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WHERE ARE CHAUCER'S "RETRACCIIONS"?

Victor Yelverton Haines

Chaucer's "retracciouns" are to be found throughout his work where he ironically presents a meaning from which he pulls back, withdraws, or retracts. In the difference between the meaning retracted from and the right meaning "retracted to," the reader's response is exercised in an ethical test. Chaucer's good "entente" engages the reader in the rhetoric of "retraccioun" as it applies throughout his work and not just in what has been called his "Retraction" at the end of "The Parson's Tale."¹

When Chaucer the scriptor writes of his conversation with the Monk, for example, "And I seyde his opinion was good," Chaucer's intention in its ethical context is to pull the reader back, to retract, from a straight reading that the Monk's opinion is in fact good. This is one of many of Chaucer's "retracciouns," as he refers to them in the plural at the end of *The Canterbury Tales* in the Epilogue to "The Parson's Tale." In fact, the meaning we are familiar with in the so-called "Retraction," that Chaucer wished to retract or annul the works themselves, is itself a meaning from which Chaucer intended us to retract. It is there in the text just as the meaning that the Monk's opinion is good is in the text, and Chaucer intended it to be there: it would protect him from vicious censors. But he also intended a more subtle and moral meaning for the "Retraction," which modern readers by and large have missed. A right reading of the "Retraction" involves obsolete

meanings of four key words in Chaucer's text: *intent*, *revoke*, *retract*, and *guilt*, words so familiar we do not suspect them of any alien meaning. Expressed in this vocabulary, furthermore, are concepts usually missing in the presumptions of modern understanding. First, the reader's response must be considered an ethical response. As the *Gawain* postscript says: "Hony soyt qui mal pense." In that we are all to tell our story in redeemed history, we are to become story tellers like the pilgrims and to practise, as David Williams puts it, both good "audiencship and authorship" (100). The intentionality of a text is a communal project of both author and reader. As we might expect of a culture of the book, Lee Patterson points out,

medieval misprison brought with it little but anxiety. Far from freeing readers from the burden of the past, it delivered them into the hands of the enemy: witness the two most famous of all medieval misreaders, Paolo and Francesca. . . . And they are significantly compared to other exemplary readers, Augustine reading the Scriptures in his garden and Abelard and Heloise reading the auctores together. (141)

In his oeuvre, Chaucer frequently expresses his concern for the reader's intent; and in the "Retraction," Chaucer's statement of his own intent implies the intentionality of the text and the reader's own learning in the intent of "oure doctrine." Unless the reader's response is understood in its ethical moment, it is difficult to figure out why Chaucer could be asking for forgiveness of his "giltes," namely for "translacions and enditynges" just after saying "'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente." It must be clear that there is no book a saint cannot read, nor any text a sinner cannot corrupt. Some reader response may indeed be wicked; and a reader can sin. But can good authorial intention have any guilt for such sin? This question involves a second idea, also foreign to our minds — that the notion of guilt allows for involuntary sin, that one can be guilty through *defaute* for what happens by accident as in manslaughter; for the wickedness of others, such as minors in one's care; for what one fails to realize in sins of omission, as in the unconscious heritage of racism, sexism, original sin, and so forth, or the thoughtless personal failures of self-righteousness and pride.

In order to understand the text of Chaucer's "Retraction" as he meant it, we must be prepared to understand that he could feel guilt for how readers had failed to get the moral point of some of his irony and had fallen into vicious interpretation and been wicked in, for example, condoning the behaviour of the Monk. The moral tests Chaucer set might have been too hard. The failure of various different readers, which Chaucer could have

observed in his lifetime, would be an ethical failure in the joint intentionality of reader and author. Ethical failure is sin, the very failure Chaucer prays "that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne."

One further proclivity of mediaeval interpretation needs to be reinforced, perhaps, if we are to get what Chaucer is saying: the view from a temporal *aevum* ensures the force of the simple present tense of "revoke": "to call back a vice from people." Chaucer revokes vanity in the texts he mentions now and also when they are written.

Such a summary introduction to the world version of Chaucer's text has to be elaborated in detailed verbal analysis. But perhaps it may already make possible a glimpse of what Chaucer means in what he writes. Without such a glimpse, no amount of analysis can make sense of a picture that if you do not get it is not there. So even though I have not yet made my case, I plead with my reader to try and see it "my" way, at least just once. Take care to read the antecedent of "the whiche" as "worldly vanitees." Chaucer writes:

For oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," and that is myn entente. / Wherefore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; / and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: / as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv. Ladies; [etc.]. (1083-86)

If Chaucer had wished to emphasize the meaning that the books themselves should be annulled, he would have left out the "as is" and just listed the books, "the book of Troilus, etc." If he had wished to emphasize his intended meaning, rather than hide it a little bit, he could have said "as in" rather than "as is"; but he maintains both meanings by saying "as is" followed by a list of books, which as books, however, must be in apposition not to "vanitees" but to "translacions and enditynges."

As a Christian poet who has just been preaching in the voice of the Parson, Chaucer has the welfare of his readers on his mind and is speaking of his responsibility for them in the serious ethical moment of reading when they do not get his irony. That this is what Chaucer is saying in the "Retraction" cannot be proved or disproved by looking to his oeuvre to see if he has actually done what he said. This would require a search under every trope and phrase for a bad intention—clearly impossible without begging the initial question of intention in the "Retraction." Irony operates within an ethical context at particular points, so that what one is to retract and pull back from is not determined by the mere possibility of irony. Chaucerian irony is

governed by Chaucer's ethics. Given ethics twisted enough, even the "Retraction" itself could be sarcastic irony, although its coherence would make it a most bitter opposite of what is said. Our shared intuition of Chaucer's rhetorical strategy does, however, support a non-sarcastic reading of his final supplication. We are familiar with the good humoured compassion of Chaucerian irony that encourages readers to exercise their own moral faculties in judging characters and in debating the moral principles through which a narrative is constituted. That this intuition is the basis for a coherent reading of what Chaucer says in the "Retraction" may be discovered in a detailed explication of the "Retraction" itself.

The Parson ends his tale or "tretys" in the dialectics of heavenly access: in this fallen world, we may purchase the blissful reign "by poverte espiritueel, and the glorie by lownesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thirst, and the reste by travaille, and the lyf by deeth and mortificacion of synne" (1080), and as Chaucer might add, right interpretations by perennial "retracciouns" of wrong ones. After preaching holy doctrine in the voice of the Parson, the voice of the poet merges into that voice in a request for thanksgiving to Christ for any wisdom in the "tretys," for Christ is the source of all wisdom:

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. (1081)

The debate over the extension of the word "tretys" here hangs on whether there is a precise point dividing the Parson's voice from the narrator's and then from Chaucer's. Even without the rubric "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve," usually added before this line 1081, identification of the "I" in this line as the Parson soon merges with the identification of subsequent "I's" as the narrator and then Chaucer himself. And, conversely, even with the rubric, the "I" (1081) cannot be dissociated from the voice of the narrator as the Parson because of the possible reference of "this litel tretys" to the Parson's own tale. There is no precise dividing point: the voices blend into each other. And the word "tretys" then extends not only to the treatise of the Parson just completed but also to the complete *Canterbury Tales*, while this extension anticipates the subject of other works of Chaucer himself. This blending of voices and merging and emerging of identities must, however, be refracted into world versions like our own: we are not to imagine a three-headed monster with three mouths one each for the Parson, the narrator, and Chaucer, all speaking at once. The identity of the speaking "I" must change somewhere from the Parson to Chaucer, the

author of the book of Troilus, etc. This retrospective identification works backward on the text to "Now prey I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede"; so the "tretys" becomes Chaucer's in the voice of the Parson. This retrospective identification works against taking any part of the "Retraction," such as lines 1085-1090a (up to "soule"), as Chaucer's interruption into what is otherwise only the Parson's voice. Nor is there any point at which it is clear Chaucer's voice stops and the Parson's resumes: grammatical parallel links the syntax; the final request that the "I" be "saved" is just what Chaucer himself has been concerned about. The final Latin prayer then harks back to the Parson's voice as a typical conclusion to a sermon, but as a prayer spoken for us all it does not exclude Chaucer's voice either, nor the angels' in the mystical choir of heavenly carnival. The point of the "Retraction" read all in Chaucer's voice, including the Latin close, is similar in many ways to the thrust of Douglas Wurtele's argument that lines 1085-1090a are in fact an interpolation. Indeed, the present paper originated in my own mis-reading of a page in the offprint of his article on "The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer": "The poet's trouble is not that the offending portions of his work may be misinterpreted but that, read literally, they will cause scandal or lead his readers into temptation. For this offence he publicly voices regret" (Wurtele 336). A wrong literal interpretation is a misinterpretation. And as I had learned in the ethical hermeneutics of the *Gawain* manuscript, "Hony soyt qui *mal* pense." Hence I thought the argument might be that Chaucer is saying he never had intended his work to have a literal meaning that would cause the scandal of a stumbling block in the way of a fellow *viator*. This was certainly not what I had understood by the "Retraction," which, lo, on turning to it, I found can indeed be reread this way I am now arguing for here. So through my misprison of Wurtele's argument, his work on the "Retraction" discovers, if I am right, a deeper meaning. He and I agree on the large question of Chaucer's rhetoric, that "it was a dangerous experiment in the art of teaching with delight," but not that Chaucer "finally had to examine his work not as artistic products but as moral acts" (356) — as if he had not always considered them moral acts.

Chaucer in the present reading, accordingly, is to be taken throughout the "Retraction" as speaking in his own voice. After paying a compliment to his readers by implying they are the sort to be pleased in such a way that they can thank Christ for it, and also implying that this is the definition of his proper reader, Chaucer then gives the credit for such things "that liketh hem" to Christ "of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse." Here we have taken Chaucer only to be plying his courtly trade in theology: "Don't thank

me, thank Christ. What you like in what I write is due to the source of my wit and 'al goodness' in Christ." But he is also subtly saying "Don't thank me for my wit, thank Christ for your own wit." The constitution of what pleases readers in all goodness depends on the source of their own right judgement and wit in Christ. The reader's as well as the writer's wit is implicated in the text, and *good* readers may thank Christ for what "liketh hem."

In the same complimentary way, these *good* readers are presumed to detect error in what displeases them (for which they could also thank Christ — for the wit to be displeased with error). But Chaucer pleads his errors are ignorant not wilful, a result of his "unkonnyge," lack of poetical talent and/or doctrinal understanding.

And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnyge, and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyð bettre if I hadde had konnyge. (1082)

So the displeasure of Chaucer's good readers cannot be for evil doctrine intended by Chaucer — at least not as he himself is able to see his intentions at this point of final supplication to the reader — which so far, accordingly, neither is nor anticipates a "Retraction." "If there are mistaken poetics or errors in the doctrine of this 'tretys,' blame my ignorance," Chaucer says, "I didn't do it on purpose." And his voice shifts further from the Parson's to his own.

Then Chaucer takes a few jumps in the argument: if the reader is supposed to sort out good and bad doctrine in reading "The Parson's Tale" and certainly to do the same in the other tales, the reader is supposed to do so not simply to excuse the author on the grounds of ignorance but also for the reader's own good and "doctrine." And this applies not only to mistaken doctrine the author left through ignorance but also to the false doctrine left through irony in the poet's art — the implied "Retraction" of any vicious teaching in all his secular work: "For oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente" (1083).

Since the Parson's non-ironic voice still lingers in these lines, "Al that is writen" includes his own holy "tretys" and its doctrine; but Chaucer's voice is also heard in these lines as the writer, so "Al that is writen" includes indeed all that is written, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It is here with regard to the way all that is written is for our doctrine that Chaucer declares his "entente":² the constitution of any narrative must be a righteous learning activity of judgment and construal. There is no book a saint cannot read. God does not skip over the parts of history He does not like. Nor is

fiction as part of what we actually hear and tell excluded from that history as it includes our fictions. Good readers, likewise, must try to read ethically "al that is writen." Chaucer, moreover, does not say that *was* his intent and perhaps no longer is. He says "that is myn entente": "that is my intent in *The Canterbury Tales*, and, therefore, was when I wrote them, just as it still is in *The Canterbury Tales*" — tales for which, accordingly, he could hardly be making a "Retraction."

The Nun's Priest, with whose ironic cast Chaucer himself is often identified, makes a similar connection between his own text and Saint Paul's text (II Timothy 3:16):

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen. (3438-46)

The Nun's Priest includes his own tale in "al that writen is" just as at the "Retraction" Chaucer includes his oeuvre, referring to the same text of Saint Paul. It is not only at the end of his career, accordingly, when his "Retraction" is presumed to have been written, that Chaucer was familiar with the intention that narrative be written (and read) for our doctrine and learning. And as a Christian, he would not repudiate this intention of the Nun's Priest as his own. Chaucer had the same intention, therefore, in writing "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and probably in all *The Canterbury Tales* as he does in the "Retraction," so *The Canterbury Tales* themselves could not be what is retracted in the "Retraction." The critical moment of "retraccioun" is also considered, probably facetiously, by the Nun's Priest in the hermeneutics offered to those who hold his tale a "folye/ As of a fox or of a cok and hen": "Taketh the moralite, goode men. . . . Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille."

The debate whether history is mere shadow or actual promise prevents the narrative account of what happened from being mere unproblematic chaff (Preus 111). In a Judaeo-Christian context, where history is important, one cannot say "forget the story of Jesus on the Cross, and just take the morality" or "forget the story of Moses and Exodus, and just take the morality": there is no morality without what happened just as without morality what happened is not even a "what." Ethics is intrinsic to our

constitution of events. Taking the Nun's Priest's story as chaff is not such an egregious dismissal of the literal level, but similar considerations apply. Even though the story is about a talking fox and cock and hen, indeterminacies of the text still must be filled in with reference to a minimal departure from our actual world: the values exemplified by the case history do not exist apart from actual history. One can kick the ladder away as one climbs into Platonic heaven, but not to Christian heaven, which is, as the redemption of history, the ladder itself. Those who do not take the tale of Chauntecleer as itself "folye" may take the fruit and chaff as one, and both comically as part of the "corn." The Nun's priest as the author of the Tale is not likely to be among those who consider it a "folye"; otherwise, he would not have told it. Aesthetically, he would not consider the figurative language of the tale reducible to a simple moral or political message. And ethically, to point out the absurdity of taking it as "folye," he cites Saint Paul's letter to Timothy, which with specific reference to sacred scripture could never have been used to argue that Timothy should just take the "moralite" and forget the scriptures, although the comedy of including both fruit and chaff, the whole corn of the tale of cock and hen, with scripture in "all that written is," would not be lost on the Nun's Priest. But it is a joyous comedy: our doctrine in scripture must be the same doctrine in the text of "all that written is."

Neither would Chaucer the author be likely to consider his whole life's oeuvre a "folye," chaff to be blown away, as if it never happened. That is not the kind of "retraccioun" either the Nun's Priest or Chaucer is likely to have in mind. What is thrown out or retracted by the author, in each case, is not the whole work itself but wrong and prurient readings of it suggested in the rhetoric of irony. In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," for example, one is to withdraw from admiring a talking cock as an epic hero, etc. Similarly in the reading of all Chaucer's oeuvre, we are to retract, as he reveals his intent in the famous Canterbury "Retraction," from constitution of narrative in worldly vanity. This means not that Chaucer closes his mind to any further refinement of intent, but that right from the start his mind was bent on his work in the right direction.

Chaucer's intent, accordingly, has been all along to teach good doctrine in the fallen mix of (i) ignorance and knowledge and (ii) good and bad ways of reading a text. His good intent excuses him for the ignorant errors of "unkonnyng," while such errors enlighten our doctrine when the truth is revealed in Christ, and Chaucer would have it so. The difficulty comes with the good and bad ways of reading a text: Chaucer cannot prevent wicked

readings of his texts and may in the subtlety of his rhetorical "retracciouns" have made it too easy for readers to fall. In the light of both the reader's and writer's obligations, Chaucer feels responsibility and guilt for trials he may have put the reader through in his translations and narrations of "worldly vanitees." He worries that he may be responsible for a reader's sin, not that he espoused false doctrine in his secular works, for he has always intended the "Retraction" of such doctrine in his heuristic irony. In his attempt to draw out the reader's education existentially by allowing for independent assimilation of the right judgment required to constitute a narrative, Chaucer may have given some readers too much freedom.

With reference to his comment on doctrine and his own intent that "al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," Chaucer refers to "my giltes" (1084). This phrase must not be understood here only in its modern sense of "having wilfully committed crime" but also in its obsolete sense of being involuntarily at fault, the mere "responsibility for an action or event" (*OED*). As the author in the community that reads his work, Chaucer is implicated.

Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes. (1084)

These are still Chaucer's guilts, however — as he says "*my giltes*." But they are involuntary guilts, the *defaute* of his participation in the involuntary sin of wicked readers, who have constituted narratives of worldly vanities without retracting from such vanities. The "giltes," moreover, are not the "translacions and enditynges" but the "giltes" of those "translacions and enditynges":

and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: / as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv. Ladies. . . . (1085-86)

Chaucer continues with the list of his secular books, a list of "translacions and enditynges," to which "book" is in apposition. The list is a list of his books that are translations and stories about worldly vanities as opposed to his other books about scientific and religious matters, the which have no irony of "retraccioun" in them. Books may be "translacions and enditynges" but hardly "vanitees" themselves. The antecedent of "whiche" in Chaucer's sentence is "worldly vanitees"; what is revoked are these vanities and not the stories and translations of them. Any ambiguous reference to the "translacions and enditynges" as the antecedent of "whiche" should be coherent with its primary reference to "vanitees." The modern meaning of

"revoke" "to annul, repeal" applies, however, more readily to books than vanities; so the primary reference of "whiche" to "vanitees" is overlooked in favour of what would have been only a recessive ambiguity or Chaucer's escape clause in case of fanatical censors — that he is taking it all back with "whiche" referring only to "translacions and enditynges" But even in its modern sense "revoke" may apply to "worldly vanitees" as they are constituted with the reader's approval and any commitment to them. Only insofar as the narratives or "enditynges" of worldly vanity seem like commitment to that vanity is the telling, as the antecedent of "whiche," itself "revoked" in the sense of "annulled." But Chaucer has just declared that his doctrinal intent prevents any such commitment, hence if revoke means annul, the "whiche" can only refer to Chaucer's own "enditynges" when they are taken in a way Chaucer never intended.

The dominant, and now obsolete, meaning of "revoke" in the fourteenth century was, however, "to recall to a right way of life and belief, to draw back from some belief or practise" (*OED*). Worldly vanity as commitment to vanity is annulled, and (metonymically) those so committed are "revoked from" their commitment. This metonymic meaning blends into construction of the idiom without the "from." "People are revoked from something" becomes "something revoked" (with "from" understood), as in *The Faerie Queene*: she "strove their stubborn rages to revoke" (II.ii.28) (cited *OED*) and other instances cited in the *Middle English Dictionary* as meaning "(g) to repress (vice); avert (trouble); dismiss" . . . "Estate of worthynesse in gouernance is given to the wise to revoked and repress the vice that wolde encreasen and aryse," etc. In Chaucer's syntax, the article in "*the whiche*" emphasizes this construction: "*the* which worldly vanities I revoke (and from which [by metonymy] I revoke my readers) in my retracciouns of rhetorical irony throughout my secular works." One pulls back and is called back in the rhetoric from an ironically presented vanity or prurience, as "yonge, fresshe folkes" in the conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde* are to repair home from worldly vanity: "Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanye" (v.1837). The metaphor is to repair, retract, back off from. But this does not mean that they were not supposed to read the *Troilus*, that it itself should be "retracted." And Chaucer's direction of the book to "moral Gower" (v.1856) is presumed to have been meant all through the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* from the beginning. Likewise, in all Chaucer's "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees," the reader with a good "entente" "repeyreth" home from worldly "vanitees," the which are revoked away from the reader and

from which the reader is also revoked in reading the books. The reader is not supposed *not* to read them.

This faded meaning of "revoke" would have been intended to go with a meaning of "retracciouns" that coincidentally has also faded. "Retraccioun" and its cognates "retreat," "retract," "retraction," "retraction," etc., all derive from correspondence with the act of dragging something back over again, from A back to B. But correspondence may be focussed at various points: absence at A (our modern emphasis), presence again at B, the act of going over the intervening terrain again, etc. Thus Latin *retractare* may be used in idioms such as undertake arms again, to re-open old wounds, to reconsider, or to draw back, refuse; and *retrahere* may be used variously to drag something back, to take yourself back, or, with emphasis on where you are going back to, to draw on again. As George Salmon says of Augustine's use of the word (to which Chaucer would have been alluding): "'Retractations' does not mean retractations in our modern sense of the word, but a re-handling of things previously treated of" (*OED*, q.v. 1.a. 1888).³ Our modern meaning of the word is "withdrawal of a statement with admission of error." But in the case of narrative, as in Chaucer's books, it is not clear how this modern sense applies, how narrative can be in error or how the error is to be withdrawn. Certainly, one has no narrative without ethics (Haines, "No Ethics, No Text" 35): one does not even know what is going on without a judicious sense of virtue involved in the action, although one's judgement may be in error.

But does retraction of such error mean retraction of the narrative itself or pretense that you never read it and never will again? Unlikely. That would be like saying redemption of history is its annihilation. The absurdity of retracting a narrative and the personal impossibility for Chaucer of banning or annulling his books already in circulation should force "retracciouns" away from the modern meaning of retraction back to its older meaning that Chaucer emphasizes by alluding to Augustine's plural "Retractationes": "to treat of again." To take this as the meaning of "retracciouns" still leaves the ambiguity: did Chaucer himself change his mind or has he meant the "retracciouns" all along? If he changed his mind like Augustine and wished to treat again of material previously dealt with, then where does he do it? He has not published a book like Augustine's "Retractations." Nor does he need to. In his rhetoric all along are hints, which we recognize as Chaucer's irony, that the narrative must be gone over again in the retractions of any approval or enjoyment of vice. Each morally deficient constitution of narrative is to be pulled back from in "retracciouns" that Chaucer meant all

along. He does not use the singular but the plural "retracciouns," which could hardly be that single retraction erroneously attributed to Chaucer as an admission he was all wrong. Chaucer's intent all along has been to educate the reader in "retracciouns" from the worldly vanity of narrative viciously constituted. The reader has been subject to ethical tests to treat the narrative right — or to re-treat. And failure in such ethical tests is not just play in some game of fiction, but actual, uncomfortable guilt. Perhaps that is another reason we want to blame it all on Chaucer and misread his "Retraction." Readers, nevertheless, cannot be excluded from the rhetoric of Chaucer's "retracciouns," not if there is to be any coherence with the stated intent: "al that is written is written for oure doctrine."

Throughout his oeuvre, Chaucer, in fact, frequently addresses his concern for all the complexities of "entente," including the reader's moral "entente" and responsibility. But because he often addresses that concern playfully, ethics can easily get lost in the aesthetics. "Unkonnyng" may be limited to its meaning as poetical skill, and Chaucer is understood to be saying no more than "enjoy my poetry and give it good reviews." Thus, in *The House of Fame*, "mysdeme" (97) has been restricted to the poor judgment of those not up to scratch in poetry appreciation, even though this does not account very well for how they "hyt mysdemen in her thought" (92): reviewers do not judge or misjudge something in their own thought — they simply judge or misjudge *it*. Nor is this a likely account of Chaucer's prayer that the "mover of . . . al" give joy of their dreams to all who hear Chaucer's dream told aright and who do not "mysdeme" it. The interpretation and judgment of dreams like the judgment of the world is a moral act. But to make his point Chaucer exaggerates, making fun of his own (lack of) charity. He asks God to give joy in their own dreams to those who hear his dream told with right judgement, and, he continues,

send hem al that may hem plese,
That take hit wel and skorne hyt nocht,
Ne hyt mysdemen in her thocht
Thorgh malicious entencion.
And whoso thorgh presumpcion,
Or hate, or skorn, or thorgh envye,
Dispit, or jape, or vilanye,
Mysdeme hyt, pray I Jesus God
That (dreme he barefot, dreme he shod),
That every harm that any man
Hath had, syth the world began,
Befalle hym therof, or he sterve,

And graunte he mote hit ful deserve,
 Lo, with such a conclusion
 As had of his avision
 Cresus, that was kyng of Lyde,
 That high upon a gebet dyde!
 This prayer shal he have of me;
 I am no bet in charyte!
 Now herkeneth, as I have yow seyde,
 What that I mette, or I abreyde. (90-110)

Chaucer prays for such extravagant misfortune to befall those who will not read his work with right judgment that his own pretended lack of charity is facetiously undercut. His facetious prayer prevents Chaucer from being the malevolent prosecutor, not himself subject to the rule of charity; but the joke depends on the serious ethics of "malicious entencion" — the envy, presumption, hate, scorn, spite, jest, vulgarity, and so forth, which prevent right judgment or interpretation of what is read or heard. Chaucer does not seem to consider here in *The House of Fame* any responsibility he may have himself for the results of a reader's "malicious entencion"; the emphasis, instead, is on the reader's responsibility to meet the moral subtlety of Chaucer's rhetoric in the interpretation of a dream told with Chaucer's own good intent "aryght." But without this presumption of the reader's responsibility, Chaucer's own responsibility as he presents it in the Canterbury "Retraction" cannot be comprehended. As May in the "Merchant's Tale" says, despite its facetious context, "He that mysconceyvethe, he mysdemeth" (iv.2410): a literal state of affairs must be conceived properly or else it is misjudged: "Hony soyt qui *mal* pense."

In the prologue to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer again calls on his audience to listen with a "good entencioun" to match the intent of his own charity and compassion in determining what happened:

For so hope I my sowle best avaunce,
 To prey for hem that Loves servauntz be,
 And write hire wo, and lyve in charite,

 And for to have of hem compassioun,
 As though I were hire owne brother dere.
 Now herkneith with a good entencioun,
 For now wil I gon streght to my matere. (1.47-53)

Those who see the characters as unworthy of compassion and so less than human do not know what is going on. Sex-objects of pornography in a prurient reading of the bedroom scenes; sinful villains beyond redemption; and other less than human characters are not part of the narrative hearkened

to with a "good entencioun" — such as that intention would be judged in either the mediaeval or modern era. Chaucer does not here consider the possible failure of the reader's intention or the implication of his own responsibility in such a failure; perhaps at this stage of his career he was more optimistic about what he could expect from his readers and the good doctrine in which his texts would participate. But his concern that the reader "herkneth with a good entencioun" does entail the possibility of a bad "entencioun." This anxiety of writing reflects the anxiety of mediaeval reading: how could the fifteenth-century compiler of the treatise *Disce more*, instructing women religious in the distinction between *amicitia* and *amor*, have thought that *Troilus and Criseyde* was appropriate reading? As Lee Patterson argues in a study of this treatise, the diagnosis of moral theology may also be offered in the gradual revelations of narrative romance: "the conclusion makes explicit an *entente* that was at the beginning only a latent possibility" (145). The author of the treatise teaches his readers to locate the *Troilus* in a context that allows its reading to be at once safe and loving: "he seeks not to disarm the text but to arm the reader" (153). However seductive its sweet letter or heretical its alien spirit, as Boccaccio argued in the tradition of Augustinian hermeneutics, a text can be read with impunity by a reader endowed with "a pure and steadfast mind" (84).

In *The Canterbury Tales* themselves, Chaucer often plays with the implications of the reader's "entente." In "The Tale of Sir Thopas," which Chaucer himself is supposed to tell as one of the characters on the pilgrimage, the narrator "himself" addresses his audience "Listeth, lordes, in good entent" (IV.712), and then proceeds to abuse their patience with doggerel romance. In this rhetoric, a dupe is implied who does not get the twofold literary and social satire: the dupe may be the narrator "himself" or one the narrator just pretends to be. Such a dupe, pretended as the voice of the author, counterpoints the reader's "entente," both aesthetic and ethical: how can the reader have good "entente" if the writer (as the dupe) does not? And once this question is posed in the rhetoric of "Sir Thopas," the dialectic of the next question becomes obvious: how can the writer have good "entente" if the reader does not? The reader and writer may have good intents independent of each other but not in the joint constitution of a *good story*. A *good story* must be the product of two *good "ententes"*; if either one fails to be good, the story fails. Harry Bailly cuts Chaucer off because he is weary of the "lewednesse" and his ears "aken" of the "drasty" speech: he cannot see the implied author in the rhetoric who is not a dupe: metaphysically, he cannot see Chaucer the author and intellectually, he

does not consider that the "narrator" might be talking parody on purpose. Harry himself then becomes a dupe failing to have a good "entente" — even though if he did consider the possibility of intentional parody it is not likely he would appreciate it anyway, not being a reader of high romance. Chaucer the narrator (or recorder) then goes on to tell his tale of Melibee in prose asking for the courtesy not to be interrupted: "herkneþ what that I shal seye / And lat me tellen al my tale, I preyre" (VII.965-66). He has just said the same thing rather gauchely as narrator of "Sir Thopas": "Now holde youre mouth, *par charitee* / Bothe knyght and lady free, / And herkneþ to my spelle" (VII.891-93). Shut up and listen: the imperative to communicate as well as to construe requires ethics in both the reader's and writer's "entente." Although "The Tale of Melibee" may not be told with the same words as the original and be longer "somwhat moore / Of proverbes," its construal is to be the same as the original in Chaucer's own "sentence": "Shul ye nowher fynden difference" — nowhere being a good place to look for such "*différance*." Chaucer continues his fairly long tale of Melibee uninterrupted and then rings the changes on the same terms we find in his "Retraction": "unkonnyng," "giltes," "mercy." Chaucer's wit through all these complications of intent depends on the assumption that it is the reader's as well as the writer's ethical obligation to have a "good entente."

This serious complexion of narrative casts a new light on Chaucer's request in the Miller's prologue not to "maken ernest of game" (I.3186). One game that we are not to make "ernest" of is Chaucer's game that he could not be to blame because it was the Miller who told the story, not Chaucer. That is only a joke, a game, that we are not to take earnestly, not after Chaucer has just asked us "For Goddes love, demeth not that I seye / Of yvel entente" (I.3172-73): what would be the point of asking us not to think that he speaks with an evil "entente" if it were impossible for him to do so? We are to put him "out of blame" not because it is all a game, in which there can be no moral blame or praise, but because, in fact, he is not to blame: he could be guilty but, in fact, he is not (Haines, *Fortunate Fall* 223). He must "reherce / Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse" (3173-74). God does not turn over the leaf and choose another tale; God reads them all. And so must the saints of history which we are called to be: all must be told and read — with a good "entente" as Chaucer desires. The game we are not to take seriously is irony in the telling and not the telling itself, which is always finally serious and comic, "for Goddes love"; we must not be earnest dolts. Although Chaucer seems to be saying all his fiction is just

a game that can be dismissed — a protective fall-back position if he gets in too much trouble for it with those who want to turn over the leaf and do not — he is actually saying that only the ironic meanings are to be dismissed and not taken earnestly. One would see a similar trope in the charitable reading of the Wife of Bath's rhetoric when she says her intent is but for to play: she expects her audience to be intelligent enough to get the paradox that that intent itself must also be for play. Her real intent is to have her concerns as a woman taken seriously by her audience. But for those in the audience who are hostile and could harm her, she has the fall-back position that she is just kidding: "For myn entente is nat but for to pleye" (III.192).

Chaucer's frequent elaboration of intent in the ethical moment of reading as well as writing must, accordingly, be comprehended in the concerns of his famous "Retraction" at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*. Our traditional reading of Chaucer's "Retraction" probably first goes wrong at the word "giltes": we have not been able to see that "giltes" refers to the way "al that is writen" for our doctrine may not all have been *read* for our doctrine. Having suppressed our constitution of textual narrative as an ethical activity, we are blind to Chaucer's anxiety that the subtle trials and tests in his rhetoric may have been too difficult for many of his readers. Every moral test they fail, they sin. Chaucer would be anxious about his responsibility for such sinful readings of his works "of many a song and many a leccherous lay" (1087) and may be having second thoughts about the rhetoric of irony. Sometimes the voices of sinful characters "sownen" as if the whole narrative may be consonant with sin. And the ethical process of rhetoric suggested by the idiom "into sinne" indicates Chaucer is concerned with the effect on the reader in the constitution of narrative. Like many authors, Chaucer would be surprised that he is read by so many readers in the wrong way and that his culture is quite so corrupt. For modern authors who may not admit the ethical moment of understanding, this wrong way cannot be considered immoral, just stupid. But in an age when the ethical moment was taken for granted, an author would see that the wrong way was, indeed, wrong. As the author of the *Gawain* postscript wrote, pointedly omitting the "Y" of the Garter Motto: "HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE." Thinking evilly in vicious interpretations is blameworthy (Haines, "Hony soyt" 181).

Ethical criticism of the reader's response entails that the reader can sin. Since fact and value cannot be separated in a full and objective account of any state of affairs, then the state of affairs in and mediated by Chaucer's text must be understood with right judgment of what is going on. One does not know what is going on in the mere physiology of vaginal penetration,

for example, unless one also knows whether it is adultery, rape, passionate, prostituted, beautiful, and so forth. Beauty and virtue as well as truth are part of an "objective" account (Zemach; Macintyre 206). In filling in the indeterminacies of a narrative, moreover, the reader's actual world is implicated. The narrator is presumed to have two eyes not three, for example, even though the text does not say so explicitly; this presumption is made on the basis of the reader's normal, actual world. Similarly, if a reader presumes in a reported instance of revenge that this is quite proper, even though there is no explicit approval in the text, then that says something about the reader's own world from which indeterminacies of the narrative are filled in. And a reader must be responsible for the judgment by which states of affairs in the world are constituted, as this judgment is revealed in the textually mediated constitution of both fiction and history.

This account of ineluctable ethics based on the principle of minimal departure (Haines, "No Ethics, No Text") makes a stronger case for ethical criticism than a principle of psychological identification argued by Wayne Booth: "all stories will produce a practical patterning of desire, so long as I stay with them" (204). On the contrary, this "I" may be disassociated from Wayne Booth. Fiction involves pretense in the role of a pretended listening act to match the role of the implied author's pretended speech act that it is actual history, and so on. Through this necessary pretense, disassociation from vice and wicked desire is always possible. A saint can read any book. And this is just what Booth shows in the latter chapters of *The Company We Keep* as he portrays himself learning to encounter Jane Austen, Mark Twain, D.H. Lawrence, and others in the sanctity of mature, ethical reading. "Sharing the fixed norms of the implied author" (145), who is to be judged as the reader's "friend" (169) and who always wants a narrative in some way to be didactic (152-53), is not necessary for those who disagree with those norms, even though they may be following the story and imagining those norms. Fictional narrative requires imagination and pretense, but not identification.

Focus on the reader's norms as well as the author's shows it is impossible not to be ethical as the reader understands states of affairs in the world and imports this information into the constitution of a narrative according to the principle of minimal departure. It is not only in the subsequent influence of a narrative, how a reader may behave after reading it, but in its very constitution itself that the ethical moment occurs. In the act itself of reading, the reader is already implicated in guilt or steadfast in virtue. As Thomas Aquinas argues, the object of the intellect is both moral and

physical truth, and any subversion of this aim is sinful (*Summa Theologia* 2.2.xv). Thus when we suppress our participation in states of affairs, the object of the intellect assumes a false pretense through which it is difficult to recognize how any narrative could be constituted or morally objectified.

If our reading is understood to have no moral responsibility, it becomes difficult to see what an author like Chaucer could have to be sorry about, except perhaps for having written the texts themselves, now, therefore, to be retracted, because vicious reading can only be the result of a vicious author. So Chaucer is variously explained as having been at the mercy of monks who forced him to retract; or he used a formulaic "Retraction" that is not meant because it is formulaic or applies only to the narrator within *The Canterbury Tales* but not to Chaucer himself; or the "Retraction" is just a literary convention to list Chaucer's works; or life is a pilgrimage that always ends in penance: mediaeval Chaucer may have been sorry for his works, but we do not have to be. Chaucer, however, has not been making a "Retraction" for the works in his list any more than to affirm the rhetorical "retracciouns" that are already in them in each work, the "Retraction" through irony from vain and worldly interpretations consonant with sin, "that sownen into synne." Chaucer would not have been ignorant of these other meanings his "Retraction" would have as merely part of a generic convention (Sayce 243). His sincerity, in fact, may also involve a complicated send up of the retractions that some theologians automatically published as insurance along with whatever they wrote. But such satire need not exhaust Chaucer's intent, for the sincerity, without which it could not be satire, implies the possibility of retraction from such purely facetious retraction.

The sincerity of Chaucer's intent implies that his guilts of translation and "enditynges" in his reader's behaviour are those for which Chaucer is involuntarily at fault. Even where readers are subject to a fair moral test in the rhetoric and fail, damage is done to the moral fabric of society. And when Chaucer's text becomes an occasion of sin, the moral test for subsequent readers will become less and less fair as weak readers are influenced by the increasingly guilty tradition of their culture. Chaucer then becomes guilty of having set an unfair test. Weak readers who are not free not to resist temptation in Chaucer's rhetoric and for whom it is not really a temptation are, nevertheless, subject to a justified reproach and guilty of involuntary sin (so long as the ethical standard of the society does not itself change).

Aside from the theology of original sin, the possibility of involuntary sin is demonstrated by Robert Merrihew Adams in such sins as self-righteousness, racism, and the unjust anger condemned by Jesus (Matthew 5:21-22). Weak readers may be liable to reproach for such involuntary sins committed in constituting the narrative — taking, for example, Chaucer's comment on the Wife of Bath's early sex life "withouten oother compaignye in youthe" (1.461) to refer unambiguously to extra lovers; it does not occur to such thoughtless accusation or prurient sexism that women may be chastely married several times without having other company in youth as some might expect, just as a woman may go out alone "withouten oother compaignye" (Kennedy). Such involuntary, thoughtless reading is subject to reproach: the potential was there for a thoughtful and just reading. Chaucer is not subject to such reproach if his intent is good and doctrine sound, and for doctrinal error due to "unkonnyng" he has already asked mercy. Here one might distinguish involuntary sin from involuntary guilt. Sin requires one's own behaviour, either voluntary or involuntary; guilt may be incurred by the sinful behaviour of others in one's community. It is this guilt which Chaucer suffers. Sin can never be attributed to God; guilt might, if our creation in God's image or the incarnation brings God within the human community. In this distinction between involuntary sin and involuntary guilt, the sense of involuntary must be elaborated to exclude the idea of voluntary guilt. No one wants guilt or sin except in a Manichaean system. Involuntary is supposed to describe the action or preliminary state of being, not the sinfulness or guilt itself.

Chaucer's concern for guilty readers would be enough to explain his use of the word "giltes" in its now more or less obsolete sense of mere "responsibility for an action or event; the [involuntary] 'fault' of (some person)" (*OED*), as when one is guilty of manslaughter. Chaucer is guilty, through the voluntary and involuntary sins of his readers, of an involuntary sin himself by further polluting the moral ecology of his culture. And further, as a member of that culture, he in turn is involuntarily influenced by its pollution and could conceivably come with so many of his readers to approve of the worldly vanity he had intended to revoke through irony. Who can presume to resist the oceanic pressure of culture? "No island is an island." It is not likely Chaucer would forget his own irony, but the spectacle of so many of his readers who did not get it could remind an enlightened poet of how he himself must also be unenlightened in some ways he does not know of, both individually and culturally. If one can see that other people and cultures are sinful in ways they do not know, so probably is one's own,

which one cannot see, while just having one's being embedded in it incurs guilt in a sinful existence, however involuntary. Only in the symbolic desert is a perspective offered outside society from the transcendental sublime to what cannot be known within that culture. In the general guilt of human society, Chaucer recognizes the transmission through himself of involuntary guilt originating somewhere in the original sin and guilt of the Fall.

But the nature of collective guilt is more complex than involuntary fault. In a century when theologians were asking such questions in their Sentences as "whether God could do evil if he wished" (Courtenay 245), one would expect a great poet to intuit the complexities of guilt as they touch on an author and creator as tester. Chaucer's genius would come to ponder his own role as author and creator in ethical tests set for readers many of whom fail and are thus guilty, involving Chaucer in collective guilt as a member of that community sick with guilt. If Chaucer were not a part of his society and culture and could act independently of it and all its failings, he could test others with impunity (if he could find a language to do it in) — just as God could test us without any personal risk of suffering if we were not made in God's image. The final punishment of the compassionate author who permits original sin is that the innocent must suffer. And yet such an author is not innocent of the knowledge that the voluntary act of setting an ethical test may implicate the innocent in collective, involuntary sin, and in its suffering and punishment. Chaucer alone, however, could never bear such guilt. Only in some collective way as in the collective body of Christ, who through sacrifice dies to the society of sin, can such collective guilt be borne; there it can be borne freely in the Way of the Cross, without resentment that the punishment is too great for an individual's particular sin, since self-sacrifice is not payment for a personal debt. The collective sin Chaucer shares in a guilty society of readers is the sin which, after listing his works with "retracciouns" in them, he asks that we pray Christ "for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne" (1087). Chaucer knows that as a tester he risks his readers' voluntary and involuntary sins, especially in his own fourteenth-century society. But he runs this risk voluntarily, like God taking on the sins of the world for our sakes. No wonder Chaucer desires help from God that for his great mercy he forgive him "the synne."

Chaucer thus does not withdraw through his irony from the human condition of sin: he engages it even more forcefully by presenting it for the participation of the reader's judgment. And for those readers who err, guilty readings of narrative and history cannot be denied by trying to annul the historical fact of such readings. Instead, in the "retraccioun" of

différance, one pulls back from the worldly constitution of vanity. It is with this obscurity of "retraccioun" and in his unknowing of the reader's constitution of the narrative that Chaucer portrays the occultation of vanity. He follows the poet's duty, as Barbara Johnson says, "to stand as a guardian of an ignorance that does not know itself, an ignorance that would otherwise be lost" (30). What the reader does not know is imported into the constitution of narrative through the principle of minimal departure (Lewis 45) just as much as what the reader does know: unexamined assumptions and attitudes and virtues and vice are all part of the reader's actual world with which indeterminacies of the narrative are filled in. In the constitution of narrative, it is what we do not *know* we do not know that weaves the tightest web of error. Continual anamnesis in the ethical constitution of a textual narrative, surprises us with an ironic otherness from which we can only retract in the moment of suddenly discovering we are ignorant of it (Johnson 16).

But for those of us whose ethical ignorance in the act of constituting a narrative is not surprise but merely suppressive "power" (Sedgwick 103), it is hard to see what Chaucer is talking about in the "Retraction" if he is not trying to annul works and suppress doctrine that he has now changed his mind about. Such a view has always, however, entailed some confusion. Why would Chaucer ask for forgiveness of his "giltes" namely for "translations and enditynges" just after saying "'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente"? Wherein is the guilt for writing translations and stories intended for our teaching and doctrine? The confusion clears up with the insight that the object of Chaucer's guilt is not Chaucer's writing, but his readers' reading. That is his anxiety "that Christ for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne." The collective sin of his readers is Chaucer's burden. It is not the "translacions and enditynges" themselves that are the object of retraction but the "worldly vanitees" in them — which are present there only ironically. Good readers may continue to read his work exercised in the various "retracciouns" of irony, difficult as that may be except in his saints' legends and homilies, where there is no irony. Chaucer, in the virtue of his complete oeuvre, never intended to be of this "worldly vanitee," and in the Boethian supplication at the end of the "Parson's Tale," he expresses his intent that *good* readers be with him. Yet if doctrine is to be taught in freedom, it must be tested existentially, and if, as is the case with moral doctrine, to fail the test is to sin, what has the author of freedom done! Good teachers of the fallen race of Adam must suffer for the guilt of those who fall. Chaucer's anguish in the abyss of

authorial instruction leaves nothing from which he may retract and nothing left to retract.

Such sophisticated anguish of the author is a far cry from the simple-minded "Retraction" we have attributed to Chaucer in the twentieth century — as if the genius of the Chaucerian oeuvre did not understand the reader is implicated morally in the constitution of textual narrative, as if the narrative is out there, an "object" for which the author alone is morally responsible. For those who take this view of the text, there can only be the meaning of his "Retraction" we have traditionally understood — with "giltes" referring only to the writing about "worldly vanitees." As the diplomatic court poet, Chaucer can use this meaning to protect himself against those who may want his life for writing blasphemous stories. But as the sophisticated creator he is, Chaucer knows that a saint can read any book, that God sees into the depths of Hell, and that in the eyes of God he is himself guiltless where his intention is concerned. It is for those of us who are less than saints that Chaucer is concerned: our moral failures in reading are his anguish. Has he not tempted us too sorely? For all our vicious, uncharitable readings, perhaps we owe him a series of retractions — especially for our reading his "retracciouns" as a single "Retraction."

Dawson College, Montreal

NOTES

¹ The text used is *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). For an analysis of the theology of Thomas Gascoigne's reading of the supplication to the reader as a late repentance and for a thorough review of scholarship on it as the "Retraction" in general, see Douglas Wurtele, "The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Viator* 11 (1980), 335-359.

² Intention declared by Chaucer for both himself and his intended reader cannot be restricted to any technical meaning of intent that would exclude desire and responsibility, for there is no such mediaeval meaning. In his dissertation in progress at McGill University, Robert Myles surveys mediaeval traditions of "intentionality": none excludes the personal agency of desire. Even "first intention," as the mind's conception stretched into (*in tendere*) an object, involves participation of the will, for it is still a form of intention like the "second intention," which clearly involves human choice as the mind's conception stretched into its own conception of the object in terms of genus, species, difference, identity, etc. As modern "naturalist" philosophers argue, ethics and aesthetics cannot be excluded from the identity of objects (and texts) as we conceive them stretching out our minds into their constitution. Hence Chaucer's demand that the reader hearken with a good intent, repeated in *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The House of Fame*, and elsewhere (see below), is an ethical demand of the reader's response, failure in which brings guilt.

³ The *Middle English Dictionary* gives two examples of the word used for physical retraction and only the single one from Chaucer for mental retraction. The editors, begging the question raised by Chaucer's text, translate it only as repudiation or recantation.

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