we have a corn y-found, and the chucking—or crowing—takes the form of an article in an academic journal.) Certainly there is “Goddes foyson” in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* for sententious foragers: Believe your dreams. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. “Mordre will out” (3052, 3057). “*Mulier est hominis confusio,*” for which read: “Womman is mannes joye and al his bliss” (3164, 166). And the meta-morals, like “Taaketh the fruyt, and lat the chaff be stille” (3440, 3443). . . . We are besotted by the riches scattered before us. We fall to.

In so doing, we may be irked by a Pavlovian sense that our response is less reflective than reflexive—looking for the point of the joke, we begin to suspect it is us. This is partly a Menippean effect, partly an effect of the tale's Aesopian inflection. If Menippean satire targets the pretensions of intellectual specialists, fable twits the intellectual pretensions of our species.

Fable and the Flesh Made Word

Fable is a curious two-edged device. The classical scholar Bruno Snell sees the fabular interplay between human and animal in the Archaic Age as playing an important role in the evolution of the Greek mind from Homeric latency to philosophical self-consciousness.³⁹ Comparisons between human and animal (or vegetable or mineral) traits imply a metaleptic interchangeability of tenor and vehicle: When human endurance is compared to a rock, the rock is conceived anthropomorphically, but human existence is also conceived “petromorphically,” for “man must listen to an echo of himself before he may hear or know himself.”⁴⁰

But we can only understand what we have made of ourselves. As successive generations of writers return to the fable form, it becomes a palimpsest and a kind of historical progress report. We read into animals traits that most personally concern us at a given stage in the ongoing construction and deconstruction of the human. We can measure Chaucer's distance from ancient fable by the fact that Chauntecleer is a literate intellectual. (Aesop's animals have not read Macrobius.) He does not announce the dawn on mere instinct, but on solid astronomical erudition: “By nature he knew each ascencious / Of the equinoxial in thilke toun” (2855-56). “By nature” seems to say that

Chauntecleer *is* acting on instinct. But the joke here is that what comes naturally to this fabular beast is Ptolemaic “natural philosophy.”

To portray a beast as endowed with historically determinate human traits (here, the traits of a certain sententious rationalism) is to draw a boundary around humankind as a metaphysical animal at a certain stage of its development. Chauntecleer’s learning does not teach him; the correctness of his theory of dreams fails to prevent him from being outfoxed by an equally anthropomorphic vanity—which in turn reduces our human self-esteem to a kind of cockiness.⁴¹ This cockiness consists partly, perhaps, in an overly bookish and theoretical knowledge with little pragmatic traction (on its toes without quite being alert). In beastly caricature, common (but historically bounded) rationality is estranged and objectified for itself, and consciousness is invited to grow along its own Menippean margin.

Aphorism in its earliest abstract usage means a *definition*; earlier still, it means *to mark off by boundaries*. There is a quasi-aphoristic politics involved in the way Chaucer’s text places sententious rationality *within* itself as an object of trope and parody, whether as erudite poultry or in the image of the scattered corns as figures or transfigurings of *sententiae* themselves—just as there is in Plato’s abstraction of conceptual Forms out of the matrix of Homeric narrative.⁴² In each case, a radical project of redefinition requires a decontextualizing phase during which elements from a previous tradition are isolated from their discursive environment, tweezed out of their rhythmic flow and placed against a new mental horizon.

Plato, then, employs his own brand of broken knowledge, but only as a kind of preliminary stage in the construction of a full-fledged metaphysical system. Chaucerian satire, on the other hand, picks tropes out of an *ideational* matrix, restoring a certain idiomatic or poetic concreteness to words (like “fruyt” and “chaff”) long subjected to more abstract usage. This kind of redefinition involves reducing (in effect) “definition” to “boundary-marking.” In an interesting twist on a figure-and-ground problem, the barnyard corns as figures for sententious boundaries are set, not against a metaphysical ideality, but simply against the *ground*.

To make animals eloquent and reduce human characters to anonymity, silence, or shouting, as Chaucer does in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, is perhaps a way of restoring

language's physical body to itself, re-connecting its metaphysical *anima* with an animality of pun, trope, and erotic couplings among words: teaching a knowledge of language too "Biblical" for the theologians. Let humans, those garrulous sententious virtuosos, be silent for once (so Chaucer's redistribution of speech and silence seems to imply). Let the *sententia* be quiet, while the sentences sing. If the Word is thereby made flesh (dallied with until it becomes wanton), flesh is also made Words. Perhaps this is the secret promise of the magic ring in the *Squire's Tale* that enables the wearer to understand the language of animals: that the fabulous will re-emerge from the *logos*, and the earth be taken lightly enough to rise up into speech again.

Dante and Chaucer: Two Kinds of Light

The lightness of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* derives in part from our sense that its author is gazing at the earth from a vantage point a little above it, perhaps in Chauntecleer style, on tiptoe, looking back at things earthly from the highest perspective this side of the otherworldly. Donaldson notes that "in one important respect [the Nun's Priest] is like his creator: he can survey the world as if he were not part of it, as if he were comfortably situated on the moon[.]"⁴³ We might compare the speed, giddiness, and effortless emotional ascent in the tale with the beginning of the *Paradiso*, where Dante and Beatrice lift off from the earth by staring, eagle-like, directly into the sun. Dante in fact passes by the moon on the way to his rendezvous with God, but his attention is absorbed by the spiritual beings he sees there (lowest among the blessed souls, the Inconstant). He requires coaching from Beatrice to realize that these are not pale reflections but the actual souls themselves—so ingrained is his earthly habit of seeing *per integumentum*, thinking of physical appearances as shadowy figures for spiritual essences.

As he looks back at the earth for the last time, Dante's allegorical vision reduces it to a pathetic diminutive: "*questa aiuola*," "this little threshing floor," a place whose ultimate purpose is merely to separate heavenly wheat from carnal chaff.⁴⁴ To be threshed in this way is Dante's ardent desire. He beseeches Apollo (himself a figure that must ultimately be threshed), in a grotesquely powerful trope, to "Enter into my breast and breathe there as when you drew Marsyas from the sheath of his limbs."⁴⁵ To be inspired by the breath of sacred poetry is to be violently drawn out of one's satyr-like body, or carnal

understanding. Allegorical figuration is here made sado-masochistically physical at the very moment when one sheds the physical entirely, becoming pure spirit in its native realm, not in the earthly land of unlikeness.

In contrast, Chaucer, in the figure of the Nun's Priest, keeps his eyes fixed on the sublunary, as loftily positioned as he is on a kind of lunar eminence. The moon is the symbol of imagination, of the inconstant wavering over human truth and human insight, a waxing and waning, fragile transcendence still subject to the pull of terrestrial gravity. One cannot be sure whether the tale's momentum is meant to carry us beyond the sublunary, or whether the eminence we reach is meant merely to give us a better view of things on terra (in)firma.

Dante's God is a point of light in the center of a ring of angelic spheres. At this elevation, a curious inversion takes place. From an earthly viewpoint, God surrounds the spheres from outside. Here, He is the inner core, surrounded by them. Center and circumference, inside and outside, He appears as the super-concentrated essence of all *sententiae*, the Word, infinitely radiant and also infinitely potential, ultimate source of all discourse and commentary, Himself pure light, infinitely One. The Thomistic lesson of the lessons Dante receives in Paradise seems to be that we cannot absorb pure radiance unless it is photosynthesized for us as accurate mental construction, right thinking. What in God is pure light must be metabolized in us as doctrinal clarity, attained through a carefully graded series of propedeutic steps, at the end of which reason finally yields to rapture, and the very passions are impressed with Truth.

There is room within the confines of the dreary pouches of the *Inferno* for the nearest equivalent in Dante to the exuberant kinetics of the *fabliaux*—even for a bit of farce with comically named devils who break wind, ply grappling hooks, and poke seething sinners in a pool of pitch.⁴⁶ But a kind of superconductive principle sets in as we ascend to higher and higher allegorical altitudes: Quirks and disruptions gradually disappear into lockstep pageantry and patterning. To get it wrong, to commit a heresy, is perhaps still a hazard. But the closer Dante approaches to pure *logos*, the more logical he becomes in his replies to the spot-quizzes he continues to be given—not only more logical, but more like the *logos* itself: incapable of erring. As one merges with Truth in ecstatic coldness, one

becomes another small character in the infallible Word as it spells itself out in enormous living hieroglyphs: imperial Eagle, mystic Rose.

In Chaucer's more earthly cosmos, on the other hand, getting it wrong seems to be the very mark of being, because here being it what *becomes*. It is through making foolish mistakes in their application of *sententiae*, or in deliberately misapplying them, that his characters come to life and grow as self-creating creatures. In sudden bursts of profane noise, in crashing down from the rafters and in such rhetorical acrobatics as we find in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, we have Chaucer's answer to the *Divina Commedia*: a kind of *Divina Commedia dell'Arte*, complete with a Watteau-like self-portrait in the midst, the figure of Chaucer himself as a slightly androgynous doll-like figure (reminiscent of Benjamin's image of the exemplary storyteller with his maternal solicitude for created things), a shyly withdrawn Pierrot, eyes fixed on the ground.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is one of those rare texts in our tradition that manage to be satirical without rancor, even with a certain joy, in a spirit of what Baudelaire calls "*comique absolu*."⁴⁸ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are two other examples. In all three, aphorisms figure crucially: as the mock-sententiousness of the Nun's Priest; as the visionary "Proverbs of Hell" in *The Marriage*; as the repartee in Wilde's divine comedy of manners, in which ironic Chaucerian "ernest" precipitates its personification, and Wilde makes splendid game of it.

Such texts invite us to reconsider what *lightness* means in literature, in philosophy. Their levity sacrifices no depth or complexity, obliging us to rethink the stale distinction between a lightness that snickers and a weightiness that intones or howls. "And with that word he fley down fro the beam" (3172). . . . Descent, these words seem to hint on behalf of the tale, need not be a tragic fall or an apocalyptic precipitation toward an internal *Schwerpunkt*. It can be a wafting, "Downward to darkness, on extended wings." The angel in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* "leaps downward through evening's revelations," "forgets the gold center," and is "satisfied." Perhaps (as the last lines of the *Duino Elegies* seem to promise) we too can "feel the emotion / that almost amazes us / when a happy thing *falls*." ⁴⁹

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* soars because (to paraphrase Chesterton) it takes itself *lightly*. To read it is to take part in a *comic* apotheosis, an un-solemn, sensuously alive

elevation, in which earthly life is lifted, for a moment, back into innocence, enjoying a state of enlightenment indistinguishable from a lightening *up*. In the later Chaucer as in the later Shakespeare, lightness is not an evasion, but an achievement. Tragic heaviness is not left behind, it is transported by the upward momentum of poetic strength, until perhaps it disappears into the sky, leaving “not a rack behind.” Here, levity is levitation. .

..

Menippulating the Moral

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For seint Paul seith that al that written is
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis.
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (1438-43)

Thus the tale ends with an accelerated coda, playing parodic riffs on the formal requirement for a moral, with each *sententia* a deceptive cadence promising sententious resolution only to withdraw it. As sententious readers we expect the interpretation of the music (the *sentence* of the tale’s *solas*, the moral of the fable about a singing rooster); instead we are given the music of interpretation—the text will not stop *playing*. We are invited three times (a sly reference to the Trinity, to Luke 22:61, an apotropaic spell?) to read this graceful verbal clowning *per integumentum*, only to discover that the proffered fruit, like an onion, is *all* integument. Peeling it leaves us with either nothing (if we respond as purveyors of hermeneutic frustration: “our perch is maad so narwe, alas!”) or an excellent view of a clear blue sky.⁵⁰

“Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille,” ostensibly extending a final invitation to moralize the tale, may in fact be setting us up, especially if we ignore the subtle integrity of Chaucer’s metaphors. Nourishing substance was earlier presented as something physical (to repeat, Chauntecleer “chukketh” when he finds it), and now it is offered to us again, this time in what appears to be an allegorical game. But can we overlook the physical context built up behind the figure, the history of its *experience* in the narrative?

By educing again what had earlier appeared as a physical object (mere chicken feed, in fact) and inviting us to read this object now as a trope for a more ascetic reading of the

exemplum itself, the text puts both ways of reading (poetic and allegorical) before us—in fact it is only when we encounter an allegorically figurative version of the fruit-and-chaff figure at the end of the tale that we realize that there *is* another version: The two species of nourishment now play against each other, but on more or less equal terms. This produces a recursive moment as the text explicitly negotiates its own meaning with its readers, offering them a mock-choice between moral *sentence* and poetic nonsense that makes, in itself, a kind of aphoristic *nonce* sense, whose point seems to be that it is not a choice between, but a choice of.⁵¹

The “moral” that precedes the final one (“For seint Paul seith that al that written is / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis”) slyly misreads St. Paul, who refers to the Scriptures. If Ovid is indeed a master of forbidden desire to the medieval mind, and if Chaucer is following the *Ovid Moralisé* in quoting Romans 15:4,⁵² we come full circle at this point and reach a kind of pinnacle, where the text places the sum total of our hunger for imaginative pleasure and freedom against the sum total of the taboo against such happiness. (We also smile at the ingenuity of using the Bible itself to justify casting a roving eye beyond it.)

A kind of farewell to an ideology is involved in broken knowledge, which is in part the knowledge that something is broken: sudden awareness that a clock has been ticking when the ticking stops; Herculean music heard only when the god forsakes us. Perhaps in the tale in question we are being roused out of a Platonic dream (or Bed?)—out of a rationalism Plato offered as itself an awakening from the Homeric dream-state.⁵³ The effect, at any rate, is summary in ways that sententiousness cannot countenance—rather, it is “transumptive.”

John Hollander describes the transumptive in poetic texts as the moment when a tradition is transcended by being summed up over.⁵⁴ With this in mind, consider how the Nun’s Priest, in his seemingly bumbling way, imputes to theologians a certain raucous dissent on the subject of free will versus determinism, with an effect of incoherence equivocally attributable to the Nun’s Priest’s confusion, or to theology itself. The high-serious theological tradition could be thought of as epic metaphysics, and Chauntecleer and the Nun’s Priest as engaging in mock-epic generalities. Conversely, perhaps theology is being burlesqued as metaphysical crowing.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is, among other things, philosophical satire. This raises the question whether such satire is not itself (if proleptically) philosophical. Is there a twilight space illuminated or adumbrated by Chaucerian laughter, a space of poetic *Aufhebung* and philosophical transumption? If the Owl of Minerva is a fly-by-evening operator, is Chauntecleer its radiant matinal shadow, announcing the day shift?

III. CHAUCER AND APHORISTIC CULTURE

[This] delivering of knowledge in distinct and disjointed aphorisms doth leave the wit of man more free to turn and to toss, and to make use of that which is delivered to more several purposes and applications.

—Bacon

“[O]nly when humor illuminated that mind did it become truly profound,” writes Huizinga of Erasmus.⁵⁵ Renaissance laughter is “the sudden meeting of two friendly thoughts after a long separation.”⁵⁶ The Gargantuan guffaw we hear is in part the sound of poetry and philosophy colliding, each discovering in the other certain long-forgotten lineaments of its own desire, to laugh at seriousness, to take laughter seriously. (Thus Rabelais and other physicians of the Montpellier Medical School, drawing on Hippocratic authority, elaborate a therapeutics and “philosophy of laughter.”)⁵⁷ Much of modern philosophy reads like an ongoing explication of the Menippean jokes and witty aphorisms of Renaissance poets.

Scattered Occasions

The mock-summarizing couplets near the end of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* I have suggested, offer a choice between fruit and chaff: between a unitary interpretation of the Chauntecleer *exemplum* and the one that would accept the immense disorder of its truths as its truth. It is a mock-choice, entailing not an *aporia* but a certain open-endedness, anticipating a characteristic High-Renaissance poetics of inconclusive “inclusion.”⁵⁸ Reading-for-fruit is not negated but demoted by being placed implicitly on an equal footing with chaffing. But that there *is* more than one interpretive choice is enough in itself to place the text under the sign of a pluralism broken into the scattered occasions of

our use and application, endowing the text with a fluctuant principle of order that shades into what, in this text at least, seems a *genial* chaos.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is thus a mock-, even an anti-*exemplum*. If the traditional *exemplum* exemplifies a pre-established moral, Chaucer's tale is an *exemplum* in search of its moral. But the search is not a serious, or rather, not a *solemn* undertaking. It is more like the climactic chase-scene in the tale, a rollicking bit of hermeneutic slapstick, a philosophical Harlequinade.

"The theory of poetry" may be "the life of poetry," suggests Stevens (referring to poetry's own *ad hoc* self-theorizing as it moves between "ideas" and the "dogs and the dung"). "Theory" alludes back to viewing. Viewing the look of things too intently (with too much sensuous enjoyment, perhaps) dissolves the abstract *eidōs* into minute particularity. There is prophecy in the closing passage in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as it conflates two kinds of seeing: conceiving and imagining; an allegorical moral (of our own choosing) and corns on the barnyard soil. (This double perspective accounts for the glint in the eyes of Chaucer's eloquence, reflected in the mild catachresis of the fruit-and-chaff figure itself, where a generic "fruit" suggests hermeneutic effort repaid, while "chaff," imaging a negligent dispersal, settles into the repose of spent rhetorical extravagance.)⁵⁹ Post-Chaucerian sensibility tends to demand ideas we can see with our eyes.⁶⁰ Chaucer's emblematic bird is not Dante's imperious eagle who stares into a Platonic sun, but Chauntecleer, who should have kept his eyes open.

The Menippean impetus of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* surpasses the cautiously secularized allegorical economy to which the Erasmus of the *Adages* appeals in order to vindicate the soundness of aphoristic learning. As Daniel Kinney puts Erasmus' case, "What distinguishes apt marshaling of proverbs . . . from pompous retailing of sterile clichés is the figurative virtue inherent in even the humblest proverbial form." This allows for "analogical application." "[T]he place for the proverbial injunction 'Don't cry over spilled milk' is . . . rarely the place where some person is crying over the milk he has actually spilled."⁶¹ But it is precisely through such apparent literalism that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* releases a "figurative virtue" from a proverbial allegorical trope (fruit-and-chaff), which is revitalized by a kind of fortunate pratfall from analogical grace. The degree of overshooting in the tale's imaginative descent into the animal kingdom perhaps

measures the intensity of comic energy required to humanize such ghostly metaphors, to bring them “from their metaphysical back to their everyday use.”⁶²

Restoring bodily substance to an allegorical figure may be a way of purifying the words of the tribe, but perhaps has more to do with what Stevens called “silence made still dirtier” (that is, richer, stranger, more complex). The significance of the ground on which the corns lie scattered for Chaucer’s delectation is precisely that it is a physical ground, not a metaphysical space. That this ground is implicitly equated with the page on which the reader forages for *sententiae* only closes the poetic circle the text draws around its own ostensibly sententious boundary. The dirt and the corns upon it radiate a peculiar semantic promise in their very opacity, their refusal to become transparent to a reading that would sacrifice their physical particularity to a forced apotheosis of their spiritual essences. Chaucer’s earthly things retain a luminous materiality, an aphoristic scatter that refuses to be threshed.

Dante, as I have noted, catches sight of this scatter from on high in the *Paradiso*, and even refers to it (disdainfully) by name. Aphoristic writing need not be identified solely with individual aphorisms and their formal characteristics. We can also discern a kind of aphoristic *trope* in the Chaucerian image of things strewn in a vital miscellaneousness across the page of the earth, refiguring the Book of Nature not as a scholastic treatise but as something closer to an anthology of witty aphorisms.⁶³

“[M]en shal nat make ernest of game” (the *Miller’s Prologue*, 3186) . . . One aphorist warns the heavy-handed critic that “To analyze witticisms is to put horseshoes on butterflies.”⁶⁴ But Chaos Theory’s famed Butterfly Effect (a butterfly flapping its wings in Burma may precipitate a hurricane in Florida) implies that the butterfly may already be wearing horseshoes. Little Mennipean moments tossed by Chaucer in his “game,” in a liminal, socially unstable holy-day framework (or frameplay), have in retrospect an oddly momentous quality, as poetic outpostings with which our common sense and common science (redefined) eventually catch up.⁶⁵

Erwin Panofsky writes of seventeenth-century projective geometry that “like so many subdisciplines of modern ‘science,’” it “is in the final analysis a product of the artist’s workshop.”⁶⁶ Panofsky here has in mind the ground-level abstractions from empirical observation of Renaissance painterly perspective, whose discovery or invention he credits

to painters active a generation before Chaucer's.⁶⁷ Imaginative perception, not as a pure innocence of registered sense-impression, but as a pre-cognition (both pre-theoretical and knowing-in-advance), would seem to be the artist's special province, as poem or painting reach out ahead of the rest of us toward new shapings of lived space and time.

Aphoristic philosophers in particular could be seen as developing theories that stand in relation to Chaucerian poetic perception somewhat as projective geometry stands in relation to painterly perspective. Aphorisms ask to be *perceived*, not just understood.⁶⁸ (The Baconian aphorism is an aggressively, almost performatively and, paradoxically, *paradigmatic* emblem of deductive patterns broken down into conceptually free-floating particulars.) Aphoristic concerns may also bear on the most radically *personal* implications of perspectivism (in Montaigne or in Nietzsche), or (as in Wittgenstein's case) on the irreducible *Bildlichkeit* of even our most abstract concepts. In crucial contrast to the Euclidean dogmatism of Renaissance geometry, however, aphoristic perspectivism tends to question the claims to absolute truth of *any* conceptual mappings of physical or discursive space—including those of perspectivism itself. Even this extreme perspectivism seems in some ways continuous with the more experimentally playful reaches of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

The poetic logic of Chaucer's text has the momentum of an almost fortuitous inspiration, as if half its energy derived from the author's own surprise—yet it has a certain inevitability. Introspection suggests how ideas that burst upon us in a fit of brainstorming at first raise a laugh with their oddness and later get taken seriously, even systematized, in a kind of mental double-take. The roll-the-dice venturesomeness of much aphoristic writing seems designed to facilitate such brainstorming, sacrificing continuity for the possibility of spawning creative mutations, fostering over the last few centuries what one might call an aphoristic culture.

If Chaucer does not wrest aphoristic initiative entirely away from the sententious tradition and hand it over to his characters, he does humble or humanize the *sententiae* he employs in his comic tales by showing how they change in various contexts, various mouths. (*Humble* and *humanize* imply a grounding, for both—together with *humus*—derive from the same root-meanings: *earth, earthling*.) The model of human existence Chaucer offers in such tales is predicated not on sin but on error. Chaucerian humanity is

the capacity to get it wrong: such is the experimental character of living. The etymon of *wrong* (related to *wry* and *awry*) is *to twist*. To get a *sententia* wrong is to twist it, or (with a little tweaking) to turn or trope it a few degrees so that at a slightly different orientation it may take on an entirely different sense.

Viewed sententiously, all figuration is at least slightly wrong, at best a twisting of the perfect right angle of spiritual truth to help it catch the light and lure us away from our carnal senses: bait of the Holy Ghost. The surprising, eccentric ways in which Chaucer's characters turn sententiousness awry also overturn old rhetorical priorities, implying (at their furthest poetic reach) that the truth of this troping is the troping itself—and conversely that the *sententia* is one among many forms of the fictive. (Locke is perhaps more Chaucerian than he realizes when he writes of “Maxims” or “general *Ideas*” that they “are Fictions and Contrivances.”)⁶⁹ What Chaucer shows, Shakespeare also tells: “the truest poetry is the most feigning.” In the mouth of a philosophical clown (Touchstone), sententiousness, having been humiliated and profaned, is resurrected as the paradoxical aphorism.

A more aphoristic mentality evolves as global vistas open up and literacy is more widely disseminated on the model of Erasmus' *Adages*, leading to an aesthetics of sententious forms and a proto-anthropological perspective on human mores. Urban growth and turmoil influence this development. The *Epigrams upon Proverbs* of John Heywood, a sixteenth-century humorist (and collector of proverbs), express the city dweller's wary, intellectually aggressive attitude as it paves over country wisdom with urbane wit: “*Fast bind, fast find*: Nay, thou were ‘prentice bound / And yet rannest thou away where thou couldst not be found.”⁷⁰ In a schematic way, Heywood's technique is aphoristic: As in Chaucer's case, the aphoristic effect arises partly from “timing,” from the speed and surprise of the trope that runs away from conventional expectation. From such local transmutations of sententiousness whole books of aphorisms arise, and finally a widespread aphoristic attitude, as proverb by proverb, the moral lexicon is rewritten, or written over, with “witty ideas,” “proverbs of the cultivated.”⁷¹

With Chaucer, modern authorship is born in the renunciation of (sententious) authority.⁷² The modern aphorism comes into its own when the *sententia*'s deductive form is turned to more inductive ends as history begins to resemble an ongoing *exemplum*

whose ultimate meaning awaits an unforeseen, perhaps arbitrary closure. Not that aphorisms can't be oracles: "The readiness is all" and "The rest is silence" are notable for what they *don't* say, but their very tacitness bespeaks a new quality and burden of alertness. In demanding Tacitean subtlety from literature, rhetoricians foster a *laissez-faire* hermeneutics. The reader enjoys authorial cunning "because by it he discovers his own."73 Sidney argues for the *didactic* superiority over the "precept" of the poetic example that moves us to virtue but "nothing affirms." An example with a muted precept approaches to a novelistic aesthetics. According to John M. Wallace, "after Sidney's *Defense* the number of overtly and tediously moralized histories drops off markedly."74

The Art of Forgetting

"I am so good at forgetting that I forget even my own writings. . . ."75 The theme of forgetfulness in Montaigne's *Essais* dovetails with the author's readiness to forget his theme.76 The posture of forgetfulness or folly is pervasive enough in some of the more original Renaissance texts (Erasmus' Folly: "I hate an audience that won't forget")77 to suggest that it may be in part an apotropaic ruse allowing bold mental leaps to pass for lapses. Forgetting is the art of extricating oneself from an old language-game—a kind of language-game in itself, one that involves erasing the cognitive equivalent of muscle memory. Paradox, arch-trope of the Renaissance, indicates a ticklish tenure on the margins of a linguistic system, where (as in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond") assertions like "I doubt" trap you back in the traditional enclosure, while "What do I know?" keeps you at the aphoristic edge, where questions are remarks, and a philosophical leap of doubt phases into a leap of poetic faith.

The *Canterbury Tales* is an early-Renaissance book of laughter and forgetting. Montaigne's amnesiac stance resembles the Nun's Priest's tendency to lose the narrative thread as well as Chaucer's own tendentious self-deprecation: "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde" (*General Prologue*, 746). The Nun's Priest, perhaps maturing some drab *exemplum* in his mind, is startled by an unexpected demand for a merry tale and wings it, producing a colorful narrative collage that surprises in part because it seems so surprised.78 He is unable to foresee where he is headed and forgets where he has been; whereas in Augustine's meditation on how the mind lives in time, memory both

anticipates and remembers: for Augustine's model of consciousness is a recited song—sung, one might say, by the Angel of Continuity.⁷⁹

Forgetting how to moralize his tale, the Nun's Priest in his brilliant confusion generates mutant novelties, such as the unruly superfetation of sub-*sententiae* generated by *exempla* ostensibly proffered to illustrate larger *sententiae*; thus “Mordre wol out” (3052) overrides the titular point of the story of the “two felawes” on pilgrimages, “that dremes been so drede” (3063). The fracturing of sermon form becomes nearly fractal at such moments, as the violation of “degree” reproduces itself at the smallest textual scales.⁸⁰ In losing the Augustinian thread, the Nun's Priest's consciousness-in-time becomes more real for us because it adjusts itself as it goes along—like the Pardoner, he hears himself talk, and seems “aware of his errors as he makes them.”⁸¹ Chaucer's attention to such short-term mental processes awakens our attention to our own. In such minute, discontinuous mental motions at the untidy margins of form, the logical shades into the psychological, and our subjectivity emerges.

The final lines of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* invite two kinds of memory to confront one another: a longer-term memory that recurs to a moralizing habit (blundering past the poetic logic of the fruit-and-chaff figure), and a shorter-term variety that forgets the older reading style and attends instead to the more local, specifically poetic patterning built up within *this* text as it writes over the bones of an allegorical tradition treated here, at least, as dead. The resulting cognitive dissonance is perhaps the not unpleasant strain of readerly consciousness growing another neo-“contextual” layer. It is as if we were being restrained, not by any concerted program on Chaucer's part, but by following the trajectory of his poetic leaps. A kind of pre-re-engineering session, then, at the antelucan hour *before* the dawn of the Information Age that Angus Fletcher sees figured in the data-bearing, space-traveling angels of *Paradise Lost*.⁸² And with the rising tide of information, the sometimes apocalyptic need to purge files. . . .

“A book such as this is not for reading straight through. . . . [Y]ou must be able to stick your head into it and out of it again and again and discover nothing familiar around you.”⁸³ Thus Nietzsche (our arch-aphoristic philosopher) with brilliant *Schadenfreude*, four-fifths of the way through *Daybreak*, in an aphorisms subtitled “Digression.” A kind of Nun's-Priestly (or Chaucerian short-witted) active forgetfulness is built into the

scattered look and schismatic logic of much modern aphoristic writing, where each aphorism or digressive bifurcation “plays its own game”⁸⁴ with sovereign disregard for what precedes or follows in a sequence of non sequiturs. Isolating themselves, aphorisms open up provocative interstitial blanks, typographical or logical; flirting with randomness, they ask to be read as philosophical *sortes Virgilianae* (tools for secular divination), with a free insouciance corresponding to their own way of seeing the world. To the Angel of Continuity, they must look like proverbs of Hell.

“Forgetting is essential to action,” according to Nietzsche, for whom cultural health requires marking “the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present[.]”⁸⁵ Perhaps he is recalling Montaigne’s similar sentiments expressed in “Of Pedantry.” There is a continuity to our forgetfulness and our latest aphoristic variations on Menippean themes. The historical pattern I have been tracing is transumptively compressed, for example, into Wittgenstein’s career, stretching between a logical purist phase and a later, more Menippean retrospect. Derridean *différance* perhaps over-systematizes philosophical forgetfulness as the law of the priority of accident over law, such that *logos* is rigorously interlineated with its own Menippean shadow (and vice-versa) at every turn, and philosophy tells (and entails) its own impossibility.

CODA: THAT WHICH IS ALWAYS BEGINNING

Is there a finite number of jokes in the universe?

—David Byrne

To read the *Canterbury Tales* is to entertain the odd thought that English literature as we know it was invented on a tavern wager—at any rate, as an extended gambit imperfectly retractable. And if yesterday’s (Menippean) joke is today’s (philosophical) theory, some of today’s most influential theory is a theory of jokes and knowingly a bit of a joke itself—*seriously*. (Wittgenstein remarks that an un-facetious philosophical work could be written as a series of them. Aphorisms are serious philosophical jokes.)⁸⁶

In Dante’s eyes, aphorisms belong to the labyrinth of the worldly, not to the sacred. For us, perhaps, they teach the broken knowledge of the threshold, which, intervening

between labyrinth and temple (or utopian ideal), may be all the temple we have⁸⁷—that, or a thoroughfare stretching between the ontic and the ontological, Southwark and Canterbury Cathedral. If this ludic space is really all the ground there is (“A kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal,” writes John Ashbery), then we are all perhaps permanent, permanently odd boundary-dwellers.⁸⁸

“Better . . . to stay cowering / Like this in the early lessons . . . Tomorrow would alter the sense of what had already been learned.”⁸⁹ Perhaps our emblem is *Aion*, the Heraclitean cosmic child who is perpetually learning an ever-new game, always sweeping away the pieces and starting afresh: an iconoclastic gesture; an icon in itself; perhaps merely clastic. Who is to keep score, what score is there to follow? Six centuries after the Nun’s Priest, we are still improvising.

Notes

1. *Philosophical Investigations. The English Text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1958 [1953], 119, 48e).
2. *Ibid.*, 66, 31e.
3. *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), XI, 1-12, 118-19.
4. I refer to a recently developed subdiscipline of German literary scholarship, *Aphoristik*, whose leading representative is Gerhard Neumann, author of *Ideenparadise: Untersuchungen zur Aphoristik von Lichtenberg, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel und Goethe* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976), and editor of a collection of essays by other scholars in this field, *Der Aphorismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997). Heinz Krüger’s earlier *Studien über den Aphorismus als philosophische Form* (Frankfurt am Main: Nest-Verlag, 1956) is especially noteworthy for its one-sidedly philosophical emphasis. R. H. Stephenson criticizes the theoretical bias toward “content” in much of this scholarship in “On the Widespread Use of an Inappropriate and Restrictive Model of the Literary Aphorism,” *MLR* 75 (1980): 1-17. Harald Fricke in *Aphorismus* (Stuttgart: Metzlerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984) offers a more literary reading of German aphorists that nevertheless dodges philosophical questions. The literature on aphorism also includes J. P. Stern’s outstanding *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (London, 1959); James G. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985); Geoffrey Bennington, *Sententiousness and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Klaus von Welser, *Die Sprache des Aphorismus: Formenimpliziter Argumentation von Lichtenberg bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986); and Stephan Felder, *Der Aphorismus: Begriffsspiel zwischen Philosophie und Poesie* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag).

5. *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firkow (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 238, 241.
6. See Daniel Kinney, "Erasmus' *Adagia*: Midwife to the Rebirth of Learning," in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11 (1981), 169-92, especially 178.
7. *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2.21.1394a, 182.
8. "[I]t is necessary for an enthymeme and a paradigm to be concerned with things that are for the most part capable of being other than they are" (1.2.1357a, 42). "A maxim [*gnome*] is an assertion...about things that involve actions and are to be chosen or avoided in regard to action" (2.21.1394a, 182).
9. *Ibid.*, 2.21.1395a, 185.
10. See *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1921), VIII, V, 1-2. *Sententia* originally meant "opinion" or "judgment," with an implication of political efficacy: *sententiam dare* means "to vote."
11. *Ibid.*, 34. ("*Ego vero haec lumina orationis velut oculos quisdam esse eloquentiae credo.*")
12. *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), VI, 507c, 742.
13. See, for example, *Metaphysics* 7.3. 1029a, and (on the mind as the Form of Forms) *De Anima* 3.7.432a.
14. *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), IV, 42.
15. See the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1896), s.v. *sentence*.
16. See Paul Zumthor, "L'épiphonème proverbial," *Revue des sciences humaines* 163 (1976): 313-32.
17. See Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *op. cit.*, II, 20-22.
18. For an illuminating discussion of the vicissitudes of the *exemplum* from Classical to Renaissance times, see John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
19. See *On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1357a, 42.
20. *Ibid.*, 1357b, 44.
21. "Speeches...with enthymemes excite more favorable audience reaction" (*ibid.*, 1.2.1356b, 41).
22. *Ibid.*, 2.21.1395b, 186.
23. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), with line references in parentheses.
24. In Chaucer's day *exempla* circulated (heavily moralized) in large manuscript collections such as John Bromyard's popular *Summa Praedicatorum*. See John Shaller, "The 'Nun's Priest's Tale': An Ironic Exemplum," *ELH* 42 (1985): 317-37 (324-26).

25. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (New York, 1924), 210, 207-8.
26. On pointing practices in medieval manuscripts, see M. B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 303-5. See also Andrew G. Watson, *Catalogue of Datable Manuscripts c. 700-1600 in the Department of Manuscripts, the British Library* (London: The British Museum, 1979, vol. II, plates 265, 372, 411, and 484, for examples of marginal pointing hands.
27. The “naïve idealism” of “the declining Middle Ages,” writes Huizinga (op. cit., 217), creates a “system of spiritual figures” in which “the *meaning* of a conception runs a constant risk of being lost in the too vivid *form*.” This formalism can take on a playful quality, even in personifying sacred or dogmatic concepts. One can detect a ludic strain of verbal display in some late-medieval sermons. See Etienne Gilson, *Les Idées et les lettres: Essai d’art et de philosophie* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1933). “Michel Menot et la technique du sermon médiéval,” 93-154. The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* perhaps pushes to (metaleptic) extremes a ludic tendency already active in at least the later-medieval sermon.
28. “Proverbs, Sententiae and Exempla in Chaucer’s Comic Tales: The Function of Comic Misapplication,” *Speculum* 41 (1966): 453-64. Further references to this article will be given parenthetically in the body of the text.
29. On the demonic aspect of allegory, see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964), 24-69.
30. *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 273-42.
31. According to B. E. Perry (following Lessing): “[A] fable should have only one obvious moral[.]” See his “Fable,” in Pack Carnes, ed., *Proverbia in Fabula* (Bern: P. Lang, 1988), 73.
32. Cf. Freud in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*: “Words are plastic, and may be moulded into almost any shape. There are some words which have lost their true original meaning in certain usages which they enjoy in other applications.” To illustrate, he quotes Lichtenberg reawakening a slumbering etymon: “‘How goes it?’ asked the blind man of the lame one. ‘As you see,’ replied the lame one to the blind.” Quoted in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 649. Lichtenberg’s joke is an example of a “Wellerism.”
33. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 316.
34. See Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 261.
35. Robertson, op. cit., 317.
36. *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), 87-8.
37. For two ground-breaking discussions of Menippean satire, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 230-31 and 309-14, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 112-22 and passim. For a comprehensive bibliographical study, see Eugene P. Kirk, *Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism* (New York and London: Garland, 1980).

Kirk notes (Intro., xv): “medieval learning...comes to depend more and more upon epitomes...taken out of earlier authors by those whose approach to the scarcity of texts...was to quote, summarize, or abbreviate down to essential portions the materials of previous cultures’ learning.” Scarcity of texts and coarse-grained knowledge of (especially Greek) originals helps account for medieval sententiousness and its bias toward “content.” Epitomes condense in anti-aphoristic, “style-less” ways. For a full-length study of Chaucer’s use of the Menippean tradition (through Boethius), see F. Anne Payne, *Chaucer and Menippean Satire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981). Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* is for Bakhtin an example of “reduced laughter,” denaturing the style’s seriocomic genius in a way that sets the tone for much later literature in the high-serious philosophical vein. (But *vide supra*, note 27).

38. Muscatine, op. cit., 237.

39. *The Discovery of Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 191-226.

40. *Ibid.*, 201.

41. My reading here is indebted to Shillers (art. cit.), who draws attention to the complex use Chaucer makes of animal characters, combining the naturalism of the *Roman de Renart* with the idealism of the clerical fable-*exemplum*.

42. See Eric Havelock’s seminal analysis of the process by which Plato forges a philosophical “syntax” out of Homeric poetry, in *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

43. Donaldson, *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 944.

44. *Paradiso*, op. cit., XXVII, 86, 306.

45. *Ibid.*, I, 19-21, 5.

46. According to Erich Auerbach, characters in the *Inferno* have a physical and psychological vividness that “breaks bounds” such that “[f]igure surpasses fulfillment.” (*Mimesis*, trans. Willard Trask [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953], 200.) But this becomes less true as we ascend from the heart of matter toward the allegorical heart of the matter in the *Paradiso*. Chaucerian mimesis elevates to the earthly light of day an unruly physical vivacity Dante confines underground.

47. The phrase is John Gardner’s in his *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 290-92.

48. Unlike self-privileging *comique significatif*, *comique absolu* overcomes its satirical rancor in a giddy, poetic exuberance, best exemplified for Baudelaire by English pantomime, derived in part from the *commedia dell’arte*. See “De l’essence du rire,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Marcel Raymond (Lausanne: La Guide du Livre, 1976), 1057-75.

49. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 77. Note how this happy falling (like the “downward leaping” in Stevens) transvalues the trope of “downward flight” (*basso batter l’ali*) that in Dante (*Paradiso* XI, 3) expresses disapproval of the merely worldly or earthly.

50. Compare Chaucer’s undoing of *per integumentum* hermeneutics here with Wittgenstein’s sarcasms in the *Investigations* at the expense of the search for unitary essences, as of the concept “deriving.” “In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of

its leaves.” But “what is essential to deriving... was not hidden beneath the surface of this case, but this ‘surface’ was one case out of the family of cases of deriving.” (164, 66e). In each text a vertical is replaced by a horizontal orientation, a surface-depth relation by a lateral spread of overlapping “cases.”

51. The following lines by the twelfth-century poet Walter of England anticipate and may have influenced the Chaucer of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* both in his use of the fruit-and-chaff” figure and in his *laissez-faire* attitude toward his own tale’s interpretation: “*Si fructus plus flore placet, fructum lege / Plus fructu, florem; si duo, carpe duo.*” Walter, nevertheless, proceeds to come down on the side of allegorical interpretation: “*Verborum levitas morum fert pondus honestum, / Ut nucleum celat arida testa bonum.*” Quoted in Stephen Manning, “The Nun’s Priest’s Morality and the Medieval Attitude Toward Fables,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59 (1960), 414.

52. “*Si l’escripture ne me ment, / Tout est pour nostre enseignement, / Quanqu’il a es livres escript, / Soient bon ou mal escript.*” Quoted in *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: Vol. I, The Canterbury Tales, Part Nine, The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 256n.

53. See the *Republic*, 476c.

54. See *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 120.

55. *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (London, 1952), 78.

56. Fr. Schlegel, *op. cit.*, 37, 23.

57. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 67-8.

58. On Shakespearean inclusiveness, see Stephen Booth, “On the Value of Hamlet,” in Norman Rabkin, ed., *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 137-76.

59. See Pearsall, *op. cit.*, 256n.

60. Told by Schiller that his conception of the *Urpflanze* was only an idea, Goethe replied: “Well, so much the better: it means that I have ideas without knowing it, and even *see them with my eyes[.]*” Quoted in Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: World Publishing, 1950), 6. Wittgenstein discusses the relationship between two “aspects” of seeing, concrete and relational, in *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xi, 193e and *passim*. See also Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Diary of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 489-519.

61. Kinney, *art. cit.*, 189. (*The Praise of Folly*, on the other hand, with its outrageously sophisticated troping of proverbs, is of course very much in the Menippean spirit of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.)

62. Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, 116, 48e.

63. Ernst Robert Curtius, in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1953), 16.7, 319-26, traces the topos of the (divinely authored) Book of Nature from Alain de Lille through such figures as Paracelsus and beyond. Paracelsus (like other Renaissance thinkers), subverts the metaphysics of the trope by taking the trope itself *too literally*: “Another country, another page.” Bacon, too, compares empirical research to learning the alphabet of nature, a trope perhaps still active in

the concept of the genetic “code” as well as in structuralist and post-structuralist notions of omni-textuality. Curtius also emphasizes the importance to both the religious and scientific imaginations of the tiniest creatures, like the ant in the Book of Proverbs, whose ways we are to consider and grow wise. According to Curtius, Hermann Boerhaave, the aphoristic early eighteenth-century physician, had just this Biblical proverb in mind in publishing Jan Swammerdam’s microscopic studies of insects under the title *Biblia Naturae*. The “minute particulars” of Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell,” as well as his drawing, *The Ghost of a Flea*, may owe something to perspectives opened up by the microscope; the odd physiognomy of Blake’s flea recalls the etching of a flea in Robert Hook’s *Micrographia*. See James King, *William Blake: His Life* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 214-15.

64. Martin Kessel, quoted in von Welser, op. cit., 85. My translation.

65. My reading tallies in many respects with Richard Lanham’s version of Chaucer as Ovidian rhetorical gamester in *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), “Games and High-Seriousness: Chaucer,” 65-81.

66. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 58.

67. Panofsky points in particular to Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Annunciation*, dated 1344 (op. cit., 57-8). Here the “realistic” coordinates of the tile floor seem to anchor the figures of Mary and Gabriel in three-dimensional, earthly space in a way reminiscent of the concreteness of Chaucer’s description of the barnyard ground in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. Interestingly, Lorenzetti’s sense of linear perspective in this painting is restricted to the rendering of the floor. It is as if the visual “feel” for linear perspective rose from the ground up, and only later were orthogonals in both the upper and lower regions of the picture plane made to converge on a single point on the horizon, giving the visual space a kind of *lateral telos* not quite as neutral as Panofsky’s notion of directionless space implies. The horizon may beckon as the visible verge of an earthly otherness (as an undiscovered country, perhaps) to be explored. (Projective geometry and mapmaking take the perception-in-depth of painterly perspective and press it, one might say, into surface, partly for purposes of commerce and empire-building.) The affinities between aphorism and the horizontal vanishing-point in Renaissance painting deserve further study. Also of note in this connection is the impression of “real infinity” made by the discontinuity in some Renaissance paintings, where “the beginning of the [represented] space no longer coincides with the border of the picture” (60). “[P]recisely the finiteness of the picture,” notes Panofsky, “makes perceptible the infiniteness and continuity of the space” (61). The dialectics of fragment and infinity, the arbitrary and the absolute, comes to the fore as “irony” in the German Romantic aphorism.

68. À propos of Blake’s art, Joseph Viscomi warns us not to think of art as “translating preconceived ideas or images into a given medium,” for “the image *is* the idea.” (“The Workshop,” *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982), “Inside the Blake Industry,” 405, 407.) Supplement “image” with “trope” and these remarks are also pertinent to aphorism.

69. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), IV, vii, 596.

70. Quoted in Lawrence Manley, “Proverbs, Epigrams, and Urbanity in Renaissance London,” *English Literary Renaissance* 15 (1985): 247-76. My discussion in this paragraph owes much to this article.

71. Fr. Schlegel, op. cit., 29, 23 (translation modified).
72. On Chaucer's "de-authorizing" of his texts, see A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 105-6.
73. Virgilio Malvaerzzi, preface to *Discourses on Cornelius Tacitus*, quoted in John M. Wallace, "Examples are Best Precepts": Readers and Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Poetry," in *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 272-90 (282).
74. *Ibid.*, 283.
75. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), II:17, 494.
76. "The titles of my chapters do not always embrace their matter" (*Ibid.*, III:9, 761).
77. *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York and London: Norton, 1989). 87. In *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), Frances Yates notes that while Erasmus in his rhetorical theory took a casual position on artificial memory techniques taught in the *Ad Herennium* and practiced devoutly in the Middle Ages (127), later Humanists could be outright dismissive. Melancthon omitted the art of memory from rhetoric entirely, and in general "its importance dwindled in the purely humanist tradition," though it "grew in the Hermetic tradition" (368).
78. My argument here is indebted to Onno Oerlemans, "The Seriousness of the Nun's Priest's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 26 (1992): 317-27.
79. See *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 10.28, 278.
80. Robert M. Jordan makes a related point in his *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 136-48.
81. Oerlmans, art. cit., 325.
82. See *Colors of the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 68-89.
83. *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), V, 454-457.
84. Montaigne's phrase (I:26, op. cit., 127).
85. "On the Uses of Disadvantages of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 62.
86. See Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 29. Goethe said of Lichtenberg: "Wherever he makes a joke, there a problem lies hidden." (Quoted in Stern, op. cit. 216.) Cf. Wittgenstein (*Investigations*, 111): "[W]hy do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)" The tense ambivalence of Wittgensteinian laughter emerges in another anecdote in Malcolm's memoir (*loc. cit.*). Wittgenstein would sometimes laugh as he thought aloud in class. "But if any member of the class were to chuckle...he would exclaim in reproof, 'No, no: I'm serious!'"
87. I borrow these terms (threshold, temple, labyrinth) from Angus Fletcher. See *The Prophetic Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) and *Colors of the Mind*, especially "Threshold, Sequence, and Personification in Coleridge."
88. John Ashbery, "Soonest Mended," quoted in *Selected Poems* (New York: Viking, 1985), 88.
89. *Ibid.*