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DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART OF PORTRAITURE IN CHAUCER'S *GENERAL PROLOGUE*

By CHARLES A. OWEN, JR.

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle you al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it seemed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne. (A41)

Ralph Baldwin, in his very fine discussion of "characterization", tries to derive from this passage a set of categories for complete analysis of the Prologue portraits.¹ "Condicoun" becomes the equivalent of the rhetoricians' *notatio*, "the interior or moral portrayal"; "whiche" represents *effictio*, the physical make-up; "degree" is status; and "array" clothing. He then draws up a table listing the number of items in each portrait devoted to each category. These results, though suggestive, are frequently misleading. We learn for instance that the Knight has only nine entries for condicioun and his son the Squire fifteen. If the many physical activities of the Squire qualify as *notatio*, where are we to place the campaigns of his father, all but one of them religious? Should the Knight's fine horses figure in the rank or the array column? And what do we make of the word "shaply" used of the Guildsmen, who in Baldwin's table have no entry for *effictio*? Baldwin, I think, comes closer to the mark when he speaks of Chaucer's "technique of suggestiveness and contrapuntal detail".² Physical detail almost always has moral import; the overt moral comment has its literal meaning qualified by context. The portraits avoid the hard-and-fast categories implied in the Baldwin table; they avoid system of every kind. In the relaxed conversational tone of the introduction, "al the condicioun . . . so as it semed me" applies to the Impressionistic nature of the whole portrait; and "whiche they weren and of what degree" means quite literally vocation and rank. The statement does promise a portrait for each pilgrim, a task Chaucer gave himself only after experiment with a number of the descriptions, a task he did not live to complete. The study of Chaucer's art in the portraits will reveal a change in his approach to the task, a development of new techniques, and an increasingly critical attitude to the society he was attempting to describe.

The art of Chaucer's portraits in the Prologue is a whole new art. There had been nothing like it in the past, not even a suggestion of it in his own previous efforts at *descriptio*. Once developed, the art proved distinctive. Portraits in the Chaucerian

manner declare themselves at once, whether directed at political targets in the twentieth century or functioning as part of the Miller's narrative in the fourteenth.³ Curiously not all of Chaucer's descriptions of people in the *Canterbury Tales* qualify. Alisoun and Virginia are not only poles apart as characters. The *descriptio*es that seek to give them life are similarly distinct. On the one hand Virginia, victim of the nefarious Apius's plot, falls victim likewise to rhetorical convention and her function in the tale. Nature as supreme artist boasts in a long *prosopopeia* of making Virginia "to the worshipe of my lord". The subsequent description of her qualities does little but prepare her for her role in the story. She becomes almost a caricature of chastity. Alisoun, while similarly performing a limited function in the tale, reflects the narrator's delight, communicated through taste, smell, sight, touch, hearing and even a suggestion of some of the kinesthetic senses - "Long as a mast and upright as a bolt". A sensual delight breaks through every effort to focus on her demure clothing, the girl's physical appeal irresistibly seductive to reader as to author.

Stimulus for the new art was inherent in what Chaucer was setting out to do - though he could have had, I think, only a partial vision of what his efforts were leading up to. Fictions within a fiction, yes, and the variety of characters to justify the variety of tales, but a character who would grow beyond her portrait and persuade him to give her another tale? The immediate task involved the fifteen, nineteen, or twenty-four portraits,⁴ one after another, and the development of the techniques that would make them sufficiently interesting to hold an audience, and memorable enough to be recalled later.

And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne (A42)

Does the redundant "first" betray Chaucer's sense of the challenge he had given himself? Is the "a" of "a knyght", both in this line and the next, a first step in the direction of solution?

Cicero, Horace, and Matthew of Vendome had asserted the importance of a name in the *descriptio* of a person. Horace even went so far as to recommend a well-known name - an Achilles, a Ulysses, a Priam, or a Nestor, and Matthew had added the possibility of an *interpretatio* like the one Chaucer provided for St Cecilia.⁶ "A Knyght there was" flies in the face of this counsel - and sets up one of the governing principles of the Chaucerian portrait - that it should build toward an identity rather than assert it. A Knyght is indefinite. After the specifications of the portrait, many of them themselves proper names, he will become *the* Knight. But he will still be capable of development, of adding to his identity, as he does when he surprises us with his interruption of the Monk. Only two of the pilgrims have names in their portraits. One of these comes at the end (the Friar) and, providing the rhyme word for the first line of the next portrait, survives perhaps from the plan for three nun's priests rather than the one we meet up with in the B² fragment? The other pilgrim is called Madame Eglentyne, though as mother superior and bride of Christ she must also have had another

name. That we never learn what it is paradoxically contributes to her identity.

But we have skipped ahead of the Knight's portrait with this consideration of names. The tacit understanding for descriptions of people that had developed in the middle ages held that the physical should precede the moral, *effictio* before *notatio*, and *effictio* ordered from the top down. Chaucer carefully avoids this ordering not only in the Knight's portrait but in all the others as well.⁸ Instead, he starts by telling us the general impression the Knight makes. Worthyness, the list of qualities associated with chivalry, the use of the negative superlative⁹ "no man ferre", above all the consistency of his "love" - "fro the tyme that he first bigan / To riden out" - all these come to us in a plain, conversational tone, with concentration on the information rather than the style, versatile, even agile in its variations of word order,¹⁰ but with none of the periodic formality and metaphoric point lavished on the spring, in the opening lines of the Prologue. This conversational tone confirms the context given us in the introduction, the pilgrimage as a personal experience, the group of people "sondry folk, by aventure yfalle / In felawshipe," Chaucer learning of them in much the same way he is informing us of them, impressionistically, without allowing system to dominate.

The relationship Chaucer establishes with us, his audience, is similarly informal. He can address us directly to explain his procedure as he does both before and after the set of descriptions -

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me . . . (A39)

and

Now have I toold you soothly, in a clause,
Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause
Why that assembled was this compaignye
In Southwerk . . . (A718)
But now is tyme to yow for to telle
How that we baren us that ilke nyght. (A72)
But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
Though that I pleyedly speke in this mateere . . . (A727)
Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde . . .
(A745)

And he can remind us of the relationship, as he does in the transition to *effictio* in the Knight's portrait, "But, for to tellen yow of his array . . ." and in the first-person qualifications and reminders scattered through the other portraits, "I gesse", "as I was ware", "I seigh", "I undertake", "I dorste swere", "But wel I woot", and so on.

The list of battles featured in the Knight's portrait provides

a paradigm for Chaucer's arrangement of any set of particulars. The clue for a meaning precedes the list in the line "As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse", it repeats itself in the geography of the battles, in the negative superlative, "No Cristen man so ofte . . .", in the "foughten for oure feith", and in the exceptional "Agayn another hethen . . .". The list is making its point in the noting of the battle *not* for our faith and at the same time winning our confidence in the probity of a report that does not avoid anomaly or contradiction. The order for the battles runs from the most famous to the most recent (reflected in the preeminence of the knight at the "tables of honor"), to the first, to a filling in of the geographical circle in a counterclockwise direction, to the most prominent area (the Grete See) of his activities, to the number of great battles he had participated in, to individual exploits, to the final exceptional expedition in a war between heathens. Few readers, even fewer listeners, would follow this shifting rationale for order; at the same time few would fail to sense the qualified meaning of the list, the importance of the battles, the fact that the list is neither entirely random nor entirely systematic, and, in addition to the religious motivation, the lifetime commitment. The last exceptional item picks up in "This ilke worthy knyght . . ." the earlier thematic dominant with its positive element in love and goes on to add an important distinction:

And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
 And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
 And of his port as meeke as is a mayde. (A69)

Two things set off this segment of the portrait. We get the only logical subordination in the thirty-six lines and the only overt *comparatio*. Whatever the meaning of worthy, and I would suggest that "sovereyn prys" implies more than just bravery, certainly the meaning of "wys" cannot be limited to prudence. The "Of his porte as meeke as is a mayde" suggests the quiet confidence of a man whose battle-exploits have had no coarsening effect. The wisdom of such a man is not just negative. Here we have an example of what Geoffrey of Vinsauf enthusiastically recommends - *Collatio occulta*. No grammatical sign compares the Knight to the run of men we loosely call worthy. But the comparison is implicitly there. Unlike most, this worthy man the Knight is wise.¹¹

As if aware of the combination of negative and positive elements in what he has just been telling us, Chaucer culminates his praise of the Knight with two striking statements. In starkest contrast, four negatives prepare the ground for the single positive "he was" and the three intensely meaningful adjectives that ensue:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
 In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
 He was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght. (A72)

The negatives throughout the portrait have had a positive superlative "sentence". They help to project the idea of "non-pareil",

wrongly applied in my judgement to the whole set of pilgrims, but certainly relevant to the knight.¹² Research has found historical parallels for segments of the knight's career.¹³ It has failed, however, to establish an historical identity. What we have here experienced is the building up of an identity that has no fellow. However hard to believe the virtues of such a man may be, his uniqueness at least conforms to our deepest knowledge of people.

The portrait has conveyed some of its meaning indirectly. In turning to *effictio* Chaucer does not abandon *notatio*. The very brevity has implications. It is not the physical presence that has weight. The contrast between horses and man, the condition of his clothing confirm the negatives and positives of the *notatio*. "But he was nat gay . . .". The observation will have relevance to the portrait of his son. The implications of contrast need not redound to the discredit of either man. The outermost element in the knight's portrait, a bismotering of his "gypon", consecrates his warfare to pilgrimage with no stain of vanity. The inadvertence is only part of this multi-faceted paradox.

Sound patterns support the informality of the language in the Knight's portrait. The rhymes are unobtrusive and only occasionally does alliteration lend emphasis, as in the b's and f's in 60-4, the negative n's in 71-2, and the "worthy-wys", "meeke-mayde", and "good-gay" pairings towards the end of the portrait. At the very start of the Squire's description we sense an important set of differences. The l's of "lovyere" and "lusty" prepare for the line "With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse" (81) and for the later

Of his stature he was of evene lengthe,
And wonderly delyvere, and of greet strengthe. (A84)

The shocking *comparatio* "as they were leyd in presse", the first of four in the 22 lines, the shorthand *effictio*, starting at the top, which turns out to be only a part of the *effictio*, the special vocabulary, "lovyere, crulle, evene" (meaning average, but with a positive resonance), "wonderly delyvere", alert us to the rapid shifts, the sparkle and movement, that imitate almost without hope of catching their elusive subject. "Chyvachie" contrasts with the chivalry of the Knight's portrait, an expedition rather than a life-long commitment, the whole completed in a single line, evaluated in another, "And born hym weel, as of so litel space", and dedicated not "to our lord" but, reprising "lovyere": "In hope to stonden in his lady grace" (A88). "Embrouded" signals a return to *effictio*, to the clothing that should indeed follow physique. But the "was he", the "al ful of freshe floures", and the climactic "He was as fressh as is the month of May" suggest that, as with the Knight but in reverse, *effictio* is *notatio*, surfaces, hair-do and clothing, are the "man". The list of his talents comes to us as activities, as verbs, and throws light on the line, "Syngyng he was, or floytyng *al the day*" - songs and music perforce of his own composition - and accompanying such other activities as jousting, portraying, and writing. The nights are also full, but with a more single-minded activity:

So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale. (A98)

The hyperbole of meaning is matched by hyperbole of rhyme, the wit of the narrator emerging as amusement and enjoyment rather than condemnation. We expect the next line

Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable (A99)

to be directed to his lady, but it is surprisingly transformed by the final line to a wider and more disciplined "sentence". We are reminded that father and son ride together on pilgrimage, in communication with each other as the Franklin and his son turn out not to be. The sense for the Squire of potential in many directions, reflected in the portrait by the sudden shifts, the plethora of verbs, contrasts with the integrated achievement of the knight, his values clear, his priorities long established, his life and his portrait deliberate and disciplined.

I hesitate to suggest that the paradox of contrast and communion between father and son was not Chaucer's original intention. But the first lines of the Yeoman's portrait suggest contiguity with the Knight's:

A Yeman hadde he and servantz namo
At that time, for hym liste ride so. (A102)

And two later lines complete a contrast in the way the Knight and the Prioress choose to ride on pilgrimage:

Another Nonne with hire hadde she,
That was hire chapeleyne, and preestes thre . . . (A164)

That the second nun and the three priests were at one point to receive no portrait identities, with the three priests named to distinguish them from one another; that the five churls were once to have been simply listed; that when Chaucer decided to tell us "al the condicioun of ech" of his pilgrims, he substituted monk and friar for two of the priests, having previously blurred the distinction between Knight's and Prioress's entourages by adding the Squire - evidence for all of this will not be conclusive. But I think it is worth presenting in its imperfection, because it perhaps outweighs evidence against and because it contributes to a consistent explanation for all the kinds of evidence the *Canterbury Tales* presents us with. This evidence includes the reassignment of tales, the number of pilgrims in the group, the number of tales to be told, the geographical references, the days of the journey, the different endings envisaged, the fragments in which the tales come to us, the retraction with its strange way of referring to both the *Parson's Tale* and the *Canterbury Tales*, the early manuscripts, the state of the text.¹⁴

Some of the elements in the Squire's portrait suggest a later stage in the development of portrait technique than the Knight's. Confidence with language, a willingness to risk decoration emerge especially in the use of the simile. When Chaucer started the long

set of portraits, he recognized that amplification was not the quality to be sought, that verbal elaboration of all kinds was to be avoided. Distinction rather than similarity was the point to be stressed; hence the resort at first to negatives ("no man ferre", "no Cristen man so oft", "he nevere yet no vileynie ne seyde") and the very sparse use of simile. These negatives frequently qualify as the *comparatio occulta* recommended by Geoffrey of Vinsauf. The form that might be termed a negative superlative is particularly apt to occur in the portraits of the most unusual pilgrims, the non-pareils like the Friar, the Man of Law, the Franklin, the Shipman, the Physician, the Wife of Bath, the Parson, the Miller, the Reeve, the Summoner and the Pardoner. The first one used of the Knight gives the typical form: "And thereto hadde he riden, no man ferre". The incidence of the negative superlative relates to substance rather than a developing technique; it occurs twice in the Knight's portrait and intermittently throughout the others, including both the Parson's and the Pardoner's. The figures on the simile suggest a quite different situation. They are as follows:

Knights 1 in 36 lines	as is a mayde
Squire 4 in 22 lines	as they were leyde in presse
	as it were a meede
	as is the month of May
	than doth a nyghtyngale
Yeoman 1 in 17 lines	as pointe of spere
Prioress 1 in 45 lines	as glas
Monk 8 in 43 lines	as dooth the chapel belle
	likned til a fissh
	as fowel in flight
	as any glas
	as he hadde been enoynt
	as a forneys of a leed
	as a forpyned goost
	as is a berye
(note "nat worth an oystre" and "yaf nat of that text a pulled hen".)	
Friar 8 in 64 lines	as the flour-de-lys
	as a champioun
	as it were right a whelp
	lyk a cloisterer
	as is a povre scoler
	lyk a maister or a pope
	as a belle out of the presse
	as doon the sterres in the frosty
	nyght
Merchant 0 in 15 lines	
Clerk 1 in 24 lines	as is a rake
Sergeant of the Lawe 0	
in 15 lines	
Frankleyn 2 in 30 lines	as is the dayesye
	as morne milk
Guildsmen 0 in 18 lines	
Doctour of Phisik 0 in	
34 lines	

- Wife of Bath 1 in 32 lines as is a bokeler or a targe
 lines
 Parson O in 52 lines
 though "For if gold ruste, what shal iren do?" and the
 numerous references to shepherds, flocks, and wolves
 represent extended metaphor, Baldwin (*op.cit.* p.46) calls
 these "expanded similes". Note too "spiced" conscience.
 Ploughman O in 13 lines
 Miller 4 in 22 lines as any sowe or fox
 as though it were a spade
 as the brustles of a sowes erys
 as a greet forneys
- Manciple O in 20 lines
 Reeve 4 in 36 lines lyk a preest biforn
 ylyk a staf
 as of the deeth
 as is a frere aboute
- Summoner 6 in 46 lines Fyr-red (I have counted this since
 the meaning is red as fire, but not
 "cherubynnes").
 as a sparwe
 as blood
 as he were wood
 as kan the pope (see Friar)
 as it were for an ale-stake
- Pardoner 6 in 46 lines was nevere trompe of half so greet a
 soun
 as wex
 as dooth a strike of flex
 as an hare
 as hath a goot
 as it were late shave.

The marked increase in the incidence of similes for four of the five
 churls and for all three of the possibly inserted portraits would
 seem to be beyond the realm of chance.¹⁵ This increase holds for
 the portraits in the three fabliaux of fragment A:

- Nicholas 2 in 31 lines lik a mayden
 as is the roote of lycorys or any
 cetewale
- Alysoun 15 in 38 lines as any wezele
 as morne milk (see the Franklin)
 col-blak
 as any sloo
 than is the newe perejonette tree
 than the wolle is of a wether
 than in the Tour the noble yforged
 newe
 As any swalwe sittyng on a berne
 as any kid or calf folwyng his dame
 as bragot or the meeth
 Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or
 heeth

Absolom 4 in 27 lines

as is a joly colt
 as is a mast
 as is a bolt
 as is the boos of a bokeler
 as the gold
 as a fanne large and brode
 as goos
 as is the blosme upon the rys.

Symkin the Miller, his
 wife and daughter 5 in
 52 lines

as any pecok
 as an ape
 as is a pye
 as water in a dich
 as glas

Perkyn Revelour 3 in
 34 lines

as goldfynch in the shawe
 as a berye
 as is the hyve ful of hony sweete,

It might well be argued that the number of similes in these portraits reflects the proportion devoted to *effictio*, that similes, especially the briefest and most conventional, are more apt to be used of physical detail. Yet the Yeoman's portrait, all *effictio*, has only a single simile; the Guildsmen's and the Shipman's have none. The portraits of the Prioress and the Wife of Bath resemble the Squire's in that they contain a vivid series of physical images. Yet their portraits, much longer than the Squire's, have only a single simile each. Not just the incidence but the quality of the similes varies. The "sharp as point of spere" of the Yeoman's portrait, the "eyen greye as glas" of the Prioress's have the effect of the commonplace. But the "hat / As brood as is a bokeler or a targe" suggests the Wife of Bath's aggressive defences; it is the first of the similes to have resonance for the character. The final three similes of the Squire's portrait, images from nature applied to the artificial, reach a climax in the nightingale, whose song as well as his wakefulness applies. The combination of negative and simile in the Friar's portrait again breaks new ground.

For ther he was nat lyk a cloysterer
 With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler . . . 260

These negative similes add to the images of poverty explicitly rejected by Huberd.

For unto swich a worthy man as he
 Acorded nat, as by his facultee
 To have with sike lazars acqueyntaunce.
 It is nat honest, it may nat avaunce,
 For to deelen with no swich poraille . . . 247

The negative similes help to project the ironic absurdity of this friar's attitudes. A series of linked similes projects the hard animal vulgarity of the Miller; a similarly linked set leads up to

the conjectural metaphor of the Pardoner's portrait:

I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare 691

Certain other features that distinguish some of the "late" portraits suggest the widening range of artistic possibilities as Chaucer worked on them. For instance the Manciple's portrait that has no similes shares with the Monk's the "mock-rhetorical" question, the question whose rhetorically compelled answer is not only wrong but mocks the kind of life that suggests it.

Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace
That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace
The wisdom of an hepe of lerned men? (A575)

The *heap* of lerned men even imitates the Manciple's contempt for the kind of learning his more than thirty "maistres" have, impractical, out of its element in his world of victuals. At the same time he distinguishes the twelve he can boast of to other underlings, great men in the kingdom, yet part of the "heap" he can dupe:

And yet this Manciple sette hir aller cappe (A585)

This association of the mock rhetorical question with the Pilgrim's tone of voice occurs even more markedly in the Monk's portrait. With the Manciple, apart from the "hepe" with its contempt, only the insistence on the skills of the "duszeyne", continuing beyond reason, usurping in fact half the portrait, suggests finally that we are in contact with his habits of thought, perhaps even listening to this furtive little man.

There can be no doubt with the Monk. His domineering voice establishes itself before the mock-rhetorical questions:

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees, -
That is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre. (A.182)

The questions themselves have the same aggressive tone mockingly picked up by the narrator in a putative dialogue, the Monk's rationalized self-justifications reduced to absurdity:

And I seyde his opinion was good.
What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloistre alwey to poure,
Or swynken with his handes, and labour
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved! (A188)

The rhetoric implies a negative and a positive answer to the two

questions. Reason compels a reversal - the Monk should and the world shouldn't.

Whether we believe that such a conversation could actually have taken place without alerting the Monk, we can hardly see the narrator as unaware of the mockery in his questions.¹⁶ The details all too clearly point up the Monk's anti-monasticism, the conversion of the cloister to the secular good life. In the overt approval of the Monk - as in the later one of the Friar

Ther nas no man nowher so virtuous (A251)

- Chaucer is giving an extreme demonstration of the way value words acquire meaning from context. Good and virtuous not only mean their opposites. They expose much more effectively than condemnation the moral squalor and the burden it entails. The Friar's efforts at self-justification, insinuating and seductive, the Summoner's mouthing of Latin and the lame joke with which he reassured "good felawes" in his vapid tavern society, the Pardoner's extravagant hawking of his relics, and the Parson's outspoken firmness with himself and others, culminate what had been developing throughout the series, the extent to which the particulars presented as constituting the pilgrim's life establish the moral level rather than any overt judgment.¹⁷ Only once does Chaucer resort to direct criticism; his giving the lie to the Summoner collapses, it regresses from what appears to be the spiritual death of excommunication to the mere power of the church to issue writs of imprisonment, the very power that gives the Summoner influence over the "yonge girles of the diocise".

The mock rhetorical question, the voice of the pilgrim, the moral comedy of praise for scoundrels, put emphasis on the narrator's communication with the audience. They alert us to the indirections, to the many different ways we receive information and to the responsibility we have to catch nuances and do the evaluation ourselves. They culminate what had begun with the *a*-ness of the Knight, with the reversal of expectations in the *notatio* preceding the *effictio*, with the avoidance of a predictable pattern in each of the portraits. Chaucer keeps addressing us directly and assuming a sophistication on our part capable of handling ambiguity and indirection.

The poet, as reader of his own verses, was accustomed to performance before an audience. As a poet, he was in part entertainer, in part teacher, in part autobiographer; he was a different "person" from when he served the king as diplomat in France or when he kept the books as Controller of Customs. The fiction he adopted in the *Canterbury Tales* permitted him a richer range of styles than even the *Parlement of Fowles*. There the birds were representative of their kinds and limited to a brief, undemanding appearance. Here he kept discovering new ways of exploiting the fiction. Robert Payne saw the stylistics of some of the tales as showing Chaucer's poetry "at its most determinedly experimental".¹⁷ The *descriptions* in the Prologue were from the beginning experimental. In no way were they more so than in the doubly complex relationships between Chaucer and the pilgrims he claimed to have observed and between

Chaucer and the audience he envisaged at one point as turning the pages and choosing what to read. The enfranchisement of all three - of the characters in his fiction whom he could describe and even mock but not control, of himself as poet with the possibilities for experiment in style and genre wider than in any other poem he had written, of the audience whom he forced, especially in the Prologue, into a kind of creative collaboration - this treble enfranchisement contributes to the sense of something fresh and unprecedented in his art.

A comparison of the Knight's and the Parson's portraits - defenders of the faith in their very different realms - will point up some of the ways the portraits developed as Chaucer wrote. The Knight's uses the word "worthy" as chief thematic note, depends for its substance on the list of battles, extends the meaning of worthiness with the ambiguous complexity of *wys* and with the one image, "as meeke as is a mayde", in the *descriptio*; it paradoxically confirms the adjectives "verray, parfit, gentil", in the "bismotering" of the Knight's clothing. It is a sober portrait for a sober man. Equally sober, the Parson receives a far richer verbal encomium. The portrait as a whole imitates the character it describes in its proportions of "thought" and "work", its general claims and the validating particulars - "swich he was ypreeved ofte sithes". It moves slowly from the poverty-richness antithesis through the cursing-for-tithes-giving-of-his-own-substance antithesis to the "wroghte-taughte" one. Here it picks up two metaphor-clusters, gold-iron-rust and shepherd-flock-wolf, the only two in the whole Prologue. At the same time we hear the voice of the pilgrim:

Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,
 And this figure he added eek thereto,
 That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
 For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
 No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
 And shame it is, if a preest tak keep,
 A shiten shepherd and a clene shepe. (A504)

In this passage the verbal elaboration of the portrait and indeed of the Prologue reaches a climax. The mingling of metaphor and antithesis paradoxically gains strength by being represented as the words of a plain-spoken parson who "snibs" high and low, eschews a "spiced" conscience, and makes no demands of others he doesn't first make of himself. In his experiment with the *descriptio* Chaucer has found what is essential to his form of it. He is now willing to give himself more leeway with language.

The Parson's portrait stands out in another way. It is straight-forward; there is little indirection. The absence of moral shortcomings in both Knight and Parson eliminates one area that in other portraits affords rich opportunity for irony. The fact that we see him and hear him though *effictio* is entirely absent testifies to the detailed validation of the claims made for him. Implications about other priests not only occur in the negative superlative, "A better preest I trowe that nowher noon ys" (A524). We even get a negative image developed beyond any other in the Prologue of the

priest who abandons his flock for a life of ease in London, (A507-511). The greatest indirection, however, occurs from the relationship with other portraits. The Parson has a brother the Plowman, whose character matches his own. The blood relationship reinforces the image we get of life at the village level. The two men are presented as collaborating in carrying out the gospel message, the Plowman as helpful on the material level as the Parson is on the spiritual, both ready to face hardship, neither seen as squeamish about moral or physical "dung". Their relationship perhaps suggested the only other blood kinship in the Prologue, that between the Knight and his son the Squire. That the most far-ranging of the pilgrims and the least should be shown as making the most meaningful journeys, the one on horseback on the frontiers of Christendom, the other on foot to the "ferreste" in his parish, underlines their importance to family, to community, to England, to Christendom. The parody of the Parson-Plowman brotherhood in the "friendship" of Summoner and Pardoner cannot but weaken, to the point of severe satire, the picture we get of society. If the portraits of the churls and of the Monk and the Friar resulted from a change in plan, they must also reflect a change in Chaucer's evaluation of the world he lived in.

The metaphor-clusters in the Parson's portrait point up the extent to which each portrait has its own form. The order, the proportions, the use of language, the resonance are unpredictable.¹⁹ "Al the condicioun of ech of hem" turns out in the case of the five guildsmen to be a shared *descriptio* which spends the last five of its eighteen lines on their indistinguishable spouses. The word "shaply" that deflates the wisdom of the five also concludes the vignette of the "deys" in a yeldehalle filled with the seated figures of these substantial men. It suggests the qualifications for leadership in guild or town. A similarly deflating word, this time in rhyme-position, lets the air out of the Prioress's conscience, as "charitable", "pitous" and "wepe" find ironic fulfillment in the "mous/Kaught in a trappe". Other strikingly resonant words bring to their contexts unique impact. "Pynche" and "infect" in the Man of Law's portrait, for instance, appear in negative constructions, but they characterize the sterile possessiveness of his attitude to property. They protect his land-purchasing and define his meagre humanity. "Snewed" in the Franklin's portrait has the opposite effect. It conveys in a single word his openhanded sharing, his generous use of his property. "Droupe" as a negative image for the Yeoman's arrows, "sweete" for the taste of the Friar's lisp, "shake" to describe what tempests do to the Shipman's beard, "haunt" for the Wife's skill in weaving, and "nosethirles" for the black wide features of the Miller's face have a similar resonance. Occasionally the meaning comes clear only after context has forced the discard of innocent alternatives. The Physician's "esy of dispense", the marriages the Friar made at his own "cost", the "water" over which the Shipman sent his prisoners home have the deceptive shape of praise. Like so many of the details in the portraits they keep the reader, the listener alert, an active contributor to the fictive experience.

The sharply seen detail with moral overtones helps to keep the

portraits manageable in length. The *descriptio* that has *amplificatio* as its purpose in the rhetorical treatises paradoxically finds in *abbreviatio* its proper techniques. Chaucer exploits the meanings possible in the pairing, grouping and placing of pilgrims. The Merchant and the Clerk, the Man of Law and the Franklin have their contrasts sharpened, the first two by the repetition of "sownyng" in describing their manner of speech, the second pair by the "pynch-snewed" opposition in their management of property. The contrasting pair, Knight and Squire, form with the Yeoman, a military group, contrasted with the more numerous religious group that follows. But their blood-kinship also has meaning when seen in connection with the other related pair the Parson and the Plowman, an effect that is sharply qualified, when Chaucer adds portraits for the churls, by the sinister companionship of Summoner and Pardoner. The varied rationale for groupings, feudal, vocational, social, family, even in the case of the churls partly moral, attests to the complexity of the society Chaucer presents in his portraits.

Even more complex than the groupings are the values the pilgrims reflect and aspire to. Each of the values tends to have its own vocabulary - morality: such words as "good", "virtuous", "charitable", "benigne", "hooly", "pacient"; social position: "estatlich", "digne", "noble", "gentil", "reverence", "renoun"; wealth: "moneye", "catel", "gold", "silver", "win", "rich", "encrees"; intelligence: "wys", "war", "studie", "heede", "rekene wel", "logyk", "science", "grounded"; professional competence: the ubiquitous "koude" and the less frequent "knewe" and "wiste", all three often modified by "wel" and even "ful wel", "able", "fair", "parfit"; social propriety: "fetys", "tretys", "curteis", "servysable"; pleasure: "delyt", "felicitee", "lust", "loved"; meticulousness in the care and use of property: "thrifty", "wel dresse", "gay", "sheene", "redy", "fyn", "ful streite", "ful moiste", "wel kepe", "yive rekenyng"; physical strength: "delyvere", "hardy", "myght", "byg of brawn and bones", "stout". Frequently the terms get interchanged and misapplied, the Pardoner as "noble ecclesiaste", the Monk as "fair prelaat", the Friar curteis "ther as profit scholde arise". "Worthy", used five times of the Knight with moral import, characterizes as well four other pilgrims. Given its relative value by context it accentuates the disparities between Knight, Franklin, Wife of Bath, Merchant and Friar. For the two last the irony is almost absolute; yet there is an element of contrast even here: for the Friar the moral value dominates, for the Merchant the monetary:

This worthy man ful wel his wit bissette:
Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette . . . (A280)

What they lack in worth distinguishes them.

Of the terms for wealth, gold and silver appear most frequently, gold in six portraits, silver in four.²⁰ For the Pardoner and the Friar silver means quite simply money. But the Yeoman's Christopher is of silver "sheene", evidence that he kept not just his weapons but everything he owned in mint condition. On the other hand the Guildsmen see in the silver mountings of their knives an important social distinction; they are explicitly not of

brass. The gold brooch the Prioress has attached to her prayer beads calls attention to its motto and brings to a climax the ambivalences of her life and portrait. Its shocking impropriety escaped the awareness so sensitive to the potential drop of food or "ferthyng of grece". The love-knotte in the golden pin that fastens the Monk's hood takes up three lines and adds an extended item to the innuendos more casually dropped of venery, pricking, lust, and hare. Whether we draw the inference of sexual promiscuity or see a sublimation of libidinous energy into the pleasures of hunting and the good life would not greatly concern this "abbotable" man, whose contribution to church government prefigures that of some Renaissance popes.²¹

Gold means money in both the Clerk's portrait and the Physician's. Chaucer's joke on the Clerk's lack of gold, though a philosopher, redounded to the victim's credit rather than the author's. The little that he has he spends on books and on learning. Chaucer makes amends for his joke by unalloyed praise of the Clerk as grateful to his patrons, succinct in speech, a dedicated scholar and a generous teacher. On the other hand Chaucer speciously attributes the Physician's love of gold to its use in physic as a "cordial". The author's humour has this time more effect, following as it does his witty use of "esy" in the already noted phrase "esy of dispense". Chaucer's ease with his *descriptions* has developed into a delightful three-sided game, played now with a pilgrim, now with the audience. He takes delight in his association with the pilgrims and with us, a delight that makes his art active and vital.

The final two uses of gold are both figurative. The Miller's "thombe of gold" has a proverbial relevance to his thievery and perhaps also a more literal reference to the heavy thumb on the scales. A similar figurative use in the Parson's portrait is not so playful; it depends on the value of the metal and its purity. The Parson sees clerical corruption as strong enough to effect the impossible alchemy of rusting gold. This hyperbolic figure indicates the ideal to which the Parson holds up his own conduct. Evidence of the standards the pilgrims set for themselves increases as the art of portraiture develops. It becomes the severest test of the pilgrims' quality. With the Monk, the Friar, the Manciple, the Summoner and the Pardoner it involves the voice of the pilgrim and, in two instances, as we've seen, the mock rhetorical question. By this time portrait with its suggestions of pose and stasis has become almost a misnomer. We watch the pilgrims move, work, talk. We see them not only in relation to Chaucer, but to each other.²² The Miller leads the pilgrims out of town with his bagpipe, the Reeve skulks cautiously in the rear, while the Pardoner and the Summoner bawl out their love song in treble and bass. The portraits have turned into impromptu celebrations, into improvisations where the freedom of pilgrims and author invites and challenges the participation of the reader.

NOTES

- ¹ Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, Anglistica V* (Copenhagen, 1955) pp.35-54. Quotations from Chaucer are from the Robinson second edition (Boston, 1957).
- ² *op.cit.*, p.52.
- ³ Articles and books on the portraits of the *Prologue* are numerous, but most of them deal with thematic material, with historical background, or with the balance between type and individual. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1926), Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1948), and Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), are most important for historical background. Arthur W. Hoffman, "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage: The Two Voices", *ELH* 21 (1954) pp.1-16, has what is perhaps the best single treatment of thematic material. The orthodox position on the balance between type and individual can be found in Donaldson's edition, *Chaucer's Poetry, An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York, 1958) pp.875f. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962) pp.242-257, finds the portraits all "point toward an abstract reality" and classifies them as "personified abstractions, iconographically described characters, and grotesques". Claus Schaar, *The Golden Mirror* (Lund, 1955), takes up the technique of the portraits in general terms against the background of Chaucer's earlier work, pp.201-212, and again against the background of the literary traditions available to Chaucer, pp.301-333. The most thorough considerations of portrait technique are to be found in Baldwin, *op.cit.*, and Harold F. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims: The Artistic Order of the Portraits in the Prologue* (London, 1962). See also James Hulbert, "Chaucer's Pilgrims", *PMLA* 64 (1949) pp.823-828; Raymond Preston, *Chaucer* (London, 1952) pp.153-168; E.T. Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim", *PMLA* 69 (1954) pp.928-36; Edgar Duncan, "Narrator's Points of View in the Portrait-Sketches", *Essays in Honor of Walter Clyde Curry* (Nashville, 1954) pp.77-101; Paull F. Baum, *Chaucer, A Critical Appreciation* (Durham, N.C., 1958) pp.63-7; James Winny, *The General Prologue* (Cambridge, 1965); and Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1977) pp.48-86.
- ⁴ The exact number is vexing. Five pilgrims receive a single portrait. It looks as if the three priests and the chaplain were originally named but not described. The list following the Plowman's portrait suggests a similar fate for the five churls and Chaucer. If the number of pilgrims including Chaucer held steady at 29, the numbers I've used would represent first the lack of all of these portraits, second the lack of the religious group, and third the difference caused by the guildsmen sharing a portrait. See "The Twenty-nine Pilgrims and the Three Priests", *MLN* 76 (1961) pp.224-30.
- ⁵ See Edmond Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e Siècle* (Paris, 1958) pp.77E. Cicero, *De inventione*, I XXIV; Horace *Ars Poetica*, ll.114-27, 153-78; Matthew of Vendome, *Ars Versificatoria*, I, ll.77-8.
- ⁶ Edmond Faral, *op.cit.*, pp.78,79; Horace *Ars Poetica*, ll.129-31; Matthew, *Ars Versificatoria*, I, l.78.
- ⁷ See Owen, *MLN* 76 (1961) pp.224-30.
- ⁸ See Faral, *op.cit.*, pp.79ff, for the medieval practice. For a similar comment on Chaucer's technique, see Baldwin, *op.cit.*, p.48. I would take exception to the word "inorganic" which Baldwin uses to characterize the Chaucerian *descriptio*. Where "disordered" (another of the words in Baldwin), the portrait in the Prologue has implications for either the

character being described or the quality of the observation. Many of the portraits are well-ordered, none of them in the prescribed way.

- 9 A term I think I've invented to cover expressions like "no man ferre" A48 and "ther nas no man nowher so virtuous" A251. The former is not technically a superlative, since what it says is that the Knight had ridden as far as the furthest.
- 10 I tried testing the incidence of variation in the portraits and in other passages of Chaucer's poetry, by comparing the number of times subject-verb - (complement) word order occurs as against variations from this norm (for questions of course the norm is auxiliary-subject-verb). The ratio for the portraits varied extremely, but in no meaningful way that I could discover. For instance, the ratio for the Summoner was 25 : 23, for the Pardoner 32 : 19. For the Knight it was 16 : 13, for the Squire 13 : 13, for the Yeoman 7 : 9. The Prioress was 25 : 17, the Clerk 8 : 16. The first eighteen lines of the *Prologue* perhaps reflected the higher style in the ratio 4 : 9. *The Miller's Tale*, the first 50 lines, A 3187 - 3236, was 30 : 16. On the whole straight narrative seemed to favour the regular pattern.
- 11 For *collatio occulta*, see Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, ll.240-63, Faral, *op.cit.*, p.204f; discussed by Faral, p.69. For a somewhat different treatment of this line, see my *Pilgrimage and Storytelling*, p.53. The footnote, 5, on p.225, gives references for the meaning of "worthy" and "wys".
- 12 See Baldwin, *op.cit.*, pp.38, 39, 49, for a reiteration of this idea. The Yeoman, the Prioress, the Merchant, the Cook, and the Manciple are hardly "non-pareils". The five guildsmen described in a single portrait reduce the idea to absurdity. It originated with Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), and was picked up, *inter alia* by Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore, 1951).
- 13 Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer*, pp.104ff, Bowden, *A Commentary*, pp.66f.
- 14 See Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling* and, for the early manuscripts and the state of the text, "The Alternative Reading of *The Canterbury Tales*", *PMLA* 97 (1982) pp.237-50.
- 15 Baldwin, *op.cit.*, p.53, discusses the similes and finds "most of them affixed to the churls or disreputables". He sees these similes as different from the "stock similes which had been the mainstay of the romance . . . not so much less class conscious as less stilted". The Squire and the Monk do not fit Baldwin's explanation. Baldwin also comments on the portrait of Alysoun in the *Miller's Tale*. Schaar, *op.cit.*, pp.259ff, under the heading "Rhetoric", discusses the similes in the portraits, comparing them with those in earlier works by Chaucer where they have "a solemn, elevated, and lyrical character". He finds them used in the *Canterbury Tales* "to convey an impression of great physical strength or magnificence of appearance or array; or else of bucolic charm or sweetness". He does not distinguish between *Prologue* and *tales*, nor does he notice the difference in incidence between some portraits in the *Prologue* and others.
- 16 See Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim", *PMLA* 69 (1954) pp.928-36.
- 17 For more detailed discussion of these examples, see Owen. *Pilgrimage and Storytelling*, pp.57, 60ff, 74, 81, 83.
- 18 *The Key of Remembrance* (New Haven, 1963) p.170.

- ¹⁹ Baldwin, *op.cit.*, pp.51f, comments on the "discontinuity and incongruity of detail" as Chaucer's stock in trade. He speaks of "his technique of suggestiveness and contrapuntal detail". These last terms give emphasis to the purpose of Chaucer's avoidance of system, of the order that frequently subsumes apparent disorder.
- ²⁰ Ann S. Haskell, "The Golden Ambiguity of the *Canterbury Tales*, *The Erasmus Review* I (1971) pp.1-9, discusses the linking of *amor* and gold in an "extended pun" throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. She discusses all the gold references in the Prologue except for the one in the Clerk's portrait.
- ²¹ For the argument in favour of drawing the inference, see Edmund Reiss, "The Symbolic Surface of the *Canterbury Tales*; The Monk's Portrait", *Chaucer Review* 2 (1968) pp.254-72, 3 (1968) pp.12-28.
- ²² Beyond the Prologue three of the last portraits have the closest association with the pilgrims' performance, the Pardoner's with his Prologue and Tale, the Friar's and the Summoner's with each other's tales.