

**EXIT FUN-HOUSE: QUEST FOR CLOSURE IN CHAUCER  
AND WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS**

by

**PHYLLIS PORTNOY-JOHNSON**

**A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

Department of English  
University of Manitoba  
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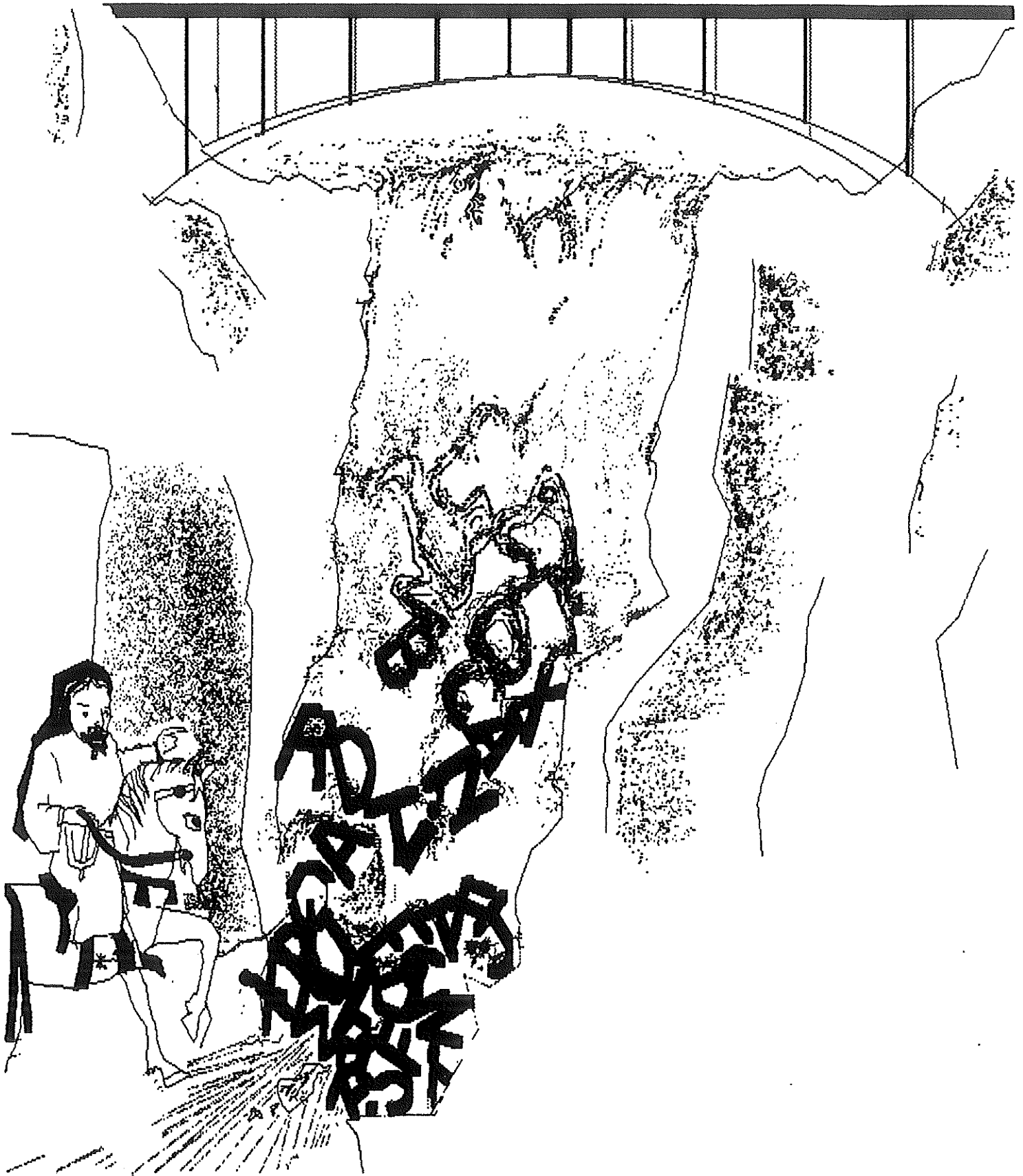
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I wish to thank Robert Emmett Finnegan, Professor,  
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direction.

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## ABSTRACT

Closure of a medieval and a modern poetic quest takes the form of a problematic palinode: the unexpected re-statement ('palin', again; 'ode', sing), of Chaucer in his Retractions to the Canterbury Tales, and of Williams in Book V of Paterson, has generated considerable critical debate over the issues of unity and artistic control. Given that disjunction, not unity, is the statement that a poem may present, is it possible to demonstrate an artistic textual logic, if not a coherence, within the process of the poem, wherein problematic closure is an essential structural element?

This study proposes that the two closures in question provide the only suitable exits from the 'language game' for each poet. The study is organized into four chapters. Chapter I outlines two critical perspectives, the language theory of Jacques Derrida, and of Jacques Lacan, which will be applied to both quest and closure in the Canterbury Tales and Paterson. Chapter II presents Chaucer's House of Fame as a meeting-place, or 'convention' of both Derridean and Lacanian critiques of convention, and as an 'ars poetica' suitable and relevant to both Chaucer and Williams. Chapters III and IV are analyses of the Canterbury Tales and Paterson respectively. In these chapters, a review of the criticism of the closure of each work precedes and accompanies the analysis of the poem, and the two proposed critical approaches are combined to trace the course of each poetic quest to its problematic end.

The conclusion of the study compares each poet's concern for language as a means to truth, and his use of closure to figure the tenability of that goal. The comparison will demonstrate, I think, that Chaucer is as 'modern' as Williams, and that, surprisingly, it is Williams, and not Chaucer, who carries on the House of Fame's delight in the absurdity of the human condition.



## CHAPTER I

### CONSTRUCTING THE FUN-HOUSE: Critical Perspectives of Derrida and Lacan

#### 1. Introduction

Jacques Derrida opens "Plato's Pharmacy" with a dubious invitation to the reader to search for "disappearances":

A text is not a text unless it hides from its first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.

And hence, perpetually and essentially, they run the risk of being definitely lost. Who will ever know of such disappearances? <sup>1</sup>

The poetic quests of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Carlos Williams are both, in part, attempts to probe, pursue, and "book" the elusive language of their own texts. Both poems are resistant to acts of interpretation that confine analysis to metaphoric structures, or that privilege any integrated system over its syntagmatic components. Presuppositions of organic unity, of the enclosed or 'framed' work of art, of the governing principles of similarity and mimesis, have led readers to criticize unwieldy works like the Canterbury Tales and Paterson as flawed, or inconsistent. This study proposes to counteract this critical tendency by bringing the structural principle of 'metonymy' into the poetic analysis, as a necessary supplement to the often preferred 'metaphoric' principle,<sup>2</sup> and to demonstrate that the dissonant interaction between these two structural principles,

along with an even more basic dissonance imbedded in the language itself, combines in each poem to express a profound epistemological skepticism. The closure of each poem serves to emphasize this philosophical questioning of the poetic craft in a manner that is problematic, and yet appropriate.

Post-modern expressions of discontinuity - 'graft', 'differance', 'supplement', 'lack' - provide useful critical tools for defining and describing these dissonances. It is not that the dissonances are post-modern discoveries; rather, because the post-modern approach is itself as discordant and as divorced (as possible) from traditional totalizing systems, it is perhaps freer to investigate a poetic quest which seeks to question its own poetics.

The Canterbury Tales and Paterson are two such poetic quests. This chapter will define and describe the post-modern concepts relevant to these two works; first, the notions of 'graft', 'differance', and 'supplement' which Jacques Derrida developed, in part, in his analysis of Plato's Phaedrus, and then the corresponding ideas of 'lack' and 'desire', 'metaphor' and 'metonymy', gathered from the Ecrits of Jacques Lacan. The two perspectives will provide both model and critique of poetic closure.

## 2. The Derridean Perspective

In an 'epilogue'<sup>3</sup> to the Phaedrus dialogue, Socrates devalues all forms of written discourse:

For writing certainly has this terrible power,  
Phaedrus, as if truly like the painting of living

animals. For the offspring of that stand forth like living animals, but if someone were to question them, they maintain a solemn silence. And it is the same with logoi; you might opine that they speak as if having intelligence, but if someone were to question them, wishing to understand what is spoken, they always signify one and the same thing. (275d)

But he who believes that, in the written word, there is necessarily much playfulness, and that no speech, in meter or without, worthy of great seriousness, has yet been written...but that the best of them, in truth, become reminders to us of what we know...perhaps that man, Phaedrus, is such as you and I might pray we may become. (278a-b)<sup>4</sup>

Socrates' distrust of the received wisdom of the written word has become a familiar philosophical stance. Many such enquiries into the nature of human understanding conclude with a similar recognition, expressed in different forms and styles of language, of the "terrible power" of the word to elude the querter. At the same time, each piece of writing which addresses this dilemma has been constrained to operate "as if" its language has somehow been able to communicate its message of self-reflexive skepticism - which, by some illogical magic, it has.

'Elusion', from 'ludere', 'to play', is both the basis and the conclusion of Socrates' critique: one who knows will treat writing as a game, never expecting to achieve anything "serious" by it. In Socrates' myth of Theuth and Thammuz, the gift of writing is set alongside those of draughts and dice by the indiscriminating Theuth (and the ironic Plato). The invention is called a "pharmakon", a word which can mean both "cure" and "poison". Plato's King Thammuz, a contrasting figure of absolute authority and wisdom, condemns the Promethean industry of Theuth for what it is - a less-than-perfect approach to knowledge and

truth. On the surface, the Phaedrus exalts the art of speech over the art of writing, and exposes the proffered "cure" for mortal cognitive limitations as a "poison", rather than an aid to wisdom. This double meaning of the word "pharmekon", although (or perhaps because) never explicitly manifest in the dialogue, constitutes for Derrida "the movement, the locus and the play of difference". The ambivalence of the word at once asserts and subverts Socrates' argument:

The "pharmekon" is 'ambivalent' because it constitutes the element in which opposites are opposed, the movement and play by which each relates back to the other, reverses itself and passes into the other...The "pharmekon" is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the 'differance' of difference.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida explores a text for such dissimulating and disrupting 'play' through the deconstruction of phonetic, morphological, and etymological relations, or the semantic connections established, as in the Phaedrus, even by a single word. In "Plato's Pharmacy", Derrida uses the multiple play of meanings of "pharmekon" as an illustration of the energy generated by a 'graft', "a little stitch woven into the back of the canvas" which "marks"<sup>6</sup> the tissue of Plato's text: the varied and repeated use of the word in this dialogue, and throughout the Platonic corpus, grafts its double meaning of cure-poison onto the related words "pharmekus" ("magician", "prisoner"), onto "pharmakos" ("scapegoat", whose exclusion purifies the city, just as the exclusion of writing is meant to purify the privileged orders of thought and speech), and onto "Pharmacia" ("administration of medicine and/or poison"; here,

companion to the ravaged Muse in the myth which opens the Phaedrus).

The 'graft' in the text is part of what Derrida identified as "a systemic production of differences, the production of a system of differences - a differance".<sup>7</sup> The term 'differance' is itself such a 'grafting' onto one another of the spatial ("differer", to differ) and temporal ("differer", to defer) modes of structure and event, comparable to the play upon "pharmekon": the "-ance" of the neologism sounds the same as "-ence", but makes the new term into a substantive, which may then encompass the multiple meanings of difference-differing-deferring. The silent deformation of the term demonstrates, as does "pharmekon", that writing cannot be seen as simply the inferior representation or displacement of speech.

In her introduction to Dissemination, Barbara Johnson notes that Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics is especially directed against this privileging of the spoken word over the written word, and against the corresponding belief in the "self-presentation of meaning" which Derrida termed "logocentrism": a "presentness" of unity, identity, and immediacy is set before and above distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment.<sup>8</sup> Writing is then mediate and debased in relation to a supposed immediacy and plenitude of the spoken word. What Plato in his logocentric bias is attacking, maintains Derrida, is the substitution of writing, a mere mnemonic device, for pure thought; of the "prosthesis for the organ".<sup>9</sup> In the Phaedrus, the temporal and spatial distance effected by writing is purported to

be a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, an impurity that admits all forms of adulteration which the immediacy of speech would have prevented. "What Plato dreams of", says Derrida, "is a memory with no sign. That is, with no supplement".<sup>10</sup> For Socrates,

Memory is contaminated by its first substitute...Instead of quickening life in the original, the "pharmakon" can at best only restore its monuments. It is...but a remedy or tonic for its external signs...an empirical, contingent, superficial agent, generally a fall or collapse...<sup>11</sup>

But for Derrida, the 'differance' of the substitution-as-supplement is that "quickening life", vital, but 'dangerously' violent:

the space of writing is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation...Why is the surrogate or supplement dangerous?...Its slidings slip it out of the single alternative, presence/ absence.<sup>12</sup>

The supplement is "dangerous"<sup>13</sup> because it is subversive. It "wrenches apart the neatness of the metaphorical binary oppositions"<sup>14</sup> (presence/ absence, good/ evil, inside/ outside, sacred/ profane, speech/ writing) which characterize the Western tradition of logocentric closure,<sup>15</sup> forcing and holding apart the 'between' in the hierarchical ordering assumed for the two terms. Derrida's deciphering of the "dangerous supplement" in the Phaedrus demonstrates how Plato's text functions against its own logocentric assertions by inscribing another message beneath the text's surface.<sup>16</sup> The sub-text does not then destroy the surface or become the privileged reading, however. Rather, it restores the alterity to the alternative offered by the text, by setting into perpetual motion an 'undecidability'<sup>17</sup> between the binary

oppositions, and so preventing the stasis prophesied by King Thammuz.

The supplement locates the life of the text in absence, not presence; in the "space" of writing. The 'undecidability' of 'differance' is the source of the transformational potential in the text, both for the reader, who must "dig up something that is really nothing - a difference, a gap, an interval, a trace",<sup>18</sup> and for the text:

Without the possibility of differance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space...this desire carries in itself the destiny of its nonsatisfaction.<sup>19</sup>

This supplementary logic in the text continues to supply fresh "breathing-spaces", or breaks, in a dialectic of "desire" which would close over the space. The energy of the supplement creates a "break-through, a beyond and a beneath of that (Platonic) enclosure",<sup>20</sup> and so disrupts the desired fulfillment at the same time as it enlarges the scope ("beyond and "beneath") of the text:<sup>21</sup>

that dangerous supplement...breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it, yet lets itself at once be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing.<sup>22</sup>

It would appear that for Derrida, closure is inimical to the vitality of the text. Derrida's deconstructive project is itself another quest for "disappearances"<sup>23</sup>, a search for "something like an opening" which is committed to the "impossibility of closing a structural phenomenology".<sup>24</sup> The economy of 'differance'

allows language to avoid the irreversible investment in the end, to discover all possible alternative routes:

to protect itself by deferring the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve. And all the conceptual oppositions that furrow Freudian thought relate each concept to the other like movements of a detour, within the economy of differance.<sup>25</sup>

Gayatri Spivak, in her Translator's Preface to Of Grammatology, describes the deconstructive endeavor as an "adventure":

If a metaphor seems to suppress its implications, we shall catch at that metaphor. We shall follow its adventures through the text and see the text coming undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability.<sup>26</sup>

The Derridean strategy provides for an uncovering of repressed points of weakness in the fabric of the text: the dialectic of the 'supplement' is disrupted at a point in its itinerary, the text is opened up to view, and its synchronic makeup placed under analysis. The strategy reveals a 'graft' of 'differance' which has both focused and 'disseminated' a variety of influences upon both reader and text.

Jacques Lacan describes a similar textual phenomenon of repression, concealment and disappearance. For both Derrida and Lacan, closure of the dialectic of desire is equated to repression; opening, to the release of energy, or 'jouissance'. Lacan's psychoanalytic search for the origins of the symptom, and for cure, however, involves an active re-recovery and re-tracing of events leading to the structural repression, as opposed to Derrida's more static<sup>27</sup> gathering/ disseminating. The Lacanian approach adds the role of guide to that of critical spectator and therefore can supply a complementary diachronic



model for following the text's adventure along its broken dialectic, and for interpreting the function of its structures.

### 3. The Lacanian Perspective

Lacan provides another model for dissonance:

There is nothing in the unconscious which accords with the body. The unconscious is discordant. The unconscious is that which, by speaking, determines the subject as being, but as being to be crossed through with that metonymy by which I support desire, in so far as it is endlessly impossible to speak as such.<sup>28</sup>

Lacan's prose itself figures what he perceives to be the inescapably perverse nature of language: "discordant", "crossed", "impossible". His own complex and elusive writing discourages the reader from building premature theoretical constructions upon the text, and demonstrates, in its breaking of conventional forms, his endeavor to upset and re-direct Freud's psychic hierarchy: of an ordered consciousness which controls a disordered Unconscious.<sup>29</sup>

In Lacan's revision of the Freudian model, conscious and unconscious are "assymmetrically co-present":<sup>30</sup> the unconscious 'inner' structure maps the 'outer' structure of conscious conceptualizing, thereby blurring the traditional distinction of inside/ outside. This mapping function is itself governed according to the laws of linguistic experience, which, like the law of Derrida's "imperceptible text", "hides from its first comer, from the first glance". For Lacan, though, the law does not remain forever imperceptible, only inescapable.

Lacan took as his starting point Freud's observation, that the Unconscious employed a distinct kind of language. The

Unconscious could then be understood as having a structure... "The Unconscious is structured like a language".<sup>31</sup> Lacan's new focus upon the Unconscious as a subversive but organized force challenged classic psychoanalysis just as Derrida challenged philosophy: according to Malcolm Bowie, Lacan's writing in fact "proposes itself as a critique of all discourses and all ideologies".<sup>32</sup> The correlation between psyche and language invites a structural critique of discourse which can investigate the nature of the 'speaking subject'<sup>33</sup> by treating the psyche as a text, or, conversely, can investigate the nature of a text by treating the text as a psyche.

To date, literary criticism (including Lacan's) has used Lacan's insights for the most part to assist in a rhetorical analysis of psychic processes (the Oedipal complex, Narcissism, the 'double', the 'schism', transference), or to apply Lacan's linguistic constructs to character and plot development. For the purposes of this study, however, Lacan's novel pairing of language and unconscious will be restricted to the 'structuring' which is the link in the analogy, "the Unconscious is structured like a language".<sup>34</sup> The analogy will be collapsed to combine a focus upon both the 'speaking subject' and the text, by positing that (here, at least) the poem is the speaking subject. Since, according to Lacan, it is the "speaking" which "determines the subject",<sup>35</sup> it is the speaking, with its "desire...which escapes the subject in its structure and effects", which will be the object of study.

The lure and play of "desire" is the essence of Lacan's conception of both language and unconscious. His critique concentrates upon moments of failure and discontinuity in language, and the attendant "splitting"<sup>36</sup> in the speaking subject. The concept of 'splitting' is developed through an inversion of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model of the sign. For Saussure, the linguistic sign represents a sudden and irreversible bonding between two distinct realms, the signified (the concept) and the signifier (the sound-image), each of which was, in itself, fluid and undifferentiated.<sup>37</sup> Each new bonding in the sign-system contributes to a larger language system which is total and synchronic, complete at every moment, as is each sign.

For Lacan, this wholeness and stability is available to the subject only at a mythical moment in his existence, a 'mirror stage' of perfect reflection of the self. From this transitional moment of "jubilation"<sup>38</sup> onwards, Lacan describes a basic discontinuity between the two levels of signification. Following Roman Jakobson's perception, that diachronic change in a language system effects a "rupture" in the equilibrium of the system,<sup>39</sup> he combines linguistic and rhetorical concepts with psychic functions: Jakobson's global oppositions between the 'metaphoric' or 'paradigmatic' mode and the 'metonymic' or 'syntagmatic' mode become the models for repression and desire,<sup>40</sup> and for the contentious interaction between the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic" orders of cognition.<sup>41</sup>

Repression is described by Lacan as a 'metaphoric' replacement of one signifier for another, in a subject's attempt

to regain his imagined 'mirror stage' harmony. The repression of the original signifier forges an invisible link in the chain of signification, which is always increasing, through the mediation of replacement, the distance between the signifier that is most accessible and visible, and those that have become invisible and unconscious (including, of course, the original signifier).<sup>42</sup>

Lacan elaborates:

"the signifying chain" gives an approximate idea: rings of a necklace that is a ring in a ring in another necklace made of rings.<sup>43</sup>

The "bar", which in Saussure's model signifies the unity of the signifying relationship,<sup>44</sup> becomes in Lacan's reversal a "barrier resisting signification".<sup>45</sup> Lacan's revision of Saussure is to give the signifier pre-eminence. The metaphoric relationship of signifier and signified is described as a "fall":

Metaphor must be defined as the implantation, in a signifying chain, of another signifier whereby the supplanted signifier falls to the level of a signified and, as a latent signifier, perpetuates there the interval in which another signifying chain may be grafted.<sup>46</sup>

Thus the potential fulfillment of metaphoric signification is never realized.

The subject fares no better upon the "rails of metonymy":

The enigmas that desire seems to pose for a 'natural philosophy' - its frenzied miming the abyss of the infinite, the secret collusion with which it envelops the pleasure of knowing and of joyful domination, these amount to nothing more than the derangement of the instinct that comes from being caught on the rails - eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else - of metonymy.<sup>47</sup>

In this "frenzied" process, one signifier relates to another by association, and that another, and so on and on into the "abyss

of the infinite", in a constant displacement of energy. The relation between signifier and signified (from which meaning is generated) is mediated through a chain of signifiers, themselves connected by meaning, and it is this mediation that is responsible for "irreducibility" and "resistance to signification":

the metonymic structure...is the connection between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation...in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports.<sup>48</sup>

The elision of the signifier by the metonym marks the same "lack of being" in the relationship as did the bar; as with metaphor, desire aims at satisfaction always elsewhere, always straining after a more adequate substitute for the lost object.

Since no concatenation of signifiers ever really grasps entirely the "being" of the object, all post mirror-stage discourse is essentially metonymic. A subject's entry into this pre-existing sign-system automatically begins for him an "endlessly impossible" process of 'lack' and 'desire':

Symbols envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes in the world, those who are going to engender him...so total that they bring to his birth the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade.<sup>49</sup>

Desire thus compels the subject to seek word-for-word (metaphoric) or word-to-word (metonymic) bonding.<sup>50</sup> Either way, 'lack', not communion, is the discovery at the end of the quest, since every word presupposes the absence of the object it

signifies, and every thought remains inarticulate without the word to (inadequately) express it.

The supremacy of the signifier is itself given supremacy in Lacan's writings through the 1956 "Seminar on the Purloined Letter", an expressly allegorical illustration of his theories which he placed at the beginning of his Ecrits. The "subject" of the story is a letter, a migratory signifier, whose complicated path of displacements as it changes hands within a complex web of intersubjective perceptions, determines the actions and the destinies of the characters :

This is indeed what happens in the repetition automatism...but what is illustrated here is more gripping still: it is not only the subject, but the subjects, grasped in their intersubjectivity, who line up...and who, more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them.<sup>51</sup>

The repetition of the structures in two similar scenes, involving two triangles of characters, is governed by the effects of the letter (the signifier), whose undetermined content (the signified) functions as the lure of desire.<sup>52</sup>

It is desire which sets this process in motion: a sequence of three glances enacts a 'dialectic of the gaze':

This (first) glance presupposes two others, which it embraces in its vision of the breach left in their fallacious complementarity...<sup>53</sup>

Invoking the "politics of the ostrich", Lacan illustrates how unlikely it is that the "insistence" of the signifying chain can ever come to rest, or that 'truth' can ever be visualized:

In order to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, we would willingly seek a model in the technique legendarily attributed to the

ostrich...for that technique...divided as it here is among three partners, the second believing itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear...<sup>54</sup>

The "subversion of the subject"<sup>55</sup> appears to be absolute, unending, and ludicrous.

There is another side, however, to the determinism of Lacan's thought. His laws of unconscious/ language, although oppressive, are also regenerative: the metaphoric law, although itself determined by metonymy, is at the same time a "creative spark", and a collection of disseminated verbal energy.<sup>56</sup> And metonymy, through its insufficient closure of the gap in the insisting chain, is responsible for what Lacan called a "remainder": what is left over from the incomplete metonymic displacements is the source of the "drive" towards knowledge. The natural tendency of the subject is to attempt, through the metaphoric mode, to "faire un", to prevent re-combination. Unchecked by metonymy, metaphor will use its "creative spark" to "drive on, demanding sacrifice after sacrifice until Nothing remains without remainder".<sup>57</sup> The unconscious' insistence upon self-expression overrides any such attainment of "the attractive zero", or "the zero point of desire"<sup>58</sup>, yet it is founded upon exactly this desire. In this way, 'lack', like the 'dangerous supplement' which expands the subject's scope "beyond" its confines, opens rather than closes the gap, "beyond" its life-threatening desire to return to a stable state.

#### 4. Perspectives on Closure

Lacan mocks "the inanity of the discourse of knowledge...asserting itself with its closure". In any discourse subject to the laws of language, truth "limps".<sup>59</sup> Like Derrida, Lacan perceives the dissonance and instability of language to be the source of its continued vitality. For both Lacan and Derrida, the alternative to the frustrating 'supplementary' process of 'lack' and 'desire', and to the disjuncture of 'differance' and 'splitting', is the silence of 'clôture', what Fredric Jameson calls "the conceptual ceiling of Western thought".<sup>60</sup> In view of this shared skeptical attitude, Lacan's unexpected 'clôture' of the signifier's insistence at the end of the "Seminar on the Purloined Letter" seems to Derrida to be an unbearable capitulation to logocentrism, an attempt to 'faire un'. To Lacan's ending:

It was already implicit and easy to derive from the title of our tale, according to the very formula we have long submitted to your discretion: in which the sender...receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the "purloined letter", nay the "letter in sufferance" means is that a letter always arrives at its destination.<sup>61</sup>,

Derrida responds:

The remaining structure of the letter, contrary to the final words of the Seminar...is that a letter can always not arrive at its destination.<sup>62</sup>

Derrida expresses the same disappointment in Plato's anticlimactic ending of the Phaedrus:

The authority of truth, of dialectics, of seriousness, of presence, will not be gainsaid at the close of this admirable movement...<sup>63</sup>



Derrida finds both Lacan and Plato trapped, in their attempts to "reconstitute truth",<sup>64</sup> into betraying in their closures the more 'true' untenability of truth which the body of their works expresses. But does Derrida himself not fall prey to the same trap, when he concludes his "Purveyor of Truth" with Lacan's own voice, cited against itself as an authoritative underlining of his own statement against closure? Lacan stated that "The signifier is a means neither of expressing nor of hiding thoughts, but of underlining them in words."<sup>65</sup> It is possible that neither Lacan nor Plato is softening his stance, but that, true to their acute sense of the "necessary playfulness" of language, each is acting as straight-man to the lively 'differance'/ 'splitting' of his own discourse, using the words, the closing ones especially, as an "underlining" or "reminder" of the argument.

Derrida's critique of Lacan assumes the very unity of signification which Lacan decries: he attributes a (conventional) concept to the signifier 'destination'. The word, placed at the end of the sentence which ends Lacan's Seminar, has been exposed throughout the discourse for all its elusiveness: the 'destination' of the signifier is whatever place it has compelled its mediators to bring it; the 'destiny' of its signified is always determined and secondary. "Destination" has been emptied, in the context of Lacan's Seminar, of any conventional meaning of logical and foreseen outcome. "Destination" as Derrida reads it implies a perfect circuit between sender-receiver, where each has in mind the same signified. But in Lacan's critique, when "the

sender receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form" (and both "sender" and "receiver" are signifiers whose signifieds change in the course of the story), that message must be a glance of desire, inevitably subject to its metonymic law, where every recognition is at once a finding and a failure to find: "What I look at is never what I wish to see".<sup>66</sup>

Lacan's insistence upon the "title" in his final words of the Seminar is a "reminder" that "purloin" should recall the disseminated signified of 'far away' ('loign', far). "According to the very formula", that is, the "reverse form" (to Saussure) of the algorithm which expresses the signified's slipping, any attempt at an agreed upon conceptualizing of "destination" between writer and reader ("sender" and "receiver") is a belated gesture, as the signified is 'always already' far away.

In a similar way, the closure of the Phaedrus is in fact a final deconstructive coup which works with, not against, Derrida's deconstructive reading. The dialogue ends with a surprising tribute to the young and promising Isocrates - a kind of political in-joke for Plato, since Isocrates is, at the time of the dialogue, an old and (in Plato's estimation) a failed writer, and a destroyer rather than a purveyor of true knowledge.<sup>67</sup> The exemplum of Isocrates in fact supports Derrida's reading, by 'underlining' the same double-bind exposed by the 'pharmakon': (Isocrates') desire for writing as remedy is revealed to be a 'poison' to the acquisition of knowledge. To stand before a 'silent' piece of writing, which encodes an authoritative message that warns against trusting any

authoritative piece of writing, is a *mise en abyme* (worthy of Derrida himself) which re-activates those fixed words for each new reader. Closure, in Plato's critique, and in Lacan's and then Derrida's, is thus another revealing manifestation of 'differance' or 'splitting' effected in these cases by the outer layer of the discourse (the frame) rather than the inner (the individual words).

\* \* \*

Plato's Phaedrus appears appealingly post-modern in its Derridean reading. Can deconstruction re-activate other works of literature whose logocentric 'alterity' marks them, like the out-moded writing which Socrates condemns, as silenced and context-bound, and so close the gap of time for the modern reader? If so, then perhaps other quests for knowledge can be shown to share similar insights into an unchanging human condition.

The Canterbury Tales and Paterson seem to be two very different poetic quests which reach across the centuries to each other in precisely this manner. The recently supplemented era of Robertsonian Chaucer criticism, however, did much to keep these two poems at an irreconcilable distance. By treating the dissonant 'gap' which Chaucer's *Retractions* exposes in the work as a 'leap' into faith, this school of criticism was able to conclude triumphantly a (mis)reading of the entire Chaucer corpus which had uniformly imposed a 'signified' of logocentric piety upon even the most irreverent of Chaucer's 'signifiers'. In a more recent critical turn, Chaucer's 'meaning' has been twisted

from religious symbolism to ironic reversal, another attempt to demonstrate that Chaucer meant exactly the opposite of what he said.

The beauty of the post-modern approach is its embracement, rather than effacement of dissonances, and its deconstruction of such uncompromising absolutes as both the typological or ironic readings require. In both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson a dissonant 'differance' or 'splitting' can be isolated as the initial dynamic impulse 'driving' the poem-as-subject into and through its process of 'lack' and 'desire'. In both poems, the discordant multiplicities which the poem both enacts and discusses is underlined by its problematic closure of the process. Of such discourse, which operates 'as if' its language could enact what it asserts by repeating the structure it is analyzing, Derrida (echoing Lacan?) comments: "it limps and closes badly".<sup>68</sup>

In Margins of Philosophy, Derrida cites this passage from Nietzsche:

What then is truth? A mobile marching army of metaphors, metonymics and anthropomorphisms... a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem...fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions...<sup>69</sup>

In 'limping' after such forgotten illusions, both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson, like Derrida and Lacan, are questing after disappearances. Their ambivalent closures supplement and complement their initial dissonances by keeping the questions which they posit continually in 'play', and therefore active,

like the leading note suspended in an unresolved cadence in music. This suspended resolution is what allows the Canterbury Tales and Paterson to continue to pose the same questions, to themselves, to the reader, and perhaps to each other.

Where the two poems would convene for such a conference, of course, is in that questing-after-dis-appearance par excellence, the House of Fame...

1. Jacques Derrida. "Plato's Pharmacy", in Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): 63.

2. In his May 9, 1956 Seminar, Lacan comments: "The eternal temptation... is to consider that what is most apparent in a phenomenon explains everything... linguists have been victims of this illusion. The accent they place on metaphor, always given much more study than metonymy, bears witness to it... it is certainly what is most captivating." Cited in Jane Gallop. Reading Lacan (London: Cornell University Press, 1985): 126.

3. G.R.F. Ferrari, Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 204-232, discusses the relevance of Socrates' diatribe against writing, both as an epilogue to the Phaedrus, and as a critique of the entire Platonic corpus. In "Plato's Pharmacy", p. 73, Derrida describes this "last phase" of the dialogue as "an appendix, a superadded supplement": "All the subjects of the dialogue... seem exhausted at the moment the supplement, writing, or the pharmakon are introduced."

4. Plato. Phaedrus, transl. Harold North Fowler. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914): 565 & 573, emphasis mine.

5. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", 127.

6. *ibid*, 70.

7. Derrida. Positions, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): 40.

8. Barbara Johnson, Translator's Introduction to Dissemination, viii.

9. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", 108.

10. *ibid*, 109.

11. *ibid*, 109-110.

12. *ibid*, 109. See also Derrida, Of Grammatology, transl. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974): 108-109: "violence is originary with language".

13. "The expression "that dangerous supplement", used by Rousseau in his Confessions to describe masturbation, is the title of that chapter in Of Grammatology in which Derrida follows the consequences of the way in which the word "supplement"'s two meanings in French - "addition" and "replacement" - complicate the logic of Rousseau's treatment of sex, education, and writing. Writing, pedagogy, masturbation, and the "pharmakon" share the property of being - with respect to speech, nature, intercourse, and living memory - at once something secondary, external, and compensatory, and something that substitutes, violates, and usurps." Translator's note, Dissemination, 110.

14. Barbara Johnson, *op.cit.*, xiv.

15. Christopher Norris, in The Deconstructive Turn (London: Methuen & Co., 1983): 22, explains: "Deconstruction sees the lure of metaphysics in all philosophies which pin their faith to an absolute Reason conceived as prior to the textual activity which articulates its working. For Derrida, the 'closure' of philosophical concepts - their absorption into structures of formalized or systematic knowledge - is always the sovereign gesture of logocentric thought."

In Writing and Difference, transl. Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), page 162, Derrida maintains "the principled, essential and structural impossibility of closing a structural phenomenology."

Stephen Melville, in Philosophy Beside Itself (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 61, notes that "Derrida begins where, however necessary it may be to speak of a metaphysical enclosure as if one could somehow stand outside, we have no choice but to recognize our own belonging to that tradition and enclosure."

16. Although in "Plato's Pharmacy", 129, Derrida comments: "it would be impossible to say to what extent he (Plato) manipulates it (language) voluntarily or consciously, and at what point he is subject to constraints weighing upon his discourse from language...to follow the constraints of a language would not exclude the possibility that Plato is playing with them...", it becomes increasingly clear that Derrida feels that the word-play is not "voluntary".

17. In his deconstruction of the either/or logic of Western metaphysics, Derrida writes: "It has been necessary to analyze...within the text of the history of philosophy, as well as within the so-called literary text...certain marks that...I have called undecidables...false verbal properties that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it...without ever leaving room for a solution." (Positions, 42-43)

18. Barbara Johnson, op. cit., x

19. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 143.

20. Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", in Yale French Studies 48 (1972): 116.

21. Barbara Johnson, op. cit., xii, comments: "The union that would perfectly fulfill desire would also perfectly exclude the space of its very possibility."

22. "Plato's Pharmacy", 110.

23. See above, Derrida, page 1.

24. Derrida, Writing and Difference, 160 & 162.

25. Dennis A. Foster. Confession and Complicity in Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 22.

26. Gayatri Spivak op. cit., lxxv.

27. By "static" I mean "forces in equilibrium", and not passivity. The Preface to Fredric Jameson's The Prison-House of Language (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972.) contains a clear discussion of the concepts of 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' structure, p. vi-vii. Jameson states that "function is to be found at the very intersection between the two dimensions."

28. Lacan Seminar of 21st January, 1975, in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne (London: Macmillan, 1982): 165, cited in Elizabeth Wright. Psychoanalytic Criticism (London: Methuen, 1984): 110.

29. Fredric Jameson, op. cit., 138, quotes Lacan on the Unconscious from Vladimir Propp. Qu'est-ce que le Structuralisme? 252-253: "It is wrong to think that the Unconscious exists because of...some obtuse, heavy, caliban, indeed

animalic...desire that rises up from the depths, that is primitive, and has to lift itself to the higher level of consciousness. Quite the contrary, desire exists because there is unconsciousness, that is to say, language which escapes the subject in its structure and effects."

In his article, "La Realite du Desir", S.Leclaire explains Lacan's concept of the unconscious as a second structure: "The unconscious is not the strange or coded message one strives to read on an old parchment: it is another text written underneath and which must be read by illuminating it from behind or with the help of a developer." Cited in Anika Lemaire, Jacques Lacan, transl. David Macey, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979):137-38

30. See Elizabeth Wright. op.cit, 107. Lacan's phrase is "the self's radical ex-centricity to itself". Ecrits: A Selection, transl. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977):171. On page 300, Lacan revises Freud's dictum, "Where id was, ego shall be" to "There where it was just now, there where it was for a while, between an extinction that is still glowing and a birth that is still retarded, "I" can come into being and disappear from what I say".

31. Lacan, Le Seminaire Livre XI, 23, cited in Malcolm Bowie. Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987):108.

32. Bowie, op.cit. 153.

33. Lacan distinguishes between the pre-conscious infans subject, and the subsequent 'speaking subject' that emerges upon entry into the Symbolic Order of language or of social organization. In opposition to Descartes's Cogito, he offers Ca parle - "it speaks" (Seminaire XI, 45, cited in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan. Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 12.

34. Lacan's theories of the psycho-sexual functioning of the subject, built upon these primary structural theories, and represented in the more complex dictum: "The Unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (Ecrits, 172), is beyond the scope of this study.

35. See above, Lacan, page 9 and note #29.

36. Anika Lemaire, op.cit. 67, explains Lacan's use of Freud's "spaltung": "The "splitting" is the division of being revealed in psychoanalysis between the self, the innermost part of the psyche, and the subject of conscious discourse. This division, which for Lacan creates a hidden structure inside the subject - the unconscious - is due to the fact that discourse, or, more generally, any symbolic order 'mediates' the subjects."

Lacan writes: "divide the 'I am' of existence from the 'I am' of meaning. This splitting must be taken as being principle, and as the first outline of primal repression, which, as we know, establishes the unconscious." (Ecrits, 26.)

37. Ferdinand de Saussure. Course in General Linguistics transl. Roy Harris (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1983): 68-69.

38. Lacan describes the "jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child" (Ecrits, 2)



39. Roman Jakobson, "Principes de phonologie historique", in N.S. Troubetzkoy, Principes de Phonologie (Paris, 1964), cited in Frederic Jameson, op. cit., 20.

40. 'Metonymy' implies a consistently incomplete movement towards fulfillment. Its linguistic function distinguishes it from 'metaphor', which attempts a complete substitution. Jakobson used the terms 'metaphoric and metonymic axes' in transferring the Freudian concepts of 'condensation' of meaning (metaphoric similarity) and 'displacement' (metonymic contiguity) from dream psychology to literature, in Fundamentals of Language (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), reprinted as "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles", in Dan Latimer Contemporary Literary Theory (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1989):22-27.

41. Where the "Symbolic Order" of linguistic experience is characterized by difference, disjunction, and displacement, the "Imaginary" is a seeking for identity and resemblance. The two orders are distinct and opposed operations of the subject upon the "Real": the field of pre-existing existence, the irremediable and intractable 'outside' of language; the indefinitely receding goal towards which the signifying chain tends; the vanishing point of Symbolic and Imaginary alike which reminds the subject that his Symbolic and Imaginary constructions take place in a world which precedes and exceeds him. (summarized from Malcolm Bowie, op.cit. pp 114-117.

42. Sherry Turkle, in Psychoanalytic Politics (New York: Basic Books, 1978):252, gives an illustrative example to clarify the concept of metaphor formation and repression: "The word combination "brave man" is a signifier for the fact that someone is a brave man (signified). When we introduce the word "lion" as a metaphor, the new signifier, "lion" stands in place of the statement "brave man" (the former signifier) and also signifies being a brave man (the original signified). "Lion" now signifies "brave man"...but the original signifier has been pushed down to a deeper level."

The process works in the same manner as repression into the unconscious of psychic 'metaphors': the father's name. for example, serves as a metaphor, a new signifier, which causes the old signifier (the desire of the mother) to descend more deeply into the unconscious.

43. Lacan, Ecrits, 153

44. See Saussure, op. cit., 67

45. Lacan, Ecrits, 149.

46. *ibid*, 27.

47. *ibid*, 166-67.

48. *ibid*, 164. On page 156, Lacan gives the example of "thirty sails" to illustrate the "elision", "the word 'ship' concealed in this expression...the part taken for the whole...by which we see that the connection between ship and sail is nowhere but in the signifier."

49. Lacan, Ecrits: 68

50. *ibid*, 506

51. *ibid*. 60.

52. Malcolm Bowie, op. cit., 124, summarizes the story:

"In Poe's story an incriminating letter addressed to an 'illustrious personage' (a queen, we are to presume) is stolen by a machinating minister in the presence of the royal couple. The Queen sees everything, and the king nothing. The Queen remains silent as the robbery takes place: to protest would be to incriminate herself. The Prefect of Police is given the task of recovering the letter and, having failed, consults the detective Dupin. The police are well-meaning plodders and the detective is all-seeingly astute. Whereas the police search the minister's apartment inch by inch and find nothing, Dupin, who knows his man and reasons that the safest form of concealment would be to leave the letter in full view of the visitor, finds the letter and steals it back. The contents of the letter are never revealed."

53. Lacan, "Seminar on The Purloined Letter", transl. Jeffrey Mehlman. Yale French Studies 48 (1972): 44.

54. *ibid*, 44

55. Lacan. Ecrits. p. 292

56. *ibid*, 157: "The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers, one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its metonymic connection with the rest of the chain."

and 154: "There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended 'vertically', as it were, from that point."

57. Lacan, from Seminar XX, cited in Juliet Flower MacCannell. Figuring Lacan (London: Croon Helm, 1986): 71 & 161.

58. Lemaire, *op. cit.* 167, and Lacan, "Seminar on The Purloined Letter", 46-47.

59. Lacan, Preface to Lemaire, *op. cit.*, viii.

60. Jameson, *op. cit.* 174.

61. Lacan. "Seminar on The Purloined Letter", 72

62. Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth", Yale French Studies 52 (1975): 66

63. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", 154.

64. Derrida. "The Purveyor of Truth", 65

65. Lacan. Ecrits, 262

66. Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977): 103, cited in Elizabeth Wright, *op. cit.* 117.

67. See Ronna Burger, Plato's Phaedrus (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980): 115-126.

68. Derrida, The Post Card, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 406.

69. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), quoted by Gayatri Spivak in her introduction to Of Grammatology, xxii

## CHAPTER II

### LOST IN THE FUN-HOUSE: The House of Fame

#### 1. Introduction

In Book IV of Paterson, Williams misquotes Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas" in a salute to the old 'auctor's' fictional "WORLD OF ART THAT THROUGH THE CENTURIES HAS SURVIVED!"<sup>1</sup> In Book I of the House of Fame Chaucer had threatened anyone who would so "mysdeme"<sup>2</sup> him with the dire fate of Croesus, a conflated intertextual reference itself misrepresented in the transmission. Both Chaucer and Williams, in building their poems from other poets and poems, address the issues of distortion and dissemination which limit any attempt to "telle aryght" (HF 79). Their poetry self-consciously highlights its intermediate 'writerly' status, partly through its focus upon the artifice of its "joints and seams",<sup>3</sup> and partly through the anti-heroic, humourous 'game' with which it deals its 'earnest' concerns about language. This chapter will present Chaucer's House of Fame as a miniature 'metafiction', bearing those same complicating distinctions of reflexivity and disjunction as the two major poems selected for study.

In some of the best (worst?) "drasty rhyming"<sup>4</sup> ever, the House of Fame offers an early example of wilful "mysdeming": in the sing-song reduction of "arma virumque cano", for example, which pairs that paragon of questers, Aeneas, with the tentative fledgling poet:

I wol now synge, yif I kan  
The armes and also the man  
That first cam... (HF 143-44),

or the squawking parody of Dante's guide, (or Christ and the apostles, or Lady Philosophy, or Chaucer's wife<sup>5</sup>):

Awak!...Awak!...  
Thou art noyous for to carye! (HF 556-576).

Chaucer's ludicrous narrative pastiche of Virgil, Ovid, Scripture, and Dante (to name the most obvious), is a fanciful enquiry into the intricacies of the signifying system. Can a word or "tydinge" ever arrive intact at its inevitable destination in another poem? Did it ever in fact exist in a pristine condition of integrity? The word "narrative", for example, derived from 'gnarus', 'knowing', ought to be able to translate "knowing" into "telling" without distortion. Knowing anything, however, dependant as it is upon the "inanity of the discourse of knowledge",<sup>6</sup> is as inane in the House of Fame as ever it could be six hundred years later in the Ecrits.

## 2. The Reader's Quest

The House of Fame has been a particularly ravaged battlefield for Truth's marching army of illusions. Lured on by the poem's repeated and intriguing pattern of narrative indeterminacy and ellipsis, the reader attempts to fill gaps, to decide 'undecidabilities', and to 'faire un' from the poem's multifarious perspectives. The text, however, seems to mock a natural 'readerly' desire for totality, insisting at every stage of the quest upon what Eugene Goodheart, in his study of deconstructive skepticism, identifies as the "intrinsic vacuity"

informing poetry's "structures of worlds, and plenitudes of meaning".<sup>7</sup>

In conflating and confusing a multiplicity of conflicting 'auctorites', and refusing to submit to 'metaphysical closure' the indeterminacy of the "openings"<sup>8</sup> it locates, the "Book" of Fame, as Chaucer re-calls the poem in his Retractions, seems to participate readily (through the centuries) in Derrida's proclaimed destruction of "the idea of the book":

The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing...I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now underway in all domains, denudes the surface of the text.<sup>9</sup>

The well-wrought medieval poem was, according to a "tradition of 'writing about writing'"<sup>10</sup> exemplified in such treatises as the *Poetria Nuova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, self-consciously aware of clothing its "surfaces":

Although the meaning is one, let it not come content with one set of apparel. Let it vary its robes and assume different raiment.<sup>11</sup>

The House of Fame, however, defies any confidence that "the meaning is one", or that the word's "apparel" is subject to the taste and control of the poet. The poem leads its maker through and by what appears to be an artlessly disorganized textual surface, probing beneath "rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned...illusions"<sup>12</sup> of mediated truth towards a deeper deconstructive vision of language. This unmediated "direct revelation"<sup>13</sup> provides knowledge, but knowledge of "a new meaninglessness"<sup>14</sup> for truth in language.

As a literary statement about the unreliability of literary statements, which deliberately distorts while highlighting the distorting process, which invalidates its own criteria for validity in its first breath, and which makes its reader fumble through the same process of bewildered interpretation of the "fracturing of the text"<sup>15</sup> as its protagonist does the events, the House of Fame, according to Derrida's description of self-reflexive literature, "limps and closes (very) badly". The process and closure of the quest has, as a result, been subject to a great deal of critical 'therapy', often as wildly imaginative as the text. A typical appraisal: "The surface of Chaucer's House of Fame presents a remarkable impression of confusion", records an undistorting objective impression of the disparate events; what typically follows, however: "No entirely satisfactory explanation of its central purpose has yet been advanced",<sup>16</sup> summarizes the critical desire of most readers to somehow organize Chaucer's "troublesome abundance of material"<sup>17</sup> for him.

The belief in the existence, of anything "entirely satisfactory" or "central" is what distinguishes 'logocentric' from deconstructive criticism, and not the challenging of a particular tradition's 'center', or foundation, which simply displaces one set of assumptions with another. Much of the critical response to the House of Fame betrays, beneath its appreciation for the poem's abundant capacity for doubt, the assumption of an underlying metaphysical 'totality' which demands resolution, one that assumes that "a valid interpretation...must

arrive at a stable picture of the text". 'Undecidability' then becomes merely a challenge to the literary sleuth:

For occultation of the referent, undecidability, reflects a transitory inability to remember where to look for the referent. Undecidability marks a passing stage in the reader's progress toward interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

In the House of Fame, however, "the referent", the meaningful "thyng" which is the stated object of the search, is continually receding before the quester, always deferred, and always just beyond reach.

Situated in the center of a triptych of dream-visions, the House of Fame offers, to rephrase Matthew Arnold, the "low seriousness" of a quest for poetic definition which works less to "find an ever surer and surer stay"<sup>19</sup> than to expose all surety as illusion and farce. Textual indeterminacy appears to demand either surrender or distortion:

You either surrender to apparent indeterminacy, or pass it over by an act of imagination...Yield to indeterminacy, and the text becomes an enigma; wave your troubles away, and its uniqueness is lost. In both cases, interpretation is defeated.<sup>20</sup>

Those who refuse to be "fooled by the exaggerated surface humour of the poetry"<sup>21</sup> are often fooled by their own desire to "pass over" its indeterminacies: the Book of the Duchess then becomes a unified search for the "oon physicien", Christ; the House of Fame, a coherent quest for the "man of gret auctoritee", again, Christ.<sup>22</sup>

This variety of authoritative pronouncements supplied for Chaucer is by no means confined to a nineteenth or early twentieth century organicist insistence upon unity and

continuity. Stephen Knight, for example, demonstrates that a Marxist re-reading of Chaucer can be as "self-assertive and reductive as any ironic individualist or awestruck allegorist" (a generalized criticism which he levies against pre- and post-structural criticism) by displacing such misguided interpretation with his own ingenious analogy: the House of Rumour becomes a feudal market town, which sends its productivity in fealty to the security of the Castle, thereby augmenting the Castle's "inherently questionable" authority.<sup>23</sup> For Eugene Vance, the House of Rumour is a bustling Frankfurt money-market.<sup>24</sup> Chaucer no doubt would have welcomed every new interpretation in delighted amusement, all the while confident that his poem would break loose from each personally tailored analogy in turn, and offer itself to another.

In "art poetical" where the narrator may ride his horse out of his bed-chamber, it is perhaps irrelevant to fret over the identity of a disembodied utterance emerging from a corner of a whirling house of twigs. From the "nothyng" of the Book of the Duchess (BD 11), to the "newe thyng" of the House of Fame (HF 1886), to the "certain thyng" of the Parliament of Fowls (PF 20), the dreamer's goal becomes syntactically more concrete, but remains semantically abstract and elusive, well hidden "from its first comer, from the first glance". In Chaucer's delightfully scattered 'ars poetica', as the House of Fame, and to a lesser extent, the three dream-visions as a set, has come to be recognized, the 'res' is never reified, nor its referent recovered.



Chaucer's three dream-visions in fact suggest their own analogy for the dizzying, over-crowded House of Rumour, which works at least as well as those imposed from without: in the Book of the Duchess, the dreamer's distress is defined as a condition of the mind:

For sorwyful ymagination  
Ys alway hooly in my mynde. (BD 14-15)

The "mynde" is distracted by its uncontrollable abundance of unstructured, unproductive contents ("so many an idel thoght" 4), which completely expand ("hooly") to fill it with nothingness ("nothyng", 7, 8, 11). Like the House of Rumour, the "mynde" houses a 'vacuous' ("idel") plenitude which cannot be integrated. If the "fantasies" (28) which crowd the dreamer's mind are 'phantomes', in Macrobius' sense,<sup>25</sup> then perhaps the dreamer's eight-year "sickness" (36) can be seen as a prolonged period of inability to focus to his satisfaction the wealth of ideas waiting to be given direction and form. The prayer at the end of Book I of the House of Fame is then perhaps, as Sheila Delaney suggests,<sup>26</sup> a plea against a recurrence of this condition of "fantome and illusion" (HF 493), and the enigmatic absence and presence of the "thyng", expressed in the Parliament of Fowls:

For both I hadde thyng which that I nolde  
And ek I nadde that thyng that I wolde. (PF 90-91)

is possibly such a recurrence. In his tripartite search for an undecorated language, the "naked text in English" (LGW.G.86), the dreamer-poet ventures from the evasive artifice of French courtly romance to unadorned confrontation with 'reality' in the Book of the Duchess, through the progressively distorting perceptions of

literary 'reality' in the House of Fame. He emerges, after the continuous proliferation of unresolved antitheses<sup>27</sup> of the Parliament of Fowls, to the still unresolved cacophonous discourse (in rhyme royale) of a gathering of medieval birds and ducks. What, if anything, did "Geffrey" learn in his celestial flight?

### 3. The Dreamer's Quest

In the Book of the Duchess and the Parliament of Fowls, the sequence of story-to-dream serves to separate the dreaming from the waking state. In the House of Fame, however, the logic of cause and effect is confounded from the outset by having the story (Dido and Aeneas, in this case), and later the dreamer, contained within the dream. Within the story itself, the sources are conflated and confused. Frank Kermode states that successful narrative is entirely dependant upon logical causality:

Sequence goes nowhere without his doppelganger or shadow, causality.<sup>28</sup>

In the House of Fame, as in "Sir Thopas", the quest goes nowhere, but intentionally (?) and brilliantly. If this is a model of 'grammar', as William Wilson suggests,<sup>29</sup> then its laws and its rules are most resistant to being "booked".

The poem begins with the word "God" and ends with "auctoritee", thereby enclosing itself in what could have been a satisfying coherence of Word and concept. The opening wish, "God turne us every drem to goode!" demonstrates a similar harmony of signifier and signified ("God" and "goode") which, by its repetition (at line 58), frames the opening statement of the

poem. That statement, however, is a breathless 'dubitatio' which undermines the validity of the entire poem. How, for example, does the reader read one of the "moments of radical proto-individualism":<sup>30</sup>

In suche wordes gan to pleyne  
Dydo of hir grete peyne  
As me mette redely -  
Non other auctor alegge I. (HF 311-314)

after the dreamer's disclaimer:

But why the cause is, noght wot I.  
Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys  
That trete of this and other werkes  
For I of noon opinion  
Nyl as now make mensyon  
But oonly that the holy roode  
Turne us every drem to goode! (HF 52-58)

The search ("why", reiterated 8 times) for cause (7 times) and "th'effect" (5) is followed by another lengthy digression, again constructed as a ridiculous assortment of idea - invocation of the god of sleep to command an attentive audience; a blessing upon those who will not misinterpret the uninterpretable, equivocating dream; a curse, for those that dare, of the fate of Croesus, who did not heed the somehow unequivocal message of his (fabricated<sup>31</sup>) dream - all contained within another envelope of exactitude, this time, an authenticating date, the "tenthe day now of Decembre" (63, 111).

The prominence of these repeated phrases has inspired a variety of thematic interpretations: through the prayers to God the dreamer "transcends given alternatives in a fideistic appeal to the highest authority";<sup>32</sup> the winter date figures the sterility of the dreamer's soul, and therefore his need for such

resolution. But the frequent bathos of the dreamer's appeals for heavenly direction - for example,

...pray I Jesus God  
That (dreme he barefoot, dreme he shod)... (97-98) -

attributes a flaunted ineptitude to this struggling dreamer-poet, "mired in prolegomena",<sup>33</sup> which repeatedly undercuts such humourlessly pious interpretations.

Robert Jordan has recently suggested a re-reading of Chaucer's rhetorical surfaces as an antidote to the unverifiable idiosyncratic readings of content and theme:

Rhetorical analysis affords a view of that dynamic interplay (between verbal surface and illusionary content) that is inaccessible to a mode of interpretation that places definitive value on rendering the verbal surface transparent...

...A valid Chaucerian poetics must take account of the intellectual dimension of Chaucerian narrative and its undisguised self-consciousness about the making of make-believe.<sup>34</sup>

In the House of Fame, the narrator's elaborate use of rhetorical devices, 'exclamatio', 'dubitatio', 'amplificatio' 'expolitio', 'invocatio',<sup>35</sup> out-does Geoffrey of Vinsauf by over-dressing the content in every set of apparel available. Jordan notes in particular how repetition ('expolitio') of enclosing phrases causes an impairment to narrative flow and to traditional modes of continuity by emphasizing each section's completeness as a "self-sufficient block of discourse".<sup>36</sup>

The overall effect of this rhetorical emphasis is a strong sense of a dreamer-poet "playing and displaying his roles", one of them being to accentuate, rather than to disguise the gap between verbal surface and illusionary content. The attention

given this "parodic excess"<sup>37</sup> of rhetoric is compounded by the openly parodic 'aping' (HF 1212) of the classical quest, most notably Dante's. The undisguised parody of sources alerts the reader to the differences in poetic treatment as much or more than to similarities: neither Dante nor Cicero would have turned their flights to the heavens into an elaborate joke on flatulence.<sup>38</sup> The disparity between the dreamer's befuddled state and what the reader knows was Dante's or Scipio's is yet another gap in the text, and a source of humour for the poem which gets lost in any attempt at serious comparison.

There is a more 'earnest' side, though, to Chaucer's 'game' with Dante. The Commedia ends with a vision of the cosmos as a profusion of scattered pages, bound together by Love:

In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one  
single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves  
throughout the universe. Paradiso 33.86-88 <sup>39</sup>

Dante's quest upholds what Jesse Gellrich terms (after Derrida) "the idea of the Book" in the middle ages: any search for truth in language which participates in the "Book of Culture" never goes so far as to doubt the preexistent totality of this ineffable truth, however impossible it may be for the poet to represent it in words. Dante's 'volume' is an integrated whole; it is human conception and perception that is faulty.

In his invocation to Apollo, which Chaucer borrows, Dante asks the god of poetry to

show forth the image of the blessed realm that is  
imprinted in my mind. Paradiso 1.23-24<sup>40</sup>

What is "ymarked" in the mind of Chaucer's dreamer, however:

...helpe me to shewe now  
That in myn hed ymarked is -  
Loo; that is for to menen this  
The Hous of Fame for to descryve - (HF 1101-1105),

cannot, without severe distortion, be considered the "blessed realm". The dreamer's Dantean journey from Hell (the desert of Book I) to Purgatory (the flight to the mountain in Book II) to Heaven (the highest realm of Fame in Book III)<sup>41</sup> seems rather to focus in through-the-looking-glass fashion upon images which are progressively distorted: first he sees the final forms of the disembodied "tydings" given material presence in Fame's court; then he sees them deconstructed into their original overwhelming and confusing abundance in the House of Rumour. The process of the dream from Book I to Book III is one of progressive disorder: re-telling of the tale is (mis)directed by the artist; the fame of the tale is directed by a capricious and illogical Fame, paired with Fortune; the tidings which make up the tale are undirected ("Ne porter ther is noon", 1955), "fals and soth compounded" (2108), and ordered and nurtured by Chance ("Aventure, that is the moder of tydynges", 1982-83). The order of the dream is itself out of order - we must read backwards from the end to the beginning to 'understand' how a tiding and then its fame (Book III, in reverse), and then its transmission (Book II), is finally crafted into a tale (Book I).

Given this multi-layered mediation of 'truth' in language, the eagle's pedantic discourse, tiresomely repeated,<sup>42</sup> is even more ludicrously irrelevant in this re-reading: the science of sound may itself be sound, but it describes phenomena which are dependant upon "feble fundament" (1132), and like "every speche

that ys spoken", this discourse, too, is itself "noght but eyr ybroken" (765). Of what use is certainty concerning sounds, when what they signify is unreliable and uncertain? Here there is no doubt about a single and knowable 'destination' for the signifier: "every soun" (720), "every speche" (783 and again at 849), "every word" (881) is destined for the capricious judgement of Fame. The poet's difficult task is one of attempting, against these impossible odds, to make a choice, and to "telle aryght" (79, 527, 1105, 143/150, 406/426).

The Invocation to Book II states the dilemma explicitly:

O Thought, that wrot al that I mette  
And in the tresorye hyt shette  
Of my brayn, now shal men se  
Yf any vertu in the be  
To tellen al my drem aryght  
Now kythe thyn engyn and myght. (523-28)

"Shette", like "ymarked" (1103), indicates possessiveness and determination, and also value: the thoughts are like 'treasures; the "brayn", a "tresorye". But the imagery also suggests imprisonment. Reason in Book II is locked into rationalization of the irrational. Furthermore, the labyrinthine phenomena, described in ordered scientific simplicity by the eagle, are discovered to be not only disordered, but as destructive as war and fire:

As dooth the rowtynge of the ston  
That from the engyn ys leten gon. (1933-34)  
As fyr is wont to quyke and goo  
From a spareke spronge amys  
Til a citee brent up ys. (2078-80)

How can the "engyn" of the mind (528) withstand such an "engyn" of destruction?

Luckily, the dreamer has 'frends'. Sheila Delaney identifies the abrupt appearances of these transitional characters (the eagle, the stranger in the House of Fame, the "man of gret auctorite" in the House of Rumour) as dialectical shifts in response to the dreamer's desire to transcend his "potential sterility of being unable to choose". She describes a repeated movement towards a multiplicity of choices and an impasse of indecision, where "the problem of choice is transcended".<sup>43</sup> The dreamer's dilemma is displaced and deferred more than it is transcended, however. Each promise of guided authoritative assurance:

"Be ful assured, boldely  
I am thy frend."(581-82);

"But now no fors, for wel y se  
What thou desirest for to here.  
Com forth and stond no lenger here  
And y wil thee, withouten drede  
In such another place lede  
Ther thou shalt here many oon".(1910-1915);

But he semed for to be  
A man of gret auctorite....(2157-58),

ends in an emphatic denial of authority for the dreamer: "no maner creature" can "telle" better than he how to judge the distortion of Virgil and Ovid's art (489-90); or his own:

"Nay, for sothe, frend", quod I...  
I wot myselven best how y stonde  
For what I drye, or what I thynke  
I wil myselven al hyt drynke  
Certeyn, for the more part  
As fer forth as I kan myn art" (1873-1882).

"Nay" is perhaps the only "soth" the dreamer can utter with certainty. Like the Invocation to Book II, this passage is serious in tone; it sits quietly between the noisy chaos of Fame



and Rumour like a poetic 'credo'. Authority and Fame are silenced, and the self is asserted with a re-iteration, in the spare style achieved in the Book of the Duchess:

"Noo?" quod he  
"Noo, parde!" (1895)

Given this emerging resistance to authority, how is the reader to view the mysterious "man of gret auctorite"? He appears to come forward out of the confusion as a great relief ("atte last" 2155) to the dreamer after the anaphoric frenzy of "Ands"(2147-2154). But even if the "man" is the exact image of "some new thyng" (1887), we know that to be in the House of Rumour he must be 'always already' an image of an utterance, and thus, like the dream, the poetry, and the scientific and philosophical arguments - all the means of validation presented in the poem - he, too, must be suspect.

The perfect consubstantiality of utterance and referent described by the eagle:

Whan any speche ycomen ys  
Up to the paleys, anon-ryght  
Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight  
Which that the word in erthe spak  
Be hyt clothed red or blak  
And hath so verray hys lyknesse  
That spak the word...  
And ys not this a wonder thyng? (1075-1083),

seems to present the conditions for the Platonic perfect discourse, where "offspring" and "parent"<sup>44</sup> would be eternally present to each other. Plato's point, of course, is that as a means to knowledge, this perfection is only as meaningful as the integrity of the "parent" utterance. But does the utterance in the House of Rumour look like what the "wight" said, or what he

meant to say, and was there a 'difference'? If the utterance was metaphoric or ironic or allegorical or ambivalent, or perhaps intentionally and persuasively deceptive, does it "shewe" forth the "craft" or "sentence" (1100)? In the House of Rumour, the linguistic sign unites "not a thing to a name", nor "a concept to a sound-image", as Saussure proposed,<sup>45</sup> but a sound-image to its speaker. According to the eagle's logic, the "tydings" can only repeat themselves exactly, with the same rhetorical 'colors' ("red or blak"). As Plato warned, "if someone were to question them, wishing to understand what is spoken, they always signify one and the same thing". The sound-image is locked in forever to the fallibility of the individual; here, the 'arbitrariness' of the linguistic convention which Saussure stated "should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker",<sup>46</sup> has the potential to create exactly this fragmented, totally individuated block to communication through language.

The House of Rumour figures the inescapability of the signifying "tyding" from its speaker. By the time a "tyding" is re-appropriated into a new tale, the signified concept "ymarked" in the mind of the speaker may be buried there forever if he was unable to "tellen it aryght"; it may be a "poison" to knowledge if he told it wrongly or irresponsibly. According to the poem's 'logic', if the man of authority's unstated utterance will be "sothe", it may arrive at Fame's court "compounded" with "fals" (2108). Even if this does not occur (by chance, of course), Fame may or may not dismiss it (by caprice). If it achieves fame, it may be misrepresented and/or confounded with the "tydings" of

others. Finally, it will be subject to 'misdeming' by artist and reader alike. The final scene of the House of Fame reveals the utterance of authoritative truth, the "thyng" (1887) itself, to be impossible to articulate, identify, or validate, and stomped upon "as men doon after eles".

#### 4. Closure

Unlike in the Book of the Duchess and the Parliament of Fowls, in the House of Fame the poet-dreamer does not waken to dissatisfied musings about the inconclusiveness of his dream experience, but remains inescapably "shette" in his "brayn". The lack of closure allows the reader to imagine the continued "energy and enthusiasm" of the search:

the energy and enthusiasm with which the poet rushes towards a conclusion would seem collectively to indicate his singleness of purpose.<sup>47</sup>,

but also the continued displacement of every attempt at "singleness". Singling out the man of authority from the mass of "tydinges" is the poem's final attempt to 'faire un', and the greatest instance of the gap it has continually exposed between desire and lack of authoritative verbal guidance. Each book in the House of Fame has been a critique of the process of mediation interrupting and/or corrupting the signifying system. Parodic manipulation of sources, rhetorical display, and transitional take-overs accompany and augment this sense of deferral and interruption within the fiction, so that the only true 'unity' in the poem's composition is this equal insistence upon disjunction

by both the verbal surface of the text, and its fictional content.

Sheila Delaney concludes that the disjunction between 'skepticism' (lack) and 'fideism' (desire), "cannot be resolved in the terms set up in the poem...the House of Fame is an unfinishable work, and nothing proclaims Chaucer's dilemma so well as the absence of an ending".<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the "terms set up in the poem" are the only ones available to any writer. If the absence of an ending is the only logical outcome to this dilemma, how can there ever be an ending which is justifiable? More to the point, if Chaucer was unable to end the House of Fame because "at this cumulative point of multiplicity, no fideistic assertion would serve", how then can the 'fideistic' Retractions to the Canterbury Tales be expected to serve?

Delaney finds a repeated pattern of dialectic and transcendence in the House of Fame; Jordan, a sequence of complete and self-sufficient blocks of discourse. If one recognizes the contiguous segments as incomplete, in their failure to fulfill their stated desire, and the attempts at transcendence as similarly unfulfilling, then the House of Fame can be seen as a prototype of the process of 'lack' and 'desire', displacement and transcendence, which is the dynamic force in both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson, and which raises similar questions about the coherence of their endings.

The poetic quest in the House of Fame has moved through a Lacanian mind-scape of 'lack' and 'desire' in pursuit of an elusive and poorly articulated "thyng". It ends with the quester

'lost in the fun-house'. The poem is a ludicrous caricature of pluralism - even the squeak of a mouse (785) gains entry into this Derridean "free-play" game of zero privilege/ subordination. Stanley Fish describes what could easily identify the House of Fame:

In the caricature... of the post-structuralist Derridian view, the denial of objective texts and determinate meanings leads to a universe of absolute free-play in which everything is indeterminate and undecidable.<sup>49</sup>

The comic center of Chaucer's dream-quest is an 'ars poetica' which is no defense of poetry at all, but rather a cartoon of the impossibility of representing truth in art. From the central vantage of Book II of the House of Fame, both poet and reader can look upon both art (Book I) and Fame (Book III), both Death (Book of the Duchess), and Love (Parliament of Fowls), and laugh like Scipio at the imperfection of all worldly endeavor. The humour of this self-caricature is the essence of play: its distortion foregrounds the imperfections of the subject, and at the same time acknowledges that this foreground is, after all, a distortion. It seems that Chaucer had looked, laughed, and carried on 'as if' an artist were free to command his unruly "idel thoughts" and materials over the epistemological gaps he had exposed.

\* \* \*

The House of Fame serves this study as a fun-house caricature of the limitations of language. In Chaucer's final work, as in the House of Fame, "pleye" is not simply a glittering, multi-faceted surface 'game', hiding for fun the

work's more 'ernest' univocal message. Like our response to the "Tune of Tunes",<sup>50</sup> the immediate delight is in the surface. It is hoped that through the following two chapters the occasional look backwards to the delightful "inanity" of the cartoon will keep foregrounded that which is easily lost in any serious critical discussion, namely, the anti-heroic, humourous attitude to the 'game' of language, which THROUGH THE CENTURIES HAS SURVIVED. Did Chaucer abandon it?

1. Paterson, page 209. All citations from this work will be by bracketed page numbers from the New York: New Directions edition, 1963.

2. House of Fame, line 97. All quotations from Chaucer will be by bracketed line numbers from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). HF = House of Fame; BD = Book of the Duchess; PF = Parliament of Fowls.

3. See Jesse Gellrich. The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 170, and Robert Jordan. Chaucer's Poetics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 17

4. "Tale of Sir Thopas", 930, & Paterson, 177

5. See notes to the House of Fame, Benson, 982.

6. See above, Lacan, p. 15.

7. Eugene Goodheart. The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 7

8. Frank Kermode, in his article "Secrets and Narrative Sequence" CI 7 1980, 83-101, discusses "openings" into the "secrets" of a text.

9. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 18.

10. See A.J. Minnis. Medieval Theory of Authorship (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988): 218.

11. Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Poetria Nova, transl. Margaret Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967.): 24. Note that Geoffrey employs three different expressions for 'clothing', and three different expressions for 'differing'.

12. See above, Nietzsche p. 20

13. John Finlayson, "Seeing, Hearing and Knowing in the House of Fame", SN 58 (1986): 50.

14. Jordan, op. cit., 49

15. Gellrich, op. cit. 173, discusses "This fracturing of the text, the unresolved openings in it".

16. A. Inskip Dickerson. "Chaucer's House of Fame: A Skeptical Epistemology of Love". TSL 18 (1976): 171

17. Robert Burlin. Chaucerian Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): 46.

18. Michael Riffaterre. "Interpretation and Undecidability". NLH 12 (1981): 228.

19. Matthew Arnold. The Study of Poetry, reprinted in Hazard Adams. Critical Theory Since Plato (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971): 596.

20. Riffaterre, op. cit., 230.

21. Bernard Huppé and D.W. Robertson, Jr. Fruyt and Chaff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963): 43.

22. ibid., p. 145, and B.G. Koonce. Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). H.M. Smyser, in a review of Koonce's book, Speculum 42 (1966): 538-39, states: "If we could convince ourselves that God had implanted hidden meaning in the House of Fame as it was thought he did in Virgil, without the concurrence of the poet, or indeed without the poet's being aware of what was going on, we would be spared certain embarrassments in reading the poem as Dr. Koonce wishes us to read it."

23. Stephen Knight. Geoffrey Chaucer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986): 4.
24. Eugene Vance. "Chaucer's House of Fame and the Poetics of Inflation". Boundary 2 7 (1979):138.
25. See Sheila Delaney. Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972):69
26. Sheila Delaney. "'Phantom' and the House of Fame". ChauR 2 (1967):67-74
27. See Michael Kelley. "Antithesis as the Principle of Design in the Parliament of Fowls". ChauR 14 (1979): 61-73.
28. Kermode, op. cit. 34.
29. William Wilson. "Scholastic Logic in the House of Fame". ChauR 1 (1967):181-184.
30. The phrase is Stephen Knight's, op. cit. p. 4.
31. Croesus' dream was a medieval fabrication, conflated from the accounts of Herodotus and Polycrates. See Benson, note 2740, p. 935.
32. Delaney, op. cit. p. 41
33. Robert Jordan, "Lost in the Fun-House of Fame". ChauR 18 (1983):111.
34. Jordan, Chaucer's Poetics, 21.
35. See J.W. H. Atkins. English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith. 1961):91-118.
36. Jordan, "Lost in the Fun-House", 110-111.
37. See Jordan, Chaucer's Poetics, 37: "As an element of Chaucer's rhetorical play, the digressiveness and prolixity...are an elaborate pretense...Chaucer objectifies his pretense mainly by parodic excess...the playing and displaying of roles is a high literary value, not a sign of ineptitude and obtuseness."
38. See John Leyerle, "Chaucer's Windy Eagle" UTQ 40 (1971): 247-265.
39. Dante. The Divine Comedy, transl. Charles Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-1975): 377.
40. ibid. 5
41. See Koonce, op. cit. 73-88.
42. Lines 320, 783, 849, 881.
43. Delaney, Chaucer's House of Fame, 122
44. See above, Plato, p. 3
45. Saussure, op. cit. 66-67.
46. ibid. 68
47. Paul Ruggiers, "The Unity of Chaucer's House of Fame" SP 50 (1953):25.
48. Delaney, Chaucer's House of Fame, 109.
49. Stanley Fish. Is There a Text in this Class? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980):268.
50. Robertson and Huppé's ingenious exegesis for "toun of Tewnes" (BD 310). See Fruyt and Chaff, 46-47.



## CHAPTER III

### EXIT FUN-HOUSE: Closure in the Canterbury Tales

#### 1. Introduction

Horace advised the conscientious poet to lock his work "intus", and let it be kept quiet until the ninth year.<sup>1</sup> When, after his eight-year "sickness", Chaucer decided to unlock his "tresorye", he left the 'authenticating' device of the dream-vision for the dissembling 'realism' of teller and tale. In the Canterbury Tales, tales, not just "tydings", vie for outlet and judgement. The 'game' of story-telling contends with the 'ernest' of pilgrimage, and there are multiple truncated attempts at authoritative utterance.

Recent Chaucer criticism has identified in the Canterbury Tales these textual elements of plurality, dissemination, and disjunction, which constitute the post-modern sense of a text as a 'play'<sup>2</sup> between author and reader: David Lawton describes the Canterbury Tales as a polyphonic "narrational diaspora" in which "the frame...disperses into a scattering of fictions"; Jesse Gellrich finds the work "indeterminate...too plurivalent to be a copy of a structural model with a fixed and centered hold on order"; Carl Lindahl describes a Bakhtinian "festive performance"; Louise Fradenburg, a similar "carnival world of poetic rebellion"; Stephen Knight, a "multiplicity of fragmented discourses".<sup>3</sup>

Multiplicity and fragmentation provide for a sense of liberation, or of limitation, 'Fun-House' or 'Prison-House',

depending upon a poet's perception, and a reader's reception of the craft. Unbounded textual energies can be a power-house of 'play':

a verbal strategy, or language game, or tendency to transform the capacity for communication into an instrument of self-presentation, competition, or mastery.<sup>4</sup>

Or a source of anxiety:

The Canterbury Tales is postmodern in its manifest awareness of the contingent and arbitrary nature of language.<sup>5</sup>

The 'play' is 'pleasurable'<sup>6</sup> only so long as the rules are consistent: for many disappointed readers, the "language game" becomes earnest at the end of the Canterbury Tales, as the Parson's final contribution to the game "in effect renders the game unplayable".<sup>7</sup> With the "Parson's Tale" there is an abrupt shift from the polyphony of dialogic discourse to monologic discourse, and we are no longer participating in the "vast stereophony" of "plurality"<sup>8</sup> - aurally, ideologically, or tonally.

The Retractions which follow have been read as the game's concession to "the highest moral purpose of medieval art, namely, the harmony which the Parson offers between thought, word, and deed".<sup>9</sup> Most reader response, however, belies any such harmony in the reading experience. Attempts to throw away the final fragment<sup>10</sup> have been replaced by attempts to explain it away as irony.<sup>11</sup> But no explanation, however ingenious, can undo the disturbing jolt to expectations which Chaucer's "Retractions" occasions in its readers.

How is it that a statement which is deemed so fitting a "Lenten conclusion"<sup>12</sup> at the same time does not seem to fit? This chapter will demonstrate that two "realms of discourse bang together"<sup>13</sup> in dissonant 'play' on the surface of Chaucer's text: a 'metaphoric' polarity of transcendence, and a 'metonymic' polarity of re-immersion. According to Roman Jakobson,

In manipulating these two kinds of connection (similarity and contiguity) in both their aspects (positional and semantic) - selecting, combining, and ranking them - an individual exhibits his personal style, his verbal predilection and preferences.<sup>14</sup>

Chaucer's predilection for visible rhetorical 'play' is honed to a sophisticated fine art in the Canterbury Tales. The interplay here between verbal surface and fictional content presents the reader with two parallel 'roadside journeys', the rhetorical process, and the fictive pilgrimage, which "bang together" at the end of the journey. The superstructure of the work conveys a metaphoric representation of quest and resolution. The ending is well prepared, as analysis will reveal, both symbolically<sup>15</sup> and dramatically, yet it is dissatisfyingly dissonant. In his choice of strategies for his 'game', Chaucer has ensured that his ending will be at once organic and disruptive; cohesive and deconstructive; the reader's 'pleasure' does not seem to have been his "entente".

Robert Jordan proposes the analogy of the Gothic cathedral to accommodate such antithetical elements into the Canterbury Tales:

The creative impulse develops in an endlessly inventive process of dividing a preconceived totality into its constituent parts...the focal points they establish are

subject to displacement...the aesthetic character is determined by dissonance between the dramatic and the static.<sup>16</sup>

He differentiates between an 'inorganic', 'multiple unity', whose features are distinctly individual, and an 'organic', 'unified unity', whose features subordinate themselves to the total impression:

Chaucerian narrative is literally "built" of inert self-contained parts, collocated in accordance with the additive, reduplicative principles which characterize the Gothic edifice...the ultimate pointing towards God adds a further architectonic dimension characteristic of the Gothic.<sup>17</sup>

Jordan's study led him to

attempt to discover how Chaucer's sense of inorganic structure could enable him to resolve the serenity of Truth and the tumult of its ages... (and) achieve the completeness of vision which to the Gothic mind was the hallmark of serious human enterprise.<sup>18</sup>

Without the preconceived notions of unity ('multiple' or not), Jordan's principles of accumulation and division, dissonance and displacement, are very close to Derrida's principle of 'supplement', and Lacan's of 'lack and desire'. In the Canterbury Tales, the "focal points" of the Gothic structure are those characters and tales which act as energizing points, gathering and disseminating a multiplicity of perspectives with particular force, and which serve to continually divide and displace any tendency towards "totality", both "pre-conceived", and "ultimate". Can the reader arrive at Jordan's sense of the complete, the self-contained, and the ultimate without his 'a priori' assumption of it?

## 2. The Parameters of the Game

Jordan's conception of dissonance and displacement presumes a logocentric wholeness and resolution underlying what Arnold Hauser identifies as the "unfinished" and "fragmentary" aspects of late Gothic style:

the dissolution of all that is rigid and at rest by means of a dialectic of functions and subordinations ...a dramatic conflict working up to a decision before our eyes...the inconclusiveness of the forms... one's impression of endless, restless movement for which any stationary equilibrium is merely provisional.

The modern preference for the unfinished and the fragmentary has its origins here.<sup>19</sup>

Although it may not attain equilibrium, the Gothic aesthetic still acknowledges "subordinations" and retains the "decision" of the dialectical process as its goal. If, in Jordan's view, meaning "dances elusively among the interstices of the discourse",<sup>20</sup> yet it is present.

Harry Bailly, Host and literary critic, similarly places himself within the logocentric tradition. His notion of "pley": "A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley" (I.4354), presupposes a single "ful sooth" veiled beneath the many facets of rhetorical playfulness. The game is played out in the confidence of the solidity of the central truth or meaning, where "to be able to play" is

to break up the unity simply so as to make it felt still more strongly!...the cliff stands firm in the play of the waves, and the more violently the waves break against it from all sides, the more we sense the cliff's solidity.<sup>21</sup>

For Harry Bailly, 'homo ludens', the rules of the game are a stay against the chaotic energy of life. There is a substantial

difference, however, between this traditional medieval 'game and play' of festive performance, and the post-modern sense of improvisatory free-play, which, as Jesse Gellrich recognizes in the House of Fame, is "play which violates language and rationality",<sup>22</sup> and which "takes its pleasure from moves in the text, not from trying to guess what the author had 'in mind'".<sup>23</sup>

Huizinga cites Paul Valery's remark:

No skepticism is possible where the rules of the game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakeable faith...If the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses. The game is over.<sup>24</sup>

Again, in the Canterbury Tales, skepticism and fideism are presented as alternatives which readers have been eager to resolve. Deciding which type of 'play' Chaucer had "in mind" for the end of his game has generated a recent critical split over the ending of the Canterbury Tales, similar to the House of Fame and Troilus. The poems tease the reader into such conjecture because of their playfully ambivalent styles of narration. How, for example, does the reader react to Chaucer's apparently open declaration of his "entente":

"Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine", and  
that is myn entente. (X.1083)

On the one hand, the Biblical quotation appears to be a straightforward, if unwelcome, invocation of highest authority, an attempt by the poet to 'faire un' from "all" that he has written, and to unveil the univocal "sooth" motivating its 'game and play'. On the other, Chaucer has invited the undermining of his own utterance by placing that same (borrowed) statement in the mouth of the equivocating Nun's Priest (VII.3440-43), whose

"moralite" is as impossible to distinguish from the tale as was "soth" from "fals" in the House of Fame.

Early in the Canterbury Tales an "elvyssh" (VII.703) narrator offers an 'apologia' for poetry which serves rather to evade narrative responsibility, and to draw attention to the artifice of the narration much in the same manner as the Nun's Priest's authenticating protestations:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,  
He may nat spare, although he were his brother;  
He moot as wel seye o word as another.  
Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,  
And wel ye woot no vilenye is it.  
Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,  
The worde moote be cosyng to the dede" (1.725-42)

The narrator's manner of validating language through the models of Christ and Plato expresses a desire for truth in language which at the same time suggests the remoteness of such a goal. It falls to the mediation of this unreliable narrator to carry out- through the further fallible mediation of memory and writing- the 'likenesse' of "everich a word" to its speaker discovered in the House of Fame. Of this passage Paul Taylor asks an old question with a new twist: "What has Plato to do with Christ?".<sup>25</sup> The disjuncture perceived here between Christ's figurative language of parable (not at all "ful brode"), and Plato's ideal of faithful representation, is even more ambiguous on closer inspection: "cosyn" (from the Latin "cognatos"), apart from the pun which it invites (cosyn/cozen), allows at best a

'relative' approximation of word to deed, and never a perfect match.<sup>26</sup>

Both models, Biblical and Platonic, assume a qualitative difference between verbal signs and truth: a sign presupposes and requires the (momentary at least) absence of the concept it signifies.<sup>27</sup> The metaphoric layering of the language of parable requires a projection towards a hidden center in the quest for meaning; the 'inside' truth bears an integral similarity to the 'outside'. In Plato's model, the written word is only an unstable "reminder" of this permanent truth, a metonymic displacement which recalls what meaning it can through association. Closing the gap between word and meaning is 'barred' (recalling Lacan's algorithms, or Derrida's 'detour') in either case from immediate gratification. When the narrator, short of wit, collapses both modes into one indiscriminating "full brode" model, is he suggesting that they are equally likely to succeed (or not)?

By adding a "rhetorical" aspect to Jakobson's "positional and semantic" aspects of metaphor and metonymy,<sup>28</sup> these two principles, when applied to structural strategy, describe well Jordan's sense of "the dramatic and the static." The notion of narrative metonymy can be seen to reiterate, in more contemporary fashion, Augustine's dialectic of "modo hoc, modo illud", the this/that contiguity proper to the impaired cognition of mortals.<sup>29</sup> 'Metaphor' conveys just the opposite, a paradigm of relationships in which:

the perception of the presence of a transcendental order of things, a unity in which...the things of this



fragmented world are signifiers that point beyond themselves toward an ineffable whole.<sup>30</sup>

In De Doctrina Christiana, Augustine comments upon the inevitable gap between thought and word:

But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us.<sup>31</sup>

It is evident that Augustine did not see the thought's integrity ("it remains entire within itself") as an imprisonment, nor the gap between its reality and its assumed form cause for despair. For Augustine, "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate; tunc autem facie ad faciem" (I Cor.13:12); the 'mirror-stage' is regained when one at last comes "face to face" with "the transcendent signified at the origin of all".<sup>32</sup>

According to Derrida, Western logocentrism (wrongly) sees in metaphor and in theology "a provisional loss...but with its sights set on...a re-turn" to revealed truth.<sup>33</sup> It is this re-routing of the wayward pilgrims at the end of the Canterbury Tales which has been considered by some to be Chaucer's final play in his view of the world as 'sub specie ludi': "The Parson's Tale, then, is a kind of 'summa' on playing the ultimate game".<sup>34</sup> In its strategic placement, the "Parson's Tale" participates in what Frank Kermode classifies as "paradigmatic" or "ideological" closure: "coherent patterns which attempt to achieve consonance between beginning and end"; to make sense of the here and now ("in hoc tempore") and at the same time...recover a lost order of time ("in illo tempore").<sup>35</sup>

### 3. The Metaphoric Superstructure: Harmony

The outer structural design of the Canterbury Tales achieves such an ideological synthesis. In the beginning of the work:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne  
And smale foweles maken meolodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,  
To ferne halwes, kowth in sondry londes;  
And specially from every shires ende  
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,  
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.,

an impulse of progression, beginning with the abstract pagan forces of "Aprill" (Aphrodite) and "March" (Mars) evolves in harmonious conjunction with elemental sources, of water ("shoures"), air ("breeth"), fire ("sonne"), and earth ("heeth"), through an ascending hierarchy of life on earth (first "croppes", then "foweles"), culminating with man ("folk"), and then continuing beyond him to the abstract "hooly". The movement of images of the earth, from "roote" to "flour" to "croppes", accompanies this process of fulfillment, while the continuous spatial focusing, from "holt and heeth", to "straunge strondes", to "sondry londes", to "shires end", "Engelond", and finally "Caunterbury", parallels the ultimate focus of all of the life images upward towards the "blisful martir".

Of this passage, Ralph Baldwin remarked:

We have a typical medieval ab origine commencement...with the inchoative seasonal-moral, seasonal-religious metaphor, where the mirror of nature could not but reflect the divine order.<sup>36</sup>

The controlled image pattern is symbolic both of Creation and Judgement, also fixed in April-March in the Christian tradition:

The Canterbury Tales, like its real life analogues (Medieval festivals), is a celebration within a celebration, a profane element embedded in a sacred procession...the seasonal allusion places the pilgrimage at the onset of spring and of Holy Week, a time when both spiritual faith and secular life are revitalized.<sup>37</sup>

The entire movement towards an Augustinian "ineffable whole" is thus contained within the ordering structure of the sentence, "whan...thanne". The culminating word pair, "seke"/"seeke", in its visual and aural assonance, is a moment of what Lacan would call the harmonious wholeness of the 'mirror-stage'.

This initial metaphoric representation is balanced in the ending of the Canterbury Tales. In this respect, the entire structure can be seen as an ideological paradigm in which

the finis was ineluctably perceived in the beginning...the Canterbury pilgrimage becomes by metaphorical pressure the pilgrimage to the Celestial City...the destination of the pilgrimage becomes by the interlocked metaphorical and dramatic structures, not so much the Canterbury shrine as the "Parson's Tale".<sup>38</sup>

Symbolic imagery in the "Parson's Prologue and Tale" provides a balance and a resolution of the temporal quest, and at the same time, a projection beyond the earthly realm into the transcendental "Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage/ That highte Jerusalem celestial":

The sonne fro the south lyne was descended  
 So lowe that he nas nat, to my sighte,  
 Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte.  
 Foure of the klokke it was tho, as I gesse,  
 For ellevene foot, or litel moore or lesse,  
 My shadwe was at thilke tyme, as there  
 Of swiche feet as my lengthe parted were  
 In sixe feet equal of proporcioun.  
 Therwith the moones exaltacioun -  
 I meene Libra -alway gan ascende  
 As we were entryng at a thropes ende. (X.1-12)

"Libra" balances "the Ram" (I.8) with suggestions of the scales of Justice. The falling sun balances the "yonge sonne" (I.7), and juxtaposes the penultimate moments of temporal decline and spatial "ende" with the coming of the final end.<sup>39</sup> The reiterated lines:

Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet mateere.  
 Telle us a fable anon (X.28-29)

I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose  
 To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende. (X.46-47)

read like a responsive litany in which the roles of the speakers become re-reversed: the 'Lord of Misrule'<sup>40</sup> yields to the representative of the true Lord; the Host's rewarding supper and the festival "feeste" yields to participation in the salvific "feeste"; "greet mateere" yields to "vertuous mateere", "fable" to "prose", and "myrie" is transformed from its worldly connotation of 'solace' to "plesauce leeful" and "vertuous sentence".

This complex structural symmetry establishes the Canterbury Tales as an "apocalyptic", or "end-determined fiction",<sup>41</sup> wherein:

the world of the Canterbury Tales moves from its own Genesis to its final Revelation in the "Parson's Tale".<sup>42</sup>

The ending of the "Parson's Tale" recapitulates with insistent repetition the end-determined "thanne" clause of the spring opening:

Thanne shaltow understonde ...Thanne is discipline  
...Thanne shaltow understonde ...Thanne shal men  
understonde" (X.1057-1076).

Verbal echoes from the opening in lines X.1076-80 place the "compaignye of sondry folk" (I.24) before the "blissful compaignye"; the earthly "droghte" (I.2) is "replenysed"; the "seeke" (I.18), "syk freele and fieble" human condition is replaced by "sikernesse"; the longing "for to seke"(I.17) is fulfilled in "the sighte of the parfit knowing of God".

Fragment X thus serves to complete a framing structure which reflects

a relationship to the structure of the Bible: a long complex history told in a series of individual parts, and framed by Genesis and Revelation.<sup>43</sup>

But in order for this "complex history" to participate in a metaphoric, Augustinian synthesis, the "series of individual parts" would have to serve figuratively as types and shadows of the final events in the linear, end-determined concept of Christian sacred history. It seems, however, that the metaphoric beginning and ending remain distinct in structural strategy and in ideology from the rather large middle, and that, on closer reading, the integrated harmony and unity of the spring opening itself contains the potential to dissonance: the stable hierarchic order is threatened even as it is set up in the verse.

Ralph Baldwin quotes T.S. Eliot's opening to The Wasteland as an illustration of a parodic use of the spring topos.<sup>44</sup> Where

Eliot openly devastates his April, Chaucer constructs his perfect harmony with only the potential to disruption. The impact of Eliot's reversal depends upon an inherited tradition of conventional spring openings. In Chaucer's, the notable absence of any gender or 'engendring' in the highest form of life (the "folke") compared to the lowest (the "erthe"), and compared to the analogues, which are full of earthly love and contention,<sup>45</sup> places an ambivalent weight on the "longen" that separates the two clauses. The language at this point 'falls' from the high aureate style to a more colloquial 'low' style at the introduction of man ("folk") into the garden. In a most original turning from the more conventional human love towards the spiritual, Chaucer draws equal attention to the ideologically separate conditions, of spirituality and of earthliness, contained in the paired "seke"/"seeke" which ends the passage.

The absence of contention, in the whole passage, and in its harmonious closing couplet, acts as a 'graft' or 'splitting' or "fissure"<sup>46</sup> similar to the elision of aural difference in Derrida's difference-differance. The silent difference between "seke" and "seeke" constitutes a deferring 'differance', and a non-committal alternative to didacticism: the 'desire' of 'seeking' the holy martyr requires his provisional absence or lack; the 'lack', or spiritual 'sickness', requires a provisional lapse in seeking. Thus the pairing which deceptively implies a unity (the signifiers appear, visually and aurally, to be 'cosyns', whereas the signifieds are radically different), in fact demonstrates an invisible 'grafting' in the Lacanian chain of desire, a gap

comparable to that which marks metaphoric significations as repressions, and which led Derrida to "catch at"<sup>47</sup> their suppressed implications.

Of such ideological "fissures" in the text Terry Eagleton writes:

For every work is constituted by an interior 'rupture' or 'de-centerment' worked upon its initial situation... The mutual confrontation of those divergent meanings in the text signals a certain incompleteness: the work is not closed on itself, a 'totality' turning around a concealed center, but radically decentered and irregular, unachieved and insufficient... ideology is present in the text in the form of its eloquent silences, its significant gaps and fissures.<sup>48</sup>

The 'metaphysical closure', grafted over the gap between spiritual sickness and spiritual quest, points to a potential rupture in the ideology without offering judgement or solution: the very assonance of "seke"/"seeke" 'underlines',<sup>49</sup> by its apparent (to the senses) absence of dissonance, the problem of achieving or maintaining in the 'reality' of the pilgrimage the same congruity between ideology and sensory experience that the artifice of language can offer. The syntactically ordered "whan...thanne" is another fulfilled, end-determined sequence easily achieved in language. 'Real' order soon fragments, however. The potential failure of closing the gap between "seke" and "seeke" is realized immediately, as the spiritual goal (the "blisful martir") is supplanted by the worldly goal (the best tale), and the unidirectional spiritual journey to the shrine and to the "Jerusalem celestial" becomes circumscribed within the earthly circular journey back to the Tabard Inn.

#### 4. The Metonymic Inner Structure: Dissonance

The polarities of 'sickness' and 'seeking' seem perversely to draw the Pilgrimage in just the wrong direction to fulfill its 'desire' ("longen"): the order of procession, led by the bagpipe, symbol of concupiscence, and closed by "Come hider love to me" indicates that "whan" men are "priked" by the compelling earthly "melodye", "thanne" the justice (Summoner) and mercy (Pardoner) which follows is spiritually empty, like the "melodye and stif bourdon" with no inner harmonies. In a second palinode, the narrator responds to an even shorter-witted narrator, who has unknowingly revealed that spiritual devotion is hopelessly, if humourously, limited, when "Goddes foyson" is confined to earthly joys:

An housbande shal nat been inquisityf  
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.  
So he may fynde Goddes foyson ther,  
Of the remenaunt nedeth nat enquire. (I.3163-66)

After the very first tale, the 'seeking' impetus of pilgrimage ("inquisityf", "fynde", "nedeth", "enquire") is complacently negated ("nat", "nor", "nat"). The unbridgeable distinction between the signifieds of each word, "seke" and "seeke", thus represents in a couplet the "crisis" <sup>50</sup> of the incompatibility of belief and conduct in late Medieval society.

The series of tales, although contained within a Gothic superstructure, gives as much (many would argue more) attention to this limitation in its congregants as it does to the holistic grandeur of its outer design. Contention and disjunction are



magnified in what Helen Cooper has called a "themes and variations" development of "a potentially infinite series of perspectives and qualifications".<sup>51</sup> The process of proliferation of perspectives is analogous to the 'metonymic' insistence of lack and desire which Lacan borrowed from linguistics. In his comparison of literary style and linguistic tendencies, Roman Jakobson describes the effect of metonymy on the reader:

The reader is crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloading on him...and is physically unable to grasp the whole.<sup>52</sup>

Jakobson goes on to relate metaphor and metonymy to Sir James Frazer's "homeopathic" and "contagious" magic respectively. As a descriptive tool, the notion of narrative metonymy is particularly apt for conveying Cooper's sense of incremental and infinite variation; "multiplicity of detail" and "contagious magic" describe well the mounting carnivalesque clamour of interactions which accumulates along the road to Canterbury.

Like theme and variation, 'metonymy' expresses basically the same sense of infinite accumulation-displacement as Jordan's notion of "additive collocation", with a fine but important distinction. When applied to the frame-narrative, the relationships between (inter) the texts continually add new levels of discourse to the work. Unlike the model of the cathedral, with its "Gothic urge for wholes within wholes",<sup>53</sup> each additional tale (in part) displaces the assertion of its precursor, partly replacing it with its own differing assertion, soon to be (in part) qualified or cancelled by the next. Each supplementary assertion, rather than being "whole" or "self-

contained", bears within itself a potential lack, to be filled by another similarly limited supplement. Each component of the whole Gothic structure, then, and not only the whole, expands to accommodate precedent as well as consecutive influences. Each successive tale limits the ones before it, and cautions the ones that follow, by demanding re-appraisal of assumptions and perspectives. Once the process begins, no single addition can be read or recalled in isolation. The cumulative result is a far greater, and less stable, plenitude than that of the cathedral.

This "frenzied miming of the abyss"<sup>54</sup> takes as its impetus the "break-through" in the "space of writing"<sup>55</sup> in the exposed space between "seke" and "seeke. In their subsequent metonymic progression, the tales qualify, parody, or 'quite' elements in each other; narrative fallacy and intrusion effect further instability by preventing a tale from asserting any meaning separate from both the circumstance of its telling, and the intertextual milieu. Chaucer's own narrative stance, when it is present, of an admiring reporter of face ('mirror-stage') values, undercuts any attempt at an authoritative perspective. In its "dramatic conflict working up to a decision",<sup>56</sup> authoritative decision in the Canterbury Tales is continually deferred.

The hierarchic ordering of the opening, for example, is reconsidered in the "Knight's Tale" in a totally new context and setting. There, the "worthy" ideal of order is reaffirmed, but at great expense to its integrity and tenability. Although the tale's form reiterates the rational ordering of divine creation,<sup>57</sup> and although the structural forces converge repeatedly

and ultimately upon Theseus in a manner that calls attention to the artifice, the "lapses"<sup>58</sup> effected by the narration are silent gaps which threaten to bring down the structure.

Theseus himself as a structural device, introduced always within the tale as an abrupt chance appearance, conveys a view of destiny which is arbitrary and inscrutable and unordered, rather than the ideal microcosmic reflection of a rational "high entente". He is consistently the cause of disruption within his own realm, hacking and hewing and bathing that representative "selve grove, swote and greene" (I.2860) with blood, not renewing "licour", and inviting the disharmony of Mars and Aphrodite to 'engender' new destruction. The Knight's Tale is in this way representative of the entire series of tales in its precariously balanced order: enclosed in a structural framework which spells order and harmony of part to whole, the inner contentions consistently seek, through their own energies and momentum, to desert the hierarchic "feyre chaine". The Knight unknowingly 'quites' the ordered spring opening by introducing and then ceremoniously amplifying the discord of human love, and then by precipitating disorder in the pilgrimage. His own tale of order is 'quited' by the further contentions and disorderly 'quitings' of the Miller and Reeve. The Knight's fictional vision of unity, order, and finality is thus presented against the actuality of disorder, discontinuity, and unpredictability in the 'real life' of the pilgrimage.

The ensuing two fictions qualify the Knight's fictional world as well: the ethereal Emilye pales before the Miller's

tactile Alisoun; that delightfully humourous view of human lusts becomes, from the Reeve's "roten" perspective, "as digne as water in a dich" (I.3964). The poetic justice that ends the Miller's Tale, although just as disruptive as the planetary justice in the Knight's Tale, is not veiled, nor casual, and therefore seems as refreshingly logical and natural as its characters, though still not controlled. This partly corrective perspective is immediately re-viewed and supplanted: justice in the Reeve's Tale becomes a nasty, controlled revenge.

Charles Muscatine notes that "Chaucer has a passion for relationships".<sup>59</sup> As each new tale partially alters and re-focuses into new relationships parts of the opening themes of creation-order-justice, we can see Chaucer extracting and developing related sub-themes: the question of cosmic order, for example, modulates to related questions of domestic power, dominance, and subjection. The tales multiply and fragment the initial ideal order into multi-faceted relationships which gather and disperse at certain 'focal points' of particular force -the Knight, the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, the Canon's Yeoman.

The Wife of Bath, like the Knight, has provoked widely varied, contradictory commentary and interpretation; the focal points themselves are not stable entities. How very much more complex it becomes to morally evaluate her position as a woman, limited by medieval patriarchal textual 'auctorite',<sup>60</sup> when her 'experience' is placed in discourse with the alternatives of Custance and of Griselde, who, in spite of (or because of) their

moral perfection, find themselves in one way or another in the same tragic, unfulfilled state of subjection and/ or childlessness. Is Dorigen in the end any less subject to a husband's 'maistre' than the Wife, or than Griselde? Can we judge her subjugating vow innocent of intent, after the disjuncture between oath/ intent in the Friar's Tale? Does Virginia's virginity and submission not seem a senseless wastage of such perfection when stripped of its (albeit senseless) Biblical vow altogether, and placed in discourse with these other heroines? Does resuming of the missing divine trappings completely dismiss these imperfections in the ideal when we read the Legend of St Cecilia? How do we view and re-view this male ideal of female perfection in the light of the Merchant's mockery of marriage, and of the ideal of 'gentillesse' expressed first in the "Wife of Bath's Tale", and then the Manciple's? How do we respond to any of these cocky husbands after Chauntecleer? And where do we place Theseus' ultimate divine order when we read the juxtaposed tragic visions of the Monk and the Nun's Priest?

The Nun's Priest's Tale focuses this accumulated question and posits its own 'justice' and 'order'. The law of Bayard governs here: to survive one must disregard and misinterpret authorial wisdom in order to bring the desired goal ("seke" -it seems far-off and forgotten by now) into accord with the spiritually "seeke" needs of one's nature:

Mulier est hominis confusio -  
'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis' (VII.3164-66)

Chauntecleer is living proof of the proverb, in his 'confusio' of its meaning, and in his imprudent 'joye' of Pertelote (whose name means 'confusio'<sup>61</sup>). Blind capitulation to worldly vanities brings Chauntecleer to tragic end and back again, thanks to the similar tendencies in his fellow creature, the fox. The urge to speak forth is the cause of both his Fall, and then of his Salvation. With the Nun's Priest's illuminating "moralite", we approach the closing sequence of tales with complete disjuncture between word and world, 'confusio' and 'blis', and with all the stability, predictability and 'auctorite' of the House of Fame.

## 5. Closure and Exit

It is from this vantage of absurdity that we view the final tales. We arrive at the last fictional and highly rhetorical tale of truth-telling with vestiges of Chauntecleer's and the Pardoner's disregard for an ordained hierarchy between thought, word, and deed, matched with an accumulation of characters ordering and manipulating 'auctoritee' and rhetoric, and/or being manipulated by it, and prefaced by a powerful statement, in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" (the very title defers responsibility twice) of the fascinating and tempting power of creativity. The short and simple "Manciple's Tale" is heard, then, amidst this overload of intertextual utterances which magnify it immeasurably. As readers we are situated again in the swarming House of Rumour and asked to discriminate "soth from fals", first in a fiction, and then in the final review of the entirety

from a new and pre-eminent perspective which demands from us a wilfull cancellation of not part, but all that went before it.

Recently it has been suggested<sup>62</sup> that these final tales become less dramatically real as more attention is given the rhetoric of the teller. This is true to a point, but keeping in mind that the tellers are themselves fictional, their accelerating dramatic interaction with one another works in one sense to increase their own dramatic realism, although the tales may in fact be subordinate to their rhetorical presences. The fictions of the tales, the furthest remove in narrative distance,<sup>63</sup> afford less and less imaginative escape (for the teller) from the 'reality' of the pilgrimage.

There is an urgency, bordering upon hysteria and desperation, informing the Second Nun's obsession with words and works, and the Canon's Yeoman's similar obsession, and failure, to "conclude". "Eschatological haste"<sup>64</sup> adds to the tales' precipitous nature as the pilgrims reach the journey's end: one soul (the Canon) is lost; there is a "desperate confession";<sup>65</sup> the Host, Cook, and Manciple re-enact the Judgement scenes of the thief-in-the-night<sup>66</sup> and Hell's Mouth.<sup>67</sup> This drive in the final tales is characterized by multiple transformations: successful spiritual transformation (Second Nun's); failed alchemical transformation (Canon's Yeoman's); whiteness to blackness, and "cleere voys" to silence (Manciple's); and finally, mortal sinner to penitent (Retractions). In the last fictional tale, the speaker of truths is 'deconstructed', feather by feather, and dispatched "to the devil", like the Cook (through Hell's Mouth)

and the Canon ("the foule fiend him secche"), and the instruments of musical interpretation.

In the "Manciple's Tale" the incongruities and varieties of genres, themes, and perspectives are twisted together into a bitterly destructive irony. Phebus Apollo, to whom the Dreamer had appealed for guidance in the House of Fame (1093-1100), falls miserably and utterly. Like Chauntecleer, he accommodates the demands of the world to the demands of truth by wilful self-delusion. Here, silence is proclaimed against "janglerye" in a similar torrent of rhetoric, but the humour of the incongruity is lost to a sneering cynicism.

Has the Fun-House of Fame become the Prison-House of Language?<sup>68</sup> Earlier in his career, Chaucer would have perhaps delighted in ending his canon with the perfect Chauntecleerian harmony of a long-winded exhortation to brevity from the barnyard, informed by the unauthenticating 'auctoritee' of the House of Fame. The "Nun's Priest's Tale" would have reasserted the Miller's unwitting equating of "Goddess pryvetee" and "wyf", and so ended the Canterbury Tales with a humourous disregard for the hierogamy posited in its opening lines - a typically Chaucerian silent exposure of incompleteness of vision.

With the "Manciple's Tale", however, the amused potential of the House of Fame's ... is "stomped upon" and silenced with finality. This silence admits no sub-text of eloquence, no "breathing-space".<sup>69</sup> It clears the air of "tydings" and prepares the reader for the "peyne to speke of God"; like Augustine, the poet "withdraws the services of his tongue from the language



markets"<sup>70</sup> of poetic discourse to speak in prose. That the "pilgrims hear it out unmurmuring"<sup>71</sup> only adds to the dead silence surrounding the final fragment.

The Parson offers both reader and pilgrim a recapitulation and re-assertion of the hierarchic harmony outlined in the opening of the work. In his (non-)tale, the "seeke" aspect of mankind is expressed ontologically as a derangement of that divine order, and a negation of reality which violates not merely a code of conduct, but the purpose and structure of creation itself:

And ye shal understonde that in mannes synne is every manner of ordre or ordinaunce turned up-so-doun./For it is sooth that God, and Resoun, and sensualitee and the body of man been so ordeyned that everich of these foure thynges sholde have lordshipe over that oother/as thus: God sholde have lordshipe over resoun, and resoun over sensualitee, and sensualitee over the body of man./But soothly, when man synneth, al this ordre or ordinaunce is turned upso-doun. (X.260)

Baldwin finds that the "Parson's Tale" realigns the earthliness of the pilgrimage by lifting each pilgrim to momentary contact with the spiritual. For Jordan, the Parson's Tale is both "paradigm" and "apotheosis", symbolically and architectonically. For Lawlor, the tale provides, finally, "a Christian version of Theseus' speech."<sup>72</sup> Yet for many other readers, the final transformation of the poet seems more 'up-so-doun' than the disorder which the Parson identifies in the pilgrimage. Is a Christian version of Theseus' speech sufficient for "apotheosis"?

The accumulated force of both the symbolic and the dramatic drives to apocalyptic closure seems to outweigh the attempts to

reduce the "Parson's Tale" and "Retractions" to parody and irony, and at the same time challenges Jordan's assertion that "the transformation is sudden - coming without preparation".<sup>73</sup> In subjecting the Parson to the same ironic deflation as "Chaucer's windy eagle",<sup>74</sup> the alternate readings do not convincingly resolve the dissonance in the reader's experience of the final fragment, even though they may demonstrate that it ought not exist. Similar problems arise from Robertsonian readings which explain that all "enditynges of worldly vanitees" are intended really to support, not subvert "oure doctrine". This "entente" would obviate any need for retracting such an obliging "pars pro toto" of the "aedificium scripturae".<sup>75</sup>

If Chaucer had intended an ironic closure, surely he could have equalled or bested Boccaccio by 'misdeming' the convention of retraction in a more 'Chaucerian', lively manner.<sup>76</sup> If he had wished a spiritually uplifting "apotheosis", surely he could have been as celebratory in his ending as he was in his beginning. Our shock and dismay at the Retractions arises in part from a most unprepared, uncharacteristic authorial gesture: Chaucer removes his mask to make an authoritative choice from the multiple perspectives available. The gesture is unconvincing because although from one perspective (the outer structural frame of beginning and ending) the "Retractions" participate fully in a movement along a 'metaphoric axis' towards an unambiguous moral closure, from the cumulative and multifarious perspectives of the middle, the largest part of the temporal reading experience, the "Retractions" appear to be a sudden braking of

an endless forward impulse along the 'metonymic axis'. The dissonance demonstrates that the "transformation" is a collision rather than a collusion between the two structural axes. Chaucer's 'metonymic' strategy insists upon the endless flux of temporality; the 'metaphoric' strategy figures the sempiternal. The two simultaneous perspectives are as impossible to reconcile during the reading experience as they are in life.

The disjunction between the two perspectives becomes actual for the reader as he is wrested from the fictions along with the poet: the Muses are effectively banished, and "the whole play world collapses",<sup>77</sup> like Prospero's illusion. The reader's profound disappointment attests to his 'pleasure' in the "vast stereophony"<sup>78</sup> created by the tales, especially in those "endytynges of wordly vanitees". Recognizing this willing self-delusion in the reader, John Locke stated that

Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself to ever be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.<sup>79</sup>

The reader had a difficult time choosing between two opposing views toward "worldly vanitees" presented in such ambivalent disarray in the palinode to Troilus. Many have felt that in spite of the final renunciation there, the poem's "eloquence", like the fair sex it both celebrates and laments, "has too prevailing beauties in it" to be convincingly renounced. Did Chaucer finally, in the Canterbury Tales, find it timely to speak unequivocally against those arts of deceiving?

If there is an ironic reading of Chaucer's closure, it speaks perhaps through the 'splitting' or 'graft' in his structures: the "Retractions" say one thing; their structural presence means another. Profane fictions have led the reader to a sudden recognition of spiritual 'lack'. We participate in the impossibility, and not the achievement, of the divinely ordered ideal. The connotative significance of the "Retractions" is perhaps only one more added supplement,<sup>80</sup> but structurally the authoritative statement serves to better define the 'gap' in human understanding and endeavor which had existed in the form of a silent dissonance from the very beginning. This final disjunction concludes the initial 'longing' with the gap between "seke" and "seeke" yawning hugely, and beckoning to the reader, paradoxically, to resume rather than to end the quest.

Arnold Hauser describes a late Gothic 'play' of "the remainder"<sup>81</sup> between artist and reader:

there is always something left over for the spectator or reader to complete. The modern artist shrinks from the last word because he feels the inadequacy of all words- a feeling which we may say was never experienced by man before Gothic times.<sup>82</sup>

Chaucer has indicated eloquently and subtly, through the dismantling of his seductive fictions, that there is a 'gap' of understanding between "Goddes pryvetee" and "Goddes foyson", and that at some point one must attempt, however insufficiently, to enquire of "the remenaunt" ("something left over"). The palinode through which he does this is, by convention, a break from what Derrida calls the "structurality" that "would limit... the play of the structure".<sup>83</sup> Faced with the sudden liberation from the

rules of the game, the reader may once again choose to engage in the free-play of 'undecidables': skepticism and fideism; 'sickness' and 'seeking'; 'lack' and 'desire'.

As always with Chaucer, the reader is left to supplement the gap as he chooses, with Chaucer's proviso: "Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys".

1. Horace, De Arte Poetica Liber, lines 388-390, in Horace. Sermones et Epistulae. ed John Rolfe. (New Rochelle, New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1976):160

...nonumque prematur in annum  
Membranis intus positis; delere licebit

Quod non edideris; nescit vox missa reverti.

"And put the parchments within until the ninth year. What you have not published may be destroyed. The utterance once sent out may not be returned."

2. Roland Barthes. "From Word to Text", in Textual Strategies, ed. Josue V. Harari. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979):79. Barthes' defines 'play': "...playing must be understood in all its polysemy. The text itself plays...and the reader himself plays twice over: playing the text as one plays a game, he searches for a practise that will reproduce the text."

3. David Lawton. Chaucer's Narrators (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.); Jesse Gellrich. op. cit. 239-40.; Carl Lindahl. "The Festive Form of the Canterbury Tales". ELH (1985): 533; Louise Fradenburg. "The Manciple's Servant Tongue" ELH (1985):83; Stephen Knight. "Chaucer and the Sociology of Literature". SAC(1980):18

4. Robert Hanning. "Chaucer and the Dangers of Poetry". CEA Critic (1984): 20.

5. Robert Jordan. Chaucer's Poetics. 169.

6. Commenting upon the 'pleasure' of the text (as in Roland Barthes' book of that name) that results from a postmodern awareness of plurality, Eugene Goodheart, op. cit., p. 76-77 writes: "The liberation of the signifier from the signified is the correlative of the triumph of the pleasure principle over the reality principle. The signified, like the reality principle represents the limiting conditions of existence. The signifier, like the pleasure principle, transgresses the limits of the signified. The transgressions that produce pleasure interrupt the binding, repressive continuities of reality. The liberated signifier enhances the power of language because of its capacity for multiple meaning."

7. Lee Patterson. "The Parson's Tale and the Quitting of the Canterbury Tales" Traditio 34 (1976): 376.

8. Roland Barthes. op. cit. 77-78: "The text's plurality... depends on what could be called the stereographic plurality of the signifiers that weave it...that traverse the text from one end to the other in a vast stereophony."

9. Paul Taylor, "Chaucer's Cosyn to the Dede". Speculum 57 (1982):326.

10. The authenticity of the "Parson's Tale" has been questioned by John Manly and Edith Rickert. The Text of the Canterbury Tales. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940)II: 454-55

11. See Olive Sayce. "Chaucer's Retractions: The Conclusion of the Canterbury Tales and its place in the literary Tradition". Medium Aevum (1971):230-247; John Finlayson. "The Satiric Mode and the Parson's Tale". ChauR 6 (1971):94-116; Judson Boyce

Allen. "The Old Way and the Parson's Way: an Ironic Reading of the Parson's Tale". JMRS (1973):255-271.

12. Mark Allen. "Penitential Sermons, the Manciple, and the End of the Canterbury Tales SAC 9 (1987):96.

13. Robert Jordan, Chaucer's Poetics, p.26 quotes Annie Dillard, Living By Fiction (New York: Harper and Row, 1983): 24 on postmodern fiction: "The point of view shifts; the prose style shifts...characters turn into things, sequences of events abruptly vanish. Images clash; realms of discourse bang together."

14. Roman Jakobson and Thomas Halle. "Two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances", in Fundamentals of Language (The Hague: Mouton, 1956):255, reprinted in Dan Latimer. Contemporary Literary Theory, 23

15. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Poetic Closure. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968):127-131 for a discussion of symbolic preparation for closure.

16. Robert Jordan. Chaucer and the Shape of Creation (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967):xi, emphasis mine.

17. ibid., 130.

18. ibid., 60.

19. Arnold Hauser. The Social History of Art (London, 1962):220

20. Jordan, Chaucer's Poetics, 170.

21. Georg Lukacs, from Soul and Form (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978):137-38, cited in Eugene Goodheart, op. cit., 157-58.

22. Jonathan Culler. The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981):42-43.

23. Gellrich, op. cit. 226.

24. Johann Huizinga. Homo Ludens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955):27

25. Paul Taylor. op. cit.:320. On page 322-23, Taylor outlines the transmission of Plato's "akin" ("sungeneis", Timaeus 29B) through Chalcidius' "consanguineae", Commentarius, and Boethius' "cognatos" (De Consolatione Philosophiae, Book 3 Pr. 12), and Jean de Meun's "cousine" (Roman de la Rose 15192), to Chaucer's "cosyn", both here, and in Boece

26. This is the burden of Plato's Cratylus dialogue. Pierre Machery. A Theory of Literary Production. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978):61 comments: "as Plato suggests in the Cratylus, the essence of resemblance is difference. The image that corresponded perfectly with the original would no longer be an image; it remains an image by virtue of its difference from that which it resembles."

27. Margaret W. Fergusson. "Saint Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language" Georgia Review 29 (1975): 842-864.

28. See above, page 52 re. Jakobson. Jordan, in Chaucer's Poetics, 15, makes a transfer (which I borrow) of the concept of signifier and signified to represent rhetoric and content respectively.

29. Augustine. Confessions, XII.xiii.16., cited in Eugene Vance. "Augustine's Confessions and the Grammar of Selfhood". Genre 6 1973:11-12

30. ibid., XIII.xv.16. Augustine elaborates on this hierarchy in De Ordine, XIII.38: "After having perfected and disposed grammar, reason then took upon itself to seek out and consider the power by which it produces art; for by defining, analyzing, and synthesizing, it had not only brought about sequence and order, but it had also prevented the intrusion of error."

31. Augustine. De Doctrina Christiana I.13.12, cited in Eugene Vance. "Roland and the Poetics of Memory", in Josue Harari. Textual Strategies, 37.

32. ibid.

33. Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 270, cited in Goodheart, op. cit. 114.

34. Michael Olmert. "The Parson's Ludic Formula for Winning on the Road to Canterbury". ChauR 20 (1985):166.

35. Frank Kermode. The Sense of an Ending. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967):3-4.

36. Ralph Baldwin. "The Unity of the Canterbury Tales", in Schoeck and Taylor. Chaucer Criticism, Vol. I (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960):20

37. Carl Lindahl, op. cit., 547.

38. Baldwin, op. cit., 1

39. According to medieval numerological symbolism, 29 degrees and 11 feet are penultimate numbers of imperfection; 4 is worldly; the divisor 6 is eternal. See Russell Peck, "Number Symbolism in the Prologue to Chaucer's Parson's Tale". ES 48 (1967): 205-14; Rodney Delasanta. "The Theme of Judgement in the Canterbury Tales" MLQ 31 (1970): 298-307, and "Penance and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales" PMLA 100 (1984): 746-761; also, Ernst Robert Curtius. "Numerical Composition", in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953):501-9.

40. Louise Fradenburg, op. cit.:93.

41. Frank Kermode's term for 'apocalyptic' as opposed to 'open' closure.

42. Morton Bloomfield. "The Canterbury Tales as Framed Narratives". Leeds Studies in English 14 (1983): 45

43. Traugott Lawlor. The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales (Hamden, Connecticut, 1980): 167.

44. Baldwin, op. cit.:18

45. The openings, for example, to the Romance of the Rose, Confessio Amantis, Piers Plowman.

46. Stephen Knight, op. cit., 25-26, describes "fissure" as "moments of crisis from which the text withdraws...strains, silences, absences...where the text turns away from its possibilities...to ideological closure... arrangements in a text which realize and confront possibilities that are disturbing to a social ideology and predictive of forces hostile to the ruling ideology. And then those possibilities are closed off in a consoling way that delimits the fissure, reveals the strain, and in locating it, contains it...the fact that Chaucer's pen failed as he wrote the word "auctoritee" (HF) is an index of the limits the text confronts."



47. See above, Derrida, page 8.
48. Terry Eagleton, "Machery and Marxist Literary Theory" in Against the Grain (London: Thetford Press, 1986):12-14.
49. See above, Lacan, page 17.
50. Charles Muscatine. Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972)
51. Helen Cooper. The Structure of the Canterbury Tales (London: Duckworth, 1983):208-240.
52. Roman Jakobson, op.cit, in Dan Latimer Contemporary Literary Theory, 25
53. Morton Bloomfield, op.cit.44
54. See above, Lacan, page 12
55. See above, Derrida, page 6.
56. See above, Hauser, page 54
57. See Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in the Knight's Tale". PMLA, 1950:911-29. Muscatine notes that the "leavening, balancing element of common sense is signaled... by a lapse in the high style" (for example in lines 1785-1825; 2913), which recalls the similar occurrence in the opening of the General Prologue. The high sentence of Theseus' closing speech is qualified by similar inconsistencies, such as his attribution to Jupiter of the events we are told were caused by Saturn; his Egeus-like portrayal of a "feyre chaine" in which the worldly component is not fair at all, but a "foule prison"(3061); and his conclusion, "parfit...lasting evermo", that asserts that all is "corrumpable" and "not eterne" (3015).
58. Robert Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, 154-184.
59. Charles Muscatine. Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1957):223
60. See R.W. Hanning, "Acts of Textual Harassment" SAC (1985):3-22
61. See Benson, op.cit. notes to line 2870, p.937.
62. Robert Jordan. Chaucer's Poetics, 147.
63. Donald Howard, "The Canterbury Tales:Memory and Form", ELH 38 (1971):320.
64. Delasanta, "Penance and Poetry".244
65. Lawrence Ryan, "The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession", ChauR. 8 (1974):297-309.
66. Delasanta, "Penance and Poetry", 245
67. Roy Percy, "Does the Manciple's Prologue Contain a Reference to Hell's mouth?" ELN 11 (1974):167-175.
68. For various responses to this final message against speech, see Richard Hazelton. "The Manciple's Tale, Parody and Critique", JEGP (1963): 1-31; V.J. Scattergood, "The Manciple's Manner of Speaking", EC 24 (1974): 124-146; Arnold Davidson, "The Logic of Confusion in Chaucer's Manciple's Tale", AnMed. 19 (1979):5-12
69. See above, Derrida, page 7.
70. Augustine, po Confessions VIII, cited in Eugene Vance, "Augustine's Confessions":22
71. Baldwin, op.cit.:37
72. Baldwin, op. cit..41:"each pilgrim and his story combine with the Parson's to make a momentary -and moving- diptych, a story and gloss, action and passion. This confers a sense of

completeness which such episodic fictions often lack."; Robert Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape: 230,241; Lawlor, op.cit.: 159-70.

73. Jordan, Chaucer's Poetics: 165

74. Leyerle, op. cit.

75. Jesse Gellrich, op.cit.: 238-9

76. See Paul Taylor, "Peynted Confessiouns: Boccaccio and Chaucer" CL 34 (1982): 122-23.

77. See above, Valery, page 47.

78. See above, Barthes, page 43.

79. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. John Yolton. (London, 1961):105-6.

80. The Parson's Tale is simply another supplement in the Gothic design. As such, it demonstrates the same combination of assertion of presence and lack of completeness: its 'contemptus mundi' view of the world as "muck and mire" denies the fairness of that part of the fair chain and is therefore less true to the hierarchic ideal than the spring opening which it balances; it requires a re-reading of the beginning to supplement its lack. The Retractions similarly require the reading of the retracted tales to have any moral effect.

81. See above, Lacan, page 15.

82. Arnold Hauser, op.cit.:220, emphasis mine.

83. Jacques Derrida. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in Writing and Difference, 278.

Stanley Fogel, in The Postmodern University (Toronto:ECW Press. 1988):106-12, discusses the convention of retraction as a device for evading, not affirming, teleological fiction.

## CHAPTER IV

### EXIT FUN-HOUSE: Closure in Paterson

#### 1. Introduction

In one of many re-iterated essays at finality, T.S.Eliot concludes wearily: "There is no end but addition..."<sup>1</sup> Invoking the voices of medieval writers to assist his struggle towards affirmation, Eliot looks with nostalgia to the metaphysical closure of the past. His modernist quest subscribes to a common twentieth century (erroneous) assumption: that back in the unenlightened certitude of the middle ages, writers perceived an unbroken and unquestioned continuity between the pagan beginning, and the Christian eschatological ending, of the quest for philosophical truth, and that poets would have rejoiced, perhaps like Theodore of Chartres, in their privileged place in the tradition:

We are dwarfs seated on the shoulders of the ancients  
as on the shoulders of giants. If we see more farther  
than they, it is not because of the penetration of our  
sight, nor of our grandeur; it is because we are  
elevated by them, and borne to a gigantic height.<sup>2</sup>

Chaucer, too, gave tribute to the wisdom of the "giants":

And if olde bokes were away  
Yloren were of remembrance the keye (LGW.G.25-26)

If "remembrance" was Chaucer's "key" to the past, it is one that he wielded with full appreciation for present limitation:

For wel I wot that folk han here-beforn  
Of making ropen, and lad away the corn  
And I come after, glenynge here and there (LGW.G.61-63)<sup>3</sup>

But the urge to contain or to unseat the "giants" becomes an "antagonism" in modern poetry: Eliot appropriates the entire

Tradition into his Wasteland; Wallace Stevens relegates its worn images to The Dump.

William Carlos Williams describes this "antagonism" as a paradox of enslavement and liberation:

There is an antagonism between the ages. Each age wishes to enslave the others...To read, while we are imbibing the wisdom of the ages, we are at the same time imbibing the death...the enslaving rudeness of the ages.<sup>4</sup>

Like every poet obliged to "come after, glenyng", Williams, "Sniffing the trees/ just another dog/ among a lot of dogs"(3), is faced with a pre-existent multiplicity of textual and intertextual "tydings". By the twentieth century, the cumulative clutter of "idel thoghte" generated by six centuries of individual talents would present a formidable over-crowding to any poet venturing into the Fun-House of Fame for inspiration. Any 'poetria nova' which would seek to rejuvenate or "comb" the amassed over-abundance of "shaggy discourse"<sup>5</sup> must confront, parenthetically, the rock-solid "lips" of the Tradition:

(What common language to unravel?  
. . . combed into straight lines  
from that rafter of a rock's  
lip.) (7)

Williams' response to the "giants" is not so much a modernist sigh of belatedness as a probing of, and a response to, the same dilemma of writing/ memory/ knowledge confronted by Plato in the Phaedrus: once removed from the origin of dialectic discourse, the issues under examination inevitably appear to be indelible, just as Chaucer discovered them, "writen in bras" within a "temple ymad of glas". The knowledge embodied in the

"tydings" of the past appears fixed and sure, and access seems perfectly transparent:

For the beginning is assuredly  
the end - since we know nothing, pure  
and simple, beyond  
our own complexities. (5)

For Williams, as for Chaucer, "remembrance" is a "key" to renewed vitality:

Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment  
a sort of renewal  
even  
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new  
places (77)

and true knowledge embodies no "mythical end":

Knowledge is not at the end of the deduction but in  
each phase of it and everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

To open the "spaces" for the "new dialect"<sup>7</sup> requires the "break through all preconception of poetic form and mood and pace".<sup>8</sup> Again, the question arises, does this 'unbinding' of language liberate or confine: does the poet's key of remembrance unlock the mind for remonstrance, or does each poet's attempt to "cleanse the words of the tribe"<sup>9</sup> lock him into a closed solipsistic circuit, where the poet finds himself

Caught (in mind)  
beside the water...  
But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused  
uproar: missing the sense (though he tries) untaught  
but listening, shakes with the intensity of his  
listening . (81)

Like Eliot, Williams is "caught" in a preoccupation with personal beginnings; "To make a start" is an insistent leitmotif in Paterson which, in its repetition, at once asserts and negates the desire to "find":

I must  
find my meaning and lay it, white,  
beside the sliding water: myself -  
comb out the language - or succumb (145)

Medievalism seems to offer Williams, as it did Eliot, a poetic closure of stability and permanence against this endless "sliding". But for Williams, the voices from the past are a compelling, but ultimately unavailable, alternative. He seeks a new poetics of the present, to be derived from a re-tracing of the poetic act from its origins, but without the nostalgia for a lost plenitude assumed to exist there at the source.

This chapter will examine the task as Williams outlined it for himself in his "Author's Note" to Paterson, and as he failed to complete it within his prescribed four-book structure. Many readers perceive in Books I to IV a constant disintegration of purpose, "composition and decomposition" (75). For some, Book V is a welcome realignment of the frustrating indefinite closures of the preceding four books; for others, it is simply "no end, but addition"; more "non-sequential babble"<sup>10</sup> which the appeal to medieval art fails to tame into a unity. The poem, weaving and playing with its float of disconnected materials, takes the reader through a "confused uproar" of episodes which "jostle" for the reader's favours like the disorderly "tydings" in the House of Fame.

## 2. Reading 'Anti-poetically'

"Missing the sense (though he tries)" is the essence of the reading experience for many readers of Paterson. Bombarded by a dizzying assortment of history and fiction in the form of

letters, newspaper clippings, conversations, archives, lyric interludes and prose, in which

the formal surface of the poem is fractured repeatedly...Lines are fragmented, pages are fragmented, sections are fragmented...even the poem itself is a fragment, for with a sixth book projected, it remains unfinished.<sup>11</sup>,

and with no "frends" emerging from the resulting "jig-saw",<sup>12</sup> the reader is at a loss to "book" this elusive text. In a 1952 review of "the discordant babble of Paterson", Joseph Bennett writes:

His 'poetry' is headless and footless...any part of Paterson can be taken out and put elsewhere in the poem. <sup>13</sup>

Williams' "design on the general structure of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales"<sup>14</sup> eliminates the authenticating devices of narrative presence and sequence, which, although artificial and ambiguous in the Canterbury Tales, maintained enough of a sense of structure and control to upset the reader when Chaucer dismantled them. Paterson presents a continuous overflowing of detail, and no built-in system for selection or subordination. Historical detail is wrenched out of context and added to the flow, so that the past, and in fact the "authority" of all "other centers"(36) but the local and the particular, is rejected in an 'anti-poetic'<sup>15</sup> which "turns to the local as a centerless center, and rediscovers the 'joy' of Neitzschean invention."<sup>16</sup>

Building upon this Neitzschean affirmation, Derrida describes the infinite possibilities of 'play' which accompanies a "rupturing" of the idea of the center:

The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely...Play is the disruption of presence...the joyous affirmation of

a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin...And it plays without security...but also with a glance toward... the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.<sup>17</sup>

The world of Paterson is populated with all kinds of "monstrosities" seeking remonstrance. Reports of "wonders" interlace with reports of violence and natural disaster, neurotic letters of reproach, lyrical reflections of despair, and a continuous metacommentary about the problems of poetic creation. The modern fun-house is less 'fun' than the medieval one, and presents the reader with the same difficulty of 'concretizing'<sup>18</sup> its gaps.

Resolving indeterminacies becomes, as in the House of Fame, an effort by the reader to make the text conform to his own ideals of relevance and synthesis. Randall Jarrell, who lauded Paterson I as "a long poem which doesn't stick to one subject, but which unifies a dozen", and who compared its design to the fugal development of themes in music,<sup>19</sup> by Book IV found that he could no longer follow the themes, and condemned the "whole poem" as "organization of irrelevance".<sup>20</sup> Leslie Fiedler criticized the poem's "transitions...irrelevances, completely out of the poem's time, assailing its fictive integrity".<sup>21</sup> Frank Thompson, in his analysis of "The Symbolic Structure", concluded:

The concept, 'poem', is thus foreign to the poem's structure...The poem is supposed to synthesize the opposites of the following dualisms...we must conclude what is a well-worn critical judgement...it fails utterly.<sup>22</sup>

The frustration and inadequacy of such imposed expectations is inevitable with any search for the completely coherent pattern of meaning for the poem; 'failure' presumes a conventional



organization of "what is necessary and economical in terms of the whole structure". 23

As with Chaucer, when confronted with such baffling polyvalency, readers are often driven outside the text to find a desired meaning and purpose. In a recent study, for example, Kathleen Matthews offers an allegorical reading of Paterson as a "covert satire" of the American literary scene.<sup>24</sup> Although the satiric allusions add to the fabric of the text, they no more provide an integrity or overall unity for Paterson than Dante's Commedia did for the House of Fame. In fact, the numerous parodic inclusions, rather than rewarding the symbol-hunting reader with interpretive insight, compound the opacity of the text with a highly visible intertextual network, where each detail offers a point of departure for several new directions of interpretation, and these in turn refer backward to other associations.

The surface of the poem, then, presents a confusing clutter of "ideas" and "things" which teases the reader into 'scratching' and 'digging' for submerged meaning with which to corroborate Williams' dictum, "No ideas but in things". Both reader and poet

Scratch front and back.  
Deceive and eat. Dig  
a musty bone. (3)

Connecting the surface network itself into a meaningful whole is even less rewarding: the "things" which determine the "ideas" are as elusive as the "thyng" drawing the dreamer through Chaucer's dream-visions, and although the connections between "things" are often available to the discerning reader, closing the gap between "thing" and "idea" is no more successful than Tim Crane's attempt

to bridge the chasm of the Passaic. In Paterson, 'poetic' assumptions of symmetry, center, and metaphoric association are discarded for "the anti-poetic...a dis-association".<sup>25</sup>

Illogical episodic association is not itself an insurmountable problem. Most readers recognize in Paterson's "dis-associative" interplay of details a 'poem of the mind',<sup>26</sup> and are prepared to receive the interlacing of its floating fragments as the workings of the human imagination.<sup>27</sup> According to Margaret Bollard, the "interlace pattern in Paterson", like that in Beowulf, assists in keeping "atemporal associative patterns" within "the larger design of the poem".<sup>28</sup> But in the 'pre-epic',<sup>29</sup> unlike the epic, "the larger design" appears to be nothing more than the arbitrary accumulation of detail. The problem in this 'poem of the mind' arises from a reader's traditional conception of "the Freudian/American notion of the ego" as "an agent of synthesis, mastery, integration, and adaptation."<sup>30</sup> The complex interweaving of detail in Paterson does not synthesize into a complete and comprehensible integrity, but remains fluid, like Paterson's disordered thoughts which "interlace, repel, and cut under" (106), but never come to rest at signification.

Williams' 'anti-poetic' style is similar to Lacan's:

utterances...seeds scattered among the thorns of traditional philosophy and psychology, in no way lending themselves to anything resembling closure.<sup>31</sup>

His poem is a close rendering of Lacan's unconscious process as it is manifested in dreams, in the speaking subject, and, by extension, in the text:

Alongside the diverging threads leading from each detail to a store of latent ideas, there exist diverging threads which go from the latent ideas to the manifest in such a way that a single latent idea is represented by several details in the manifest. Finally, a complex network of crisscross threads forms...the links inside this network operate through the processes of metaphor and metonymy.<sup>32</sup>

David Hurry notes that the surface of Paterson, where "associations seem to play...in accordance with chance similarities and connections", is precisely how dreams are structured.<sup>33</sup> His procedure for interpretation focuses upon what Freud described as the "lacunary" nature of conscious discourse:

At certain privileged points...language seems to be torn apart... It then allows pure speech -the unconscious- to break through, usually in a veiled and incomprehensible form.<sup>34</sup>

The Freudian approach, however, treats the "lacunae" as something like a Derridean 'graft' or dissonant opening into the workings of the conscious speaking subject, and it is here that Lacan's revision of Freudian analysis is helpful to literary analysis. Paterson as speaking subject frees itself of a consistent center of controlling consciousness; Dr. Paterson as epic hero is a continually shifting "anti-representational voice that defies identity",<sup>35</sup> "asymmetrically co-present",<sup>36</sup> like Lacan's unconscious speaking subject.

The 'anti-poetic' of Paterson attempts to "loosen the attention", bring the poem into "one plane" of several non-privileged perspectives, where Paterson simply "occupies part of the field".<sup>37</sup> This 'field' allows no foreground or background: the poem attempts to locate itself, like a dream, on a single plane of a continuously disconnected present, where the only

'temporal' structuring is an arbitrary choice of the glance. Whatever detail attracts the 'gaze'<sup>38</sup> first, constitutes the temporal beginning of the dream; the temporal 'order' which ensues is a function only of the associations effected by 'displacement' and 'condensation', which fan out from this arbitrary center.

In this free-play of speaking subjects, the Lacanian dream is "neither a vast metaphor nor the stage performance of an underlying theme."<sup>39</sup> Although Hurry's Freudian analysis assists in inscribing meaning to disparate episodes, a Lacanian analysis of the dreaming process is perhaps a preferred method of positing any sense at all of structural logic for the "incomprehensible form" of the poem. Just as in the House of Fame it was less important to interpret each appeal to authority, than to discover that a series of such appeals formed a consistent pattern, so in Paterson, lacking as it does even the sequentiality of the House of Fame, symbol-interpretation produces nothing more than an illogical collection of significant, rather than insignificant, fragments. But by following the unconscious 'mapping'<sup>40</sup> of the dreaming psyche, a logically consistent pattern does emerge from Paterson: the poem enacts a repeated 'fall' into language, in which the original 'split' of the self, initiates

the progressive discordance between the ego and the being...a cycle of attempts at resolving this discordance by consummating it... marked by a transcendence, a normative sublimation of desire, corollaries of a destruction.<sup>41</sup>

Within the "progressive discordance" of Paterson, the dream-like, 'interpretable' parts, those identified by Hurry, stand out conspicuously as "marks of transcendence" because of their metaphoric "creative spark":<sup>42</sup> the sleeping giant, the descent, the fire, the sea, the Unicorn. These points of metaphoric 'condensation' punctuate the dream-field of metonymic 'displacements'. They participate in an endless "cycle" of "progressive discordance", "marked" by fluctuating states of dissonance/ consummation.

### 3. The Fall into Language

Williams' dissonant 'anti-poetic' is a departure from what Wallace Stevens called "the huge high harmony" of "the essential poem at the center of things", in which the image of the consummate self was itself

a giant on the horizon...

At the center on the horizon, concentrum, grave  
And prodigious person, patron of origins.<sup>43</sup>

This 'poetic' imagination could project a connectedness with the "giants", like Theodore of Chartre's, to both a past and a future "patron of origins". Stevens insists upon the 'idea of the book', centered around "a fixed point of view":

To fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings, and incessant new beginnings leads to sterility.<sup>44</sup>

For Williams, continuity and center are the illusions of the autotelic poem; the "local", both temporally and spatially, ensures vitality, not sterility:

only the moment is real. The present is the beginning  
and it contains everything: the seed of all life.<sup>45</sup>

In Paterson, "remembrance" is an anti-poetic, anti-closural<sup>46</sup> questing, through "incessant new beginnings", not towards a prelapsarian point of wholeness and regeneration, but to a point of dissonant "misconception", and then back to the present:

we must go back in established writing... We must go to the bottom. If we suspect that in past writing, archaic forms give... a false cast, we are under an obligation to go back to that place where the falsity clings... We have to dig. For by repeating an early misconception, it gains acceptance... It has to be rooted out at the site of its first occurrence.<sup>47</sup>

The 'misconception' at "the site of first occurrence" is the lack which opens the poem, figured by the empty space before the colon: to the left of the colon is the entire tradition of "established writing"; to the right is the poet's "reply" -the italicized agenda, the Preface, and the poem.

*: a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea; a confession; a basket, a column; a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands; a gathering up; a celebration; in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to one; daring; a fall; the clouds resolved into a sandy sluice; an enforced pause; hard put to it; an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and a metamorphosis.*

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the function of the colon:

its best defined use is to separate clauses which are grammatically independent and discontinuous, but between which there is an apposition or similar relation of sense.

The poem begins, not with a word, but with an inarticulate gesture of both division and continuance, which brings both the absent and present clauses into mutual syntactic and syntagmatic

presence: the opening presents a pre-linguistic, 'mirror-stage' moment of contact and entry into the Tradition.

As a conventional representation of inner thought, not speech, italics convey a state where there is yet no 'differance' between thought and word, an "exemplary situation" of a 'mirror-stage' "mythical join between signifier and signified".<sup>48</sup> The first paragraph of substantives constitutes a perfect metaphoric replacement, or "gathering up" of the entire poem; like the words of a title, the absence of the predicate offers an initial "exemplary" still point which figures:

the reassuring presence of a stable world, a static moment in the rush of time...a heuristic encapsulement, a point of departure as well as a point of arrival.<sup>49</sup>

The poem's introductory focus on "a local pride", conveys Lacan's sense of the initial 'jubilation' or "celebration" of self-recognition. "A basket", "a gathering up", give a sense of enclosure and security; "a column" adds support. "A confession" and "a reply" represent a first experience with language that is balanced and whole.

But the moment is at once a harmony of identification and a dissonance of differentiation: a primal 'splitting' of subject and object occurs through the intermediary of language:

which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality.<sup>50</sup>

In this suspended "pause", differentiation begins: the "pride" of individuation is reflected in the sense of "distinctive" purpose, of choice from "multiplicity", of "resolving", and of control

("terms", "reduction", "sluice", "enforced"). Attempt ("daring") and result ("a fall") introduce the discord which existed only as a potential in the "pride" of replying to the Tradition "with the bare hands", and in the "fall", which besides hinting at the fall of Icarus (into the sea), identifies the problem to be addressed in the third italic grouping: the incessant lateral sliding of signifiers. Whereas the "reduction to one" produced an illusory sense of oneness, the "dispersal" of language begins a process of dissemination, an endless series of "slack", "action", and further "action to supplant a plan for action". This metonymic drive gives rise to endless "metamorphosis", and no further stability. Thus the cycle of the seasons is deflected from completion, as the disseminated signifieds of "fall" slide from the concept of season into the associated verbal idea of falling (into) the sea.

This instability of the language is at the same time, for Williams, an antidote to Steven's predicted "sterility": "taking up" the 'remainder'<sup>51</sup> which drives desire from the initial perceived lack, or "slack", assists the poet in his endeavor to avoid the "apparition of finality":

Minds like beds always made up,  
(more stony than a shore) (4).

Williams' initial "reply" consists of an endlessly deferring metonymic series of images, each attempting to convey the essence of only a part of the whole poem to follow. Each discrete episode in the poem acts as a similarly non-contextual, non-temporal substantive, separated from the next as if by semi-colon.



Historical events are brought forward to the present in non-prioritized juxtaposition, to form "one plane", on which an established hierarchic ordering, or "false cast", can be shuffled into a "new and unsuspected (dis-)order".<sup>52</sup>

The italicized passage functions, then, as a prologue which, like the prologue to the Canterbury Tales, states the metaphoric ideal of the quest. Whereas Chaucer 'replied' to the traditional quest with a heightened projection toward the transcendent, Williams announces a poetics that will give voice to the "local". And like Chaucer's prologue, Williams' contains its subversive antithesis: as Chaucer's pilgrims were pulled from the sacred to the profane, Paterson is drawn from the local to the transcendent.

The "Preface" to Paterson repeats the 'condensation' or replacement function of the italicized opening in another metaphoric gesture: in its prefatory function of "abstract generality", it replaces what Derrida (after Hegel) describes as the "self-moving activity" of a text. Gayatri Spivak explains:

preface/text = signifier/ signified...It is as if...the son or seed (preface or word), caused or engendered by the father (text or meaning), is recovered by the father and thus justified. But within this structural metaphor, Derrida's cry is "dissemination", the seed that neither inseminates nor is recovered ...but is scattered abroad.<sup>53</sup>

The "Preface" as signifier reflects a harmony of beginnings and ends, son and father, word and meaning, in the metaphor of the man-city:

the city  
the man, an identity - it can't be  
otherwise -an  
interpenetration, both ways (3).

The interpenetration of flowing water and "numbers" (a poet's 'measure') in the "Preface" figures birth:

rolling up out of chaos,  
a nine month's wonder...

Rolling up, rolling up heavy with  
numbers.

Rolling in, top up,  
under, thrust and recoil, a great clatter:  
lifted as air, boated, multicolored, a  
wash of seas -  
from mathematics to particulars-

and re-birth:

...renews himself  
thereby, in addition and subtraction

...divided as the dew  
floating mists, to be rained down and  
regathered into a river that flows  
and encircles (3-5)

But the metaphoric flow bears within it the "multiple seed"  
of dissonance that marks the initial split of identity:

(The multiple seed,  
packed tight with detail, soured,  
is lost in the flux and the mind,  
distracted, floats off in the same  
scum) (4)

This "thought" (given in parentheses) "subverts" the harmony and continuity of the "craft" with the knowledge that an original truth is "distracted" and "lost" forever. It figures the "misconception", or miscarriage ('souring') of the seed, due perhaps to a "falsity" in the craft, which can be meaninglessly and ignorantly repeated:

...the ignorant sun ("the son or seed")  
rising in the slot of  
hollow suns risen...

This for Williams is the "sterility" which subverts the potential of the "son or seed":

and the craft,  
subverted by thought, rolling up, let  
him beware lest he turn to no more than  
the writing of stale poems...

The opening and the "Preface" of Paterson thus announce the inception of both lack and desire as the program for the poem. "Rolling up!", the insistent water-motif of the "Preface", is a straining towards the imminent birth of an identity. The arrival at the "paternal metaphor"<sup>54</sup> closes the "Preface" with the general resolving to the particular:

generally and so to man,  
to Paterson.

so that the poem may then begin, with Book I, to "make a start, out of particulars and make them general".

#### 4. The Dialectic of Desire

The poet, however, is "hard put to it" to disengage the "particular" from past and future and "enforce" its location. The idea of the quest which opens the "Preface" is the first speech-act of the poem (it is in quotation marks):

"Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?"

In its genitive construction, the ideal, "beauty", is separated from the manner, or the process of the questing; "rigor" is the goal, not beauty. This focus sets up expectations of a rigorously controlled artistry (!), or at least a rigorous dedication to the stated focus, of process. Instead we find that the poet has allowed his noun "quest" to slide to its related verbal idea of

seeking, and the seeking to its telos, "find", and that the "rigor" ('exactitude') is blocked by "rigor" ('rigidity'). The initial focus upon process, defined in the first sentence, loses its direction and "rigor" by the second, where the focus is on the end. The 'graft' or 'splitting' evident in these differing connotations of "rigor" (scrupulously 'measured' action/ rigid inaction) like 'pharmakon' and like 'seeke/sike', opens or 'unlocks' the mind-text for remonstrance. The poem maintains a dissonant counterpointing between these two opposing principles: one movement "forever strains forward" in ever-present concentrated effort applied to the process; the other, "rock-thwarted", desires to stop, make and end.

Once 'present' as an identity, the thoughts of Paterson the man-city are related in Book I to the omni-present water motif, which has changed from the futurity of "rolling up" to a dynamic stasis of continual "retake":

Jostled as are the waters approaching  
the brink, his thoughts  
interlace, repel and cut under,  
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside  
but forever strain forward -

...Retake later the advance and  
are replaced by succeeding hordes  
pushing forward...  
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close  
they leap to the conclusion and  
fall, fall in air!...

a fury of  
escape driving them to rebound...they  
retake their course, the air full...coeval (7-8)

Paterson remains in a continually present dream-state; his subjective activity is given the objective form of a psychomachia:

...Eternally asleep  
his dreams walk about the city where he persists  
incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.  
Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom  
seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his  
machinations  
drawing their substance from the noise of the  
pouring river  
animate a thousand automatons. Who...  
walk outside their bodies...  
locked and forgot in their desires - unroused. (6)

"The Delineaments of the Giants" repeats the "pause" of perfect 'mirror-stage' reflection between man and city: "He" is "eternally asleep"; "they" are "automatons". He "walks about the city"; they "walk outside their bodies". He "neither moves nor rouses"; they remain "unroused". He persists incognito"; "They walk incommunicado":

Inside the bus one sees  
his thoughts sitting and standing. his  
thoughts alight and scatter -

Who are these people...  
They walk incommunicado  
...-that they may live  
his thought is listed in the Telephone  
Directory - (9)

For a moment, "idea" and "thing" are one, in Paterson's personified thoughts: he is thinking about the people; the people are his thoughts. But in this metaphoric unity, the contents of the thoughts (the signifieds) are repressed: "Who are these people?" They exist as listed names, divorced from their identities.

The metaphoric mode, in its tendency to effect consummation of desire, seeks continually to 'faire un' in Paterson ("a reduction to one"). The moments of union are non-linguistic, rather than pre-linguistic, however, and the quietude is an "enforced" pause, a lack of consciousness, not pre-consciousness": "incognito", "incomunicado", "unroused", "automatons", "locked", portray a succumbing to Lacan's "attractive zero", a closure of Derrida's "breathing space".<sup>55</sup> Like Lacan, Williams insists "Yet there is no return" (3). Consummation therefore is continually interrupted: "his thoughts alight and scatter"; the mountain idyll, "facing him, his arm supporting her...asleep" is "scattered about...waking their dreams"(8).

In Book I the metaphor of descent accompanies and interacts with the "catastrophe" of the Falls, of individuals, and of language:

A false language pouring - a language (misunderstood)  
pouring (misinterpreted) without dignity, without  
minister, crashing upon a stone ear. At least it  
settled it for her. (15)

Any attempt to achieve the "quiet as at the close", or to "leap to the conclusion" to "settle it", is equivalent to the death-potential of the metaphoric impulse to "drive on... until Nothing remains without remainder". Hence, the 'rigid' fate of the hapless Sam Patch, "frozen in an ice-cake"(17), whose "mistake" was to apply his sense of rigorous 'measure' ("he went to great trouble to ascertain the depth of the water below") to "one final marvel", "to complete it". Mrs Cumming's fall is another almost

farcical parody of the desire to 'faire un': in response to her husband's call, "My dear, I believe it is time for us to set our face homeward"(14), instead of responding, "Cumming, dear", she makes the "reduction to one" implied in the collective "our face" a reality by disappearing; the "idea" of oneness and the "thing" are, forever, one.

In both death-leaps, the "frozen" or "settled" state of mind is sharply defined against the free-flowing of the Falls. Both Sam Patch and Sarah Cumming

leaped (or fell) without a  
language, tongue-tied  
the language worn out .(84)

Like the thoughts-people of Paterson the man-city, "they die also/ incommunicado... -the language is divorced from their minds"(11-12). Whereas the omni-presence of the falls attempts to keep the poem situated in "the roar, the roar of the present" (141), the fall, leap, or descent seeks a lyrical movement out of this "one plane" to some ecstatic "bottom", and "reduction to one". Book I closes with a repetition of the Preface's originary "great clatter" of division and re-gathering (5):the hanging fragment, "He shifts his change"(39) shifts in meaning, first to the cataclysmic 'change' of an earthquake, "The 7th, December, this year, (1737) at night", then to a primordial, mythic sea- "change" of form out of the chaos. One single

Thought clambers up  
snail like, upon the wet rocks  
hidden from sun and sight-,

re-enacting the original dissonance of the "multiple seed" of thought, and repeating the "terror" of the original identity split:

inspiring terror, watching . . .  
And standing, shrouded, there, in that din,  
Earth the chatterer, father of all  
speech . . . . .

The extended ellipse which ends Book I invites the reader to resume the quest, repeated in a variety of combinations and re-combinations in the rest of the poem. "Incommunicado" and "divorce" becomes another interpenetrating motif in Paterson, which speaks to the impossibility of union between thought and its articulation:

the marriage riddle: so much talk about the language -  
when there are no ears (106)

In the continued search for a "redeeming language" out of the general "din", Paterson desires a "deathless song" to solve the "marriage riddle":

Sing me a song to make death tolerable, a song  
of a man and a woman: the riddle of a man  
and a woman  
What language could allay our thirsts,  
what winds lift us, what floods bear us  
past defeats  
but song but deathless song? (107)

Throughout the poem, the 'marriage' of man and mountain,<sup>56</sup> man and city (the integrity of the disparate selves) is sought and despaired, through a pattern of lack and desire which the metaphoric descent "strains forward" to fulfil. Consummation is repeatedly "rock-thwarted" and re-directed, through "dispersal" and "metamorphosis". 57



In the process, the humourous sketching of character and situation in the opening book of Paterson modulates to an agonized search:

There is a sense of urgency about everything he does, and about his constant movement as he searches, listens, observes.<sup>58</sup>

In Book II, Paterson "shakes with the intensity of his listening" (81) as he moves over the "one plane" surface of the poem, "Walking -". In section one, his scattered thoughts slide through repeated scenes of "blockage, exiling one's self from one's self" (45), distracted by voices: "Voices . indeterminate" (45); "Voices! multiple and inarticulate . voices clattering loudly...Voices!" (54); "a thunderous voice...the voice that has ineluctably called them - that unmoving roar!" (55). The section ends, like the House of Fame, with the dreamer straining "to catch the movement of one voice". (60) Although the multiplicity of voices is resolved to one, the poet is left with the words of the one voice, "Pleasure! Pleasure!", divorced from his thoughts: "deformity-"; "a corrosion, a parasitic curd"; "NO DOGS ALLOWED" (61).

The second section restates the blockage: "Blocked. (Make a song out of that: concretely)" (62). The impasse is ultimately unmoved by creativity, as the "terror" of consummation prevails:

and terror-  
terror to him such as one, a man  
married, feels toward his bride-  
...-in your  
composition and decomposition  
I find my . . .  
despair! (75),

underlined by the reminder of a real blocked relationship, in the fragment of another letter from 'Cress'. "The descent" frames section three (77 & 85), beckoning the 'walking' poet away from the present surfaces, where his intent listening rewards him with "no syllable in the confused uproar" (81). The descent offers the 'completion' of "accomplishment" (77, 78, 79, 81); at the same time, it acknowledges again the 'terror' of consummation:

Only the thought of the stream comforts him,  
its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage- (82)

Another cataclysmic splitting: "to the bases; base! to the screaming dregs" (85) ends in metamorphosis, as the poet is transformed into an 'incommunicado' part of his "hideous" surroundings:

As there appears a dwarf, hideously deformed-  
he sees squirming roots trampled  
under the foliage of his mind...  
From his eyes sparrows start and  
sing. His ears are toadstools, his fingers have  
begun to sprout leaves (his voice is drowned  
under the falls) . (83)

The exhortation to the poet to "accomplish": Poet, poet! sing your song, quickly!"(83), amounts to nothing more than "stale poems": "-saying over to himself a song written previously".(85)

The love lyric which (almost) closes the book is an example of the perfect "accomplished" poem, "the poem, the most perfect rock and temple, the highest falls" (80), in its 'succumbing' to "the magic sound of the stream" (84):

On this most voluptuous night of the year  
the term of the moon is yellow with no light  
the air's soft, the night bird has  
only one note, the cherry tree in bloom  
makes a blur on the woods, its perfume  
no more than half guessed moves in the mind.

No insect is yet awake, leaves are few.  
In the arching trees there is no sleep.  
The blood is still and indifferent, the face  
does not ache nor sweat soil nor the  
mouth thirst. Now love might enjoy its play  
and nothing disturb the full octave of its run. (86)

Here, total lack of dissonance is expressed in the perfect metaphoric reduction to one ("only one note") of the unison of the octave. Nothing will disturb the full octave because it is empty of life: "no light"; "no insect"; "no sleep", "no ache", "sweat", "thirst". The tedious but just lover's complaint from Cress<sup>59</sup> which ends the book points to a bitter irony in the poem's closure in the present: "now love might enjoy its play". The trance-like "voluptuous night" is as "unroused" as the opening "enforced pause".

In Book III, Paterson still seeks inspiration from the "erudition" (80) of established art forms. The quest now identifies the "idea" if the goal (beauty) with the "thing", the "Beautiful thing" which draws the poet through Book III, leading the mind away (95), like the books in the library. The seductive "cool of books" provides relief from the continuous noise of the Falls, which has become as deadening as the acquiescence of the repeated "so be it":

So be it. Rain  
falls and surfeits the river's upper reaches,  
gathering slowly. So be it. Draws together,  
runnel by runnel. So be it...the stream grows leaden  
within him, his lilies drag. So  
be it. Texts mount and complicate them-  
selves, lead to further texts...  
So be it. So be it. So be it. (130)

"Is there no release?", the poem asks. Going "to the river for an answer"(111) brought only empty echoes: "a reverberation not

of the falls but of its rumour." (96) The Library is no better:  
"a roar of books from the wadded library oppresses him" (100).  
The fire of Book III is itself able to create beauty from  
"borrowed" (80) materials of the bottle:

the flame that wrapped the glass  
deflowered, reflowered there by  
the flame: a second flame, surpassing  
heat . (118)

But the poet, following the rules of his "game", is simply able  
to repeat:

Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game! The bottle!  
the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I  
give you the bottle! (118)

Flood and fire finally bring the book to a FULL STOP (140).  
The 'descent' -now a "bare" tabulation of the substratum at the  
Passaic Rolling Mill- is as useless a means to discovery as the  
Falls ("the attempt...was abandoned"), as the excerpt from Gray's  
"Elegy", a visual reduction to one, implies:

-and leave the world  
to darkness  
and to  
me

Paterson at the end of Book III appears 'worn down' by his  
repeated searching descents to the "bottom". The book ends in  
another descent into the primordial "fertile (?) mud":

Rather a sort of muck, a detritus...a pustular scum, a  
decay, a choking lifelessness-...  
Degraded. (140)

The difficulty of remaining in the "muck" of the local and the  
present is reasserted:

The past above, the future below  
and the present pouring down: the roar,  
the roar of the present (144)



The "lullaby" of the sea is another lure of the "attractive zero", calling Pater/son to another 'fall' into the lost union:

Listen!

Thalassa! Thalassa!  
...immaculata: our home, our nostalgic  
mother in whom the dead, enwombed again  
cry out to us to return .  
                                  the blood dark sea!  
                                  ...from which the sun  
alone lifts undamped his wings...

In refusing the call of the sea ("not our home! It is NOT our home."), Paterson seeks to affirm yet another beginning to counter the "ocean of savage lusts"<sup>63</sup> which has overwhelmed it. The poem reduces its focus to one undistinguishable "thing": "Flotsam of some sort", (202) and the down-home Odysseus<sup>64</sup> emerges,

                  spitting the seed out  
then headed inland, followed by the dog. (203)

The arch-poet, bearing "the seed", is followed by the "just-another-dog"-poet, who has at last reached the "bottom" (with Homer) of the Tradition. Beginning again with a "blast", or dissemination of the seed-word, he pauses for a final de-bunking 'ascent',<sup>65</sup> and so turns a final somersault to an ambiguous end:

This is the blast  
the eternal close  
the spiral  
the final somersault  
                  the end.

Book V repeats the gesture with an ideographic somersault:

In old age  
                  the mind  
                                  casts off  
                                  rebelliously  
                  an eagle  
from its crag

Readers have likened Paterson to a fugue, a tapestry, an interlace, a collage, a mosaic, a jig-saw. Williams' own paradigm, "a basket", works as well: an inter-weaving of recurring strands of text as its formal structure, filled with an unlimited variety of items. But the insistent critical questions remain the same: is the "basket" dumped and refilled for each added book, or dismantled and re-woven to accommodate more and more?<sup>66</sup> Does its variety reflect Derrida's inevitable corollary to plurality: the "formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity?" Does the poet "waken from the dream of the whole poem" at the end of Book IV with the rejuvenating sense of "a new awakening" (78), or with Huizinga's let-down sense that "the whole play-world collapses; the game is over"?

To those for whom the poem is still an "untamed aggregate of miscellaneous pieces of verse and prose yoked together by violence",<sup>67</sup> Williams' note to Book V might seem like a facetious jest:

I had to take the world of Paterson into a new dimension...Yet I wanted to keep it whole...keeping, I fondly hope, a unity directly continuous with the Paterson of Paterson 1 to 4. <sup>68</sup>

Like the House of Fame, the "unity" (or at least the continuity) of Paterson resides only in its consistently repeated disunity; the end especially evades being "defined".<sup>69</sup> Each book traces a process of quest - block - disintegration - begin again. The very fact that the process is repeated four times during the reading act tends to negate for the reader any sense of a continuous

progression, such as the one posited by Williams in his original "Author's Note": "a man...beginning, seeking, achieving, and concluding his life."

Critical accounts of such progressions as the life cycle, the seasonal cycle, the course of the river, of the language, <sup>70</sup> profess a "unity" for Paterson which the reading experience simply does not corroborate. Every book, in fact, including the added fifth, overflows to fulfil the poet's assignation for each separate book: each repeats the "elemental character of the place" (I); each "comprises modern replicas"(II); each "seeks a language to make them vocal"(III); each is "reminiscent of episodes" (IV); each gives the world of Paterson "imaginative validity" (V).<sup>71</sup> The repeated pattern always ends in new potential, but at the same time, "incessant beginning" precludes ever achieving the goal of the quest.

The "epilogue"<sup>72</sup> that resumes the game has generated still more response to Williams' "random" style: in an early review, Thom Gunn re-iterates Joseph Bennett's earlier criticism: "So what does it all add up to?"<sup>73</sup> Many readers seem to feel, however, that in Book V of Paterson, at last "all the deformities take wing" (221): the "hunchbacked, limping" poetry acquires a "brilliant light",<sup>74</sup> and the "grossness, destruction, daredevilry and divorce"<sup>75</sup> are summarily 'routed'- to such an extent that the poem appeared to Charles Olson to lose its narrative distance,<sup>76</sup> and to James Breslin, its capacity for self-criticism.<sup>77</sup> In Book V Breslin finds rather



an easy measured grace, a tone of relaxed assurance, tenderness and benignity of feeling...The aging poet, content with his long and productive life...pulls the diverse parts of his experience into unity.<sup>78</sup>

Is this what the poet means, when he says

The (self) direction has been changed  
the serpent  
its tail in its mouth  
"the river has returned to its beginnings"  
...it tortures itself within me  
until time has been washed finally under  
...-the times are not heroic  
...we'll say  
the serpent  
has its tail in its mouth  
AGAIN! (233)

Williams had said that when the river ended in the sea, he "had to take the spirit of the River up in the air".<sup>79</sup> Rather than expressing 'contentment', the passage seems to imply that the poet has incorporated the river, with all its torturous returns, and is ready for another leap, "from the air" (203). This tenacity is reflected in the "rebelliousness" of the book's opening lines. Together, poet and river, ("we'll say") must tirelessly re-iterate: "Again -again" is 'again' the "magic word" (135).

The new focus in Book V upon the immortality of art is all-pervasive: the ourobouros, the Unicorn tapestries, the epic catalogue of a world of art and music, which "THROUGH THE YEARS HAS SURVIVED" (209). The 'key' to the altered tonality, however, is less this 'remembrance' of the past than the comment upon the present, heard distinctly in the conspicuous silence of the Falls: "the times are not heroic." (233) The carnivalesque "noise" (6) which accompanied the first four books is "mellowed"<sup>80</sup> in Book V to an anti-heroic, (self)-mocking humour:

Beethoven makes an appearance, not in the heroic storm and stress of the famous first movement from his Fifth Symphony, but in the playful 'scherzo', considered to be "one long musical joke".<sup>81</sup> The poet recognizes that the anti-heroic is less gripping, and chastises the bored reader: "I have told you, this is a fiction, pay attention!" (236) He mocks his own difficult style ("Aren't we supposed to understand it?" 225), and Gertrude Stein's ("but you cannot be an artist by mere ineptitude!" 222), and e.e. cummings', whose falling, leaping and somersaulting is even more difficult for the reader than his own:

FalleA  
ps!fl  
Oattumbl (224)

The poet is still "'WALKING' in the world" (231) in Book V. That the tapestries appear to Charles Olson to be "at zero distance",<sup>82</sup> and to W.D. Snodgrass, a "conventional" "description and meditation",<sup>83</sup> is a measure of Williams' achievement, as the tapestries are in fact given the same fractured presentation as the rest of the poem. The temptation, capture, killing, and resurrection of the Unicorn is described in the same non-conventional format of atemporal 'dis-associated' fragments, with the same focus upon the local and the particular: "the brutish eyes of the deer; a rabbit's rump disappearing through the thicket" (216); the intriguingly seductive "virgin and whore" (237), so real that the poet invites her out of the fiction: "Come out of it if you call yourself a woman" (238).<sup>84</sup> The same incongruous contiguity of "unshaped blocks of material"<sup>85</sup> presents blocks of poetry against blocks of prose. Just as in

Book I the metaphoric 'marriage' of "A man like a city and a woman like a flower" was first invaded by "Two women. Three women. Innumerable women, each like a flower", and then shattered by its contiguity with the un-flower-like 'Cress'(7), in Book V the sacred and mythical Unicorn is charged with its secular ambivalences of betrayal of innocence and ambiguous sexuality<sup>86</sup> by its juxtaposition with Lorca's "young girl, no more than a child" who "leads her aged bridegroom innocently enough to his downfall" (208). In the same manner, the sacred mystery of the ouroboros symbol, "a snake with its tail in its mouth", and of the "lady with the tail of her dress on her arm", is undermined by the contiguity of both with "the whores grasping for your genitals" (214-15).<sup>87</sup>

The tapestries dominate Book V, but they flash restlessly and intermittently and relentlessly upon the consciousness as poetic "crystallizations".<sup>88</sup> The prose passages "follow to enlighten...penetrate everywhere to enlighten". This jagged 'cubist'<sup>89</sup> rhythm has been constant throughout Paterson. Through it, (internal) intertextual influences and resonances have been continually confounding the integrity of these discrete blocks, 'penetrating' boundaries and opening "new (breathing) spaces" for meaning. The incongruity of each juxtaposition is a 'graft' which defers and displaces interpretation. As in cubist paintings - the Armory Show "deformities" which had such impact upon Williams-<sup>90</sup> any sense of continuity or meaning comes from the reader's combination of the disparate blocks; the poem is in this way "a collaborative event",<sup>91</sup> not entirely unlike the Tapestries (232).

The Unicorn myth is Paterson's most compelling metaphoric reduction to one. "The Unicorn", "the artist", and "Death" are one identity:

		The Unicorn
has no match		
	or mate	the artist
		has no peer.
Death		
	has no peer	(211)

Like the fragmented presentation of the call to the sea in Book IV, the serenity of the Unicorn in death<sup>92</sup> seems to pursue the poet, almost as an insistent and hypnotizing temptation to identical repose: to "cast off" the rebelliousness of the opening leap, to accept the impotence of old age, and to cultivate his flower garden in this best of all possible worlds. Temptation to tameness is the tapestries' message; reader responses of "measured grace", "conventional meditation", "mellowing", attest to its power. Lured by the virgin, the Unicorn submits to his capture and murder. With its resurrection, the imaginary creature lives as a centered "idea", twice divorced from the "thing". This 'supreme fiction' of a stable center lures the poet on his quest for closure as seductively as the virgin-whore lured the beast to his en-closure.

The temptation to end the quest "assuredly" (3) is as urgent in Book V as the temptation to 'succumb' to the sea, and to the roaring of the Falls. In Book V, the modern quest is still represented as a leap, a flow, and a descent, but un-heroically, in the deflated image of an escape from the confines of a bag - and not by bursting out, or by overflowing, but almost in an

image of incontinence: dribbling out of "a hole in the bottom of the bag":

death is a hole  
in which we all are buried...

But there is a hole  
in the bottom of the bag...

Through this hole  
at the bottom of the cavern  
of death, the imagination  
escapes intact (212)

The play upon "hole", as passage and as container ("cavern"), and as a 'whole' ("intact"), re-iterates the poem's prevailing distinction between process and finality. This alternative is restated on the final page of the poem: "Cessa! -learning to sleep my life away: saying . ." (nothing). Against this call, "the dream" in Book V summons the aging protagonist to join the centaurs and other errants from meaning ("vocables", cubists) in the "rout": "The dream is in pursuit!" (222).

The "dream" in Book V, like the "quest" in the Preface, vacillates between the process of questing ("dream" is the ideal; "pursuit", like "rigor", is the means to the ideal), and the artistic desire to "knytte up" and "make an end" (144). With the 'insistence' of the tapestries, the noun "pursuit" slides to its verbal meaning, and the "dream" or ideal is in pursuit of the dreamer, demanding closure. The entire poem has pulled in both of these directions: to remain suspended in the present, or to make an end; finish the leap.



Paterson began with a humourous image of the poet as lame dog, attempting to satisfy an itch in two directions, on only three legs. In Book V, the poet has grown old; "the dog of his thoughts has shrunk" (230). He advises himself (hopefully) "Paterson, keep your pecker up!" (235), and he ends his quest with his poetic identity shifted from a Uni-corn to a two-horned satyr (by tradition 'rigorously' erect), again trying to go in two directions at once ("contrapuntally"), dancing on one "foot".

Do all the deformities 'take wing' in Paterson V, in the defeated sense of 'take off'? Or do the deformities acquire wings in the Lacanian-Boschian sense of "growing wings and taking up arms"?<sup>93</sup> In the genitive construction, "the rout of the vocables" (222), who is routed, and whose is the rout? At the end of the poem, all the deformities: the "deformed verse", "deformed morality", the "wonders", the "vocables", and the "lame dog" are poised for another rebellious leap, which, with their new wings, cannot be unsuccessful. But it cannot end, either.

1. T.S. Eliot. Four Quartets, page 37.
2. Theodore of Chartres, cited in Robert Payne The Key of Remembrance (New Haven: Yale University Press):29
3. See also the Parliament of Fowls: although the poet acknowledges that:
 

"For out of olde felde, as men seyth,  
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,  
And out of olde bokes, in good feth,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere"(22-25),

 still, the poet feels 'sharply' his limitations:
 

"The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th' assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge." (1-2).
4. Williams. The Embodiment of Knowledge. ed. Ron Loewinson. (New York: New Directions, 1974):xi.
5. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova:
 

"Behold, I have provided a comb, which, if used, can make both prose and verse resplendent. Whether you have combed well, you will fully discern in this mirror." (48-49)

"Consider whether your discourse is raw or well done; juicy or arid; shaggy or combed" (915-916)
6. Williams. The Embodiment of Knowledge, xiii
7. Williams, Autobiography, cited in the introductory pages to the New Directions edition of Paterson: "(Whitman)'s poems...had broken the dominance of the iambic pentameter...It is up to us, in the new dialect, to continue by a new construction upon the syllables."
8. Williams. Imaginations (New York: New Directions, 1970): 308-309
9. Eliot echoes Mallarme in "Little Gidding": "Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us/ To purify the dialect of the tribe", Four Quartets, p.54; Chaucer's concern is for "the naked text in English to declare" (LGW.G.86); Williams' "virgin purpose" throughout Paterson is "a search for the redeeming language" (dustjacket to Paterson III, cited in Stephen Tapscott. American Beauty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984):220.
10. Joseph Bennet, "The Lyre and the Sledgehammer". Hudson Review V (1952):303.
11. Stephen Cushman. William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure (New Haven: Yale University Press): 100
12. Parker Tyler, "The Poet of Paterson Book I". Briarcliff Quarterly III (1946), cited in Charles Doyle. William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980):178
13. Bennet, op. cit. 269
14. Williams, Buffalo Manuscript, cited in Margaret Glynn Lloyd. William Carlos Williams' Paterson (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1980):182
15. "Anti-poetic" is Wallace Steven's phrase which appeared in his preface to Williams' Collected Poems, 1921-1931. (New York: Objectivist Press, 1934). Joseph Riddel, in The Inverted Bell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974): 12, comments: "the 'poetic' implies the idea of plenitude and presence;



- the 'anti-poetic', a kind of metaphysical 'poverty', to use another of Steven's terms."
16. Riddel, op.cit., 13
  17. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play", 292
  18. Wolfgang Iser's term, in The Act of Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) for the reader's role in filling gaps, rendering concrete and determinate places of indeterminacy in a work.
  19. Randall Jarrell. "The Poet and his Public". Partisan Review XIII (1946): 493
  20. Jarrell. "A View of Three Poets". Partisan Review XVIII (1951): 699; Edwin Honig. "The City of Man", Poetry LXIX (1947): 280, objects that "it becomes increasingly difficult to validate as integral parts of the poetry the successive chunks of prose interlardings, which one instinctively wants to skip".
  21. Leslie Fiedler. "Some uses and Failures of Feeling". Partisan Review XV (1948): 930
  22. Frank Thompson. "The Symbolic Structure of Paterson". Western Review 19 (1955): 292.
  23. ibid, 289
  24. Kathleen D. Matthews. "Competitive Giants: Satiric Bedrock in Book One of William Carlos Williams' Paterson" JML (1985): 237-260. reads Williams' images of rocks, water, thunder and lightning entirely as a parody of Eliot's Wasteland and The Rock; Tim Crane the bridge-builder is Hart Crane; Hopper Cumming and his wife Sarah add up to represent e.e. cummings, and Sam Patch, who left his native area to jump into other streams, is Ezra Pound.
  25. Williams. Collected Later Poems 28
  26. I am referring to Louis Martz's The Poem of the Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966): 125-61, which contains two seminal essays on Paterson, "On the Road to Paterson", and "The Unicorn in Paterson".
  27. James Breslin. William Carlos Williams: An American Artist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970): 182, for example, states that "The form of the poem is the stream of consciousness".
  28. Margaret Lloyd Bollard. "The Interlace Element in Paterson". Twentieth Century Literature (1975): 288.
  29. James Breslin, op.cit., 202, distinguishes between The Wasteland as "a kind of anti-epic, a poem in which the quest for meaning is entirely thwarted and we are left, at the end, waiting for the collapse of western civilization." and Paterson as "pre-epic, showing that the process of disintegration releases forces that can build a new world."
  30. Jeffrey Mehlman "The Floating Signifier". Yale French Studies 48 (1972): 19. See also Gayatri Spivak, op.cit. lxii, who rejects the American ego psychologists' assertion that "the ego is the primary determinant of the psyche"
  31. Anika Lemaire, op.cit. 114.
  32. ibid. 44. See also 187-88: "The formations of the unconscious are psychological phenomena in which the intervention of the unconscious is manifested in a veiled form. Taken as it stands, the dream, for example, is meaningless. A careful

analysis, however, using the technique of free association around each detail, reveals, however, a whole network of signifiers united by various associative links. This is the unconscious network."

33. David Hurry. "William Carlos Williams' Paterson and Freud's Interpretation of Dreams". Literature and Psychology 28 (1978): 170-177.

34. Lemaire, op.cit. 188

35. Joan Burbick. "Grimaces of a New Age: The Postwar Poetry and Painting of William Carlos Williams and Jackson Pollock". Boundary 2 (1982):115.

36. See above, Lacan, page 9

37. Williams' response to a letter from Wallace Stevens, cited in Riddel, op.cit. 50

38. See above, Lacan, page 14: the 'dialectic of the gaze'.

39. Lemaire, op.cit. 188.

40. See above, Lacan, page 9.

41. Lemaire, op.cit. 182.

42. See above, Lacan, page 15.

43. Wallace Stevens, "A Primitive Like and Orb". The Collected Poems. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982):440 & 443.

44. Stevens, in correspondence with Williams, cited in Riddel, op.cit., 49.

45. James Breslin, cited in Carl Rapp. "William Carlos Williams and the Modern Myth of the Fall". Southern Review 20 (1984): 82

46. In Imaginations, 13-16. Williams rejected the "apparition" of a "finality", comparing the fiction of that belief to a belief in literature as a sacred order. In The Embodiment of Knowledge, xiii, he calls this belief "a very identical heaven of mystical understanding".

47. Williams. The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams. (New York: Random House, 1954): 202.

48. Lacan, in Seminar 22/1/1958, cited in Lemaire, op.cit. 116-117, considers such 'anchoring' of signifier to signified a mythic, as opposed to 'real' possibility of referentiality. In Ecrits he identifies the 'mirror stage' as an Imaginary point in psychic development, an unrecoverable "exemplary situation...in which I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification."

49. Owen Miller, Preface to Identity of the Literary Text. ed. Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985): vii.

50. Lemaire, op.cit. 53 & 178, elaborates: "Birth into language and the utilization of the symbol produce a disjunction between the lived experience and the sign which replaces it...fusion of ego and truth will never be any more than asymptotic."

51. see above, Lacan, page 15.

52. Williams, from a 1948 essay, cited in David Hurry (1978):170

53. Derrida, Of Grammatology, xi.

54. Lacan in Ecrits, 215-16 describes "the paternal metaphor" as an unrecoverable "point at which..signifier and signified are stabilized in the delusional metaphor".

55. See above, Lacan, page 15 and Derrida, page 7.

56. Joel Conarroe. William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), Chapter 5, pages 99-116, "The Mountain", discusses the metaphor of the man and mountain as the masculine and feminine principle.

57. In Ecrits, 13, Lacan states that "Each instinctual metamorphosis...will again challenge its delimitation." That is, each "reduction to one" will be displaced by further "dispersal and metamorphosis".

58. Conarroe, op.cit. 139

59. Paul Mariani. "The Eighth Day of Creation: William Carlos Williams' Late Poems". Twentieth Century Literature (1970):317 suggests that 'Cress' stands for 'Cressida': "During the winter of 1942, Williams reread Chaucer with renewed interest; he was especially taken with Chaucer's psychological rendering of Cressida." One can perhaps see the letters from 'Cress', included in the poem to the point in Book II where for many readers the poem is almost destroyed, as a structural and thematic representation of 'divorce', and perhaps also of a self-blame similar to Criseyde's.

60. Brian Bremen. "The Radiant Gist: The Poetry Hidden in the Prose of Williams' Paterson". Twentieth Century Literature 32 (1986):222.

61. Williams, note to the Yale papers, cited in Conarroe, op.cit., 92.

62. Williams, Buffalo manuscript, Conarroe, p. 97.

63. Williams, from The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams. (New York: McDowell, Oblensky, 1957):292, cited in Breslin, op.cit. 202: "A man wonders why he continues to write. And yet it is precisely then that to write is most imperative for us. That, if I can do it, will be the end of Paterson. The ocean of savage lusts in which the wounded shark gnashes at his own tail is not our home. It is the seed that floats to shore, one word, one tiny even microscopic word, is that which can alone save us."

64. In The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random house, 1951):392

65. In a stuttering parody of perpetuation, the murder of the old world John Johnson, murderer of the new world John Van Winkles ("long residents of this country" 198), ends the poem with a perpetuation of violence to match the perpetuation of the "seed-word": "John Johnson, from Liverpool, England, was convicted after 20 minutes conference by the jury. On April 30, 1850, he was hung in full view of thousands who had gathered on Garrett Mountain and adjacent housetops to view the spectacle."

66. Paul Mariani. William Carlos Williams: The Poet and his Critics. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1975):105, notes: "Whether Book V was an organic part of Paterson or really another separate poem was a question which continues to be asked

by nearly every reviewer and critic of the poem up to the present."

67. Carl Rapp. William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984):104.

68. Author's note to the 1963 New Directions edition of Paterson. Richard Eberhart, in New York Times Book Review. (Sept 14, 1958) noted a "comic denial of the work of art as inevitable".

69. James Breslin, op.cit. 173 writes: "Not given a surface network of articulated connections, the reader is forced to suspend each block of material in his mind until he gets to the end, when the entire poetic field has been defined."

70. See Tapscott, op.cit. 167; Audrey Rodgers. Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in William Carlos Williams. (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1987): 121; Conarroe, op.cit., 112

71. Louis Martz, in "Paterson, a Plan For Action". Journal of Modern Literature (May 1971): 513-22, finds that every book begins in spring and never makes it past summer.

72. Louis Martz. The Poem of the Mind, 155, calls Book V an "epilogue or coda"; John Berryman, American Scholar 28 (1959):390 calls Book V an "ecstatic addendum", cited in Charles Doyle, op.cit., 322.

73. Thom Gunn, in "Poetry As Written". Yale Review (Winter 1959): 298, describes what he sees as "the very minor work of a major poet" made "unfit to write poetry of consecutive discourse" by his imagist discipline.

74. Stephen Cushman. op.cit., 102.

75. M.L. Rosenthal. "The Transforming and Saving Power of the Imagination". Nation (1958):500, cited in Doyle, op.cit., 317.

76. Charles Olson. "Paterson (Book V)" Evergreen Review 11 (1959):220-1

77. Breslin, op.cit., 211.

78. *ibid.*, 203. See also Joan Burbick, op.cit, 120: "Williams ... attempted to reassert the power of the imagination to synthesize the chaos of human experience into images of beauty".

79. John Thirlwall. "The Genesis of the Epic Paterson". Today's Japan IV (1959):65-70, cited in Conarroe, op.cit., 98.

80. Rosenthal, op.cit. 318

81. Joseph Machlis. The Enjoyment of Music (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977):280 Hector Berlioz described this scherzo as the "gambols of a frolicsome elephant".

82. Olson, op.cit. 221

83. W.D. Snodgrass., cited in Doyle, op.cit. 318.

84. The same earthiness is the focus of Brueghel's spiritual subject, the Nativity: the poet's attention is directed to the new-bornness of Christ, not the divinity, the pot-belliedness of Joseph, the unkempt straggling hair, sagging lips.

85. Ralph Nash. "The Use of Prose in Paterson". Perspective 6 (1953): 194-95.

86. See Audrey Rogers, op.cit. 113-118, and Margaret Freeman. The Unicorn Tapestries. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Dutton, 1976):318 for a review of the myth's ambiguities.

87. In a similar way, the sterility, rather than the serenity, of Unicorn ("against a millefleurs background" 231), and

artist ("tending his flower garden"230) is emphasized by placement next to the poet's "errors", on the one hand, and the procreative vitality of "any young man with a mind bursting to get out", and of Chaucer's spring (231).

88. Williams. Imaginations, 140: "Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination - the perfection of new forms as additions to nature- Prose may follow to enlighten...to penetrate everywhere with enlightenment."

89. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language". p.24. stated that cubism has a "manifestly metonymical orientation" in its depiction of space: object presentation is broken into parts, each of which conveys some aspect of the object.

90. Williams. Autobiography, 138: "Whether the Armory Show did it...the poetic line, the way the image was to lie on the page was our immediate concern...I had never in my life felt that way. I was tremendously stirred."

91. Stephen Tapscott. op.cit. 34-35 is describing Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending A Staircase". See also H.W. Janson. History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:Prentice-Hall,1967):521-531, for an illustrated discussion of the artists included in Williams' 'rout' in Paterson, 222.

92. Of the 19 fragments referring to the Tapestries, 4 only (209,212,232,234) express the immortality of art; the others focus upon the death and agony of the Unicorn.

93. Lacan, Ecrits,4, describing the art of Hieronymus Bosch.

## CONCLUSION: Closure and Retrospect

### 1. 'Closure' and 'Anti-closure'

The sub-title of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's seminal study of closure, 'A Study of How Poems End', points towards a post-modern distinction between "closure" and "end". "Closure", derived from the future participial construction of the verb 'claudere', indicates an act in progress, a "gesture of exit".<sup>1</sup> In his preface to the 1984 issue of Yale French Studies, David Hult states that the concept of 'closure' comes to interrogate not simply a work's essential pre-determined unity, but rather its contingency. If, as he maintains, "'end' is to meaning as 'closure' is to interpretation",<sup>2</sup> then it should be possible to interpret closural strategies as an essential part of a work's structural strategies, without engaging in the kind of closed-system, meaning-dictated structuralism deplored by Derrida.

Jonathan Culler explains Derrida's objection to any approach which "grasps an organized whole by starting with its end or purpose",<sup>3</sup> and which assumes that "the structure is commanded by a particular end":<sup>4</sup>

The notion of "structure" has a teleological character...When one speaks of the structure of a literary work, one does so from a certain vantage point: one starts with notions of the meaning or effects of a poem and tries to identify the structures that are responsible for those effects. Possible configurations or patterns which make no contribution are rejected as irrelevant.<sup>5</sup>

For Derrida, structural analyses are self-limiting attestations of a "centered" ideology.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to this "metaphysical desire to make the definition coincide with the defined...to balance the equation, close the circle",<sup>7</sup> Derrida maintains that:

The absence of any ultimate or transcendent meaning opens an unbounded space for the play of signification.<sup>8</sup>

Structure does not necessarily have to imply teleological design, however. In both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson, the thematic announcement of the poem as a quest would appear to be the autotelic device for unity and ideology, yet both poems proceed towards closure of the quest as if the end were either forgotten or undecided. The structuring of each poem is a dynamic development of endless supplementation and deferral, so that both closures, the Retraction to the Canterbury Tales and the addition of Book V to Paterson, are unconvincing terminations of an un-ending process. Rather than the end commanding the structure, the structure appears to be driving the poem. In both works, the inner structure acts like an insistent signifier, "commanding" the poetic process beyond any conceivable end.

Because this drive is similar in its configurations to the unconscious drive of lack and desire, its poetic end can only be a cessation, a metaphoric achievement of that "attractive zero", or else a deferral of the end. These two broad alternatives, the sense of termination or of continuation, constitute Barbara Smith's two basic

categories of 'closure' and 'anti-closure'. Closure frames the poetic utterance with a structure that is "integral, coherent, complete, and stable". Anti-closure is an "openness" in which "the rhythms come to no formal conclusion, but resume constantly".<sup>9</sup> Leonard Meyer, in his study of the 'anti-teleological' avant-garde in the arts, suggests that a denial of closure "rests upon an even more fundamental denial: a denial of the reality of cause and effect".<sup>10</sup> Anti-closure, then, would seem to be a structural mimesis of a modern malaise, and a fitting 'end' to any work which seeks to question both the referential and the authoritative powers of language. John Barth provides an amusing example from the modern Fun-House:

It's about over. Let the denouement be seen and unexpected, painless if possible, quick at least, above all soon. Now now! How in the world will it ever  
11

Paterson seems to employ many similarly self-reflexive elements of anti-closure, through which

the structural forces of continuation are not arrested or overcome... a conclusion is not determined by any thematic principles...the last allusions are to beginnings, or unstable events... concluding assertions are qualified and tentative.<sup>12</sup>

Yet readers' affective responses to Book V reveal a general satisfaction with "a fitting close".<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Chaucer's Retraction, though it "announces and justifies the absence of further development" and bears as well many of the "special terminal features" of strong closure:



predetermination...tone of authority...closural  
allusions to finality...poetic coda<sup>14</sup>,

it is for most readers "a disappointing conclusion which... disturbs or unsettles the reader's retrospective experience of it".<sup>15</sup> This seeming illogic in reader responses is perhaps best understood through Smith's notion of "retrospective justification", a process which she sees as a reader's final response to a poem, through evaluation of its closure.

## 2. Retrospective Justification

Paterson closes with a blatant gesture of anti-closure: "Yo ho! ta ho!" (239) is a summons to begin the hunt. Retrospective analysis of the poem confirms a pattern of repetition-compulsion: a re-enactment of loss, search, and recovery. The attempt to bring the totality of experience into "one plane" of the subject's present is continually deconstructed through lyric breaks towards a still point of 'Imaginary' recovery (Books II and IV), or through frenzied plunges into the abyss (Books I and III). Beginning again is always a deconstruction of all that went before - an "aggressive disintegration"<sup>16</sup> and a dissonant regathering from the primordial "dregs" and "bases".

The repeated structural pattern is a powerful determinant of reader expectation. When it is subtly but significantly altered in Book V, it is not a "mellowed" style of writing which makes the fragmented presentation of the Unicorn tapestries appear to be a conventional,

sustained, and integrated meditation, but the absence of what have been the most dissonant elements in the pattern: the descent against the grain of the poem's announced 'field' of the present; and the violent disintegration which always preceded a resuming of the quest. The Unicorn tapestries remain, in fact they contribute, to the poem's present: the fragmented 'meditations' are not a nostalgic retreat into the past, but a trans-lation of that past into the field of Paterson, where, like the Cloisters, and like Sappho's poem, which are both modern constructions from ancient relics (like Book V itself), they con-struct, rather than de-construct the "one plane". In this way, the "WORLD OF ART THAT THROUGH THE YEARS HAS SURVIVED!" - the Tradition - is finally brought into alignment with the individual talent, and the harmony and balance of the opening colon is re-affirmed.

Paterson 'justifies' a coherent pattern in which two planes or axes, a metonymic present, and a metaphoric escape from the present, are in constant friction. Although the closure finally resolves the two axes into "one plane", this successful reduction-to-one, where all perspectives are equally present, suspends indeterminately any subordinating relationships of cause-and-effect, representation, referentiality, or 'metaphysical closure'. A similar analysis of the structural strategies of the Canterbury Tales revealed an initial break from the metaphoric plane, and an inner structure which acquired an independent

metonymic momentum of its own. Closure was ideologically strong, but affectively dissonant, as it brought the metonymic drive to an abrupt and unconvincing halt with what could perhaps be construed as the ultimate capitulation to the attractive zero: the father negates his own authority, 'eating' his unruly progeny by retracting his words.<sup>17</sup>

In both quests, then, the formal attempt to reconcile beginnings and endings works in different ways to underline the inability of a poet to fashion absolute truth, given his limited materials. In another ambiguously closed poetic quest, the poet laments: "the forme to the fynisment foldez ful selden".<sup>18</sup> The Gawain poet's exquisite formal symmetries actualize in language his theme of spiritual perfection, but the affective experience of the poem's unstable closure does much to undermine its perfect shape. In a similar way, the "forme" and "fynisment" of the Canterbury Tales enclose the poem's metonymic earthly procession within a metaphoric figuring of eternal order. What Chaucer achieves in his dissonant collision of the sacred and the profane is a formal 'splitting' of these two irreconcilable states. Paterson 'folds' together beginning and ending into a similar expression of lack: the enclosing assertion, "we know nothing and can know nothing" obviates the very idea of the quest for knowledge. The end simply confirms the negativity of the beginning, widening the gap between the quester and his goal.

In both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson, the structural strategies provide a "pharmakon" for the reader: a 'poison' to a comfortable reading experience and to facile interpretation, and an antidote to complacency and "falsity". Both poems have jarred the reader, Paterson continuously and the Canterbury Tales abruptly, into a "remembrance" of Plato's 'playful reminder': that if a written work is constrained to repeat eternally its final utterance, then that utterance, if it desires to direct its reader to wisdom, must speak undecidably and/ or dissonantly in order to keep both sides of the dialectic open and viable.<sup>19</sup> The closures of both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson ask the reader to question traditional 'closed' assertions of knowledge and truth, not ultimately to discard them, but to re-evaluate and to re-activate the "unbounded space" of skeptical undecidability which allows each reader his own personal quest.

Plato himself denies the possibility of ever arriving at a conclusive end to the dialectic journeying;<sup>20</sup> his poetic 'inquiries' "raise problems".<sup>21</sup> which allow the works to "persist in their investigations"<sup>22</sup> through time. William Carlos Williams and Geoffrey Chaucer add their 'inquiries' to the tradition of 'raising problems'. At the end of their poetic quests, rather than either re-discovering or denying the received conventions of Tradition, Williams lays his own "basket" alongside its "sliding waters", with the same mix of humility and confidence as Chaucer, who placed his own

"litel bok", and then his "litel tretys" at the feet of the "giants": Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, Statius - and God. Like Plato, neither poet succumbed to the skepticism he expressed about the inadequacies of writing; both wrote 'as if' their works could, "like the best of them", provide the reader with a much-needed 'key' or "reminder to us of what we know".<sup>23</sup>

### 3. The Language Game: Reading 'as if'

Plato's Phaedrus is a series of 'palinodes': each of Socrates' speeches plays with the arguments by 'saying again', differently and persuasively, thereby demonstrating the "terrible power" of language. All literature, in Derrida's and Lacan's views, is no more than a series of palinodes, 'saying again' in different textual arrangements and structures what has been said before. Derrida and Lacan provide one more way of 'saying again'. That their skeptical approach to language is not revolutionary, but in fact a repetition of earlier, even ancient, philosophical stances, is simply a corroboration of their insistence that, "always already...belatedly, supplementarily",<sup>24</sup> "the game is already played, the dice are already cast".<sup>25</sup>

A Derridean approach gains entry and access to the 'play' in a poem's language which will keep 'open' and active those issues that the text forecloses. Thus the similarity in the signifiers 'seke/seeke' deconstructs a professed hierarchic subordination of one to the other, and

a similar play upon 'rigor' deconstructs an attempt to forego the ultimate and remain located in present process. The deconstructive strategy opens up the 'game' by finding an inconsistency (an 'offside') in its plays, and by exposing a synchronic abundance of disseminated meanings which compound the individual text at that particular focal point. This 'plurality' enriches the text, but at the same time imposes upon it the limitations of a 'belated', non-present, non-originary re-production. Yet many works continue to effect the reader 'as if' they are original and individual: the Canterbury Tales is not another Decameron; Troilus is not a second Filostrato; Paterson is not another fragmented reproduction of other modernist fragments, and its tortured quest another Four Quartets with an added fifth.

The Lacanian approach to language helps to demonstrate how this can be so. Just as each psyche or speaking subject (or text), although pre-determined by a pre-existing symbolic system of language and law, is still a unique combination of these composite factors, so each text combines the disseminations available to it into a new configuration. In poetry which is itself similar in construction to the unconscious in its network of disjunctions, condensations and displacements, intertextualities simply join, rather than enjoin, the processes of the new work: inner intertextual resonances are generated within the poem's own private 'field', creating a

'never already' newness that appears as original and as differentiated as each character on the road to Canterbury, or as Sam Patch or Sarah Cumming or the Unicorn Tapestries.

Through Lacan's analogy of psyche and text, it is possible to see the palinode especially as an act of individuality: beating language at its own game by departing from the prevailing structure, the subject speaks in a new voice, and so is able to 'cast the dice' again for himself.<sup>26</sup> Interpreting the new voice in Chaucer's palinode as an ironic voice does not resolve a reader's sense of its dissonance any more than Williams' final utterance, which mocks the "limping" inanity of all quests for knowledge,<sup>27</sup> deters the poet or the reader from pursuing the quest. Chaucer's final fictional tale, like Williams' framing negations of knowledge, effectively silences any further speaking of truths (including the "Parson's Tale"),<sup>28</sup> and demonstrates as well Horace's warning that an utterance once released can never be returned (that is, retracted), "though hym repente".<sup>29</sup> But in spite of the theoretical validity of these arguments, which would effectively place Chaucer's entire final fragment under erasure and so solve the reader's distress, Chaucer closes his poem 'as if' our immediate response will be a reaction against its unwelcome message - which it is. And Williams "limps and closes" 'as if' we could dance to so faltering a measure - which we can.

David Hume explains our perverse blindness to the theoretical 'truth':

All human life must perish, were (the skeptic's) principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true, so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle.<sup>30</sup>

A dominant "principle" of both the Canterbury Tales and Paterson is a skeptical distrust of language. As readers we can re-view the linguistic system with Paterson's informed shrug of skeptical certitude ("We know nothing and can know nothing"), or with the House of Fame's deconstructive absurdity, or with the Canterbury Tale's glaring exposure of the vanity of all "laughable"<sup>31</sup> human discourse. And after our probings and our laughter or despair at the limitations of the language which both forms us and plays upon us, we might answer for ourselves Derrida's 'principled' questioning of textual presence, "Who will ever know of such disappearances?", by recognizing that the radically inadequate "nature" of language has been made often to dance with both rigor and beauty and presence, 'as if' the complete consort is dancing together, although we 'know' it cannot. Then we might reiterate with skeptical wisdom what Chaucer's Eagle asserts with confident naivety:

And ys not this a wonder thyng?



1. Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Poetic Closure: a study of how poems end. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.):196
2. David Hult, "Editor's Preface". Yale French Studies "Concepts of Closure" 67 (1984):iv. Derrida, in Les fins de l'homme: a partir du travail de Jacques Derrida (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1981):464, cited in Eugenio Donato. "Ending/Closure: On Derrida's Edging of Heidegger", in Yale French Studies 67 (1984):13, states "The ending has always begun, yet one must distinguish between end and closure".
3. Derrida. Writing and Difference, 44.
4. Jonathan Culler "Structure of Ideology and Ideology of Structure". NLH 4 (1973):474.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.* In Writing and Difference, 41, Derrida maintains that "any structuralist procedure...always presupposes and appeals to the simultaneity of things as seen by God."
7. Gayatri Spivak. "Preface" to Of Grammatology, xx.
8. Derrida. Writing and Difference, 411.
9. Smith. *op. cit.*, 239-40.
10. Leonard Meyer. "The End of the Renaissance? Notes on the Radical Empiricism of the Avant-garde". Hudson Review 16 (1963): 178. Meyer includes in his study the serial music of Stockhausen and John Cage; the paintings of Tobey, Rothko, and Mathieu; the writing of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, and Jackson Mac Low.
11. John Barth. Lost in the Fun-House (New York: Bantam Books, 1969):110
12. Smith, *op. cit.* 210.
13. Audrey Rodgers. *op. cit.*, 121.
14. Barbara Smith. *op. cit.* 36; 151-158; 186-189.
15. *ibid.* 213.
16. Lacan. Ecrits, 4
17. I borrow the analogy (not with complete seriousness) which Robert Con Davis makes in The Fictional Father (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981):1-26: when Kronos eats his unruly progeny he destroys his paternal authority, since fatherhood requires offspring for its existence.
18. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978):line 499: "The beginning matches the ending very seldom".
19. Does Plato himself not shock the reader into his own re-viewing of the choices, between skepticism and convention, with his final utterance: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius"? (Phaedo 118).
20. See Republic 533 a
21. The Greek adjective "skeptikos" derives from a verb meaning "to inquire". An anonymous Introduction to Plato's Philosophy which dates from the sixth century A.D.

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states: "In his discussion of things...inasmuch as he tries to establish contrary views about the same things, he clearly extols inapprehensibility...he himself says in his dialogue 'I know nothing and I teach nothing: all that I do is raise problems'." Cited in Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. The Modes of Skepticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 13.

22. Sextus Empiricus, in Outlines of Pyrrhonism, probably second century A.D., wrote: "Those who investigate any subject are likely either to make a discovery or to deny the possibility of discovery and agree that nothing can be apprehended or else to persist in their investigations."

Cited in Annas and Barnes, op.cit.1

23. See above, Plato, page 2

24. Derrida. "Freud and the Scene of Writing", transl. Jeffrey Mehlman, in Yale French Studies 48 (1972):92: "The text is not thinkable in an originary or modified form of presence...everything begins with reproduction. Always already: repositories of a meaning which was never present, whose signified presence is always reconstituted by deferment...belatedly, supplementarily."

25. Lacan. Seminare II, 256, cited in Malcolm Bowie, op.cit, 116: "The game is already played, the dice are already cast...with this exception, that we may take them in hand again and cast them once more...Don't you find something ridiculous and laughable in the fact that the dice are already cast?"

26. See above, Stanley Fogel, page 69 and note #83: "Retraction is a way of debunking the whole theory of representation.

27. See above, Lacan, page 15.

28. Mark Allen, op.cit., 77, writes: "Indeed, silence would negate the "Parson's Tale" for the pilgrims, since the tale would not be told if the Parson followed the manciple's advice. For us, the advice to be silent countermands the Canterbury Tales itself, since without the telling of the stales and the voices of the pilgrims there is no poem."

29. See "Manciple's Tale", lines 353-356:

"But that he myssed, I dar wel sayn

He may by no wey clepe his word agayn.

Thyng that is seyde, and forth it gooth

Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so looth."

In Paterson (129) Williams elaborates upon Horace dramatically: "It is dangerous to leave written that which is badly written...Watch carefully and erase, while the power is still yours, I say to myself, for all that is put down, once it escapes, may rot its way into a thousand minds, the corn become a black smut, and all libraries, of necessity, be burned to the ground as a consequence."

30. David Hume. Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding XII ii. ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

31. Recall Lacan, above, page 114.

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