



# Introduction

## Negotiating Presumption and Despair

The study of medieval literature is in two interrelated states of crisis, one methodological and the other pedagogical. The first of these crises, a sort of paralysis within the ranks of professional scholars, is the predictable result of the impact of deconstruction and other skeptical poststructuralist ideas on the profession of medieval studies. Rather than blithely misinterpreting these skeptical notions and simply turning them into another approach to the Middle Ages, medievalists seriously considered and even took to heart notions of logocentrism, decentered structure, *differance*, and the *abime* and began asking fundamental questions about the validity of their collective enterprise.

Responses to some of these questions seem to be part of the project of the “New Historicism.” Like most “schools of thought” or academic “-isms,” New Historicism leads a nebulous rhetorical life. Without a strict definition—too logocentric—the tag seems to function chiefly as an evaluation rather than as a useful description: calling an article or book or scholar New Historicist almost never transfers any useful information about it or her or him. Typically, the term is either simply a compliment or a knock, depending on who is calling whom or what. At base, though, New Historicism seems to mean paying scrupulous inductive attention simultaneously to evidence about the past while acknowledging our unbridgeable distance from that past. In practice, what we might call New Historicist intentions result in cautious, self-reflexive and self-critical attempts to understand or reclaim the past from the prison cell of our own cultural milieu. Unlike “old historicism” (if there is such a thing), New Historicism eschews facts for their own sake, rightly concludes that little of the past is to be understood from when this king reigned or that Pope died, and judiciously applies analytical methods from political science and sociology. In general, New Historicist writings are simultaneously



better and more widely informed than “old historicist” ones but still remain fashionably skeptical if not downright despairing of their supposed goal of discovering the truth.

New Historicism has produced a few genuine masterpieces of medieval and Renaissance literary and social criticism—the works of Patterson, Strohm, and Greenblatt come to mind—and far more than a few lesser efforts. These lesser works seem to find safety in small topics, minor points, bewildering multiplications of selves as subjects and objects, and a stylish lack of closure, vision, and daring.

This is not to say that medieval studies and Chaucer studies are failures: it is to say that they seem to be in a crisis of despair. Painfully aware of our own psychic mixedness, our Western legacies of gender repression, occidentalism, Judeo-Christian philosophy and theology, and complex psychological models, students of the Middle Ages, it seems, more and more fashionable to succumb to despair of saying anything true and important about the past.<sup>1</sup> Instead we fuss around the edges of texts and with peripheral issues, stopping short of reaching a conclusion because we do not trust ourselves as historians and analysts.

This timbre of defeat has precipitated the other, pedagogical crisis in medieval studies precisely because it is so well, so often, and so sadly expressed. When disseminated to a culture already skeptical of the value of “olde bokes,” the learned skepticism of medievalists sounds like enervation and morbidity, not like vigilant self-examination. In an educational environment where the value and relevance of the past is already under attack, the high-rent humility, relativism, and cynicism of professional scholars of the past sound too much like surrender. Certainly a measure of humility in the face of the past can be an inspiration to a new generation of students and scholars, but only if it is balanced with palpable passion, curiosity, and boldness, at least to explore and hypothesize. Negotiating presumption and despair is never easy in any relationship: with God, with other people, or with one’s vocation. But it is nonetheless crucial, in the end, to *negotiate*—say “no” to—both vices and press forward.

This book is a humble attempt at just such a negotiation, between the presumptions of the old historicism and the despair of the New. Its thesis is threefold:

1. Geoffrey Chaucer and his contemporaries *thought differently from the way you and I do*.
2. This difference can be appreciated (provisionally) when we study

- how Chaucer and his contemporaries were educated.
3. This “difference in thinking” is a fundamental and formative influence on the *Canterbury Tales*.

Specifically, this book argues that Chaucer’s training in language and logic taught him that natural languages were not naively and transparently expressive but were always a function of the individual minds of the speaker and hearer and the vagaries of the linguistic units themselves, what Aristotle called *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Chaucer’s medieval education taught him that human languages never transmitted one person’s thoughts to another without some level of distortion. More than this, that same language, internalized by each individual speaker, tyrannizes the speaker’s processes of recognition such that, even before we open our mouths, language and its vagaries may already have compromised our perceptions.

The early education of the Middle Ages taught these things, we shall see, but they also taught that, for all this, the truth was at least theoretically attainable. If our senses could be sharpened and purified and our use of language could be regularized and rationalized,<sup>2</sup> we could, they taught, both see and communicate the truth. These two beliefs, I argue here, created a densely verbal, dogged, but cynical medieval mind-set, intensely aware of the failure of language and its logical implications yet at the same time hopeful that the tools of language and perception could someday allow us to locate and share the truth. Medieval people, you see, knew how to negotiate between despair and presumption.

This hypothesis about the tenor of medieval thinking in turn makes medieval poetry, Chaucer’s poetry, both like and very unlike modern poetic models. Modern thinking about poetry and literature and art in general is based on the principle that art does not simply report or reproduce reality but represents the artist’s consciously fabricated expression or impression of that reality (or of the artist’s fantasy, of course). In other words, what is the difference between a photo of people in a park and a painting of the same scene by Cézanne or Seurat? The difference, we would say, is that the paintings do more, or at least do other than, naively represent the scene, and that this more or other is what makes them art. Expression thus comes before representation in modern art: whether it is an expression of emotion or an intuition of design or a celebration of chaos, it is the mediation of the artist and not the replication of reality that makes the product art.

This foundational perception of modern art has some remarkably



positivist implications, at whose level we can see how different our art is from Chaucer's. When we define art primarily in terms of expression and artistic mediation, we imply in effect that unmediated representation or a merely replicative alternative to a poem or painting is at least possible, or that it is possible to represent or express an idea without art, plainly, without "noise" or artistic "mediation." In other words, when we call "art" representation mediated by consciousness, then we imply necessarily that "not-art" or unmediated representation is possible or that it exists: otherwise every expression or perception is art. But science, from quantum mechanics to anthropology, has shown that unmediated observation and report are not possible: whether we are looking at electrons or South Sea tribes, we *cannot not* affect what we are seeing by our looking at it and cannot not impose some interpretive schema on what we observe.

In other words, modern art is actually based on the same acknowledgment of authorial or artistic mediation that has seemingly enervated medieval studies, the (happy? sad?) fact that we can't seem to get out of our own way. What renders our history and literary criticism suspect is the same mediation, the same stamp of individual self-expression, that seems to be the essence of our art.

Medieval poetry (and art in general) recognized the same issues but responded to them differently. Medieval artists, Chaucer included, neither particularly valued self-expression for its own sake nor ever naively hoped that that they could avoid it. From logicians to manuscript illuminators to controllers of the wool custom, medieval thinkers and writers and artists seemed to see, in their fallen status as God's creatures, that all of their thoughts and words and expressions were uneasy negotiations between the world and their personal, wishful, anxious, muddled versions of it. Try as they might—through logic, allegory, iconography—to make their media behave themselves, honest medieval artists like Chaucer and Dante still struggled to express the world, knowing they could not help but express themselves as well in the effort.

I call the product of these medieval poetic negotiations between the individual mind and the substantial world a "mindsong," simultaneously a song *of* the mind and a song *by* the mind. Though of course Chaucer never himself used the analogy (let alone such a twinkly, new-age term), I suspect he would have understood the idea behind the analogy.<sup>3</sup> Whenever we speak or put pen to paper, we may write words that are about a consciously considered topic (lyrics in my analogy), but the tune will inescapably be our own tune, as expressive of us as our words



are expressive of our topic. Given, as I hope to show, the tenor of late medieval education in the *trivium* and given the dominant models of human cognition and learning, Chaucer and his contemporaries could hardly have helped thinking about language in this way, as the chant of a creature whose head ascends toward heaven but whose feet can only momentarily leap a few feet off the earth.

Negotiating presumption and despair, navigating between the presumptive narcissism of self-expression and the despair of creatures alienated from their God by the Fall, Chaucer, happily for us, pressed on toward Canterbury. After a “litel tretys” on the values and priorities of medieval education, we shall do the same.

