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THE CANTERBURY TALES: MEMORY AND FORM *

BY DONALD R. HOWARD

I

Memory is a major problem, possibly the central problem, in reading *The Canterbury Tales*. As we come to each new tale we must call to mind from the General Prologue the description of the pilgrim telling it; if we do not, a whole level of meaning drops away. If it is true that Chaucer read the work aloud at court, his audience could not have kept their left index finger stuck in the General Prologue, as we do, at the beginning of each tale. They would have had to remember each pilgrim. And maybe they did; they had more practiced memories than we, and might well have been able to keep in mind twenty-odd characters after a single reading of a serial description.

Hence it is pertinent to ask how the narrator, who spent the better part of a week in their company, *remembers* the pilgrims. He *seems* to visualize them as he first saw them at the inn; but as he proceeds he includes details about their appearance on the road and even details about their private lives at home—all the matter of hearsay and surmise which a returned traveller might have amassed or imagined. He even knows the secret thoughts of the Pardoner and the Monk. If we ask “where we are” in the General Prologue, the answer must be *not* in the inn, and *not* on the road, but in the realm of memory, of story, of empathy,

* This paper, in a different form, was presented before the Chaucer meeting at the Modern Language Association in December of 1970.

even of fantasy. We pass through the looking-glass of the narrator's mind into the remembered world of the pilgrimage; from it into the remembered worlds of the various pilgrims; and from these sometimes even into the remembered worlds of their characters. This controlled lapse from one remembered world into another remembered world, this regression by successive steps into the past and the unreal, is the essential principle of form in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer introduces this principle by representing himself as a naive pilgrim who listened to the tales so well that he could write them down verbatim and not "feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe."¹ In this guise he makes himself a model of attention, empathy, the suspension of disbelief, and the ability to remember what one hears. The stories he retells exist in his memory. Simple and natural as this seems to us, who read novels, it was not at all the usual thing for a medieval work to take the form of an imagined feat of memory and to have as the subject of that memory an imagined experience of the author's own. Where do we find this in medieval literature? St. Augustine and Boethius used memory in a factual, autobiographical way. Gower used the impersonal "I" of medieval complaint; Boccaccio and Sercambi referred to themselves in the third person. We do get a fictional first-person account of a remembered experience in Dante, and a rather more mundane one in *Mandeville's Travels*, and these may have been Chaucer's inspiration. The other possibility—and this will not be news to anyone—is the dream-vision. It was the fashionable premise of fictions in Chaucer's time, but remembering the dream and writing it down were usually taken for granted. When Chaucer ended *The Book of the Duchess* with a specific reference to the act of writing the dream in verse, he was doing something unusual, and even here he made nothing of memory as the step between dreaming and writing: the dreamer hears a clock strike twelve, wakes, finds the book he had been reading when he dropped off, and says,

¹ I. 736. Quotations from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). That the narrator serves as a kind of opinion-leader or model to the reader is implied by E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, 69 (1954), rpt. in *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), especially pp. 9-12, and by Morton W. Bloomfield, "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*," rpt. in *Essays and Explorations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 201-216. I have applied the notion to the *Troilus* in *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 113-114.

Thoughte I, "Thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best, and that anoon."
This was my sweven; now hit ys doon.

Like the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator of *The Canterbury Tales* remembers a past experience—from the real world rather than from dreams—and tells it as it comes into mind.

II

If the form of *The Canterbury Tales* is based on this primary fiction of a remembered personal experience, we shall have to ask how things *do* come to mind. The physiology of memory is no doubt basically the same in each individual, but the character of memory varies with our notions of what memory is and does. Because Freud or Wordsworth placed more importance on childhood memories, they likely had more of them—though Wordsworth seems to have selected rather different aspects of the childhood state than Freud. Our preconceptions about history, or causality, or human nature affect the selection, association, and structuring of memory; what we expect the memory to do influences what it really does. So if *The Canterbury Tales* is a fictional feat of memory, we have to ask whether memory itself did not have a different character in the fourteenth century from what it has now.

As with most other things, the medievals had two contradictory notions of memory and believed in both. In medieval "faculty psychology," memory played a minor role. It was one of the five "inner senses," higher than the vegetative powers but lower than the locomotive and the intellectual. It was made up of phantasms, images bound to the particularities of the sensible world. That memory contained all experience, a fact St. Augustine marvelled at, did not raise its status much, for Augustine was arguing, after all, that we must seek God beyond memory or through the total experience of memory, but not in particular memories.² When Chaucer the pilgrim claims to remember the

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, Pt. I, q. 78, especially art. 4; St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. X, secs. 8-26. On Augustine's rejection of platonic innatism and his transformation of Plato's idea that the mind remembers truth and therefore God, see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Vintage, 1967), pp. 64-65, 74-76, 82, 100-105, 219-223.

particularities of a past experience he is not therefore boasting of mental powers which were admired or thought reliable. He is limiting his scope to the experience of the temporal or secular world.

But while the medievals put a low value on memory when they saw it as a faculty of the soul, they valued it highly as a necessity of everyday life. St. Augustine, with his customary verbal felicity, called it the "stomach of the mind." From this practical view, they imagined memory as a storehouse which had to be supplied with shelves, so to speak, and kept in order. One always supposed men had better memories before cheap paper and printed books made such a clutter in our heads, but until Frances Yates published her remarkable study *The Art of Memory*³ most of us did not fully realize how medieval men *trained* their memories. The memory systems of the ancient world, Miss Yates shows, survived into the Middle Ages; there is even a short treatise *De arte memorativa* attributed to Chaucer's contemporary Bishop Bradwardine.⁴ And it is reasonable that Chaucer in his career as a public servant, would, as the Man of Law did, have cultivated a good memory. This "artificial" or cultivated memory worked on principles of order and association. It was by nature spatial and visual. It required, first, a mental framework of "places"—a remembered mental picture of some actual building or interior. To this mental picture one associated mnemonic images or sometimes words, mentally "placing" one upon a column, another on an altar, another in an alcove, and so on. This habit of mind is a startling difference between our medieval ancestors and ourselves: we memorize a few things (like *utor*, *fruor*, *fungor*, *potior*, and *vescor*) almost always in lists and with words—otherwise the memory of modern man is an intellectual rabbit's warren made from slips of paper. But the medievals made of their memories storehouses of visual images, disposed upon structured "places," symmetrical and concrete. And this was one way they gave form to their experience of the world.

The General Prologue is structured on such principles of memory. The characters are arranged in associations easiest to remember, associations of class, alliance, and dependency endemic to medieval society. First, they are arranged according to the

³ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, especially pp. 50-104.

⁴ Yates, p. 105.

conception of the Three Estates. There is the aristocracy (Knight and Squire, with their Yeoman); then the clergy (the Prioress and her entourage, the Monk, and the Friar); all the rest, from the Merchant on, belong to the "commons," except for the Clerk and Parson whom I shall mention in a moment, and except for the Summoner and Pardoner, two classless pariahs who are put at the end.⁵ This perfectly natural order is then subdivided—Chaucer might well have had in mind Geoffrey of Vinsauf's advice, that one should divide a thing to be remembered into small parts. He arranges the pilgrims in associations so natural that because of them the people themselves in such relationships would have fallen into groups in the inn or on the road, and we are told they did so. There is the Knight, his son, and their yeoman; the Prioress, her companion and "preestes three"; the Man of Law and the Franklyn; the five guildsmen and their cook; the Parson and his brother the Plowman; the Summoner and Pardoner. Call to mind any of these and their companions come to mind automatically. Others are described together, though we are not told they travelled together: the Monk and Friar (two kinds of religious); the Shipman, Physician, and Wife (three bourgeois); the Miller, Manciple, and Reve (three small-fry functionaries).

The well-known "idealized" portraits seem thrown into this order at random. Three of them (Knight, Parson, and Plowman) correspond to the Three Estates. I find it hard not to see the portrait of the Clerk as idealized, and perhaps he represents a style of life which Chaucer considered separate from the usual three. But the Clerk comes for no apparent reason between the Merchant and the Man of Law, the Parson and Plowman for no apparent reason between the Wife and Miller. I should like to offer a possible explanation of this seemingly haphazard arrangement. If you take the description of the Prioress and her followers

⁵ Cf. the divisions and subdivisions suggested by Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1951), pp. 149-157, and by Phyllis Hodgson in her edition of the General Prologue (London: Athlone Press, 1969), pp. 31-34. The Three Estates was by Chaucer's time an old idea which did not describe the social structure of his day; on the gradations of fourteenth-century society and its lack of classes in the modern sense, see the speculations of D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Chaucer's London* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), pp. 4-11. What I suggest here about the arrangement of portraits is not necessarily inconsistent with the theory of a "socio-economic ranking based upon an analysis of the origins of income" advanced by Ruth Nevo, "Chaucer: Motive and Mask in the 'General Prologue,'" *MLR*, 58 (1963), 1-9.

and that of the Guildsmen and their cook as single descriptions (which they are), and if you count the description of the Host, the portraits of the General Prologue can then be seen arranged symmetrically into three groups of seven, each headed by an ideal portrait:

Knight:	Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant
Clerk:	Man of Law, Franklyn, Guildsmen, Shipman, Physician, Wife
Parson & Plowman:	Miller, Manciple, Reve, Summoner, Pardoner, Host

Although I do not mean to suggest that this arrangement is like statues in niches or an allegorical painting, I do think it interesting that the "images" in artificial memory *were* emblematic or symbolical, that is, were meant to call abstractions to mind. To the medievals, as Frances Yates points out, memory's highest function was to remember moral precepts. Miss Yates thinks the carvings inside Gothic cathedrals were mnemonic,⁶ but surely that is a matter of degree; they were still carvings. Anyway, the "ideal" portraits undeniably have an emblematic quality, and the other portraits, for all their warts and red stockings—which make them memorable—suggest, in the old phrase, "types of society." Yet one of the principles of artificial memory was that one remembered best the image which startled one's feelings. Hence the mixture of particularities and abstractions which we admire in the General Prologue was itself a phase of artificial memory; as Geoffrey of Vinsauf said, "enjoyment alone makes the power of memory strong."⁷ Then, too, the symmetry of the arrangement is characteristically medieval; some might suspect numerical composition or number symbolism clicking away in the background, but I will let this be counted up on fingers other than my own. Such efforts at proportionableness were a habit of mind in the Middle Ages, and the ordered "places" of artificial memory gave powerful support to such a habit if they did not create it. I should guess that Chaucer apportioned the ideal portraits in this architectonic way more by habit than design; however he did it, the result in the General Prologue is an arbitrary shape or placement which resembles the artificial order imposed on words and images as an aid to memory.

⁶ Yates, pp. 50-57, 79-81.

⁷ *Poetria Nova*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), V. 2020 (p. 89).

III

If these suggestions have any validity, then we have to see the General Prologue in an unaccustomed way. It is not just the beginning of the work, but its heart or backbone. It is not a portrait-gallery or cross-section, but a calculated piece of thematic writing which evokes at the beginning of the work the experience of being alive in the author's world. If in the General Prologue specimens described *seriatim* were all he wanted, Chaucer would have been well advised to parcel out the portraits among the tales. But that is not what he was after. He was describing a group of personages and their relationships. As an aid to the reader's memory of this group, the General Prologue is like a *vade mecum* which we must carry with us as we proceed into the tales. It informs the whole; it centers attention upon the artist-narrator's consciousness as essential to the conception of the whole, and makes us aware that in consciousness things remembered are by nature things of this world.

The General Prologue is therefore what gives unity to the whole. In constructing his work this way Chaucer followed Geoffrey of Vinsauf's advice perfectly: "Let the mind's interior compass," said Geoffrey, "first circle the whole extent of the material."⁸ Critics have worried endlessly about the order of the tales, and about the work's incompleteness. Most Chaucer criticism assumes that more tales were to be added and a return journey supplied; hence a fair amount of that criticism deals with what Chaucer did *not* write rather than what he wrote. Yet the work, as I have described it, is such that it might be added to or subtracted from and never lose the principles of its unity which the General Prologue introduces. It is true that there are groups of linked tales: the sequence Knight-Miller-Reve-Cook, the "marriage group," and the tales of Fragment VII (Shipman through Nun's Priest). It is true, too, that there are unlinked tales: the Man of Law's, the second Nun's and Canon's Yeoman's, the Manciple's, and the Physician-Pardoner fragment. But in reading the work we could transpose the order of these linked or unlinked segments—could "Turne over the leef and chese another tale"—without losing the greater unity which the General Prologue imposes. Indeed the incompleteness of the

⁸ I. 55 (p. 17).

work and the apparent randomness of its order reflect in part the quality of memory as we experience it. And its inclusion of moral tales and moral precepts reflects the medieval notion of memory's highest function.

The problem of order and unity in *The Canterbury Tales* hangs upon our ingrained notions about the kind of work it is. We see it in a literary way as Chaucer himself must have done, against the literary background of its time, with literary devices and literary art foremost in our minds. We take as its analogues similar collections—the *Decameron*, Sercambi's *Novelle*, Gower's *Confessio*, the *Roman de la Rose*. And one conclusion we come to is that, against these literary analogues, its most original feature is its setting, a pilgrimage to Canterbury.⁹ But if we see the work as a remembered account of a pilgrimage, its true analogues are accounts of pilgrimages. There were many prose accounts written in the late Middle Ages about the pilgrimage to Jerusalem,¹⁰ plus a very popular fictional account, *Mandeville's Travels*,¹¹ and a poetical (and allegorical) one, the *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*. Such analogues generally have a first-person narrator, often describe the author's fellow-travellers, and sometimes mention quarrels among the pilgrims. They never include tales, but often include information supplied by others which the author reports with detachment. It is pertinent to the study of *The Canterbury Tales* that such accounts do not ever describe the

⁹ Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young, "The Literary Framework of the Canterbury Tales," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (1941; rpt. New York: The Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 1-33. Most writers on the subject, following Pratt and Young, report that Sercambi used a pilgrimage as a setting for his *Novelle*; but the journey is never so called and does not resemble a pilgrimage in any ordinary sense. It is a trip, as in the *Decameron*, to escape the plague.

¹⁰ For an introduction to this vast topic, see *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Percival Newton (New York: Knopf, 1926), especially pp. 159-194. R. Röhricht, *Bibliotheca Geographica Palaestinae*, rev. David H. K. Amiran (Jerusalem: Universitas Booksellers, 1963) is a chronological bibliography of such accounts from a. d. 333. Some of the major narrations may be read in *Peregrinatores mediæ aevi quatuor*, ed. J. C. M. Laurent (Lipsiae, 1864); *Early Travels in Palestine*, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1848); and *The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims Text Society*, 14 vols. (London, 1887-97).

¹¹ On Mandeville's book as a fiction, see Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1954), pp. 1-86; on Chaucer's knowledge of the *Travels*, pp. 224-227. See also Donald R. Howard, "The World of Mandeville's Travels," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1 (1971), 1-17.

return journey. They scarcely ever mention it except in a perfunctory way; the first treatment of the return journey that I have found is in the account of Felix Fabri (1484). Against these analogues, the two most original features of *The Canterbury Tales* are these: that the author describes the pilgrims first in a group, and that the pilgrims tell tales.

We are likewise encumbered by ingrained notions about the style of *The Canterbury Tales*. When people talk about its style they always talk about combinations of pre-existing styles—of the high and low, the French and Italian, the conventional and natural. But if you take style in its broadest sense to mean the full range of effects and qualities which characterize a work, and which therefore reflect a style of life or of civilization, “unity” is as much a matter of style as of form or structure. The informing vision of the work, the *idea* of the work in the author’s consciousness, is what gives the work its style, its form, and so its unity. And it is a unique feature of *The Canterbury Tales* that its prologue reveals and imposes these principles of unity. The General Prologue *seems* to have a random lack of organization, but is artfully structured to reveal a typifying group; the tales *seem* to follow spontaneously, but many are artfully ordered into thematic or dramatic clusters. The General Prologue includes ideal figures at fixed though seemingly random intervals; the tales include ideal narratives—the tales of Constance, Griselda, Virginia, Cecilia—dispersed among the tales or clusters of tales. In the General Prologue, the Host dominates the group and is the leader; in the tales he directs their order when he can. In the General Prologue we get elements of class-conflict, conflict of interest, and temperamental difference; in the tales these produce moments of competition and aggression which account for the order of most other tales. In the General Prologue, the very first thing mentioned after the season is the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in the allusion to “palmeres” and “straunge strondes”; in the Parson’s Prologue we are reminded of the glorious pilgrimage to Jerusalem celestial.

In the same way, the narrator’s feat of memory, announced and begun in the General Prologue, opens to us in the tales a world of remembered fictions. The world of his memory comes in the tales to be the irrepressible world of story, passed by books or traditions to the pilgrims, by them to the author-narrator, and by him to us. The quality of inner, remembered experience which we get

in the General Prologue, J. V. Cunningham has shown,¹² was inherited from the dream-vision. But in it memory replaces dream as the principle of form: there is no longer the possibility of a revelation, a *somnium coeleste*, for memory is tied to experience and the truth of memory is to be selected, not revealed. Hence in the General Prologue there is a pervasive sense of obsolescence, the passing of experience into memory. Old ideals, institutions, and customs—knighthood, monasticism, the Christian commonwealth which made parson and plowman brothers—are seen in decline, as things forgotten or to be forgotten. The Knight is a veteran of assorted past campaigns, his son of a few recent and questionable ones. The Wife, dressed up in outmoded fashions, is obsessed with her own past and with ideals (and books) of long ago. The Prioress wears a medallion of some forgotten occasion, the Monk lets “olde thynges pace.” The narrator brings the pilgrims into the present through memory, and the Host invites them to tell “Of adventures that whilom han bifalle”; in their tales each, recaptured from the past, recaptures some part of the past. Literary tradition, notable to the point of exaggeration in the opening lines of the General Prologue, thus becomes the substance of the work: things remembered, known to the mind and spirit, and preserved in language, are the world of *The Canterbury Tales*—a world more real, more articulate and more perdurable than the day-to-day world, the pilgrimage of human life, which purports to be its subject. Yet at the end we get a prose meditation about the way to deal with that day-to-day world, and after it a terse statement in which the author rejects that world, and with it his books about that world, and “many another book, if they were in my remembrance,” to embrace the world he believed existed beyond memory.

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¹² “Convention as Structure: The Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*,” in *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960), pp. 59-75.