THE CANTERBURY TALES AND ITS DRAMATIC BACKGROUND

Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of tales that show some particular features totally new in the literary tradition of the period. It has been generally accepted the fact that Chaucer modifies in very important aspects the literary sources at his hand to make a literary work full of realism, humour, irony and dramatic interplay. Even if we compare Chaucer's collection with Boccaccio's we see strong and important differences between the two, being the most relevant of them, as Sklovsky pointed out, the design of the frame (1971: 119-124).

As we know the tales in *Il Deccamerone* are told using a static frame, while those in *The Canterbury Tales* move inside a dynamic one. In the latter the pilgrims, the tellers, travel towards Canterbury and in their very detailed way enjoy themselves with the telling of the tales, as in a game. In *Il Deccamerone* we hear two voices: the author/narrator and the tellers, the Florentine gentlemen and ladies; but in *The Canterbury Tales* we hear several voices: the authorial voice, the narrator's, the pilgrim Chaucer and the rest of the pilgrims. These voices are not merely reporting and narrating, but also arguing among them, discussing about different topics and subjects, and commenting about the excellence or ugliness of the stories, abusing each other, and so on and so forth. The pilgrims are described as individuals as well as types:

> A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
> That fro the tyme that he first began
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and cursteisie. (C.T. 43-46)

everyone in either the inner or the outer audience would be familiar with the typical portrait of the type, and that means that a social and literary conventional pattern is behind the mere lines and words, as Jill Mann showed (1973).

Ricardo Sola, *Selim* 9 (1999): 111—122

From this point of view it seems most difficult to explain the following lines that describe the real knight in the group of people in front of the audience:

> But to tellen yow of his array,
> His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
> Of fustian he wered a gypon
> Al bismotered with his habergeon,
> For he was late ycome from his viage,
> And wente for to doon his pilgrymage. (C.T. 73-78)

All the prilgrims in the General Prologue, the Host and later the author/narrator/pilgrim Chaucer are depicted with these two perspectives. We have a tradition for the first, but ¿do we have one for the second?

Quoting once again Roberth Scholes and Robert Kellog in their book *The Nature of Narrative* they state:

> All art is traditional in that artists learn their craft from their predecessors to a great extent. They begin by conceiving the possibilities open to them in terms of the achievements they are acquainted with. They may add to the tradition, opening up new possibilities for their successors, but they begin, inevitably within a tradition (4).

It seems that the assumption that any writer belongs to a tradition is an unquestionable axiom in literary criticism and textual analysis. Aristotle said so in his *De Poetica* and Horace in *Arte Poetica* when in their analysis of epic poetry and tragedy they proposed Homer as a model for other writers. Later in time T.S.Eliot insisted on this debt of the individual artists to a received and given tradition when he stated in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" that a situation of a cultural and literary vacuum is not possible in creative writing. Tradition always exists and any poet or artist must have this "historical sense", being the seminal difference the acceptance or the rejection, and so modification of such tradition (49-52).

Once we have considered that there is a tradition surrounding or preceeding the writer we can repeat our previous question about Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*: which tradition do they belong to? or which tradition are they following?. Many years ago, as I have pointed above, Jill Mann describ-

ed in her book *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (1973) the catalogue that stayed as a background for the depiction of the pilgrims in the "General Prologue", while Claes Schaar in *The Golden Mirror* (1967) developed a systematic study of descriptive literary techniques at the back; Bryan & Dempster in their recollection *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (1958) studied and showed the debts of Chaucer's work to other authors and to a classical and medieval narrative tradition; D.W. Robertson in his *A Preface to Chaucer* (1969) explored the learned and mythological tradition in which Chaucer was inserted, and W.W. Curry in *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (1960) the scientific one, etc., just to mention a few.

Very recently Piero Boitani and Jill Mann in their anthology *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion* (1987) have developed with the help of other chaucerians scholars more modern approaches and, let us say, posmodern analysis studying Chaucer's works and retaking the same facts and evidences pointed out in previous studies, some of which I have already quoted. But in some way, I think, they miss the chance - specially when dealing with *The Canterbury Tales* - and the opportunity to explain the reason for such "rich individual variety and interplay", as they seem to be repeating old concepts, ideas and themes in more modern terms and expressions. Let us have a brief look to some of the contributions in the anthology which more clearly deal with the topic I am proposing here.

Benson in his article " *The Canterbury Tales*: Personal drama or experiment in poetic variety" settles his point with a well-known and right statement:

> For many, the clearest signals of the variety of the *Canterbury Tales* are the sharply differentiated tellers and their intricate relationships before, after, and sometimes during the tales. No other story-collection has a frame that is so lively and dynamic (93).

This, in fact, supports his view that the collection of tales reveals a sharply interplay among a group of speakers/tellers, but next the question is to choose between personal drama or experiment in poetic variety to justify it. It seems that Benson is in favour of dramatic interplay and so he brings Kittredge's much quoted definition of this design and develops what he calls "dramatic theory":

> Kittredge argued that the individual tales are not told in Chaucer's own voice, but that each is a dramatic expression of the personality of its particular teller: "The Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the story, but *vice versa*. Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons - they are more or less comparable, in this regard, to the soliloquies of Hamlet or Iago or Macbeth (94).

Once Kittredge and Benson have stated that the tale is an extension of the personality, ideas and behaviour of the teller they inmediately think of character, not type, and in order to explain what character is they refer as a way of example to Hamlet, Iago and Macbeth - we may say to a literay tradition -. The important fact to notice here is that none of the scholars link the "acting and doing" of the tellers to a narrative tradition for there is none. Further on Benson goes on saying:

> Given such diverse and energetic portraits it is all too easy to imagine *The Canterbury Tales* as fully developed and psychologically complex characters, like those we know from realistic novel or popular film (96).

On the one hand the dynamism and complexity of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales* take the scholars to the field of performance, to the field of film, as well as to the idea of character as it is seen in realistic fiction. On the other, Benson does not explain the needs and reasons why Chaucer moved from a static and "energetic portraits" into "complex characters", so establishing an opposition between passive portraits and active characters. Finally Benson adds:

> Scholars have even argued that Chaucer must have had real-life models and suggested specific names, but the latest studies confirm what some earlier readers understood - the *General Prologue* describes types rather than specific individuals (96).

Following Aristotle's rules a character first must be life-like and so in connection with real known people, and second a character must be a universal, a type. This takes the thread of our analysis to the topic of realism, something that is used by many Chaucerians scholars to support the idea of Chaucer's modernity and originality. And its is true, but let us have a look at Bloom-

field's essay "Chaucerian realism". Again Bloomfield starts with a general assesment:

> There is good reason why realism in general is such a popular subject in literary theory and criticism, for in one way or another one might say that it is central to any discussion of literature even art. As the ancient theory of imitation or mimesis testifies, art must claim to be real in some sense if it is to be taken at all seriously. The whole problem lies, of course, in what sense or senses art is real (180).

Aristotle's concept of mimesis, as we know, is not concerned with metaphysical thought - as may in Plato - but with the factual evidence that men are naturally imitative, they enjoy imitating and learn by imitation. So the content of literature is not everything that can be imitated, but its effect is *mediated* by the manner of imitation or representation, that is to say, its form. We do not simply react to what we are shown but rather to how we are shown it. Then Bloomfield touches upon another important aspect, very much studied by formalist critics in the 60s:

> A basic realism in narrative is concerned with the establishment of an air of truth or plausibility to a tale. Narratives use such strategies to avoid the accusation of lying. This type of realism may be called "authenticating realism" and is to be found in one way or another in almost all narratives (181)

A piece of literature is a thing in its own right, different from those other things it imitates or represents, and it is the manner of imitation what determines the kind of realism in art. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* there are two basic authenticating devices: the dream-vision pattern that helps to establish the distance between dream and reality, in the opposite way as Bloomfield suggests, and the individual interplay of the pilgrims, as Kittredge explains it, but considered as a "dramatis personae" not as narrative characters.

We see how the theoretical frame that the contributors to Boitani and Mann's *Companion* use is based on criteria and judgements not radically different from the ones already known to us, nor do they completely explain

from the point of view of a literary tradition the rising of this new individual characterization.

When the British dramatist Anne Devlin came to the University of Alcalá de Henares (1994), she was talking about her last play *After Easter* (1994), and she declared:

> "I love working in the theatre, in the space of the theater, because it's very different. It's very close to standing up in a public square and telling a story. I have to say that the origins of *After Easter* began with me standing up in a music room in Corpus Christi College, in Oxford, and reading the play that I was beginning to write to a group of visiting oversea academic drama teachers and students. From that audience experience of them listening to the story I was telling I decided I was able to explore that in relationship to the audience."

Then she added: "I come from an oral story-telling tradition and I always describe myself as a storyteller. Even in theatre." The recognition of the dramatist that a play has a narrative component gives us way to think that a narrative may have a theatrical component too. It is the same idea that André Helbó, quoting Roland Barthes, points out when he explains how the process of "representation", which is thought of as a peculiar of drama — i. e. a dramatic process of representation — also works when we read a story, a narrative or a fiction:

> La conciencia de la representación se incluye en el origen del hecho estético. Dicha comprensión se halla históricamente asociada a la tradition narrativa (41). (the awareness of representation is included in the origin of aesthetic fact. Such way of understanding has been historically associated to narrative tradition).

It is important to emphasize that both Helbó and Barthes are referring to the process of "reading" as a process in which the reader represents (perfoms we may say) in an imaginary stage built in their mind the geographical environment and the features of the characters as they are depicted in the story. In my opinion and following that argument we can conclude that the reverse operation is acceptable too: the writer imagines, represents and performs in

an imaginary stage built in his mind the plot and, then, expresses it in narrative sequence.

One of the most important problems we face in modern literary history is when we try to explain the artistic innovations of the past in terms of contemporary critical criteria. So that when dealing with character in the Middle Ages we inevitably pass through the conceptions drawn by the Ranaissance writers and most important the romantic idea of individuality and the modernist and postmodernist conflict between subject and art.

There is nevertheless a basic point I want to state and is the fact that subject and identity in the Middle Ages, and specially in the XIVth century, appeared as a result of the development of the economical and social structures which primed a social relationship based on the private enterprise and free will of the subject against a collective pattern of thinking and believing imposed upon the individuals. The cultural and literary expressions had to accomodate to this social and economic condition and frame; there was a literary subject because there was first an economical one.

Although Dante in *La divina commedia* deals with the subject's understanding in a historical and specific time, Langland in *Piers Plowman* takes subjectivity as one of his topics, though it is a religious identity that shows the struggle between the inner and the outer, and then the struggle against hierarchy and dogma, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the knight identity is unveiled when his private decisions make him responsible for his sins, moral and knightly, and his repentance, in Chaucer as Patterson says, character is the result of a conjunction of the specific and the general:

> It (Dryden) has also assumed that the key to his meaning resides in the proper understanding of his characters: how we interpret *Troilus and Criseyde* will be determined by how we understand the three protagonists; and *The Canterbury Tales* are habitually read as indexed to the ethical register of their tellers. In fact, the controversies that have traditionaly preoccupied Chaucer criticism have focused not on the legitimacy of this procedure but rather on the terms of its practice. On the one hand is a self-proclaimed "historicism" that insists on the priority of stylistic and iconographic traditions, rhetorical programs, and a required exemplary meaning; on the other a "criticism" that privileges mimetic accuracy and commonsense psychology. In both cases

> Chaucerian character is seen as a conjunction of the specific (whether derived from stylistic imitation, rhetorical precept, or empirical observation) and the general (whether taken to be authoritative truths or universal human nature). (15)

but Patterson still collides with the same ideas he wants to criticize and returns once more to a kind of thematic - subject vs history - level which does not explain the stylistic design of *The Canterbury Tales*. Surely it is Chaucer who better expresses this dialectical tension between subject and history, between the inner and the outer-self, between canon and parody in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* choosing dramatic dialogue and theatrical performance to represent this conflict, and so making the character, the subject, the "dramatis personae" more relevant than story and narrative in front of the audience:

> And whan that he was out at dore, anon
> He planed awey the names evrychon
> That he beforn had written in his tables;
> He served hem with nyfles and with fables.
> " Nay, ther thou lixt, thou Somonour!" quod the Frere
> "Pees", quod oure Hoost, "for Cristes mooder deere!
> Tel forth thy tale, and spare it nat at al."
> "So thryve I," quod this Somonour, "so I shal!" (C.T. 1755-1764)

In the Middle Ages there was one only possible definition of character, both in tragedy and epic, and it followed the features described by Aristotle and Horace. Although Aristotle conceives of action as more important than character in tragedy and comedy he also thinks that epic narrative is inferior to drama in this process of imitation or "mimesis", so that it is in drama where character and action are better developed. There is, however, one important distinction to bare in mind: fable is the combination of incidents, and character is what makes us ascribe certain moral qualities to the agents. In the same way character in a play is what reveals the moral purpose of the agents. To put it in other words character is what unveils psychological complexity, i.e., individual identity versus individual type. Sklovsky says, "… probablemente, el carácter, tal como lo comprendemos nosotros, surge como resultado de la contraposición del hombre corriente al "personaje" (… surely, character as we understand it, arises as a result of the opposition between

common man and the individual", and he goes "… aquí, en la percepción de la diferencia empieza a crearse el carácter" (… here, in our perception of the difference character appears)(128). Horace goes even further when he says that characters must be suitable for the genre, and the question, once again, is: what kind of genre do the characters in *The Canterbury Tales* belong to?

There is not a specific genre, a particular literary tradition to refer to, and, in some sense, to support "authenticating realism", since saying that "Chaucer had real-life models" is to miss the point twice: first insisting upon the obvious i.e. that realism in literature always means looking at real life, and second forgetting that literary patterns and forms can also be models for other literary works. So in *The Canterbury Tales* the combination of the specific and the general, the life-like individual and the type was possible through the contextual and intertextual reference to the only one literary expression that used "mimesis" and character as "dramatis personae", the medieval theatre. To support this pose two important clues are given, one by Tydeman when he comments some aspects of "closet theatres" and quotes:

> Richard Axton suggests that this mode of separation between actors and narrator would mean that the cast (probably professional players) would not need to learn complicated Latin speeches, simply improvising to the narrator's story-line, while the learned author or narrator avoided the stigma of too close an association with the acting fraternity (27-28).

Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* having in mind a stage, i.e., interplay of narrator and actors. The other clue is given by Hans-Jürgen Diller when in his paper presented in the SELIM Annual Conference held in Cordoba showed intertextuality in action between medieval stage and medieval painting and glass-working:

> The drama, to which I want to turn now, is a richer medium that the ones considered so far, because it combines word and image. The image, moreover, is a living image…Like the other verbal media, it can represent speech (which the pictorial media cannot). But over and above the verbal and the pictorial media, it can represent action iconically as developing in time(51).

Diller sees the interaction between drama and the pictorial media as a kind of process in which the former acts as a model for the latter, so that when the medieval glass-worker builds a biblical scene in the gothic glass window of the church he looks at theatrical representation not to biblical narrative. It is not surprising, then, that Derek Brewer (1974) pointed out the paralelism between the design of the tales and the design of a Gothic cathedral, each tale being the equivalent to one of the scenes represented in the gothic glass windows of the church. We readers realize the truth of that when we see that Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, as the narrative proceeds, is showing more and more interest in "theatrical interplay" and less in the telling of the story, as it happens when we reach the prologues to "The Manciple's Tale" and "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale"

There is no time now to enter deeper into the particular analysis and study of the *Canterbury Tales* as a peformance. It is enough to say that the realistic details and features described in them belong to the world of theatre more than to a specific narrative tradition. To put it in other way, Chaucer is thinking of a stage when he describes the Tabard Inn, and of theatrical characters when he describes the pilgrims. Chaucer is following the "closet theatre" pattern, with a narrator and a mime, all of them in the stage being in turn protagonists and audience. Even more, when Chaucer uses humour and irony is taking advantage of the parodic element, explained by Aristotle and Bajtín as a constitutive element of comedy in front of tragedy, as a constitutive element of the popular against the established, courtly literary taste.

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