

CHAUCER AT THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE:

SILENCE AND INEXPRESSIBILITY

in

*TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

BY

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A Thesis

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Chaucer at the Limits of Language:  
Silence and Inexpressibility in *Troilus and Criseyde*

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**Sara (Wilde) Wright** (1903-1986),  
Whose love of life, literature and the arts  
found its way onto these pages.

## ABSTRACT

Following the lead of Philip Pulsiano, who considers *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer's "moral and philosophical workshop for exploring the breakdown of language" ((1989): 154), this thesis examines the degree to which language is manipulated competently and efficiently, and how Chaucer's success reflects the larger themes of the poem. Because artistic endeavours are often "hampered" by "the resistance of the external material (like marble or even words)" (Manning (1981): 289), differentiation is made between authorial incompetence and material inflexibility. Humbled by virtue of language's "brotelnesse," writers are forced to acknowledge their place in a transitory, mutable universe: no one can transcend the mutable (least of all *via* a mutable medium), and this is a lesson learned by narrator and reader alike.

This study employs a critical strategy that utilises language philosophy and a consideration of medieval rhetoric, to an end considering of the accuracy and precision of expressibility in Chaucer's reworking of the Trojan legend. *Troilus'* narrator, anxious to express exactly what he means, yet not having mastered that "craft" which is "so long to lerne" (*Parliament of Fowls*, 1), finds himself in states of poetic stasis and, ultimately, silence. Sudden halts in character dialogue or in narrator commentary underscore the rift between word and non-word, the expressible and inexpressible, and the comprehensible and unfathomable, and thereby encourage comparisons that, more often than not, reflect negatively on the narrator. *Troilus'*s narrator frequently claims that "words cannot say,"

and this paradoxical assertion works only to draw attention *to* the artist's craft and skill, rather than away from it.

The narrator's shortcomings are ultimately part of a *universal* problem that extends well beyond the realm of language and expressibility. *Troilus and Criseyde* revolves around the themes of change and mutability. The world changes, language changes, texts change, and interpretations of Chaucer's writings change. The reader comes to recognise that, like Lady Philosophy's conception of Fortune itself, "the textual condition's only immutable law is the law of change" (McGann, 9). *Troilus and Criseyde* asserts its position in our transitory world by exploring the limitations of language -- the very language, ironically, by which it and its narrator unsuccessfully attempt to vault the consequences of mutability.



## Chapter 1: The Three R's of *Troilus*: Rhetoric, Renouncement, Reticence

This chapter will examine the traditions or *topoi* by which writers, narrators and orators have sought to predispose an audience favourably, and the conditions under which a protest of "I cannot say" denotes a sincere, universal linguistic impediment, and when it should be considered a mere rhetorical tag. Any thorough study of inexpressibility must examine what are apparent claims of self-abasement; to do so establishes the boundaries that separate an author with an identity-threatening dilemma from one who is indulging in what are essentially word games. Such a study not only helps the reader differentiate a woebegone author from one who is merely trying to "win the audience over"; it helps one attain a better understanding of the true boundaries of language and, by extension, of communication amongst ourselves.

From the onset of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, attention is drawn to the narrator's ability to convey feelings of utmost breadth and profundity; the very fact that it is a self-proclaimed "woful vers" (1.7) that promises in its first stanza to "tellen" of "the double sorwe of Troilus" (1.1)\* draws attention to the language of a narrator who, ironically, forever fights to remove himself from the product of his eloquence. Although the narrator's desire to abdicate responsibility for his finished product is of course highly rhetorical in nature, his assertion that "as myn auctour seyde, so sey I" (2.18) nonetheless

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\* All references to the work of Geoffrey Chaucer are from The Riverside Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), and will be cited in the text when and where appropriate.

betrays an awareness of the fundamental problems associated with language and its multifarious forms, and brings to bear an added thematic weight to the poem.

In terms of rhetorical credibility, the narrator's introduction to the reader is favorable enough, especially for those acquainted with the fundamentals of medieval rhetoric. He has evidently heeded Geoffrey of Vinsauf's advice in the *Poetria Nova* to "let the end [of a literary work], as a worthy precursor, be first to enter and take up its place in advance, as a guest of more honorable rank,"<sup>1</sup> and the narrator's indebtedness is confirmed in the ending of book one when he says that

. . . everi wight that hath an hous to founde  
Ne renneth naught the werk for to bygynne  
With rakel hond, but he wol bide a stounde,  
And sende his hertes line out fro withinne  
Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynne. (1.1065-69)<sup>2</sup>

As for the foundations of his poetic "house," the first stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde*, significantly enough, presents the crux of the entire poem, and this introduction is appropriate in light of rhetorical advice offered by the *Poetria Nova*. Ernest Gallo (1978) observes that the *Troilus* narrator, achieving essentially what Vinsauf's "beginning

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, 2.112-15; all citations are from the Margaret Nims translation (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), and will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> q.v. *Poetria Nova*, 1.43-46: "If a man has a house to build, his impetuous hand does not rush into action. The measuring line of his mind first lays out the work, and he mentally outlines the successive steps in definite order."

at the end" method undertakes, starts "at the precise point which most lucidly summarizes the meaning of the sequence of the action" (73). The *Troilus* narrator promises within the first stanza that he will "tellen" how Troilus's "aventures fellen/ Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie," and makes the very conventional invocation for divine assistance as he variously "endites" and "writes" of these adventures. Within the first seven lines of the poem, then, an association between language -- both verbal and written -- and Fortune has been already suggested,<sup>3</sup> which in turn sets a tone appropriate to a poem that, far from celebrating the love of yet another pair of "star-cross'd lovers," ultimately condemns the "false worldes brottelnesse" (5.1832) that makes itself manifest in the story's action, its messenger, and its medium. Because, as Bonnie Wheeler (1982) points out, "almost half of *Troilus and Criseyde* is dialogue, and much of the rest of the poem is composed of reflections of such dialogue" (106),<sup>4</sup> it is reasonable to claim that *Troilus* aims to examine the medium which makes its existence possible, as well as the degree to which a rhetorician -- or any other individual for whom language is a living entity -- is capable of harnessing it.

---

<sup>3</sup> Woehling suggests that the poem's "first stanza is a miniaturized version of the structure of the poem" because it "begins and ends with references to language and the art of writing, and joy is at the center of it." (18) At the physical centre of the first stanza and the thematic "centre" of the entire poem is mutability and the dealings of fortune; the relationship between language and mutability which I see in the first stanza is made even more evident in other areas of the poem. (q.v. 2.22-28)

<sup>4</sup> Empirical evidence helps support the hypothesis that one of *Troilus and Criseyde*'s principal concerns is language: according to Tatlock and Kennedy's concordance to the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, there are 123 occurrences of the word "telle," 73 of "word," 59 of "speke," 44 of "speche," 37 of "write," 36 of "devyse," and 15 of "endite"; in addition, there are 59 specimen occurrences of the word "seye".

As interesting as poets' attempts to harness language are, even more so are the consequences of writers' desire to deprecate their own work. Robert Ernst Curtius, in his influential European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, examines the roots of the "modesty formulae" in which classical authors proclaimed their artistic incompetence, their lack of preparation and their dull wit in an effort, Curtius says, "to dispose of the [oratory] judges favourably" (83). In the exordium of Cicero's *Orator*, for example, Curtius points out that it is implied that

to treat the theme is beyond Cicero's powers; hence he fears the criticism of learned men; dares not hope to accomplish the thing successfully; foresees that Brutus will find him lacking in discretion, and resigns himself only because Brutus's request is justified. (83)

Similarly, Tacitus claims that his *Agricola* is composed in "artless and unschooled language," Fortunus suggests that his "little wit cannot relate great things," and Ennodius speaks of the "poverty of mind" that limits his poetic powers (83). Considering from whose pen they issue, these claims seem quite tongue-in-cheek; what is important, however, is that these claims of poetic ineptitude and failure, through successive generations of writers, translators and poets, ultimately influenced the poetry of Chaucer and his contemporaries. In light of such influence and how it surfaces in medieval thought, to claim that *Troilus* concerns itself with language and its limits is far from a dubious position to take.

The modesty *topos* which is so readily found in pre-Christian literature was even accepted and tailored by St. Augustine, who "urged the Christian rhetorician to adopt a *sermo humilis* -- a low style for a lofty theme," such as the Divine (Howland-Schotter, 1984: 24). The figure of this endorsement is grounded in the traditions of pagan Rome, where the writings of the time were taken up as models by the earliest Christian writers; Curtius points to the *mediocritas* used in Arnobius, Lactantius and Jerome, and how they diffused into the literature that survived from Carolingian times, claiming that it is here that "we have the transfer of a pagan formula of self-disparagement to [a] Christian use" that was ultimately incorporated into the "Latin and vernacular literature of the Middle Ages." (84-85, 83) For a poem such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, which appears to vacillate between pagan and Christian sentiments right until the end of the poem, the modesty *topos* is one which the historical Chaucer was unable to resist.

Obviously concerned with being "rhetorically correct," the *Troilus* narrator is quick to exploit the benefits of affected modesty, and examples are peppered throughout the poem. He makes the traditional invocation to muses without whom failure would, supposedly, be imminent (1.6-7; 2.8-11); he says that he will follow his author's writings, *if he can* (2.48-49); he compares his wit to a boat that he barely controls (2.1-7); so meagre is his wit, says the narrator, it is impossible to comment on Troilus and Criseyde's joy in consummation (3.1311); he claims that his "little tongue" would "childishly deface" the extent of the pain that Criseyde feels in learning of her impending departure (4.798-805). All of these examples of self-abasement, like their classical ancestors, seem to point

to an attempt by the *Troilus* narrator to induce pity or to lessen the harshness of his audience's judgment. Given, as James Murphy (1964) relates, that we can "by no means *assume* the existence of a native English rhetorical tradition during Chaucer's lifetime" -- that, indeed, the "evidence . . . points definitely in another direction" (5) -- almost every aspect of the narrator's rhetoric is ultimately transplanted from older times, and they make themselves exceptionally evident every now and then.<sup>5</sup>

Given the rich tradition of proclaiming one's self an artistic failure, then, the narrator's claim that "a blynd man kan nat juggen wel in hewis" (2.21) -- a probable allusion to the rhetorical colours<sup>6</sup> -- need not be taken wholly at face value. Indeed, one would have an uphill critical battle to wage were it accepted that Ovid, in his *Ars Amor*, is anything less than a master of rhetoric when he says "I am, I confess, not perfect in this

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Chaucer, *TC*, 2.1-4:

Owt of these blake waves for to saylle,  
O wynd, o wynd, the weder gynnyeth clere;  
For in this see the boot hath swych travaylle,  
Of my connyng, that unneth I it stere.

with Paulinus of Périgueux, in a metrical paraphrase of Sulpicus Severus' *Life of St. Martin* (II, 6), as cited in *Curtius*, 79:

Nunc quid ago et dubiam trepidus quo dirigo proram?  
("What do I, and where fearful do I steer my doubtful  
boat?")

<sup>6</sup> Although the phrase "Caecus non iudicat de coloribus" was, according to Benson's notes, a proverbial phrase of the time, Woehling's suggestion that the narrator here refers to the rhetorical colours is perfectly congruous with a narrator endeavouring to undercut his rhetorical abilities in an effort -- paradoxically -- to strengthen his rhetoric. See Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*, 4.1095-1218 for a discussion of the various "colours".

art; what am I to do? I am less than my own maxims" (2.547-48). Less modest and also more realistic is Pandarus's claim that "a fool may ek a wis-man ofte gide" (1.630): the narrator *does* have something worthwhile to say -- the very existence of *Troilus and Criseyde* would suggest as much -- but he also realizes that when it comes to matters of rhetorical eloquence, it behooves him, ultimately, to take a stance of affected modesty.

### 1.1 The Babelic Tower of Language: Translation and Inexpressibility

When the narrator claims that his poem is a likeness of that of his *auctour*, save for their "tonges difference" (1.395) and that he "kan nat tellen al,/ as kan [his] auctour, of his excellence" (3.1324-25), he is being careful to inform his audience not only of *his own* limitations, but also of those imposed by translation. Although these reminders can of course be construed as a back door through which he can flee unscathed from impending poetic disasters, the problems that arise for the narrator in translating from Latin into English are every bit as intimidating as those that arose for Chaucer himself as he translated Boccaccio into his mother tongue. Unlike the narrator's modesty *topos*, they are not mere literary or rhetorical devices, but very real problems with which any translator must contend. They can ultimately force a writer to admit his or her culpability where the final poetic product is concerned, and move a reader to consider the limitations of language. After all, the difficulties that arise in converting the exact connotations from

one language into another have a lot to say about the slipperiness of language on the whole, and are not the essence of mere word games.

Were the narrator a faultless writer and translator, his invitation for the audience to emend his poem would nonetheless betray his awareness of what happens to texts when exposed to future poets and translators like himself. Payne (1963) suggests that 3.1324-36<sup>7</sup> "might be taken to suggest the possibility that some subsequent poet may do with Chaucer's poem what he has done with the old books of Benoît de Ste. Maure and Boccaccio" (77). It is not only people that can be "apeired/Thorough wikked tonges" (1.38-39); a text is also susceptible to change on account of the whims of its audience, their interpretations and, in the case of *Troilus*, their translation abilities. Pandarus himself realizes that a story's outcome would be significantly altered were one to "peynte or drawn it on lengthe" (2.262) or, similarly, to emphasize this or that rhetorical *topos*; this

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<sup>7</sup> i.e.,

But soth is, though I kan nat tellen al,  
As kan myn auctour, of his excellence,  
Yet have I seyde, and God to for, and shal  
In every thyng, al holly his sentence;  
And if that ich, at Loves reverence,  
Have any word in eched for the beste,  
Doth therwithal right as youreselven leste.

For myne wordes, heere and every part,  
I speke hem alle under correccioun  
Of yow that felyng han in loves art,  
And putte it al in youre discrecioun  
To encesse or maken dymynucioun  
Of my langage, and that I yow biseche.



is a fact of which the narrator, as the individual who made these characters possible for his English audience, was most certainly aware.

*Troilus and Criseyde* is a highly rhetorical poem.<sup>8</sup> It is also no secret that to spend time in analyzing the poem and cataloguing its rhetorical figures would be superfluous: this was already achieved in John H. Manly's "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians" (Publications of the British Academy, 12 (1926)) and in Traugott Naunin's dissertation Der Einfluß der mittelalterlichen Rhetorik auf Chaucers Dichtung (1929). In addition, I agree with Robert Payne (1978) when he says that there is

a rather sterile circularity in combing through Chaucer's works and tabulating the figures in them that are also listed and described in the [medieval rhetoric] manuals (271).

Similarly, Dyck (1986) asserts that "finding examples of [rhetorical] applications" in a literary work "contributes only little to understanding that work" (170), and this is something from which I have deliberately and earnestly steered my own critical boat.

Instead, my focus thus far has been firmly fixed on those claims by which the narrator of

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<sup>8</sup> Allen Koretsky (1970) says that regardless of "Chaucer's source of rhetorical doctrine, the fact remains that *Troilus and Criseyde* is full of rhetorical figures." Pointing to empirical evidence, he concludes that the poem "abounds in metaphor (*translatio*), simile (*similitudo*), repetition (*repetitio*), parallel construction, antithesis (*contentio*), rhetorical question (*interrogatio*), and several other devices." (245)

See also Kökeritz (1954) for studies of *traductio*, *adnominatio* and *significatio* in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

*Troilus and Criseyde* distances himself from his poem, as well as to determining to what degree he is successful in convincing his readers of his incompetence with language. What is ironic is that claims of incompetence are reflexive and ultimately self-defeating; the more convincing he is of his meagre share of wit in following his source (2.243), the more conspicuous he makes his own eloquence. Once again, differentiating Chaucer's "earnest" from "game" in terms of inexpressibility is necessary to this study, if any serious limitation of language is to be uncovered.

### **1.2 Justified vs. Affected Modesty: the mystical contingency**

As touched upon and will be further explicated, one of the narrator's strategies is to place blame on *language* rather than on his culpability where it is concerned. Realizing that a claim of inexpressibility may not always be taken at face value but can be, rather, a rhetorical *topos*, I will take steps to examine those instances in which an author's modesty is not *affected*, but very much *justified* -- instances in which the artist's materials themselves show themselves unreliable and inflexible, and instances where the ramifications necessarily touch every human who has ever hoped to communicate something.

Aside from a convenient disclaimer through which one might favourably dispose the oratory judges -- be it an audience member or, as is the case with *Troilus*, a reader -- there is another, more intriguing reason that one may profess that something cannot be

said. In examining the use of what appears to be a modesty trope in the literature of Chaucer's contemporaries, so evident are language's limitations, one is moved to consider that there are certain phenomena for which there are *no adequate words* to describe -- phenomena which transcend both our worldly perception and the language which would allow us to share those experiences with others. Such were the circumstances upon which Chaucer's countrymen, the anonymous composers of The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling, may have focused: the author of the former mystical work asserts that

þat werke þat falliþ to only God dar I not take apon me to speke  
wiþ my blabryng fleschely tonge; &, schortly to say, al-þof I durst, I  
wolde not.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar yet more animated fashion, the author of The Book of Privy Counselling insists that

3if a soule, þat is þus ocupied [with God], had tonge & langage to  
sey as it feiliþ, þan all þe clerkes of Cristendome schuld wondre on  
þat wisdom. 3e! & in comparison of it, al here grete clergie schuld  
seme apeerte foly. & þefore no wondre þof I kan not telle þee þe  
worþines of þis werk wiþ my boystouse tonge. & God forbede þat

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<sup>9</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 26; in Phyllis Hodgson, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling* (N.Y.: Oxford UP (E.E.T.S./O.S., no.218), 1944), 62.

it scholde be sol defoulid in it-self for to be streynid vnder þe  
steringes of a fleschly tonge!<sup>10</sup>

St. John of the Cross, in the sixteenth-century *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, articulated the basis of ineffability best when he reasoned that God "would never communicate to [the human soul] the abundance of His Spirit through these aquaducts [sic]" -- our human mouths -- which are "so narrow".<sup>11</sup> Indeed, given that a mystic is one who, by definition, is "one who has been taken into some sort of deep union with God, and who knows it while he [or she] cannot adequately describe it,"<sup>12</sup> the medieval mystical tradition has much to "say" about the limitations of language.

Whether such authors as those of *Cloud* and *Counselling* were writing under the shadow of a modesty trope or under the sincere conviction that words are incapable of expressing the divine is, once again, an issue of *justified* modesty, as opposed to *affected* modesty. The difference between the two, one might say, is like that between being blinded and being blindfolded: both produce the same effect, yet one is marked by a

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<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Privy Counselling*; in Hodgson, 153.

<sup>11</sup> (St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, xvii; Ogilvie-Thomson, 86)

<sup>12</sup> From Clifton Wolter's introduction to Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 24. David Knowles, in The English Mystical Tradition, says that a mystical experience, characteristically, is

wholly incommunicable, save as a bare statement, and in this respect all the utterance of the mystics are entirely inadequate as representations of the mystical experience, but it brings absolute certainty to the mind of the recipient. This is the traditional mystical theology, the mystical knowledge of God, in its purest form.  
(3)

greater measure of solemnity, and is certainly apportioned a greater measure of respect, for want of a better term. What makes the problem of "true" inexpressibility more intriguing than other concerns that move writers to underrate their poetic efforts is that they denote language's limitations and problems, which are really quite universal. They pertain to those characteristics which typify *homo loquens*, rather than those which characterize merely an unctuous rhetor or panderer.

Aside from language's own deficiencies, the problem of articulating the divine is one that is partially contingent on past personal experience, and in that sense, the lovelorn narrator's inability to describe the joy of Troilus and Criseyde's love is perhaps partially in earnest. Richard Rolle, a contemporary of Chaucer, asserts that "No man knoweth this gift [of Divine Revelation] save he who has received it; therefore they are few or none who tell of it . . . . All the clerks on earth may not imagine it or know what it is, but he that has it . . . ." <sup>13</sup> One cannot, presumably, articulate that which is imperceivable or

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<sup>13</sup> *Melos Amoris*, xxxix; as cited in Ogilvie-Thomson, 61. Other examples in Rolle's *corpus* of the divine eluding the powers of the human tongue are readily found:

[Mary is] pulcrior quam possum solare,  
Ut cantem capacior, ardet amor a re.  
Ipsa excellencius nichil est creatum,  
Nec erit feruencius amans et amatum.

(*Canticum Amoris*, 107-10; as cited in Knowlton, 193-94)

Ihesu, for loue þou sufr[ed]est wronge,  
Woundes sore and peynes stronge;  
Þi peyn rewful was ful longe,  
Ne may hit telle tunge nor songe.

(Rolle, *Lyrics*, (vi), 14-17; in Ogilvie-Thomson, 52))

incongruous with one's world concept. Were I to witness a square circle, for example, I would find it impossible to say anything about it, for not only would I have never seen one before, but neither has anyone else; my explication of this figure, as a result, would be stymied by an inventory of words that describe only widely-experienced phenomena. Such a figure would elude any and all existing terms or definitions; speech, consequently, finds itself quite null and void in such circumstances, and the end result is necessarily silence.

Expressibility, then, can be realized only when a personal, mental understanding of the subject has been established, and this, in turn, cannot be realized until some measure of knowledge has been acquired. Thomas Aquinas voiced this premise succinctly in the *Summa Theologica* when he said that

Whenever we understand, by the very fact of understanding there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the thing understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and proceeding from our knowledge of that thing. This conception is signified by the spoken word, and it is called the word of the heart signified by the word of the voice.<sup>14</sup>

In language, such an impediment is reflected in the inexpressibility *topos* which, "defined in its pure form. . . centers on language, not the speaker: the point is not that the speaker

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<sup>14</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, first part, XXVII, 1; this citation is from the Fathers of the English Dominican Province translation (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), vol. 1, 153.

fails, though the speaker does, but that *any* tongue fails."<sup>15</sup> (italics added) There are certain things which cannot be vocalized by *anyone*, presumably, and it is to these topics that we must turn our attention if we are to determine any sort of boundary beyond which the efficacy of language ceases.

As Dauenhauer phrases it, there is in literature and elsewhere "the widespread experience" of the insufficiency or incompleteness of language and expression which is, more often than not, "experienced as the inability of expression to cope with God."<sup>16</sup> This experience was one made especially manifest to medieval man, according to Marcia Colish (1968): perhaps due to their educational system,<sup>17</sup> more so than those of our own day, realized that signs

would always be limited in their cognitive function, both in the degree to which they could represent the transcendent God at all and in the degree to which they could convey the knowledge of God to the subject in the first instance. (ix)

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<sup>15</sup> Ann Chalmers Watts, "*Pearl*, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss." *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 27.

See also Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 159-62.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Silence: An Intentional Analysis." *Research in Phenomenology*, 6 (1976), 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> As delineated by Colish (1968: viii), medieval education, while paying special attention to classical philosophy and culture within the seven liberal arts and the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic), not only "taught medieval men how to read, write and think in Latin in logical order," but also "provided them with epistemological methods, linguistic forms, and criteria which they used in theorizing how words functioned as cognitive intermediaries between subject and object and between speaker and audience."

Such reasoning is at the heart of a tradition of inexpressibility called *ineffability*, or the inability to ascribe words to the divine. The rift between the divine and our world and how it manifests itself in our language is further illustrated in the fourteenth-century *Pearl* when the dreamer, upon witnessing paradise, says that

More of wele watz in þat wyse  
Ðen I cowþe telle þa3 I tom hade,  
For vrbely herte my3t not suffyse  
To þe tenþe dole of þo gladnez glade.<sup>18</sup>

It really is not surprising that tongues fall silent when the Divine is the topic at hand, least of all for those familiar with medieval language philosophy. Josef Peiper tells

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<sup>18</sup> *Pearl*, 133-36. Editors Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron of The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) claim that "the inadequacy of the human body and mind to perceive and comprehend paradisaical and heavenly experience" is a common motif of *Pearl* (61). Consider other instances within the poem:

So al watz dubbet on dere asyse  
Ðat fyrth Ðer Fortwne forth me ferez  
þe derÐe Ðerof for to deuyse  
Nis no wy3 worÐé Ðat tonge berez. (97-100)

A mannez dom mo3t dry3ly demme  
Er mynde mo3t malte in hit mesure.  
I hope no tong mo3t endure  
No sauerly saghe say of Ðat sy3t. . . (223-26)



us that on the feast of Saint Nicholas in 1273, St. Thomas Aquinas "turned back to his work after Holy Mass," but that he was "strangely altered": the otherwise

articulate Aquinas

remained steadily silent; he did not write; he dictated nothing. He laid aside the *Summa Theologica* on which he had been working. . . "I can write no more" [Aquinas explained,] adding "All that I have hitherto written seems to me nothing but straw." (39)

While on the surface Aquinas' claim may resemble an instance of affected modesty, the fact that his accomplishments were, for a time, brought to a screeching halt is certainly no act of rhetorical persiflage. It would seem that Aquinas himself experienced the inexpressibility that constitutes part of his own conception of the *via negativa* (the negative way); this theory explains that since "the divine substance exceeds by its immensity every form which our intellect attains," we can best come to know and understand God "by coming to know what [He] is not."<sup>19</sup> In what is perhaps the most outstanding example of the *via negativa*, Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, the Divine Presence is described as being "not soul, not intellect, not imagination, opinion,

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<sup>19</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 14. Frederick Copleston illustrates, through an exercise employing the *via negativa*, that "we come to know God by recognising that which He is not, and cannot be, a corporeal [and therefore imperfect] substance: by denying Him corporeality we form some notion of His nature," and "the more predicates we can deny of God in this way, the more we approximate to a knowledge of Him." (A History of Philosophy, vol. 2 (Toronto: Image Books/Doubleday, 1993).

reason and not understanding . . . . There is neither logos, name, or knowledge of it." The author tells us dozens of things that God *is not*, and finally closes off his fit of negation with the claim that God, as the "all-complete and single cause of all" is "beyond all negation."<sup>20</sup> In negating those positive qualities which might otherwise be attributed to the divine, the very act of speech itself is consequently negated, and the resulting silence demarcates, strangely enough, a greater understanding of the nature of God, albeit a rather inarticulate one.

The ontological conception of God as put forth by St. Anselm in his *Proslogion* further suggests that He, by definition, exceeds the grasp of language and is found more in silence than in words. Assuming, naturally, that one can describe to *some* extent anything imaginable, to claim that God surpasses in greatness the greatest *conceivable* being<sup>21</sup> is tantamount to expressing God in terms of surpassing the greatest describable thing. As Gehl (1987) points out, Anselm's work is filled with so many such paradoxes and "unutterable attributes" that it can only be understood as a "prayer that aims to catapult its reader beyond language itself, into the silence which is God." (149)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Name and Mystical Theology*, J.D. Jones, trans. (Milwaukee: 1980), 221-222.

<sup>21</sup> q.v. Paul F. Gehl, "Competens Silentium: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West." *Viator*, 18 (1987), 149.

<sup>22</sup> For other examples where God is equated with silence, consider Gueric, Cistercian abbot of Igny:

"Let him who has ears to hear, hear what this loving and mysterious silence of the eternal Word speaks to us." (from *Liturgical Sermons*, 63-64; as cited in Gehl, 156)

According to another church father, silence is as natural to humans as is language.

St. Augustine claims that humans are predisposed to silence because they are predisposed to goodness and God, and words are but paltry attempts "to reascend to that silence from which the world fell into the perpetual clamour of life as fallen men know it." (Mazzeo, 23) Inexpressibility that directly results from wrestling with the tangibility of the Divine, then, issues from an attempt to communicate with God *via* the words that are used amongst mere humans. Like a rope that is too short to descend the side of a mountain, however, human language that is used to describe the Divine is just not adequate enough, and the whole excursion, as a result, is often altogether aborted.

If silence can be viewed as an attempt to achieve some measure of pre-Fall perfection, one's use of language can be treated, theoretically, as an indicator by which moral soundness may be assessed.<sup>23</sup> As applied to *Troilus and Criseyde*, this is something which, in conjunction with the ineffability tradition, will be allowed broader

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as well as Aelred of Rievaulx:

"[God's] voice will not strain nor shout. It will not be heard abroad. Inside it is heard; within the heart it is heard; it is heard in silence." (*For Christ Luve: Prayers of S. Aelred Abbot of Rievaulx* (Den Hag: 1965), 159; cited in Gehl, 147)

and Pseudo-Alcuin of Nonantola, who cites Ecclesiasticus:

"Though we speak much, words desert us; the sum of our discourse is this, He is in all things." (*De psalmorum usu*, PL 101.492; cited in Gehl, 137)

<sup>23</sup> Medieval monks who practised silence as an attempt to escape the *strepitus mundi* (noise of the outer world) saw silence as a moral path of behaviour that precluded them from the temptations of "falsehoods, unkindnesses, inanities, and superfluities of language ill used, that is, used for anything but the praise of God." (Gehl (1987): 134)

scope in the following chapter. What has been most important and most profitable to recognise thus far, however, is that although inexpressibility and silence can be quite disheartening and frustrating --especially for the writer -- they need not be;<sup>24</sup> in *Troilus and Criseyde* or elsewhere, Jerzy Peterkiewicz points out,

the obscure gaps, whether in life or in art, need not be as frightening as a precipice. The drama of existence is not all voice. Nor is its voice heard only at a given time. It has its silences, pauses, and gestures in lieu of words.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This is especially profitable and pacifying for poets, authors and critics for whom a "discrepancy between artistic vision and formal execution is felt all the more acutely," because they have "become accustomed to measuring success according to degrees of failure." (Walsh (1993): 63)

<sup>25</sup> Peterkiewicz, 73-74.

## Chapter 2: Beyond the Semi-Colon: Silence and Ineffability in *Troilus and Criseyde*

The title of this chapter is drawn from an essay by George Watson (1982), which recounts a vision experienced by Edwin Muir, and how the Scottish poet interpreted it as relating to the limits of language:

The dream was a very simple one: it consisted of a semicolon. The meaning of this semicolon, as it revealed itself to the dreamer, was that the poet never knows all that he writes: he writes only, as it were, as far as the semicolon, beyond the statement is something more, that completes its meaning. We can never define it, for it is not finite in its very nature; yet it is part of the poem, and part of what the poet communicates to the reader. (32-33)

To *fully* understand what language -- that art of using sound with intermittent pauses and silences to communicate -- seeks to convey is to understand this "something more"; hence the search to understand the phenomenon of silence, or what appears to be a vacuum -- a *nothingness*, as it were -- becomes a search for something *greater* -- something great enough to elude the powerfully reductive proclivities of speech.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> R.A. Shoaf, in Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word, says that "To use a word is *always* to commit an act of reduction," because just "as money reduces everything to arbitrary exchange values, so language reduces experience to meaning. The object, so in the latter system the word can supplant reality by substituting itself for the thing to which it supposedly refers." (12)

It would seem that Ludwig Wittgenstein, in closing his language-philosophy work Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, would agree that certain "language excursions" must necessarily be aborted: he says simply that "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" -- "Of what one cannot speak, one must be silent" (7.00). It seems a simple enough assertion, but it is an important one which goes far in pacifying the poet frustrated by the limitations of language, as well as those philosophers and thinkers who would deem the silencing of language as tantamount to the silencing of civilization itself.

It is one thing to state, as Wittgenstein does, that "es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches" -- that "there are things that cannot be put into words" (6.552) -- but it is quite another to throw one's poetic hands in the air and admit what appears to be defeat. The poet is driven on, however, by a desire to capture that which is forever elusive.<sup>27</sup> For such individuals whose identities are sustained insofar as the ink continues to flow, this is a perpetual and perennial paradox: Timothy Walsh (1993) explains:

While our most intense and visionary moments are often perceived as a blankness, as a wordless wilderness beyond the familiar townships of language, this perception often initiates a contrary motion wherein the writer, aspiring to an almost pentecostal gift of tongues, finds that language can at least reach within a finger's breadth of such states -- often by importing absence itself into the work via the various "somethings" and "nothings" and other empty phrases stored in the sub-cellars of

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<sup>27</sup> This is even truer in the case of the clergy, who, in carrying out what Colish calls the "Christian mandate," found it necessary to find words that would describe their Lord positively and adequately.

language. It is in this sense that art in general can be seen as a species of analogy gesturing at something greater than itself. (64)

Contrary to the nihilism inherent in such comments as "silence kills literature" (Woehling, 166), silence is a positive, "active human performance"<sup>28</sup>; an occurrence of silence need not be feared as a sort of void or abyss, for it can be "just as essential to the rhythm of the totality as are any of the sound phrases which make up the utterance."<sup>29</sup> Silence is often to language what rests are to a piece of music; a lapse into silence, in many cases, "establishes and maintains an oscillation or tension among the several levels of expression," as well as "between the realm of expression and the realms of pre-expressive and post-expressive experience."<sup>30</sup>

Naturally, not all silence is mere punctuation; in terms of true inexpressibility, silence acts more like a figure than a ground. Of the several strains of silence delineated by Dauenhauer, *terminal silence* can be most associated with the limits of language, for it plants "a cut which, while interrupting the entire set of performances belonging to the

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Discourse, Silence, and Tradition." Review of Metaphysics, 9 (1976), 437.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Silence: An Intentional Analysis." Research in Phenomenology, 6 (1976), 83.

Consider this statement with reference to John Cage's *4'33"*, in which its silence is intended to exalt surrounding sounds (fluttering of concert programmes, coughing, shuffling of feet) to the level of "music". See Adam Jaworski, The Power of Silence (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 162.

realm of expression, is itself nonetheless tied to that realm inasmuch as it is motivated by the experienced limit of what can be accomplished in expression"<sup>31</sup> ; it literally closes the realm of expression, and marks the boundary where the efficacy of words ceases. By all definitions, terminal silence appears to be a type of death for language, from which language "receives its fragility, its incapacity to correspond perfectly to its referent, in short, its finitude"<sup>32</sup> and mutable nature -- rendering it a perfect medium by which to examine the mutable nature of life itself.

True to its name, terminal silence is found in the fifth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and its effects on the work as a whole are profound. "With the sign of the brooch" in book five, Woehling (1991) notes, "the speech of the characters begins to dissolve."<sup>33</sup> From Criseyde's realisation in the Greek camp that it "to late is now to speke" of how differently things could have been (5.743) to Pandarus's asking of Troilus, "What sholde I seyen?" (5.1732), attention is increasingly drawn to the ineffectuality of the spoken word, but it is the final line of character dialogue that has the final "say" about the feebleness of language. The verbally dexterous Pandarus, having been until this point as much an *artiste* of language and rhetoric as the narrator (and, naturally, Chaucer himself), finds himself in a state of linguistic stasis; Pandarus, the loveless panderer who, until this

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Silence: An Intentional Analysis." Research in Phenomenology, 6 (1976), 77.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, Silence, 136.

<sup>33</sup> Woehling, 315-16. Woehling also cites 5.1672, 1716, 1725, 1729, 1732 and 1743 as examples where language in book five begins to unravel.



time, has entertained the reader with his bottomless bag of courtly love bromides and tropes, is left speechless. When Pandarus says of Criseyde's infidelity, "I kan namoore seye" (5.1743), the poem's dialogue is brought to a final silence, and brings to mind an inexpressibility used by Fortunatus: *Materia vincor [sic] et quia lingua minor* ("The matter conquers, and my tongue threatens silence.")<sup>34</sup>

Watts explains that "the greater the accumulation of words that cannot say, the more overpowering the silence of a reality beyond language" (28), but in the case of Pandarus, the greater the accumulation of words in the past that *have* been able to say, foiled by an inexpressibility, the greater the amplification of silence. In a way, Susan Sontag (1966), who reminds us that "in order to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other zones of the world as full," would perhaps liken the effect of Pandarus's verbal bankruptcy in book five to that of "Harpo Marx's muteness," the effect of which is derived "from his being surrounded by manic talkers" (10-11). Piero Boitani also ascribes the impact of Pandarus's silence to a comparison with his earlier achievements, and says that

when the factual confirmation arrives that Criseyde has betrayed Troilus for Diomedes, it is one of the saddest moments in the book, because Pandarus, for the first time, does not know what to say to Troilus (5.1723-25). When he opens his mouth, it is only to condemn his niece; then, "I kan namoore seye" (5.1743). And with Pandarus's silence the comedy is really finished: from the end of the

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<sup>34</sup> as cited in Curtius, 83.

story, which, as he himself says, is "every tales strengthe" [2.260], Pandarus is absent.<sup>35</sup>

Because until this time "the manipulation of love" has been "predicated on the manipulation of language" (Woehling, 13), Pandarus's silence marks the end, once and for all, of Troilus and Criseyde's relationship. As language falls away, so too does love -- or, it should be qualified, worldly love, for such is a distinction that is not made clear in the text.<sup>36</sup> In much the same way that the flashy rhetoric of the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* is stripped away, layer by layer, until he is forced to exclaim, simply, that "She ys ded!" (1309), the effect of the ensuing silence is one which, in a word, needs to be felt (rather than *read*) to be experienced. Where one might expect a need for words to proliferate, the silence, ironically, really leaves little to be desired.

The silence in *Troilus's* dialogue ultimately underscores the poem's theme of mutability, but not without first arousing our emotions *via* "our own information-processing performance," as opposed to "vicarious emotions aroused by the experience of

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<sup>35</sup> Piero Boitani, English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (N.Y.: Cambridge UP, 1982), 217.

<sup>36</sup> q.v. 1.976-80:

For this have I herd seyde of wyse lered,  
Was nevere man or womman yet bigete  
That was unapt to suffren loves hete,  
Celestial, or elles love of kynde;  
Forthy som grace I hope in hire to fynde.

the characters."<sup>37</sup> It is self-evident that silence can be an "active human performance," but that it certainly "cannot be an act of unmitigated autonomy". All the same, silence can be a "verbal yielding which binds and joins."<sup>38</sup> Silence in literature naturally gives rise to a "sensory or conceptual gap between the artist and his audience" that "constitutes grounds for "ascetic affirmation" (Sontag, 8): in order for sense to be made in the *presence* of *absence*, an earnest, almost deliberate effort on the part of the reader to empathise with the characters is necessary. Only when this is accomplished can the gap left by silence be "filled," and the line of communication between writer and reader be rendered more whole and intact. The experience hence becomes for the reader more of a *personal*, learning one, and it successfully leaves on the reader the desired impression that, in some instances, "less" is evidently "more".

The failure of Pandarus to express himself, furthermore, sets the scene for the epilogue, where the narrator undergoes a troubling -- and troubled -- set of transformations.<sup>39</sup> Pandarus's breakdown in expression corresponds to the narrator's similar ineptitude as exemplified in the poem's last fourteen stanzas. Both the dialogue

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<sup>37</sup> Leona Toker, Eloquent Reticence (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Discourse, Silence, and Tradition." Review of Metaphysics, 29 (1976): 437.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Sontag explains that silence can be produced through "utter self-negation (as art)" or, as is the case with the bumbled epilogue, through "a form that is heroically, ingeniously inconsistent." (Sontag, 11-12).

and Troilus's life are quelled with one line each ("Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille", 5.1806), and the silence produced reminds the reader of how quickly and radically things can change -- and how cruelly unreliable our fickle world is.<sup>40</sup>

Language, as a part of our unreliable world, is a slippery communicative surface, one critic writes: poems are "frail, susceptible documents" -- not only because words are "unreliable conveyors of meaning,"<sup>41</sup> but because they are products of erring humans who, incidentally, created and perpetuate the frailty and unreliability of the world. The narrator fails in his use of language which is, in itself, flawed as a medium of expression; both speaker and speech reflect that larger focus of *Troilus and Criseyde*, namely the "false worldes brotelnesse" (5.1832).

What becomes clear as one examines the language of *Troilus* is that its recurring and various strains of inexpressibility are indicative of a larger lesson learned by the narrator -- and therefore also by the reader -- in the course of the poem. The poem's various forms of inexpressibility, contrived and otherwise, are effectual in delineating its larger theme of mutability; in keeping an eye to things more permanent, inexpressibility reveals an apparent desire to expose carnal love's baseness in comparison to divine love.

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<sup>40</sup> For more recent discussions of the language in the epilogue, see Gerald Morgan, "The Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Modern Language Review*, 77 (1982), 257-71; James Dean, "Chaucer's *Troilus*, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, and the Poetics of Closure." *Philological Quarterly*, 64 (1985), 187-98; and Murray Evans, "'Making Strange': The Narrator (?), the Ending (?), and Chaucer's *Troilus*." *Neophilologisches Mitteilungen*, 87 (1986), 218-28.

<sup>41</sup> Bonnie Wheeler, "Dante, Chaucer, and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Philological Quarterly*, 61 (1982), 105-8.

## 2.1 Silence in *Troilus*: its Sources and Ramifications

Amongst the "more characteristic inexpressibilities" of affected modesty<sup>42</sup> in the poem are two types that "maintain purity and seriousness," and both issue from the emotional extremes of Troilus's love for Criseyde. In saying that of their "delit or joies on the leeste/ Were impossible to [*his*] wit to seye" (3.1310-11), *Troilus's* narrator helps confirm Antigone's generality that "alle the folk that han or ben on lyve/ Ne konne well the blisse of love discryve" (2.888-89), but their happiness is driven fully into the realm of "pure" inexpressibility later in the same book, when it is said that their love

. . . is no litel thyng of for to seye;  
This passeth *every wit* for to devyse;  
For ech of hem gan otheres lust obeye.  
Felicite, which that thise clerkes wise  
Comenden so, ne may nought here suffise;  
This joie may nought writen be with inke;  
This passeth al that herte may bythynke.  
(3.1685-94; italics added)

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<sup>42</sup> Watts, 29. Watts notes that Chaucerian inexpressibilities are usually "devious," as they tend to involve a "humorous sliding . . . into modesty." q.v., the words written into the mouth of *The Knight's Tale* narrator, 1459-61.

For a more in-depth discussion of Chaucer's use of affected modesty, see Alice Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975), pp. 14-30, 81-96, 116-31, and 132-55.

What had been inexpressible for the narrator is shown to be inexpressible for humanity and language in general, and the ensuing silence is one which makes the experience universal, rather than merely one of the narrator's, Troilus's, or Criseyde's. The silence invites those "that felyng han in loves art" (3.1333) to *feel* with the characters -- an empathy intended to fill the space left gaping by the inadequacy of language. Ironically, as paradoxical as the conception of inexpressibility itself is (words are used to say that "words cannot say"), equally so is the *effect* of it here: the rift between language and silence -- or what Watts calls the separation between "word and non-word" (29) -- brings into being a communion between character and audience. Disjunction gives rise to unity, and inexpressibility thereby makes the silence of the poem more effective than perhaps anything to which words could aspire.<sup>43</sup> Like exercises in the *via negativa*, silence -- an experience popularly regarded as "empty" -- often fills us with a greater understanding than words could offer. Indeed, it is quite viable in this case to argue that "*nothing* is lost if one does not seek to say the unsayable," for "that which cannot be spoken is -- unspeakably -- *contained* in that which is said!"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The idea of silence creating a communion between writer and reader brings to mind Dauenhauer's earlier assertion that silence can be a "verbal yielding which binds and joins." ("Discourse, Silence, and Tradition." *Review of Metaphysics*, 29 (1976), 437.)

<sup>44</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Letter to Paul Engelmann," April 9, 1917; as cited in Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), 3.

On the general effect and literary function of inexpressibility, Ann Chalmers Watts explains that it "divides what would be continuous" by "explicitly call[ing] into being," or calling attention to, "the gap between language and all that is not language, whatever that may be." (27) In literature, this "gap" can be represented by the silence felt by character and audience alike when words fail, and it dramatically shears the world of experience into two portions -- that which one can "devyse," and that which one cannot. In yet another inexpressibility from the consummation scene of book three -- one that is somewhat more characteristic of the affected modesty found throughout the Chaucerian *corpus* -- that of which "no tongue can tell" assumes a highly spiritual flavour, and ultimately prompts a criticism of Troilus's obsession with Criseyde. In an intrusion, the narrator exclaims,

Away, thow foule daunger and thow feere,  
And lat hem in this hevne blisse dwelle,  
That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle!  
(3.1321-23)

Recalling the earlier appraisal of their love as higher than the "felicite" of which clerks speak (3.1691-92), the fact that their inexpressible love is equated with the joy of heaven becomes increasingly pivotal. Joseph J. Mogan, Jr., in Chaucer and the Theme of Mutability, considers this incidence of inexpressibility an allusion to Second Corinthians,<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Of St. Paul in Corinthians II, 12:2-4 of the Douay-Rheims Version, it is said that "he was caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted to a man to utter." C.f., *House of Fame*, 980-82.

but one acquainted with the *Divine Comedy* will find borrowings from Dante equally, if not more so, plausible.<sup>46</sup> In attempting to describe his vision of the Eternal Light -- which causes his soul, comparatively, to "dilate beyond her proper self" -- Dante finds that his tongue could utter no more than that of "the babe's/ That yet is moistened at his mother's breast."<sup>47</sup> Should one consider this a chance similarity in narrator rhetoric, the parallel between Troilus's earthly joy and Dante's divine joy is further solidified through a consideration of how Troilus's "O Love, O Charite!" speech alludes to St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary.<sup>48</sup> Ellis (1988) claims that in so doing, Chaucer the poet is using "the *Commedia* in a manner Dante did not intend, to point out the dangers and impropriety of its use . . . to describe both human and divine love." (289) Such are what Diomedé himself would call words with "two visages" (5.899), and the double meaning of these passages alone (as one might expect from a poem that calls for the assistance of the two-

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<sup>46</sup> In her essay on language in *Pearl*, Anne Howland Schotter (1984) says that the *Pearl* poet "makes the inadequacy of *language* in conveying the Divine an implicit theme," and that while he was likely aware of such mystical works as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it is also likely palpable that he knew of the *Divine Comedy*. (23, 28) Obviously, a large stretch of imagination is not required in saying the same of Chaucer.

<sup>47</sup> *Paradiso*, 33.87-88, 100-02. This and all subsequent references to the *Commedia* are from the Rev. Henry G. Cary translation (N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., Publishers, 1897), and will be cited within the main body of the text.

One interested in Dante's use of inexpressibility in the *Divina Commedia* should consult Stephen Bemrose, "'Una Favilla Sol Della Tua Gloria': Dante Expresses the Inexpressible." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 27.2 (1991), 126-137.

<sup>48</sup> Compare *Troilus III*, 1261-63 ("Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges,/ Whoso wol grace and list the nought honouren,/ Lo, his desir wol fle withouten wynges") with *Paradiso* 33.14-17: "So mighty art thou, lady, and so great,/ That he, who grace desireth, and comes not/ To thee for aidance, fain would have desire/ Fly without wings."



faced Janus (2.77)) attests to the slipperiness of language -- a fallibility that, understandably, drives Dante to cry out "O speech! How feeble and how faint art thou. . ." (*Paradiso*, 33.112-13).

The saints of Dante's Paradise 'kan telle' the beauty of heaven, for they have experienced it; the lustful, however, as Woehling (1991) would say, "have not experienced real love," and are therefore incapable of doing it true justice with their worldly tongues (117). Dante and Chaucer (*via* his narrator) use what are essentially the same words to say that "words cannot say," and their use of inexpressibility to juxtapose the earthly and the divine -- or that which is mutable and that which is immutable -- indeed *begs* a comparison. Criseyde may have initially been mistaken by Troilus for a goddess (1.425-26) and she may have "forsook [Troilus] ere she deyde" (1.56), but the faithfulness of the Virgin Mary, to whom the poem's closing prayer in part alludes, remains forever intact; the "worldly vanyte" of Troilus's passions is such a thing that "passeth soone as floures faire" (5.1837, 1841), and falls well below the mark of "thilke God that after his image" we are all made (5.1839); Troilus rises through the heavens to hear the "hevenyssh melodie" (5.1813), a divine art whose perfection stands in direct and stark contrast to the infamous "mental breakdown in poetry"<sup>49</sup> in which his ascension is related. Inexpressibility makes evident the division between that which *would* be continuous, were it not for human

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<sup>49</sup> E. Talbot Donaldson makes this comment with regards to the narrator's puzzlingly bumbled epilogue; *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), 91.

failings -- the division which helped lead to our alienation from what the narrator calls our original, heavenly home (5.1837). Language in *Troilus* not only underscores the division between the earthly and the divine but also makes apparent, by virtue of comparison, the fallibility of the former -- we certainly *can* learn from the staggeringly high price that Troilus eventually pays in assuming that "ther was non other grace" but that bestowed by Criseyde (4.952).<sup>50</sup> It indeed becomes increasingly evident, Gerald Morgan (1982) notes, that the narrator wishes to convey

his tragic awareness of the gulf that separates human love from the divine, and also his belief in the true bond of love that unites them. It is not simply that human loves are false . . . [but] it is that the limited and imperfect love of man receives its true value only when united to its divine source. (260)

Similarly, Dante says that great poetry demands "men who exceed in genius and knowledge."<sup>51</sup> In accordance with Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and Searle's "Principle of Expressibility,"<sup>52</sup> then, understanding is a prerequisite of expression, and it is therefore not

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<sup>50</sup> Consider Wasserman's (1989) intriguing idea that Troilus's pain stems in part from his denial of mutability and that things "of this world" necessarily change: his problem "is that he cannot reconcile the visage of the goddess with the visage of the woman who betrays him later in the tale" (211); Woehling (1991), similarly, asserts that "part of Troilus's tragedy is his refusal to change" when everything else does. (290)

<sup>51</sup> Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. A. G. Ferrers Howell, trans. (London: Rebel Press, 1973), 49.

<sup>52</sup> Searle's principle of expressibility, in its simplified version, can be stated thus: "Whatever can be meant can be said exactly." For further discussion, see Karl Hackstette, "On Searle's Principle of Expressibility." *Studies in Language*, 6 (1982), 425, and

surprising that the Christian Dante cannot relate his heavenly vision, nor that the pre-Christian (and presumably virginal) Troilus cannot adequately speak of his heaven-like experience. Both Dante and Troilus are members of a fallen race who are, by definition, unable to understand that which they consider "divine," because being not of this world and beyond comprehension, "the heavenly communion is [also] beyond language,"<sup>53</sup> and "the ineffable is not in the 'world,' not knowable, not a matter of 'facts in logical space'."<sup>54</sup>

In vernacular poetry, silence in response to the divine had already been well exemplified in the words of the dreamer in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* when he says that

Ne mæg þær ænig	unforht wesan
for þam worde	þe se Wealdend cwyð:
frineð he for þære mænige	hwær se man sie,
se ðe for Dryhtnes naman	deaðes wolde
bitres onbyrgan,	swa he ær on ðam beame dyde.

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Timothy Binkley, "The Principle of Expressibility." Philological and Phenomenological Research, 39 (1979), 307.

<sup>53</sup> Marcia L. Colish, The Mirror of Language (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968), 49.

<sup>54</sup> Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1-1.3. References to Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal work are from the D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness translation (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), and will be cited in the text whenever possible.

Wittgenstein is here asserting the premise that *that which cannot be expressed is not in/of the world*, and that *that which is not in/of the world cannot be expressed*; this inevitably gives rise to the conclusion, by transference, that *anything that is in the world can be expressed*: language, as a world-based system of expression, necessarily has world-based limitations, and these linguistic limitations, in turn, affect our perception of the world in a restricting manner. See n.12 above on John Searle's similar assertion that "Whatever can be meant can be said," and consider Timothy Walsh's dissertation (1993) in which he explores the "chicken-and-egg" dilemma of conscious thought and language. (64, ff)

Ac hie þonne forhtiað            ond fea þencap  
hwæt hie to Criste    cweðan onginnen. (110-16)

In comparison -- quite comically -- Troilus is also silenced into a mystical trance before his "goddess" and, in theory, can therefore be placed in a "silence before God" tradition. Answering the question posed in the last line of the second book ("O myghty God, what shal he seye?"), Troilus is speechless before Criseyde, the figure of his courtly love "religion" from whom he seeks "grace". When Criseyde asks for Troilus's support, Woehling (1991) points out, "he cannot say a single word"<sup>55</sup>; "in this most glorious of love poems," paradoxically, "the lover is at a complete loss for words": he cannot even "produce his carefully rehearsed speech." (153)<sup>56</sup> The parodic parallels suggest that the silence marks a point where Troilus is at the level of a St. Ambrose, whose radical choice to read silently, as St. Augustine understood it, "was nothing else than listening to the instruction of the inner teacher," Christ (Mazzeo, 22).<sup>57</sup> "There is no question," continues

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<sup>55</sup> Worthwhile here is a comparison to the Scottish visionary poet Edwin Muir, where although in his poetry he "has everything to say," he, paradoxically, "discovers his inability to say anything. For as he approaches, in moments of contemplation, the world of 'silent immortality,' so he approaches the borderline of the unsayable." (Bouson (1982): 32.)

<sup>56</sup> Such is not merely the problem of a tongue-tied lover, however -- humanity shares in Troilus's problem because "Troilus's attempt to recall his speech is somewhat similar to the problem of history. When a source fails in recording an event, when the memory of an *auctour* fails, something of history fails." (Woehling (1991): 153)

<sup>57</sup> The scene where Augustine finds St. Ambrose reading silently is in the Confessions, VI, 3. St. John of the Cross, similarly, asserts that God communicates

Mazzeo in Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies, that for St. Augustine, "the thinker is always impelled up," and that "the nature of St. Augustine's thought led him to look more and more to the intelligible, the eternal, and the 'silent.'" (28) The inner voice to which Troilus listens is his sexual lust, and the parallels between Troilus's silence and the true silence of ineffability are not only comical but instructive in recognising the relative baseness of his -- and our -- worldly vanities.

Even in the end, when understanding is finally Troilus's as he ascends to the eighth sphere (5.1807-27), it is a scornful laugh rather than words which "describes" his experience, and it must be this way: having transcended that which is "of this world," he cannot recount his experience with a worldly, transient language. Doubtless, he now has the knowledge and experience needed to describe "the pleyn felicite/ That is in hevenc above" (5.1818-19), but his language itself -- significantly altered, presumably, so as to be free of the world's characteristic "brottelnesse" -- would be beyond earthly comprehension, and the mortal, earthly reader would yet be denied understanding. As Mary-Patrice Woehling says, Troilus at this point "has gone beyond rhetoric," or the mere ornamentation of language (321); like Dante, Troilus ascends to greater heights, having left behind his pseudo-Virgil figure, the Pandarus whose language-games had led him so

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Himself to the soul "secretly and in silence". (*Living Flame*, III, §46; in Ogilvie-Thomson, 80.)

Consider also Pulsiano's (1989) understanding of Augustinian philosophy to say that "if the natural world were to fall silent, and if man should also fall silent, he would hear everything in the created universe proclaim that God is Lord and Creator. The universe becomes a multitude of signs, all proclaiming God's divinity." (160-61)

far astray, and in the end he scornfully "dampned al oure werk" (5.1823). The narrator lets it go at that, and leaves a silence that the reader must interpret personally -- a silence which, like that issuing from the inexpressibility of Troilus and Criseyde's bliss, perhaps performs more of a function than could words, and in the process the silence *does*, paradoxically, "say" something.

The counterpole of Troilus's happiness can also be interpreted in eschatological terms, but rather than emphasize the severance between the human and the divine, the inexpression of Troilus's pain ultimately points to the true purpose of language: to serve as a means of consolation and enlightenment by which the divine and the mortal may be bridged. Of Troilus's grief at his impending separation from Criseyde, the narrator says

For mannes hed ymagynen ne kan,  
N'entendement considere, ne tonge telle  
The cruele peynes of this sorwful man,  
That passen every torment down in helle.  
(4.1695-98)

Again, on the general utility of language in expressing pain, one will find comparisons with the *Divine Comedy* illuminating. In the *Inferno*, language itself is typically the epitome of "non-word," for speech there is in the form of a roaring chorus of "outcries of woe" and "accents of anger" (3.24-25); the clerics, as they confront each other on their rounds of the circle, voice their mutual reproach not with words, but with howling (7.43-46); the Minotaur is a dumb beast who, possessing no verbal outlet for his "rage distract," is

instead content to "gnaw itself" (12.15); and the suicides, metamorphosed as trees, speak in hisses which more resemble the sound of the wind than speech (13.40-44).<sup>58</sup> As Philip Pulsiano notes, hell is a proverbial "babelic pandemonium," and

when inhabitants of hell do speak, it is in a corrupted form of language which acts more as a mirror of their depraved moral conditions than as an avenue to truthful discourse. (165)

Such can be said of any language-employing creature -- as will be explained, shortly -- but language for the inhabitants of hell is especially ineffectual because they are beyond the redemptive qualities that "truthful discourse" can offer: despite Dante's assurance to various damned souls that they will enjoy earthly renown because they have appeared in his vision, their pain is not lessened, and in the face of despair, Troilus also finds language worthless. In book five, Troilus's language, like that of those in hell, has a distinct "babbling" quality, and as his verbalizations are intended largely for no one but himself,<sup>59</sup> they also serve no practical or redeeming purpose. For Troilus, language in the form of

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<sup>58</sup> One should note that at 4.1135-41, the narrator claims that Troilus and Criseyde's pain surpasses that of Myrrha, who is one so metamorphosed as a tree. See *Inferno*, 30.39. Note also other references to hell in book 4: Proserpine (4.473); Mynos (4.1188); Atropos (4.1208 and 1546); and the river Styx (4.1540).

See also Melvin Storm's "Troilus and Dante: The Infernal Centre" (*Yearbook of English Studies*, 22 (1992), 154-61), in which he says that in *TC*, Chaucer "evokes the geography and atmosphere of Dante's *Inferno*, while in Pandarus's actions he evokes Virgil's role as guide through hell."

<sup>59</sup> See *Troilus*, 5.606; 5.631-37; 5.668.

consolation is equally futile,<sup>60</sup> and even when speech in the form of Cassandra's interpretations promises enlightenment by drawing him to the threshold of truth, it remains nonetheless ineffectual.<sup>61</sup> So great is their pain, neither Troilus nor the inhabitants of Dante's hell can take comfort in the offerings of language. Words literally go "in one ear, and out the other" (*Troilus*, 4.434), and Pandarus draws special attention to this when he tells Troilus, "I have told the yore,/ That it is folye for to sorwen thus,/ And causeles, for which I kan namore." (5.324-26)

## 2.2 Language, Silence and Morality in *Troilus*

Relatively, the inhabitants of hell are to us what we are to the divine realm; in both cases, the use of inexpressibility simultaneously underscores the separations between heaven, earth and hell, and yet serves as a common thread through which their inhabitants are comparable. Divine creatures such as the *Pearl* Maiden or Dante's Beatrice are never susceptible to the pitfalls of inexpressibility,<sup>62</sup> humans are often plagued by it, and the

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<sup>60</sup> See *Troilus*, 1.571-74; 1.577-81; 4.248-50; 4.353-57; 4.428-34; 4.694-700.

<sup>61</sup> Although Cassandra is not in any emotional turmoil at the time, it is still interesting to note peripherally the ineffectuality of the written words of the "Siege of Thebes" in book 2: when Pandarus interrupts the ladies' meeting, the remainder of the story -- which has significant parallels with the siege and destruction of Troy -- remains unread. As Woehling points out, "the knowledge [for possibly saving Troy] is in the book -- i.e., the book "kan telle" (2.104) -- but Criseyde does not finish it." (84)

<sup>62</sup> q.v. Watts, 28.



inhabitants of hell, always. Inexpressibility, therefore, is not only a symptom of moral degradation, but a product of it; the more fallen the being, the more clouded his or her understanding, and therefore the more prone to error and inexpressibility is his or her language. It is finally reasonable to hypothesise, as Denis Donoghue (1977) does,

that there are experiences which lie so far beyond nature that words have never been found for them, and will never be found: they belong to the good angels. It is also reasonable to make the same assumption of experiences which lie beneath nature or deep in nature: their words belong to the fallen angels. (371)

Inexpressibility involving the characters themselves is most readily found in book four, when Troilus and Criseyde meet after hearing the news of her impending exchange for Antenor. The narrator there recounts that

. . . whan they gonnen first to mete,  
So gan the peyne hire hertes for to twiste  
That neyther of hem other myghte grete,  
But hem in armes toke, and after kiste.  
The lasse woful of hem bothe nyste  
Wher that he was, ne myghte o word out brynge,  
As I seyde erst, for wo and for sobbynge. (4.1128-34)

It is noteworthy that this scene follows Troilus's lengthy Boethian soliloquy (4.953-1085), for just as inexpressible emotions of heavenly heights and hellish depths

have been shown to stress the rift between the human and the divine, even the failure of language itself represents the downturn of Fortune and the transitory nature of life. In these terms, it is highly significant in the poem that

whan [Troilus] saugh that specheles she lay,  
With sorweful vois and herte of blisse al bare,  
He seyde how she was fro this world yfare. (4.1167-69)

and that her restoration of speech prevents his suicide (4.1233-35). Coinciding in the poem with Troilus's death and the destruction of Troy is the narrator's closing of his "litel bok" (5.1786), and his full realisation of poetry's mutability is thereby manifested in *actions* rather than in more words. Language -- either verbal or written -- fails the characters and narrator alike, and though they use it in the attempt to derive what they consider some good -- the poem itself, or the union of Troilus and Criseyde -- it is ultimately for naught, for they have not the art of harnessing that which is so untrustworthy.<sup>63</sup> An obvious and quite possibly deliberate connection has been made in

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<sup>63</sup> c.f. Dante, Paradiso 13.116-18:

Much more than vainly doth he loose from shore  
Since he returns not such as he set forth,  
Who fishes for the truth and wanteth skill....

*Troilus* between the mutability of language and the mutability of worldly life, for both are transitory and unreliable, and both are therefore worthy of renouncement.<sup>64</sup>

The fact that Criseyde has fallen into a swoon because of her anguish (4.1151-55) does not, however, change what appears to be an ongoing correlation between emotional turmoil and the failure of language, which is especially intriguing when one considers Boethius's contemplation of those things that contributed to his disconsolate state:

I accorde me gretly to Plato, for thou recordist and remembrist me  
thise thinges yet the seconde tyme; that is to seye, first whan I loste  
my memorie be the contagious junccioun of the body with the  
soule, and eftsones aftirward, whan Y lost it confounded by the  
charge and be the burdene of my sorwe.

(*Boece*, book 3, *met.* 11, *pro.* 12, 1-8)

These contentions are consequential in terms of inexpressibility in *Troilus and Criseyde*. If great sorrow leads to a loss in one's memory of those things which sustain faith, reason, and all such effects that act as an anchor in a painfully unreliable world, it necessarily follows that a loss of those memories integral to understanding -- or that which, as discussed above, is a prerequisite of speech -- will necessarily leave one in a tangle of inexpressibility. It is this very corporeality that deprives Dante of a thorough

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<sup>64</sup> This idea is especially interesting when one considers how Chaucer, in effect, renounced the world by rejecting a great portion of his *corpus* in his "Retractions"; he did so, he says, so that he "may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved." (X.1091)

recollection of his vision: his readers, anticipating a glimpse of the Great Mystery through his eyes, find themselves disappointed when he curtly cuts his narration away with the claim that "what [he] saw,/ Was not for words to speak, nor memory's self/ To stand against such outrage on her skill." (*Paradiso*, 33.52-54) Such inherently human limitations at once caused our earthly home to become the sadly deficient *speculum* it is of our original, heavenly home and also drove us to forget memories of our origins -- memories which would sustain our love for something more substantial than riches, power, or, as is the case in *Troilus*, relationships and civilizations that are ultimately doomed to failure. A separation from our divine beginnings implies a separation from the complete enlightenment and expressibility it obtains; failure echoes failure, and it is illustrated once more that linguistic breakdown, theoretically, mirrors a moral degradation of which we have all been dispensed some measure.

As noted, one's language theoretically indicates the extent and gravity of one's ties to the world. Inexpressibility often indicates a lack of understanding, which can be wrought by a mind too engrossed in the corporeal to let reason take its natural course: mortals, by virtue of their very corporeality, are *limited* beings, and this will naturally reflect itself in their speech acts. What is ironic is that it is this very corporeality that makes speech a necessity, as Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* explains:

... we are of the opinion that no one has knowledge of another by means of his own actions or passions as a brute beast; nor does it happen that one man can enter into the mind of another by spiritual

insight, like an angel, because the human spirit is hindered by the grossness and opacity of its mortal body. It was therefore necessary that the human race should have some *rational* and *sensible* sign for the inter-communication of its thoughts. . . (I, iii)<sup>65</sup>

In a "Former Age" of human history, Chaucer says, humans were as close to that of which Dante speaks as they ever were, for back then "hir hertes were al oon withoute galles," and "Everich of hem," consequently, "hem his feith to other kepte" (47-48). Chaucer blames the disruption of this harmony on those men who "first dide hir swety bysinesse/ To grobbe up metal, lurkinge in derknesse,/ And in the riveres first gemmes soghte" -- a literal love for the world from which "sprong up al the cursednesse/ Of covetyse, that first our sorwe broghte." (28-32) In *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, comparatively, Purdon (1989) claims that "Chaucer is anything but vague when he expresses his concern over the mutable condition of language." (146) Chaucer compares the contemporary, fourteenth-century use of language to that of another Golden Age, when there was no divergence between sign and signified; in his time, however, Chaucer sadly notes that human words, like the world itself, have become "fals and deceivable." (3) In fact, as Purdon writes of Chaucer's craft in that poem,

Chaucer's repetition of the line, "That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse," identifies the cause of the present social disorder in a

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<sup>65</sup> For more on the necessity of language in corporeal beings, one might consult Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3 (Providence), Chapter 154, §7.

lack of moral certitude and fortitude. However, it also implies that the world's "permutacioun/ Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse" (19-20) has come about through the abuse and mutability of language. (147)<sup>66</sup>

Great insight is unnecessary to recognizing the implied vicious circle of tainted language and moral corruption giving rise to one another. While *Troilus and Criseyde* does not wear the theme of language on its sleeve in any obvious manner, it is profitable to note Eugene Vance's (1978-79) assertion that

while other poets of Troy's legend chose to glut us with the splendor of heroic swords and cut arteries, Chaucer [in *Troilus and Criseyde*] remains centered upon language as a privileged field of aggression; and so he probes that more quiet calamity that begins in the dislocation of signs in the desiring psyche, where promises, meanings, values, and truth are quite simply forgotten. (329)

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<sup>66</sup> In terms of the medieval concern for language in relation to holiness, consider also *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (B-Text), I, 88-91:

Who is trewe of his tonge and telleth noon oother,  
And dooth the werkes therwith and wilneth no man ille,  
He is a god by the Gospel, agrounde and olofte,  
And ylik to Oure Lord, by Seint Lukes wordes.

as well as Richard Rolle in *The Commandment*:

"For[þi] al þat wil loue God perfitly, ham behoueth nat alonly flee al dedly synnes, bot also, as myche as þay may, al venyal synes, in þoght, in word and dede, and namely [to] be of litel speche. And þat silence be in occupacioun of good thoghtes, hit helpeth gretly to Goddis love . . . ." (11-15; Ogilvie-Thomson, 34)

Vance is speaking here of the various lies and deceits used by Pandarus (and Troilus) to encourage Criseyde to cast off her widow's weeds, the cunning words that Diomedes uses to win Criseyde, and finally Criseyde's breaking of her promise of fidelity -- and always looming in the background is the destruction of Troy itself, for which King Laomedon's broken promise, the ramblings of the Trojan parliament and the cunning speech of Synon can all take partial responsibility.<sup>67</sup> Chaucer's visions of an earlier, linguistic propriety cannot be brought to bear on any specific case of expressibility in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but they affirm a currency in the Chaucerian *corpus* of acknowledging the perils of fallible language and, together with such considerations of language in *Troilus*, not only further justify a study such as that undertaken here,<sup>68</sup> but certainly move one to elevate the prestige of silence as that of language diminishes.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The wrath of both Apollo and Neptune "wol brynge [Troy] to confusioun" because King Laomedon refused to pay them for building the city walls (4.120-126); it is out of the "noyse of peple" (4.83) in the Trojan parliament that the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor -- who will pilfer the safeguarding Palladion -- is chartered; and, though it is not mentioned in *Troilus* itself, it is Synon's speech that convinces the Trojans to open their gates to the Greeks' wooden horse (q.v., *House of Fame*, 151-56; *Legend of Good Women*, 930-33; *The Squire's Tale* (V. 209-10); and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (VIII. 3228-29)).

<sup>68</sup> In addition, R.A. Shoaf in *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, Inc. 1983) discusses how in *The Shipman's Tale*, "Word and thing (*vox et res*) are obviously disjunct." (13-14) Piero Boitani (1983) asserts that one of the fundamental themes of the *House of Fame* is "the relationship between reality, truth and words . . . . Reality, now concrete only insofar as it is spoken, is truth no more. Transformed into oral narrative, it is the daughter of Chance. Such a "modern" image of literature is not to be found elsewhere in the English and European fourteenth

Because humans, by definition, are limited beings incapable of transcendental communication, external signs are required to converse; these signs, as might be expected, are also tainted by the ramifications of human mutability. In much the same way that *The Former Age* indicts human covetousness as the root of our present discord, St. Augustine points to human failing as the ultimate cause of miscommunication and, by the same token, inexpressibility:

It has been found impossible . . . to make those signs [i.e., words] common to all nations owing to the sin of discord among men, which springs from every man trying to snatch the chief place for himself . . . the ungodly men concerned [in the building of the Tower of Babel] justly earned the punishment of having not their minds only, but their tongues besides, thrown into confusion and discordance.<sup>70</sup>

Robert Payne (1978) argues that if language is really to "have any reasonable meaning at all, it must depend on the adjustment of two different hierarchical orders, idea and language, so that they correspond precisely." (273) How can this be achieved,

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century." (211) Woehling (1991) also makes the commonsense statement that the fact that "language is a major concern of Chaucer is obvious," and that "he is concerned with his poetics as he is with history because it is through his poetics that [*Troilus*] lives." (331)

<sup>69</sup> q.v. Sontag, 21.

<sup>70</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II, 4; references to Augustine will be from *The Confessions, The City of God, On Christian Doctrine* (Toronto: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. (Great Books of the Western World Series), 1952), and will be cited in the text wherever possible.



however, if both tongue and mind have been "thrown into confusion and discordance" -- if, indeed, the symbiotic relationship between understanding and expressibility has been assailed on both sides? This, in itself, is something of which few can say anything, and this fact, in itself, perhaps "says" much about saying *nothing*.

A desire to transcend the issue of language and its limits is not only a want for the silence that such would imply, but it is tantamount to a desire to transcend the "brottelnesse" of this world and return to simpler beginnings. Susan Sontag (1966) claims that "behind the appeals for silence lies a wish for a perceptual clean slate," or a "total liberation" in which there is a separation of "the artist from himself, of art from the particular artwork, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations." (17-18)<sup>71</sup>

Inescapable limitations still abound, however. Innumerable writers have vainly looked to literature as a means of erecting a "moment's monument," and to, in effect, counter the mutable nature of life. As shown by the works of Chaucer themselves, however, language recorded as the written word is very much susceptible to error and the inconstant tastes of humans,<sup>72</sup> and it becomes more and more clear that "no man" may, in

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<sup>71</sup> Considering the weight that tradition had placed on the shoulders of poets, it certainly *is* a great "wonderynge," as Payne (1978) notes, that out of the "long historical tangle of persuasion and persiflage and ethos and equivocation and 'sentence and solas,'" that Chaucer was able not only to express himself, but to make great poetry (287).

<sup>72</sup> One can recall Chaucer's own poem "Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn" for his acknowledgment of scribal error. For a discussion of the ramifications of scribal tampering in at least one Chaucerian manuscript, see C. David Benson and David Rollman, "Wynkyn de Worde and the Ending of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." Modern

any way, "fordon the lawe of kynde" (1.238) -- least of all *via* a mutable medium. The art of *Troilus*, like that of any work of literature, does not so much *imitate* life as proclaim itself a *part* of life, because just like life itself, "the textual condition's only immutable law is the law of change,"<sup>73</sup> and this is something of which the narrator has all along been aware. He not only employs that choice rhetorical device of appealing to the "authority" of the audience but also divulges his own recognition of language's transitory nature when he says:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge  
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
That hadde pris now wonder nyce and straunge  
Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,  
And spedde as wel in love as men now do. . .  
(2.22-26)

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Philology, 78 (1980-81), 275-79. William Kamowski's "A Suggestion for Emending the Epilogue of *Troilus and Criseyde*" (Chaucer Review, 21 (1987), 405-18) could also be construed as a modern attempt at "scribal tampering".

<sup>73</sup> Jerome J. McGann, The Textual Condition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991), 9.

Compare with how Fortune, according to Lady Philosophy, would defend her hand in mutability:

". . . schal it bynde me to ben stedfast, syn that stidfastnesse is uncouth to my maneris? Swiche is my strengthe, and this pley I pleye continuely." (*Boece*, II, *pro.* 2, 48-51)

Life in our world constantly mutates and, as a result, texts change, language changes, and interpretations change. James Dean (1985) says that in the end, the narrator "rejects his poetry" because of "its complicity with the world and its falseness -- a world which can mutate in customs and taste such that it might no longer value [*Troilus and Criseyde*] at a later time". (181) Both human life and human words are subject to the pitfalls of mutability, and appear to be unchangeably so; it only makes sense, then, to say that the world and language share the same limits -- Wittgenstein even asserts that they *determine* each other's limits (*Tractatus*, 5.6-5.61).<sup>74</sup> A rejection of the false world "that may not last" (*Troilus*, 5.1824) would naturally imply a rejection of its language systems, but recalling Dante's rationalisation for language, whether it would be possible -- or even desirable -- to do so is highly questionable.

Language, like all else in the world, has a double "function," *for want of a better word*. Like words that have "two visages" (5.899), language itself can have a double purpose; it can be corrupted and used in a morally base manner, or otherwise:

In language. . . there is for Chaucer hope for redemption, much as there was for Dante hope for redemption in prayer. The Word redeems man's fallen nature and hence his fallen words. Language -- as the medium between abstract and concrete, between idea and object, and even between sacred and secular -- holds a

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<sup>74</sup> see n.54 above.

privileged place. It remains the closest thing to a transcendental that man has of his own making.<sup>75</sup>

Rather than claim that language is wholly flawed and that communication is therefore futile, it is perhaps more germane to say that of any subject *homo loquens* can "somewhat seye" (1.672), though the quality of expressibility may often be conspicuously wanting.

As with Dante or even with the disconsolate father of *Pearl*, however, the small, fragmentary measures of truth that have been revealed to them and retained in their memory do not fail to appease them; expression need not be contingent upon some sort of totality or completeness -- indeed, such concepts, in their truest senses, are really incongruous to our fragmented world.<sup>76</sup> Instead, inexpressibility can be considered another means of expression: to say "God is ineffable" is to say something,<sup>77</sup> just as to say "I cannot say what this means to me" is often to express a fitting acknowledgement of thanks. "To claim to be able to say everything is a version of the sin of pride," contends

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<sup>75</sup> Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney, in the introduction to chapter 2 of Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse UP), 142.

<sup>76</sup> Alluding once again to the poetry and craft of Edwin Muir, Bouson (1982) says that "Although he must 'stop at the colon: / And set a silence after to speak the word' which he seeks and cannot find," he nonetheless "communicates a profound truth which exists beyond systems and beyond the words of poetry. As he creates his song out of his deep spiritual awareness, commemorating his momentary glimpses of a transmuted, perfected world, he communicates, however imperfectly, a knowledge that transcends and fulfills us." (35)

<sup>77</sup> q.v. William P. Alston's "Ineffability" (in John Donnelly, comp. Logical Analysis and Contemporary Theism. N.Y.: Fordham UP. 1972) for an absorbing debate on the issue of "God is ineffable" as a self-defeating assertion.

Watson (1982), and once one eats of that poetic apple, it is unclear how innocence can be recovered, save for a sort of "ritual humiliation" (491), such as the affected modesty *topoi* already discussed above. Writers fall back on such literary conventions when needs be, just as those in trying times look to religious conventions to sustain some measure of comfort and control. While it is understandable that the poet thwarted by inexpressibility often feels that s/he "has made a raid on the inarticulate and returned with nothing to show for [the] labor" (Donoghue (1977): 372), the silence that follows one's "I cannot say" may, innocuously and simply enough, "indicate that language has been stymied," and that the silence thereafter points the reader "past itself to another aspect of experience" (Kawin (1984): 197). The silence that naturally follows language's failure, as has been illustrated above, often "says" more than words ever could have; lack of expression is often an act of expression in itself, and in select circumstances, it is perhaps the most *apropos* means of expression:

To label something ineffable in an unqualified way is to shirk the job of making explicit the ways in which it *can* be talked about; just as unqualifiedly to label an expression (which is actually used) 'meaningless' is to shirk the job of making explicit the sort of meaning it *does* have in these uses. There may be something in the world which can't be talked about in any way, but if so we can only signalize the fact by leaving it unrecorded. (Alston (1972): 92)

If something is truly ineffable and inexpressible, then, silence is not only *inevitable*, but it is perhaps most *illustrative*. Whereas justified modesty points us toward something that somehow eludes language, affected modesty is merely an imitation; in the latter instance, the resulting silence is a mere contrived gimmick set up to make a good impression. The effect ultimately rings hollow, though its sugarcoating of rhetoric may be stingingly sweet. Like the world that produced it, however, it offers little satisfaction in comparison to that which ultimately creates the silence; that has been what this thesis -- perhaps following in the footsteps of Chaucer's "litel bok" in the process -- has been pointing towards from the very start.

## Conclusion

Thomas E. Ryan, in Hölderlin's Silence, suggests that the western world's suspicion of silence in relation to language is perhaps due in part to Christian philosophy, whose Johannine axiom of "In the beginning was the Word," for example, "asserts itself with near inevitability in the endeavors of Western man" and that we therefore

tend to conceive of our existential roots as somehow linguistic in nature; we seem to feel that we *are* only insofar as we *speak*. Hence the Western mind's traditional suspicion of any tendency, such as that of mysticism, to suggest the validity and even superiority of a silent, or at least non-verbal response to the world.  
(1)

People of such a mindset might belong to what George Watson terms the "Cult of the Explicit," for they believe that "knowledge and speech are coextensive" (484): they would hold, for example, that a pupil, in answering a teacher's queries with silence, necessarily betrays his or her ignorance. Still other people would suggest that our disregard for silence is capitalist-based, and that because silence "stands outside the world of profit and utility" and "cannot be exploited for profit," it is usually "regarded as valueless" (Picard (1952), 18). Silence, as an absence of sound, need not be a vacuous, meaningless phenomenon, however; quite the contrary. Considering that language is a world-based system and that the world itself is highly fragmented and mutable,

expressibility is something for which there will always be something wanting. Silence is an emptiness that is, all too often, mistaken for utter -- and worthless -- nothingness. Be it in regards to heaven above, hell below or to what the first English poets called our "middle earth," silence implies and points to a realm beyond communication -- a silence which marks the point at which experience and individual understanding no longer apply to the topic at hand, and expressibility must necessarily give way: words cannot hope to reign over what the mind cannot fathom.

Silence is no more -- and, perhaps also, no less -- a "murdering" of literature than death is an end to one's existence: rather, a crossing of the boundary between what we perceive as *presence* and *absence* is a crossing into something immutable and therefore greater. "Under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better," Thomas Carlyle proposed; "silence is deep as eternity; speech is shallow as Time."<sup>78</sup>

Although it could be added at this point that Jacques Derrida had "shown that speech or expression and meaning are intrinsically bound up with temporality,"<sup>79</sup> my purpose has been to examine silence with respect to one piece of literature and to posit answers to some of the issues raised -- not to take apart a great poem and leave behind nothing but questions, as the great archie-debunker<sup>80</sup> and his fellow deconstructionists are

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas Carlyle, in an essay on Sir Walter Scott; as cited in Walsh (1993), 6.

<sup>79</sup> Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "On Speech and Temporality." Philosophy Today, 18 (1974), 173.

<sup>80</sup> Brian G. Chang (1988) calls Derrida the "archie-debunker of Western philosophy" who first came to hypothesize that "any text, constituted by an impossible



often wont to do. Whereas they imply that the "indeterminacy found at the heart of language erodes or obliterates any claims to referentiality, destroying the 'illusion' that language has anything to do with the external world" (Walsh, 16), I wish to impress instead that the pauses and silences that arise during language's shortcomings might be seen in a more *constructive* light. Silence in literature can quite readily be construed as a sort of mimesis -- a matter of "craft countrefeyt[yng] kynde" (*House of Fame*, 1213), as Chaucer might have called it -- where art corresponds to the condition of our world and, perhaps also, even to the universe in which we find ourselves:

All the visible matter of the universe, the scientists now tell us, all of the stars and planets and interstellar dust, the aggregate of everything in the universe we have come to know as "matter," accounts for no more than five to ten percent of the total mass of the cosmos. In other words, 90-95% of the universe seems to be composed of something invisible and undetectable, of something we were previously comfortable in calling nothing itself, yet a "nothing" that accounts for nine-tenths of the mass of creation. (Walsh, 3)

That some quality of absence or silence is found, conceivably, in every facet of experience is certainly not a new idea, nor is it one newly-explored. Many critics such as Jaworski (1993: 161) and, more notably, Steiner (1967) erroneously believe that the

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logic of "presence," is *always and ready* on the verge of deconstructing itself, provided one knows how to give it an initial push." (553)

"election of silence by the most articulate is . . . historically recent" (46); as has been found with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* -- as well as with the literature of Chaucer's contemporaries -- silence arising from inexpressibility is a medium that was explored well and long before now. It is a finding which helps us not only appreciate language and our ability to communicate, but instills in us a greater appreciation for language's ability to, in some measure, transcend time by giving us *Troilus and Criseyde* itself.

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