oes form prescribe content? Does the shape of a poem or argument determine or even affect the theme or point or concept being presented or argued? Do novels, lyrics, epics, and other literary forms tend towards certain themes to the exclusion of others? Or are form and content completely separate, the former simply the vehicle by which the latter is expressed? Specifically, does the peculiarly interpersonal strategy of the dream vision, which devalues the discursive component of its dream report for the purpose of establishing a special sort of psychic communion between reader and dreamer, necessarily cause the poetic form to gravitate toward certain themes and away from others?

The answer to this is a qualified yes, at least for the dream vision. Medieval dream visions tend to be about the same things and consider the same topics, provided we maintain a loose, relatively abstract sense of words like "theme" and "topic." Poems as different in their announced subjects as the Roman de la Rose, the Dream of the Rood, the Hous of Fame, the Book of the Duchess, and Pearl all treat, in the last analysis, questions of epistemology, of perspective, of ways of knowing, and of the relationship between words and the truth these words seek to express. Deferring the Book of the Duchess, Pearl, and the Hous of Fame for later in this chapter, consider for a moment the other poems in this list and note their common interest in knowing, in language, and in the verities language attempts to express. The Roman de la Rose, especially as conceived by
Jean de Meun, is a thoroughly epistemological poem whose ultimate concern is with the cosmic implications of human life, a satire on learning that slowly chips away at the medieval edifice of lore. The poem concludes, in the address of Genius, that the fundamental and natural generative urges, which seemed so foolish when all that was at stake was Amant and his rose, are the basis of human existence, are truer and more real than all the contingent verbiage that surrounds them. The graven message on the Well of Narcissus, taken at face value without any attempt to twist or gloss or determine it, is the final message graven on the reader at the conclusion of the Roman: "here starf the faire Narcissus."

The Dream of the Rood is more obviously an exercise in perspective. The narrator of this dream vision, a person "stained with sins, wounded with stains," encounters the Rood, a physical object that, historically, is more reprehensible than he but which has been transformed by the Redemptive Act into an object of veneration, a golden, jewel-bedecked "beacen" or sign of hope. The encounter, it seems, teaches the dreamer that, although he is morally flawed and unworthy, God's redemption operates on an unearthly and irrational level, transforming these very flaws into signs of divine love and forgiveness. Piers Plowman shows a remarkably similar movement, presenting in the Visio what seems to be the villainous figure of Lady Meed, expelling her, and finally discovering that, without her, humanity is denied access to the holy "meed" of salvation. The words of the pardon that appears in the climactic scene of the Visio constitute the chief impediment to an understanding of meed in bono and, in a strangely liberating act, Piers tears up the pardon and frees the folk from the limitations inherent in human formulations of divine verities.¹

This similarity of theme in dream visions is not accidental but inherent, a function of the poems' common form. We have seen that the dream vision as a rhetorical nexus was born of late medieval scepticism, a scepticism that questioned dream lore, the relationship between truth and its semantic representations, and ultimately the ancient and pervasive Platonic dualism of the Scholastic period. It is
only logical and reasonable to assume that the same philosophical impulses that quickened the form might also find their way into the poems as contents.

These impulses did find their way into the poems. The three dream visions discussed in the next few pages all share a profound distrust of language and its ability to represent phenomenal reality (to say nothing of the other world), and an equal distrust of the knowability of that reality. In positing and then denying the possibility of supernal knowledge, the Book of the Duchess, Pearl, and the Hous of Fame each offer for purposes of examination a "dis­course," test out the discourse in a dream setting, then finally awaken their readers to critique the possibility of using words to access the realities that have lain behind them. The Book of the Duchess is a creative exercise in the "discourse of sentiment," which discovers that the relationship between emotions and their verbal expressions is artificial, ambivalent, and contingent; Pearl's dialogue sub­sumes its many topics into a grand demonstration of the "discourse of eschatology," showing at its conclusion that (if nothing else) the realm of Heaven is beyond representation in earthbound terms; the Hous of Fame, in its Proem and three books, considers the discourses of science, history, rhetoric, and philosophy and shows that all are finally equally contingent, equally functions of humankind and of the here and now.

It is in this spirit that I call the discussion that follows "decon­structive." While deconstruction as a clearly recognizable anti­rhetoric is a product of eighteenth and nineteenth century thinking, deconstruction as a basic social impulse has existed and must exist in every culture insofar as and as soon as that culture is articulated. Far from being a tool of literary criticism, another new way to get at a text, deconstruction is the necessary obverse of any culture-as­system, the ubiquitous urge to untangle, untie, unravel, and demythologize any intellectual system that comes to be replaced by its semantic formulations, any system whose primitive communal sense becomes—literally—"lost in transmission." Thus, we should not be surprised to find deconstruction in places other than in Der-
rida or Rousseau or Nietzsche or Levi-Strauss; it ought positively to be expected in the fourteenth century, in the obsolescence of old ways of knowing but before the bright reasonableness of new ones.

Thus, if our sense of content is broad enough to include such notions as "thrust," "purpose," "movement," or, perhaps best, "program," then the dream vision, born in the gaps of medieval taxonomies and realized in a rhetoric that is based on the contingent and even illusory relationship of words and things, does prescribe its content. This can happen because (to risk circularity) the content prescribed is, finally, that contents are functions of form: dream visions are about the obstructive nature of language and its troublesome relationship to the world. Thus, what we might otherwise be tempted to call the topics of the poems—Blanche's death, the loss of the "perle," the search for tidings—become in this case constitutive vehicles analogous to words and sentences. Just as Augustine's discussion of hyssop or Marcrobius' of the stars show that they are not really talking about either plants or stars—even as symbols—but instead are presenting a discourse to celebrate the communion of souls predisposed to communion, the dream vision uses its literal contents as morphemes in the expression of its higher "content" or "program." In other words, the dream vision is about aboutness; it explores the problematics of reference; it begins as an insomnium, an experience by definition lyrical rather than discursive, then masquerades for a time as discourse, and then finally undercut this discourse while affirming the emotions or dispositions or perceptions that generated it. It is an insomnium-revelation, a somatic event that reveals, first, that personal or somatic experiences are the only true experiences, and second, that the emotional or spiritual ground of these experiences, when felt and shared, is the only true, holy, and worthy response to the ritual drama of human life.

The Book of the Duchess and the Discourse of Sentiment

The subject of the Book of the Duchess is, to use Chaucer's own carefully chosen word, "routhe." It is not in any traditional sense an elegy on the lately deceased wife of John of Gaunt, Blanche of Lan-
caster, although her passing and the feelings of those left behind are surely its occasion. Instead of being an explicit memorial, the poem is a meditation on the problems of the language of sentiment on such occasions, a subtle examination of one of the crucial spheres in which language fails to represent the motives and the will behind its articulation. Thus, the *Book of the Duchess* is a deconstructive poem the program of which is to show language at work, to show it failing to meet the investigative, expressive, or rhetorical intentions for which it was invoked, and, finally, to show that its very failure affirms the commonality of intention that underlies it, affirms a community of individuals who together hold beliefs or values inexpressible in words.

It is this final plank in the program, the dream vision's tacit and indirect assertion that there exists a feeling or belief in the poet and in the right readers of the poem of which the artifact is a failed expression, that technically disqualifies the dream vision as truly or thoroughly deconstructive, but the defect is not a serious one. This unspoken thematic core—"routhe" in the *Book of the Duchess*, "faith" in *Pearl* and in the *Hous of Fame*—is more a movement of the soul than a topic or a content. In keeping with a deconstructive program or movement, this thematic core is enacted rather than referenced: only one of the *Book of the Duchess'* 1333 lines is "thematic" in even this broad sense. Line 1309, "Is that youre los? By God, hyt ys routhe!" enacts the inadequacy of all that has gone before it: it asks a simple question about reality—a rhetorical question representing Geffrey's sudden intuition of the Black Knight's sorrow—and then responds with a simple, unadorned assertion of the will to sympathy. The line is not elaborate: its only figure, the oath "By God," invokes the Deity as witness to Geffrey's sincerity in a discourse from which all rhetorical or ornamental artifice has been stripped. All of the other lines of the poem (too numerous to quote) prepare the reader for this shattering moment by methodically deconstructing the discourse of sentiment, leaving Geffrey and the readers with a failed artifact, a *cuniculus figurarum* whose failure and foolishness—and whose success—are perceptible only at its terminus.
The term “discourse of sentiment” deserves some brief elaboration before I continue. By “discourse of sentiment” I mean language produced to express emotion and to betoken sympathy, two intentions which are closely related but surely very different. As anyone knows who has written a letter to a friend who has lost a parent or child or spouse (for example), the expression of grief or sympathy is very easy and made even easier by the many universal clichés and conventional phrases guaranteed to send the appropriate signals. Paradoxically, it is this very ease of expression that makes it proportionally difficult to broadcast or betoken sincere sympathy in the expression. To turn to another sentiment for a moment, the availability of mass-produced Christmas cards—with preprinted signatures—devalues them as successful tokens of good wishes for the holidays. In the discourse of sentiment, it is almost worse to be a poet, a word crafter, one whose tools and currency are self-conscious and artificial expression and, worse yet, to be a medieval poet, one whose words and phrases nearly never ring with the simple expression of sincere feelings. In the age of Froissart and Machaut and Guillaume de Lorris and Petrarch, how does a poet both express emotion and betoken sympathy? In an age where the greatest poetry consists of passionate love protestations to women often unknown to the poets, full of artificial and grotesquely inflated expressions of sentiment, how does Chaucer write a poem to his patron and friend John of Gaunt on the occasion of Blanche’s death? This is Chaucer’s challenge in the Book of the Duchess. Faced with this impossible task, Chaucer hit upon a novel and daring strategy: to write not an expression of sympathy but a demonstration of the hopelessness of such an expression, a poem that enacts the hollowness of language and its inextricable entanglement in paradoxes of expression, intention, effect, and entailment. Taken as such a demonstration, the Book of the Duchess exposes the discourse of sentiment—all of it, the Black Knight’s as well as Geffey’s—for all its foolishness and inefficacy: all that survives the Book of the Duchess’ indictment of the discourse of sentiment is, captured in the gruff, old-fashioned “My God, hyt ys routhe,” the will to express emotions forever imprisoned in inadequate language. To reach this
still, tense moment of recognition, Chaucer the journeyman poet constructs a subtle structure which, in holding religiously to the conventions of contemporary French poetry, undermines those conventions.

This feature, the conscious imitation of a set of conventions to expose those conventions and their shallowness, is one which Chaucer will exploit for comic and other purposes later in his career in *Sir Thopas* and in other of the *Canterbury Tales*—the tales of the Clerk, the Pardoner, and the Prioress come to mind—but here Chaucer's exploitation of conventional language and form reflects his sense of the operation of the dream vision, with its fabulous, labyrinthine, and finally pointless surface which nonetheless leads to an ultimate revelation of an identity between dreamer and reader. The *Book of the Duchess* illustrates nearly all of the structural and affective features of the form: the modal movement from lyric to narrative and back to lyric; the failed attempt to identify the dreamer by his distress; the splitting of the dreamer into a fallible character and a mysterious narrator; narrative normalization; and finally the reunification of the dreamer figures and the identification of the dreamer and readers in their common sympathy for John of Gaunt.

This procedure must therefore begin with the introduction of a dreamer-narrator, one with a problem, setting up the poem's radical lyric expectations:

```
I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
I may nat slepe, wel nygh noght;
I have so many an ydel thoght,
Purely for defaute of slep,
That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.
Al is ylyche good to me—
Joye or sorowe, wherso hyt be—
For I have felynge in nothyng,
But, as yt were, a mased thyng,
Alway in poyn to falle a-doun;
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For sorrowful ymagynacioun
Ys alway hooly in my mynde.

( lines 1–15 )

Chaucerians have long recognized the conventionality of this opening, especially its near-translation of Froissart's *Le Paradys d'Amour*. In his contribution to *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, D.S. Brewer reproduces the two texts side by side, italicizing examples of what he sees as Chaucer's "Englishness"; for similar purposes but different conclusions, compare the lines above with Froissart:

Je sui de moi en grant merveille
Comment je vis quant tant je veille
Et on ne point en veillant,
Trouver de moi plus travaillant,
Car bien sacies que par veullier
Me viennent souvent travaillier
Pensees et merancolies
Qui me sont ens au coer lies
Et pas ne les puis deslyer,
Car ne veull la belle oublyer
Pour quele amour en ce travail
Je sui entres et tant je veill.

I am in great wonder about myself,
how I yet live, I've been awake so long.
One couldn't find anyone more belabored
than I in my long sleeplessness.
Know well that thoughts and sadnesses
often come to torture me;
they are bound inside my heart.
I cannot loose them
because I do not wish to forget that beauty.
For such a love, I am in this travail
and stay awake so long.  

Brewer's point in comparing the two passages is to emphasize Chaucer's stylistic departure from his French original, the fact that he adds distinctly English, conversational, or idiomatic "doublets
and alternatives, asseverations that are mild oathes, expletives and parentheses."7 Brewer is certainly correct in seeing these features as adding an English flavor to the poem—"routhe" in line 1309 comes to mind again—but what is the final rhetorical effect of these changes, the impact on the artifact of replacing the highly stylized French courtly idiom with something more closely resembling the idiom of everyday speech? Far from heightening the drama of the passage, the addition of phrases like "wel nygh noght," "by my trouthe," and "leef nor looth" tends to devalue the passage as an expression of sentiment by rendering it less taut, less hushed, less "pained." Without making a value judgment here (for emotional "realism" is rarely a virtue in this tradition), I believe we can say that Froissart sounds more realistically languishing than Chaucer does. In fact, this opening, like the unfinished Sir Thopas, is an example of Chaucer's adoption of a persona who knows and can imitate a set of conventions but who cannot quite reproduce them to the desired effect. To put it another way, Geffrey can use the discourse of sentiment for expressive purposes but cannot use it to betoken sincere sympathy. The addition of the conversational phrases, far from giving the passage color and character, mottle and flaw it as a conventional and therefore legitimate expression of shared emotion.8

This notion, by no means a new one, valorizes a long-standing negative judgment on the opening of the Book of the Duchess. The sleeplessness, the famous eight years' sickness, and the sentimentalized redaction of the story of Ceys and Alcion are all evidence for the belief that this is a totally conventional love allegory which includes all of the necessary details and makes all the right moves (though making them very flatfootedly). Geffrey's point in recalling the Ceys and Alcion story, it seems, is the magnitude and poignance of Alcion's grief and uncertainty, along with the boon granted her by the gods: he seems to miss the fact that the story ends rather unhappily.9 After telling her that he is dead, Ceys' ghost counsels her to be of good cheer:

"And farewell, swete, my worlds blysse!
I praye God youre sorwe lysse.

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To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!"
   With that hir eyen up she casteth
   And saw nought. "Alas!" quod she for sorwe,
   And deyede within the thridde morwe.
   But what she sayede more in that swow
   I may not telle yow as now;
   Hyt were to longe for to dwelle.
   My first matere I wil yow telle, . . .

   (lines 209–18)

This "first matere," of course, is the favor granted to Alcion by the
 gods, the dream-visitation by her husband's spirit (or rather by
 Morpheus clothed in Ceys' "dreynt" body). Like a Browning per­
 sona, Geffrey skates blithely over the pathetic story of the queen's
deadth to get to more important business, ignoring life and death in
his obsession with his "sicknesse." This is the same Geffrey, we shall
see, who can hear the Knight's lament in a few lines and simply not
attend to the fact that the fellow is mourning a death. Alcion's deadth
is, for Geffrey, not the crucial part of the story: what is important is
that Morpheus granted her a resolution of her distress through
sleep and dream and, impressed though dubious, Geffrey prays for a
similar visitation though he "knew never god but oon" (237).10

Geffrey's prayer to Morpheus (or to "som wight elles, I ne roghte
who" [244]) is one of the funniest passages in the poem. The gross,
mercantile description of the bribe of the featherbed and the ob­
vious, clanking progress of the prayer is, more than any other pas­
sage in the poem, the broad comedy of Sir Thopas.11 Like that tale,
the parody is funny in being both excessive and accurate, holding
true to the prescribed conventions but botching their execution
through tastelessness and excess:

   I wil yive hym a fether-bed,
   Rayed with gold, and ryght wel cled
   In fyn blak satyn doutevmer,
   And many a pilowe, and every ber
   Of cloth of Reynes, to slepe softe;
   Hym thar not nede to turnen ofte.

   (lines 251–56)
Though there is precedent for such a gift—that of Machaut's *La Fontaine Amoureuse*—Geffrey's bourgeois advertisement seems silly next to the exotic bed of gyrfalcon feathers that Machaut offers. The additions here to the offer, specifically Geffrey's assurances of the high quality of the materials and his prediction that Morpheus will sleep surpassingly well, cross the line into parody.

The thrust of such an opening is, clearly, to create radical lyric expectations in the reader. It is patently, even embarrassingly obvious from even the first twenty lines of the *Book of the Duchess* what sort of poem it is to be: the broad comic parody announces itself to be a poem after the French school and invites—rather desperately—the reader to see its dream as the conventional lover's *insomnium* described disparagingly by Macrobius, an *insomnium* that will take, perhaps, the form of a love *debat* (after Machaut's two *Jugement* poems) in which two aggrieved lovers present their sorrows before a figure of authority who decides who suffers the most.\(^\text{12}\)

The early stages of the dream report reinforce these perceptions of bankrupt conventionality. Early in the dream, the whelp appears and disappears, a gratuitous, sentimental image:

```
I was go walked fro my tree,
And as I wente, ther cam by mee
A whelp, that fauned me as I stood,
That hadde yfolowed, and koude no good.
Hyt com and crepte to me as lowe
Ryght as hyt hadde me yknowe,
Helde doun hys hed and joyned hys eres,
And leyde al smothe doun hys heres.
I wolde have kaught hyt, and anoon
Hyt fledde, and was fro me goon;
And I hym folwed, and hyt forth wente
Doun by a floury grene wente
Ful thikke of gras, ful softe and swete.
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*(lines 387-99)*

While intended, I believe, to be seen as a clumsy transitional device, the whelp does serve nicely as an emblem of the generic identity of
the poem to this point, an identity that must be held clearly in mind if the next few crucial lines—the encounter with the Black Knight—are to be understood correctly. As I argued above, the whelp is pure and radical lyricism like the basting of the sleeves in the Roman; in the discourse of sentiment, the image is a qualified failure both as an expression of emotion (for, what does it mean?) and also a failure as a token of true and sincere feeling (in its artless conventionality). Nonetheless, the little dog succeeds in reinforcing the lyricism of the passage, as opposed to, say, its discursive possibilities: it is a clear signal that this is a love elegy, even a love debat, to the forum of which Geffrey is led by this pallid little descendent of the lion in Machuat's Dit. The consciously awkward, even bumbling exposition and expression to this point strain the readers' patience (as they do in Sir Thopas), as the readers surmise all too easily the tenor for which this dream vision is the vehicle.

And sure enough, the doggy leads Geffrey to the Black Knight, the figure surely meant to be his interlocutor in the debat:

But forth they romed ryght wonder faste
Doun the woode; so at the laste
I was war of a man in blak,
That sat and had yturved his bak
To an ook, an huge tree.
"Lord," thought I, "who may that be?
What ayleth hym to sitten her?"
Anoon-ryght I wente ner;
Than found I sitte even upryght
A wonder wel-farynge knyght—
By the maner me thoughte so—
Of good mochel, and ryght yong therto,
Of the age of foure and twenty yer,
Upon hys berd but lytel her,
And he was clothed al in blak.

(lines 443–57)

This moment is the first turning point in the Book of the Duchess, the beginning of "narrative normalization," the second stage of the dream vision structure. Beginning with the introduction of this cen-
tral figure, the mode of the poem begins to change from the essentially lyric situation of the lover’s insomnium to a narrative one in which events take place or images are introduced which the reader can interpret independent of the dream frame.

This stage is typically signalled by a mistake or misinterpretation on the part of the dreamer-character, and the Book of the Duchess is no exception to this rule. The mistake, of course, is Geoffrey’s failure to understand (hear?) that the loss which the Black Knight mourns is the death of his good Lady White, which he seems to make so abundantly clear:

“I have of sorwe so gret won
That joye gete I never non,
Now that I see my lady bryght,
Which I have loved with al my myght,
Isfro me ded and ys agoon.

Alas, deth, what ayleth the,
That thou noldest have taken me,
When thou toke my lady swete,
That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,
So good, that men may wel se
Of al goodnesse she had no mete!!”

When he had mad thus his complaynte,
Hys sorwful hert gan faste faynte,
And his spirites wexen dede;
The blood was fled for pure drede
Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm—
For wel hyt feled the herte had harm—
To wite eke why hyt was adrad
By kynde, and for to make hyt glad;
For hit ys membre principal
Of the body; and that made al
Hys hewe chaunge and wexe grene
And pale, for ther noo blood ys sene
In no maner lym of hys.

(lines 475–99)

This is the key to the Book of the Duchess. Deferring for a time a discussion of the Black Knight’s lament, consider the dreamer-
character’s outrageous reaction to the song. After hearing the complaint, Geffrey spends fully thirteen lines in an accurate but inane dissertation on the physiology of the swoon, detailing the descent of the blood into the heart and reflecting with unbelievable coldness on the Knight’s green coloring and eventual unconsciousness. His reaction, to anticipate the argument a bit, is analogous to the readers’ reaction to Geffrey’s own languor: we recognize these symptoms, we know what is going on here—oh yes, this person is lovesick. For Geffrey, the Knight’s lament is half-successful as discourse of sentiment. As far as Geffrey goes, the song is sincere without being expressive: Geffrey is clearly able to see that something is bothering the Black Knight but he can’t figure out what that something is. This means that this song is exactly the opposite of Geffrey’s prologue, which was expressive but not credibly sincere, conventional but not genuine.

Such thoughts begin to explain Geffrey’s curious and obtuse response:

"Me thynketh in grete sorowe I yow see. 
But certes, sire, yif that yee 
Wolde ought discure me youre woo, 
I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo, 
Amende hyt, yif I kan or may.
Ye mowe preve hyt be assay; 
For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool, 
I wol do al my power hool. 
And telleth me of your sorwes smerte; 
Paraunter hyt may ese youre herte, 
That semeth ful sek under your syde."

(lines 547–57)

The critical literature abounds on this strange speech, with ingenious explanations why Geffrey does not understand or hear or react humanely to the Knight’s wretched situation. It is possible, for example, that Geffrey is playing dumb here, only tipping his hand slightly at lines 545–47, which could look forward to the balance of the poem.15 The perspective from which we are viewing the poem, however, offers only one sensible explanation for this crux. This is
the pre-eminent moment of narrative normalization, at which the
dreamer-character makes a mistake which is recognizable by readers
in their newly won independence from the interpretive prerogative
of the "eyewitness." Given Geffrey's clear predilection for the love
debat to this point, he assumes that the Black Knight is simply the
other principal in the contest of sorrows to follow and, as such, the
very last thing that this mysterious figure would be doing while
leaning mournfully against his tree is telling the exactly literal
truth. Geffrey's reaction to the story of Ceys and Alcion in the
prologue has demonstrated that death to this dreamer is a sentimen
tal, even bathetic experience, either a hyperbolic metaphor for a
beloved's scorn or a boring and irrelevant detail in a love story. It
seems perfectly natural, then, to assume that Geffrey would hear the
Knight's lament and conclude that it is of the same courtly, fig-
urative patois that he himself uses.

The readers, of course, know better. They have been wondering
for five hundred lines or so what is to become of this odd, truant
little poem, and now the answer becomes clear: this is not Geffrey's
languishing love elegy, written in artificial homage to Joan of Kent
or to whomever. It may still be a love debat: Machaut contrasted the
sorrows of death and "daunguere" in the Jugement du Roy de Be-
haigne and, in the Jugement du Roy de Navarre, even concluded that
a beloved's death is the greater sorrow.

So the appearance of John of Gaunt here reassures the reader that
the Book of the Duchess is, if peculiar, perhaps not unprecedented.
Perhaps Geffrey's mistake is not so much one about the content of
the poem but rather one about the point of the poem, a mistaken
view which the readers can now understand. Thus, Geffrey's request
for plain talk after the Knight's complaint is based on the belief that
the purpose of the dream is to compare two sorrows, two sentimen
tal catastrophes, and the readers are now positioned to reject this
view and to decide that the Book of the Duchess is a funereal elegy
on Blanche of Lancaster, that Geffrey's insomnium is puff, and that
this will be the emblematic story of the love of John and Blanche.
For the record, remember that Geffrey is right and the readers are
wrong (of which more later).
What is quite neatly set up in these lines is a clear-cut opposition between what seems to be the Black Knight's "real" sorrow and consequently righteous discourse of sentiment and Geffrey's artificial, ridiculous sorrow and faulty discourse. Forgetting the frame and the fact that this is, after all, Geffrey's dream, the reader embraces this opposition and so feels considerable pain as Geffrey says all the wrong things (such as, above, offering to make it all better). Unaware (as readers are not) that his questioning is painful to the Black Knight, the dreamer-character tries repeatedly to draw the figure out and learn the cause of his sorrow. The Knight for his part obliges, offering as explanation the famous metaphor of the chess game with Dame Fortune (perhaps drawn from the Zodiac) and the long, rather stylized rehearsal of his meeting and courtship with the lady. The Knight's discourse of sentiment, it seems, succeeds both expressively and affectively, for the readers both know and sympathize with the pain he suffers. Ignoring Geffrey's obtuseness—we are not obtuse—the poem has a completely new locus (the Black Knight) and, as Chaucerians are fond of remarking, he is a far better poet than Geffrey.

This last judgment, that the Black Knight's sorrow and discourse are inherently more worthy than Geffrey's, needs examination. In the spirit of many a naive reader of Chaucer who simply can't see that the Knight is a better poet, it needs to be said that he is not, or at least that he is not less mannered, artificial, and conventional than Geffrey. The Knight's heavily stylized imagery and diction may be better executed than Geffrey's, but they are not different in kind; for example:

"But swich a fairnesse of a nekke
Had that sweete that boon nor brekke
Nas her non sene that myssat.
Hyt was whit, smothe, streight, and pure flat,
Wythouten hole; or canel-boon,
As be semynge, had she noon.
Hyr throte, as I have now memoyre,
Semed a round tour of yvorye,
Of good gretnesse, and noght to gret."
"And goode faire White she het;
That was my lady name ryght.
She was bothe faire and bryght;
She hadde not hir name wrong.
Ryght faire shuldres and body long
She had, and armes, every lyth
Fattyssh, flesshy, not gret therwith;
Ryght white handes, and nayles rede,
Rounde brestes; and of good brede
Hyr hippes were, a streight flat bak.

(lines 939-57)

This is fine poetry, but it is every bit as conventional as Geffrey's; it appears more excellent, perhaps, because it lacks some of Geffrey's "Englishness" and because its topic is "real," not artificial. Still, Blanche's exemplary bone structure and her arms, "fattyssh, flesshy, not gret therwith," could easily have come from the muse that offered the black satin bedclothes to Morpheus. Yet it is somehow heretical—and rightly so—to make this point, to compare the Black Knight's diction with Geffrey's, or at least to do so at this stage of the poem. The recognition of John of Gaunt and his "goode faire White" (948) and the comparison of her death with the eight years' sickness of Geffrey make such discriminations all but impossible at this point in the Book of the Duchess. An objective consideration of the Black Knight's discourse of sentiment literally cannot be made at this juncture, for any such judgment would be clouded by the readers' appreciation or apprehension of the good reasons for the Black Knight's grief. As I suggested above, the Black Knight's sorrow is "real" while Geffrey's is "only conventional," a pair of interpretations that will not be challenged until the conclusion of the Book of the Duchess.

The remainder of the poem is an excellent illustration of narrative normalization, the pseudo-narrative in which the dreamer-character is divested of any special interpretive prerogative and one in which readers feel competent and comfortable. It is, we remember, a virtual monologue on the part of the Black Knight, punctuated only occasionally by wrongheaded conclusions of the dreamer-character:
"But wherfore that ye telle my tale?
Ryght on thys same, as I have seyd,
Was hooly al my love leyd;
For certes she was, that swete wif,
My suffisaunce, my lust, my lyf,
Myn hap, myn hele, and al my blesse,
My worldes welfare, and my goddesse,
And I hooly hires and everydel."

"By oure Lord," quod I, "y trow yow wel!
Hardely, your love was wel beset;
I not how ye myghte have do bet."
"Bet? ne no wyght so wel," quod he.
"Y trowe hyt, sir," quod I, "parde!"
"Nay, leve hyt wel!" "Sire, so do I;
I leve yow wel, that trewely
Yow thoughte that she was the beste,
And to beholde the alderfayreste,
Whoso had loked hir with your eyen."
"With myn? nay, alle that hir seyen
Seyde and sworn hyt was soo.

(lines 1034-53)

Passages such as this are typically seen as examples of the pain to be felt in the Book of the Duchess, the pain inflicted on the suffering Knight by the obtuse Geffrey. The dreamer-character can seemingly say nothing right: in lines 1042-44, he agrees with the Knight, saying that he cannot imagine him doing "bet" than the Lady White, to which the Knight responds in anguish and distraction that, indeed, no man could hope to do so well. Next come a few lines of throat-clearing, after which (lines 1047-51) Geffrey attempts to initiate the debat format. He begins by courteously acknowledging that the Lady White was the "alderfayreste" to all who saw her through the Black Knight's eyes; to say more for Geffrey would be to admit that the Knight's lady was superior to his own. The Knight will have none of this, of course (lines 1052-53), and, refusing to play along, denies Geffrey any framework for comparing White to any other woman. Thus, Geffrey's "naive" attempt to impose the debat frame on the exchange intensifies the Black Knight's pain, while the
Knight’s refusal to respond courteously to a brother-sufferer frustrates Geffrey.

Frustrates him, and worse. Affecting sympathy with the dreamer-character for a moment, we can easily see that, far from allowing room for Geffrey and his empty, conventional love languor, the Black Knight gives the poor fool no chance even to try and be sympathetic or companionable to him: he constantly and sharply corrects Geffrey’s attempts to restate his ideas and gives him no credit for trying, according to his lights, to understand. Alongside fitful bursts of dialogue such as lines 1034–53, just quoted, we should consider the discourteous refrain of the poem:

"Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;
I have lost more than thow wenest"—
(lines 1305–06 and elsewhere)

The reader who has embraced the Black Knight’s perspective on the poem must certainly agree with this judgment: the dreamer-character does not know what the Knight is talking about while the readers do. At the same time, however, from a longer perspective we should see the lines as a titillating and noncommunicative figure of speech, either aposiopesis, significatio, or innuendo, a locution to exactly the same effect as Geffrey’s elliptical “physicien but oon That may me hele” (lines 39–40). Both statements, recalling my notion of the discourse of sentiment, fulfill the second requirement while failing utterly to address the first, for both statements betoken sentiment without expressing or specifying it; both statements assert that the speaker is suffering grievously while also asserting that the nature of that suffering is beyond the hearer’s ken. The fact that the reader is generally unable to make comparisons such as this one between Geffrey and the Black Knight is testimony to the success of the dislocation of the reader and of the power of narrative normalization in the Book of the Duchess: at no point at which both characters are on stage does the text allow the reader sufficient distance to see that the Black Knight and Geffrey are comparable or that their comparison has any relevance or validity except to Geffrey, in his frustrated expectations of a love debat.
When the spell is broken at the end of the poem, the “Game is doon,” as Geffrey says. When Geffrey finally gets the Black Knight to repeat explicitly the cause of his distress—that “she ys ded”—several perspectives shift suddenly and radically. In the stark and beautiful exchange of artless sympathy,

"She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"
"Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!"

(lines 1309–10)

the reader is (or should be) challenged to rethink all earlier judgments about griefs and their expression in the poem. In light of such a humble, human empathy, we are made to see that, while Geffrey’s discourse of sentiment is expression without sympathy, the Black Knight’s was (at least for Geffrey) a “betokening” without expression and, in fairness, rather perversely teasing to the dreamer-character. The final explicit expression of the Black Knight’s grief, by shocking Geffrey out of his courtly miasma, precludes the possibility of a love debat—no man could contest with such a griever—but, more important, the simple statement also forces a realignment of the relationships among the reader, Geffrey, and the Black Knight, relationships that have obtained throughout the poem. In truth, the reader has failed to appreciate (or even perceive) Geffrey’s loss just as Geffrey failed to perceive the Knight’s. Both failures—Geffrey’s and the reader’s—were due to the speakers’ conventional, artificial language, discourse that is sincere in inverse proportion to its expressiveness. As Geffrey feels with (and his always felt with) the Black Knight’s loss without knowing it, the reader has known all along but has not felt with Geffrey’s distress. When the Knight’s loss is finally revealed to him, Geffrey’s sympathy is natural and automatic, but, insofar as he was able, he has sympathized throughout. Readers of the Book of the Duchess cannot say this, however, for they have cast aside Geffrey’s conventionalized distress because it seemed so trite, so conventional. So the Book of the Duchess reveals its readers to be caught in a trap, the trap of judging the discourse of sentiment by a double standard: dismissing Geffrey’s discourse because it is trite while accepting the
Black Knight's discourse because what it describes is famous and worthy.

Ultimately, all human grief, we learn, is as impossible to express or to judge as Geffrey's eight years' sickness. We sympathize with the Black Knight because we know he is John of Gaunt; we fail to sympathize with Geffrey because we do not know the real grief of which his words are the expression or, even worse, brush aside that sorrow because its expression is so sloppily conventional.

Both of these responses are central to the experience of the *Book of the Duchess*, which is finally a poem which expresses grief by proving that successful such expressions are impossible. The good, solid Anglo-Saxon word "routhe"—not "pitee," mind you—is the artless predicate that destroys all that has gone before it. Its artful but empty environment has invested it, paradoxically, with great rhetorical power because, when the discourse of sentiment has been examined and its two requisites set in unbreakable opposition to one another, that is all that can be said. "Is that youre los?" (recognition); "Be God, hyt ys routhe!" (sympathy): the discourse of sentiment is an excrescence, at best trite (Geffrey's) or egregious (the Black Knight's), at worst an obstruction to the wordless, interior, spiritual sympathy that makes the dream's noon bell our own midnight bell.

*Pearl* and the Discourse of Eschatology

*Pearl* is surely the Middle English poem least understood by modern critics, or at least the poem confidently understood. In more genteel days, Sir Robert Cotton's librarian catalogued the poem as

>Vetus poema Anglicanum, in quo sub insomnii figmento, multa ad religionem et mores spectantia explicantur.

An old English poem wherein, under the fiction of a dream, many things concerning religion and morals are expounded.

Modern criticism has done very little to enlarge on this simple but accurate formulation. While scholars have detailed the many specific doctrinal points raised in the poem and have identified them variously with contemporary orthodox and heterodox teachings, we
have neglected in large measure the nature of the medium in which "multa ad religionem et mores" are presented in the poem. We have yet to begin to appreciate how the poem is about "mores" as well as being about "religionem," about conduct as well as doctrine. Finally, we have not settled the issue of explicandum by way of a figmentum, in a sphere in which both Macrobius and later Christian theorists alike frowned on the use of fabulous narratives.

In other words, Pearl is an important test case of the sense of the dream vision developed in these pages. Unlike the Book of the Duchess, the Hous of Fame, the Parlement of Foules, and even Piers Plowman, Pearl is, from first to last, a serious doctrinal poem concerned with nothing other than crucial truths of eschatology. If anywhere, the Macrobean sanctions against the use of the fabulous narrative in discussions of the highest truths ought to apply here. If anywhere, the argument that the dream vision is a fictive apocalypse should prevail here, in a poem that concludes with a vision of the Procession of the company of the Lamb in Heaven. If anywhere, the sense of the dream vision as a perceptual puzzle issuing in community, not revelation, should not apply here.

The seriousness of these challenges is, I believe, a mark of the depth of our misunderstanding of Pearl. Pearl is not an exposition of the mysterious hierarchy of Heaven; not a presentation of the notion of democratic royalty (every man a king, every woman a queen in Heaven); not an argument on the salvation of baptized (or unbaptized) infants. It is not a Michelin guide to the other world, not a reasoned and logical disputation of theological controversy, and certainly not an elegy written by a wayward priest on his dead daughter Margery. What Pearl is is a deconstruction of the discourse of eschatology: a sophisticated presentation of a human discourse the purpose of which is to demonstrate the complete inefficacy of that discourse. Like the Book of the Duchess and the Hous of Fame, Pearl attempts to bring human discourse to bear on a subject, only to discover human discourse to be inadequate as a medium.

Though this position is new and radical, it has its roots, not only in my own view of the dream vision and its background, but also in two sensitive attempts to remove Pearl from the worn-out elegy.
doctrine controversy and to place it in relevant medieval contexts. The most extensive such attempt is a long chapter in A. C. Spearing's *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*, the style and manner of which tend to belie its importance in the history of *Pearl* criticism. Amplifying Schofield's remark that the pearl-image is "Protean" in its reference, Spearing suggests what is effectively a new reading of the poem, one which might truly be called "dramatic" rather than "elegiac" or "didactic" or doctrinal. In the subtle manipulation of the image of the pearl in the dialogue between the Pearl maiden and the narrator, Spearing sees a conscious movement from initial elegiac expectations to the wider perspective of the religious vision, a movement both masked and intensified by the conventional naive narrator of the medieval dream vision. In an important article in *Traditio*, Louis Blenker characterizes a similar movement from a personal to an eschatological orientation, as he notes three stages in the poem analogous to the three stages of contemplation.

What these two very different perspectives on *Pearl* share is a **dynamic** sense of the progress of the poem, a sense of movement from the personal, local, phenomenal, or sensory to the communal, universal, supernal, or spiritual. Both Spearing and Blenker are correct in their identification of the ground of this movement: the poem works on both levels, moving simultaneously outward and upward, away from the self and the world and mutability and the senses and toward "unknowing."

What neither writer suggests, however, is that the poem ultimately critiques this dynamic itself. In the last analysis, *Pearl* is not even an eschatological poem: its intent or purpose or program is to undermine the discourse of eschatology through an exposition of its dependence on human language and human reason, and from this to encourage in place of such notional comprehension of Heaven a simple relationship with God based on faith and trust, not on thoughts and words. Such a sense of the poem eliminates the need for choosing between elegiac and didactic readings because it effectively identifies *Pearl* as both and neither: by arguing that eschatology is as misguided as a survivor's tears, such a reading turns *Pearl*'s two interpretive poles into extremes, both of which are (similarly)
improper human responses to the facts of mortality and of the gratuitous, irrational need of salvation. This presentation of funereal grief as an analogue to eschatological speculation also brings the poem into line with the persistent medieval doctrina themes of personal salvation and the incomprehensibility of redemption. Like *Piers Plowman* and other religious poems of the period, *Pearl* perceived as an anti-eschatological poem becomes a profound statement about the inescapable simplicity of the relationship between God and humanity, a relationship beclouded, not elucidated, by the discourse of eschatology.\(^{23}\)

Considering *Pearl* as a deconstruction also enables us to come to terms with the often contradictory contents of the poem. The doctrinal points made in *Pearl* are, as has often been noted, alternatively conservative and radical, ranging from the fact of the Pearl maiden’s salvation (conservative) to her unaccountably high position in Heaven (radical). The only way these stances can be reconciled is in rejecting them as contents and considering them as strategies: all of the narrator’s attempts to come to rational terms with the organization of Heavenly society are thwarted by the (often snap-pish) rejoinders from his “daughter,” who challenges him and the readers to put by the mysteries of eschatology and to embrace the single mystery that lies behind them and that makes consideration of them foolish and even sinful. The “message” of *Pearl*, then, is the Pearl maiden’s persistent theme of Heavenly “cortaysye,” the sweet, mysterious gentilesse that, understood and embraced, constitutes the poem’s attack on the discourse of eschatology.

The Pearl maiden approaches this effective goal through the carefully planned pattern of perceptions, hints, explanations, and denials that make up the body of the dream-vision dialogue. In about the middle of the poem, for example, the Pearl maiden makes the superficially outrageous claim that she is the Bride of the Lamb and thereby Queen of Heaven. The narrator, who has been resting comfortably in the realization that this visionary lady is his long lost “pearl,” responds to her claim quite predictably, seeming a little scandalized and answering that he had always understood the Virgin Mary to be the one and only Queen of Heaven. This common
sense response to the paradox is based, of course, on sound doctrine and tradition, and also on the presumably stable denotations of words like “queen”:

'Blysful', quod I, may bys be trwe?
Dyspleseg not if I speke errour.
Art you the queene of heuene brewe,
bat al bys worlde schal do honour?
We leuen on Marye that grace of grewe,
bat ber a barren of vrgyn flour;
be croune fro hye quo morg remwe
Bot ho hir passed in sum fauour?24

In other words, the narrator reasons, owing to the nature of queenship, that there may be only one queen per realm, and doctrine teaches us that the Queen of this Realm is the Virgin Mary.

The Pearl maiden responds to this with a short prayer of Marian praise and then the crucial explanation of the “cortaysye” of Heaven:

The court of be kyndom of God alyue
Hat a property in hytself beyng:
Alle bat may perinne arye
Of al be reme is quen oper kyng,
And neuer oper get schal depreye,
Bot vchon fayn of oper hafyng,
And wolde her coroune get worn worpe bo fyue,
If possyble were her mending.
Bot my Lady of quom Jesu con spryng,
Ho halde be empyre ouer vus ful hyse;
And bat displese non of oure gyng,
For ho is Quene of cortaysye.

(lines 445-56)

If this explanation seems hairsplitting or even casuistical, the fault, the Pearl maiden would say, is in our fallen minds and our fallen language: she has succeeded in removing the narrator’s puzzlement by affirming the doctrine of the queenship of Mary alongside the doctrine of celestial courtesy at (for her) the negligible expense of the efficacy of language and logic. Effectively, the Pearl maiden says
here that the courtesy of Heaven is a contradictory one in which everybody is a monarch, Mary is a “meta-monarch,” and, most importantly, everybody is totally satisfied with his or her royal prerogative over no one.

Given the courtly diction of the poem and especially given the blithe tone and homely vocabulary of the Pearl maiden’s answer, then, this is not much of an explanation. What she says is true, of course, and has a rich history in Christian apocalyptic writing, but we should not lose sight of the fact that what she says is also exceedingly odd; especially considering the literalist, courtly preconceptions of the narrator, this “explanation” seems intended more to confound by irrationality than to satisfy with simplicity. Like Orwell’s dictum that all pigs are created equal but that some are more equal than others, the Pearl maiden’s assertion of universal queenship is really a tease, a form of verbal unknowing that enacts the fact that, with the language at our disposal, explaining is the last thing that will explain.

Perhaps guessing that the dreamer is not yet ready for such a frontal attack on sublunar logic and semantics—the discourse of eschatology—the Pearl maiden restates the paradoxical courtesy of Heaven in the next stanza, avoiding overt verbal paradox and alluding to St. Paul’s metaphor of the mystical body of Christ:

(Of courtauysye, as saytȝ Saynt Poule,
Al ȝrn we membreg of Jesu Kryst:
As heued ȝn arme ȝn legg ȝn naule
Temen to hys body ful trwe ȝn tryste,
Rȝȝt so ȝs vch a Krysten sawle
A longande lym to be Mayster of myste.
Benne loke what hate ȝper any gawle
Is tached ȝper tyȝted by lymmesȝ bytwyse.
By heued hartz nauȝt er greme ne gryste,
On arme ȝper ȝnger þag þou bere byȝe.
So fare we alle wyth luf ȝn lyste
To kyng ȝn quene by cortauysye.

(lines 457–68)

Once more, it is important to see these lines dramatically as well as
didactically. At the level of doctrine, Paul’s corporeal metaphor is a
perfect emblem of Christian unity and Heavenly parity, but, for the
narrator, whose question was “sensible” in at least two senses of the
word, the answer seems platitudinous and mildly evasive, not serv­
ing to answer a material question in material terms. Recall that the
original concern was the Pearl maiden’s obtrusive reference to her­
self as a queen and to a courtesy or courtliness that seemingly exists
without the principles of monarchy and hierarchy on which every
court is based. Courtesy is, after all, a function and an acknowledg­
ment of rank, and, without rank, the narrator reasons, there can be
no courtesy. Thus, the Pauline metaphor of the mystical body of
Christ serves to authorize or insulate the Pearl maiden’s principles
of royal parity and uncourtly courtesy, but it does not explain these
mysteries in terms which are either coherent or comprehensible.

The Pearl maiden’s last attempt to characterize Heavenly “cort­
taysye” is by a direct and extended allusion to the New Testament, a
degree of authoritarian evidence to which she has not resorted be­
fore. At the effective center of the poem, she rehearses and inter­
prets the parable of the vineyard workers from Matthew 20: 1–16
and, true to the spirit of the parable, uses it not as an explanation of
but as a celebration of God’s irrational love for humankind. A gloss
she offers toward the end of the discussion gives a good sense of the
meaning that she draws from the narrative:

More haf I of joye and blysse hereinne,
Of ladschyp gret and lyue 3 blom,
[en alle the wy3ez in be worlde my3t wynne
By be way of ry3t to aske dome.
Whe3er welnygh now I con bygyynne—
In euentyde into be vyne I come—
Fyrst of my hyre my Lorde con mynne:
I wat 3 payed anon of al and sum.

(lines 577–84)

Not even the long redaction of the parable—occupying nearly a
hundred lines in the text—seems to satisfy the narrator’s curiosity
about the social architecture or protocol of the Heavenly society for,
ignoring the hortatory tone of the lines just quoted, he continues to treat the Pearl maiden's exhortations to peace and courtesy as positions to be understood and judged rationally and not merely to be accepted. At this point in the poem (if not much earlier), the two functions of narrative normalization, the splitting of the dreamer and the foregrounding of imagery, have acted to separate the dream-experience from its somatic frame, and the readers begin (wrongly, as always) to believe that they understand what is going on in the text. Even if the Pearl maiden were once a human individual to whom this boorish narrator had some tie, she is certainly something else, something more, now. The Pearl maiden offers, it seems, a glimpse of Heavenly bliss and precious eschatological information, but the narrator, the readers' frustrating representative, refuses to learn what is to be learned about the world of light and argues with his visionary interlocutor. This misperception—that there is something new and true to be learned at all here—is a trap, as I suggested earlier, but traps are the result of narrative normalization, and the readers' hunger for eschatology will soon be proven to be as wrongheaded as the narrator's elegiac pouting.

Nonetheless, the marked change in tone to be noted in the Pearl maiden at this point in the poem—just after the vineyard workers redaction—seems righteous, signalling her strategic shift from the relatively mild and patient invitation to accept the irrationality of her position to more aggressive tactic designed to undermine the narrator's stubborn, prideful rationality. The tonal change can be seen in the following lines, which appear about three stanzas after those quoted above ("More haf I of joye and blysse hereinne," etc.), but they are decidedly more shrill and their contents downright accusatory:

```
Bot now ou mote3, me for to mate,
Pat I my peny haf wrang ran here;
ou say3, pat I pat com to late
Am not worj?y so gret fere.
Where wyste3 ou euer any bourne abate,
Euer so holy in hys prayere,
Pat he ne forfeted by sumkyn gate
```
At first glance, these lines seem a startling violation of the very "cortaysye" that the Pearl maiden has been advocating: her notion that the older one gets, the more one sins is, though uncourteous, the perfect rejoinder to the narrator's position that long struggle is more meritorious than innocence. The last line of the Pearl maiden's attack, however—the tag line for this set of stanzas—will ultimately help readers put her indictment of adult holiness into perspective. If, as she says, "be grace of God is gret innoge," that is, sufficient in itself to save anyone, then all talk of merit and deserts is foolish and misdirected. The Pearl maiden's attack, then, shows readers that we may justly (but pointlessly) attack the merits of anyone, even of the saints, because none of us actually merits Heaven.

In specific doctrinal terms, this obsession with justice and merit is the error of the Bradwardinians, who taught that unbaptized infants received a Heavenly reward perceptibly inferior to that of those who led complete lives of piety. In a larger sense, however, the error of the narrator (and ultimately the error of readers as well), who has concluded or judged anything at all about his pearl's fitness for her rewards, is the error of eschatology in general, the error inherent in seeking to comprehend the eternal and supernal joy of salvation in rational, logical terms. The wisdom of God (which may or may not be foolishness to men) is nowhere more evident than in His granting the gift of eternal salvation: both Piers the Plowman and the Pearl maiden take care to call it a "mede" or unwarranted gift, as opposed to a payment for services rendered. Such a notion certainly corrects the Bradwardinians, but it also challenges and invalidates all other eschatological positions as well: insofar as we are intellectually curious about the shape of the Heavenly society, this poem suggests, we imperil our eventual enjoyment of the simple
peace and happiness implicit in faith and hope, the joy in which is the source of the Pearl maiden’s “cortaysye.”

This conflict, between courtesy and curiositas, is the central dramatic tension of the poem and, before examining its resolution through the dream vision form, we may digress momentarily to consider the background of the tension in contemporary mystical writings. At base, as Blenker points out, the positions of the dreamer and the Pearl maiden represent, respectively, meditation and contemplation. Blenker’s source for this distinction, Hugh of St. Victor’s Nineteen Homilies in Salomonis Ecclesiasten, makes the point nicely:

Tres sunt animae rationalis visiones, cogitatio, meditatio, contemplatio. Cogitatio est, cum mens notione rerum transitorie tangitur cum ipsa res, sua imagine animo subito praesentatur, vel per sensum ingrediens, vel a memoria exsurgens. Meditatio est assidua et sagax retractatio cogitatio-nis, alicuius, vel involutum explicare nitens, vel scrutans, penetrare occultum. Contemplatio est perspicax, et liber animi contuitus est res perspicientes usquequaque diffusus.

There are three modes of cognition (visiones) belonging to the rational mind: cogitation, meditation, contemplation. It is cogitation when the mind is touched with the idea of things, and the thing itself is by its image presented suddenly, either by entering the mind through sense or by rising from memory. Meditation is the assiduous and sagacious revision of cogitation, and strives to explain the involved, and penetrate the hidden. Contemplation is the mind’s perspicacious and free attention, diffused everywhere throughout the range of whatever may be explored.

Blenker argues that each of these three stages is represented sequentially in the poem in something close to the (chronologically) later Ignatian pattern of meditation of place, meditation of participation, and final contemplation. We have already seen, though, that this program is not precisely true to the dynamic of the poem: the conversation between the Pearl maiden and the narrator is anything but a smooth straight ascent and is only nominally a conventional oracular instruction by a figure of authority. The pair vigorously dispute in human and realistic ways, which suggests that the Pearl vision is actually something closer to a struggle between meditation (or eschatology, represented by the narrator and the readers) and con-
templation (or humble, graceful acquiescence, represented by the Pearl maiden). In English contemplative writing of this period and especially in the naive, populist tradition, this tension between meditation and contemplation was far more important than the less challenging "step approach" offered by Blenker and more closely associated with later continental writers. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, meditation is described as an impediment to rather than as a stage of contemplation:

Be sure that if you are occupied with something less than God, you place it above you for the time being and create a barrier between yourself and God. Therefore, firmly reject all clear ideas however pious or delightful. For I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do. And you are more blessed to experience the interior affection of this love within the darkness of the cloud of unknowing than to contemplate the angels and saints or to hear the mirth and melody of their heavenly festival.  

In this text and elsewhere in mystical writings, contemplation of "the angels and saints" and of "their heavenly festival" of exactly the sort that the narrator and the readers seek from this dream is treated merely as a special case of the vain imaginings which prevent the soul's mystic union with God:

These originate in a conceited, curious, or romantic mind whereas the blind stirring of love springs from a sincere and humble heart. Pride, curiosity, and daydreaming must be sternly checked if the contemplative work is to be authentically conceived in singleness of heart.

Such perception of the "conceited, curious" and "romantic" dreamer (and reader) of *Pearl* redefines the poem's fundamental tension and makes it virtually a new poem, a poem full of self-consciously insoluble intellectual puzzles. Throughout the vision, the dreamer and the readers he represents treat these puzzles as challenges: the narrator attempts to gather information from the Pearl maiden toward their solution and assumes that his eschatologist's mind is sufficient to unlock their mysteries. This attitude, a stubborn unwillingness simply to rest in the presence of God, is treated with growing co-
tempt by the Pearl maiden, who first seeks to amend the narrator's mind but finally comes to the more aggressive strategy of teaching humility by confounding intellectual pride with the wonderful irrationality of God. This later strategy, seen first in her rhetorical attack on adult holiness, reappears as she recollects her own call to Heaven:

'My makeleg Lambe þat alle may bete',
Quod scho, 'my dere destyné,
Me ches to hys make, al þag vnmete
Sumtyme semed þat assemblé.
When I wente fro yor worlde wete,
He calde me to hys bonerté:
"Cum hyder to me, my lemmán swete,
For mote ne spot is non in þe."
He gef me myȝt and als bewté;
In hys blod he wesch me wede on dese,
And coronde clene in vergynte,
And pyȝt me in perleg maskelleȝ.

(lines 757-68)

But this appeal, like all those that went before it, falls on deaf ears, or rather on ears that might as well have been deaf, for the narrator fails to appreciate the Pearl maiden's insistence on her humble unworthiness for brideship and, worse, mishears her crucial distinction between "makeleg" and "maskelleȝ":

Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe
Þat qe wolde wedde vnto hys vyf?
Ouer alle oþer so hyȝ pou clambe
To lede wyth hym so ladly lyf.
So mony a comly on-vunder cambe
For Kryst han lyued in much stryf;
And þou con alle þo dere out dryf
And fro þat maryag al oþer depres,
Al only þyself so stout and styf,
A makeleg may and maskelleg.

(lines 771-80)
Clearly, the narrator still fails to understand that Heaven is beyond earthly conventions (such as merit or monogamy), but more important at this later stage of the poem is his mistaken predication of both adjectives, “makele3” and “maskelle3,” to the Pearl maiden. In her response, she makes the difference between the two clear:

“Maskelles” quod þat myry quene,
“Vnblemyst I am, wythouten blot,
And þat may I wyth mensk menteene;
Bot ’makele3 quene’ þenne sade I not.”

(lines 781–84)

The distinction, now underscored by the dangerous similarity of the two words, is one of the crucial ones of the poem: superior goodness or sanctity, indicated by “makele3,” has no significance, is an empty eschatological fiction, while absolute goodness, the state of being untainted absolutely or “maskelle3” (“immaculate”), is the mark of the saved soul and especially of the soul that enters Heaven without having had even the opportunity to know sin. It is such souls that the Pearl maiden has in mind as ideals, souls that escaped unavoidable sin by their early abstention from physical life, when she introduces the most famous pearl of the New Testament, the margarita pretiosa:

“Jesus con calle to hym hys mylde,
And sayde hys rychc no wy3 my3t wynne
Bot he com þyder ry3t as a chylde,
Oþer elleg, neuermore com þerinne.
Harmleg, trwe, and vndefylde,
Wythouten more oþer mascle of sulpande synne,
Quen such þer cnoken on þe bylde,
Tyt schal hem men þe gate vapyynne.
þer is þe blys þat con not blynne
þat þe jueler so3te þur3 perrē pres,
And solde all hys goud, boþe wolyn and lynne,
To bye hym a perle wat3 mascelle3.

“This makelle3 perle, þat boþt is dere,
The beauty of this passage lies in the way it brings together disparate allusions from Scripture with motifs in the poem itself to deconstruct eschatology and to assert the courtesy of Heaven. Jesus' injunction to become "as a chylde" (Mark 10:15, etc.) recalls the various senses of childhood in the poem: initially considered unworthy of eminence in Heaven (by the narrator), the child is now seen as having the essential purity that will "be gare vnypynne." The play on "makele3" and "maskelle3" in these lines looks forward to the narrator's problem with these words a few lines later, but the confusion—essentially a semantic one—can already be seen as destroying the discourse of eschatology by showing (as the notion of common queenship did) that eschatology is finally beyond discourse. The pearl (here suggesting personal salvation) is "maskelle3" by virtue of the soul's fastidiousness and also "makele3" or incomparable to any other possible reward for the avoidance of "sulpande synne." As if to underscore the inadequacy of the discourse of eschatology, note the recurrence of an earlier paradox implicit in lines 721 and 739, the pearl's being both "makele3" and also "commune to alle pat ryn3twys were," that is, the badge of membership in a peerless community of equals.

Such is the nature of Heavenly courtesy, a special, ecstatic courtesy that exists among the elect without the earthly prerequisites of rank and hierarchy. And this "cortaysye" is Pearl's critique of eschatology, a critique of meditation, intellection, and even of earthly dreams which conceptualize the afterlife in insufficient human terms. That the dreamer fails to learn this within the dream is evident from the dream's interruption: the dreamer's final act in the
dream is the fundamental violation of courtesy, a radical breaking of the rules specifically laid down by the Pearl maiden:

Delyt me drof in y3e and ere,
My maneg mynde to maddyng malte;
Quen I se3 my frely, I wolde be þere,
Byȝonde þe water þag ho were walte.
I þogt þat noþyng myȝt me dere
To feth me bur and take me halte,
And to start in þe strem schulde non me sterle,
To symme þe remnaunt, þag I þer swalte.

(lines 1153–60)

The narrator’s attempt to cross the river is in direct defiance of the third of the Pearl maiden’s injunctions, the “three errors” specified in lines 289–300. Moreover, the dreamer’s emphasis on his delight and his following of his curious “maneg mynde” suggest that his awakening at this point is a signal of his unworthiness to cross. His desire to know, in place of what should be his desire to be, expels this still-ignorant intruder.

It is only on awakening that the narrator’s perspective of the vision begins to change from human to celestial:

To paye þe Prince ðeper sete s4ȝte
Hit is ful þe to þe god Krystyn;
For I haf founden hym, boþe day and nȝte,
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I lagte,
For pytþ of my perle enclynin,
And syþen to God I hit bynȝte
In Krysteg dere blessyng and myn,
Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
þe prest vus scheweȝ vch a daye.
He gef vus to be his homly hyne
Ande precious perleg vnto his pay.

(lines 1201–13)

As with those of the Book of the Duchess, these final lines require
readers to readjust their allegiances. Until this point, the narrator has been the fool who was offered a vision of the afterlife and ignored it, the boor who was offered a sense of Heavenly courtesy and challenged and repudiated it. The poem’s conclusion, however, gives evidence that the dreamer-poet—as opposed to the dreamer-character—understands the courtesy of Heaven full well and knows it to be available in this world through humble service to the Prince and through sacramental intermediaries. This shift in perspective within the poem, discovering the tenor of the pearl-image (or at least its final tenor) to be salvation and not some little girl, redefines the anxiety or longing of the dreamer at the beginning of the vision, showing it to be the laudable and holy desire for membership in the community of the elect. That the dreamer was unable to comprehend this until this late point is not as important as the readers’ analogous failure to recognize—again, before this—the futility of such dreams of the afterlife. Such are, Pearl teaches, as misdirected as the search for baby Margery, the attempt to make human sense of Heavenly society, and the desire to “preview” what is open and comprehensible only to those loosed from the discourse of eschatology.

The Hous of Fame and the End of Lore

I claimed above that the Book of the Duchess is a poem which says impossible words, a poem that expresses grief without succumbing to the trivial locutions required for such expression. The Hous of Fame expresses the inexpressible as well, for it is a poem that demonstrates that poems lie.

This is not by any means a new reading of the Hous of Fame; from among the many others who have shared some of the following perceptions, I should single out Sheila Delany’s The House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism as an important source for this present discussion. After treatments of sceptical fideism and its poetics in early chapters of her book, Delany moves sequentially through the poem and traces a progressive dismantling of received wisdom in its Proem and three books. Defining fame as “the body of traditional knowledge that confronted the educated fourteenth-
century reader,” Delany perceives Chaucer to be fundamentally anxious about the contingency of this body of knowledge but unable to perform the logical gymnastics necessitated by the late medieval crisis of authority:

Despite its benefits, the distinction between kinds of truth was one which Chaucer was unable fully to accept as the basis for literary practice. The *House of Fame* shows that while Chaucer felt the dilemma which made the separation of truths necessary, he still preferred to transcend the choice between traditions rather than to commit himself wholeheartedly to a single intellectual position or consistent point of view.

Delany is certainly correct in identifying the *Hous of Fame* as a sceptical poem, but her book leaves unanswered many crucial questions about Chaucer’s perspective on this medieval scepticism and, in subtle but important ways, misjudges the poet. The anxiety of the *Hous of Fame* is unmistakable, but it is still a work of art produced not by its anxious dreamer but by its less anxious artist. We must take care not to confuse the two: it is Geffrey the dreamer-character who prays,

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“O Crist!” thoughte I, “that art in blysse,
Fro fantome and illusion
Me save!”
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(lines 492–94)

and Chaucer the maker who writes these lines for him. The distinction, of course, is as old as Kittredge but, we shall see, the working distance between the dreamer-character and the dreamer-poet—and the distance between these two figures and Chaucer—is especially difficult to maintain in this, Chaucer’s greatest dream vision. These slippery distinctions suggest the purpose or program of this poem, the undermining of lore itself, the deconstruction of, perhaps, discourse itself. To do this, Chaucer must produce a poem that implicates lore and poems, a very different project than that of merely decrying their contingency; to do this, Chaucer must use lore to its own destruction, use writing to deconstruct the tyranny of the written word. What must survive the *Hous of Fame* is a community whose perception of the contingency of this world and whose dis-
trust of human language and human rational formulations are their common bonds. This is a much more ambitious program than that of the Book of the Duchess or of Pearl, which attacked only very limited discourses; the strategy, however, is the same. What the Hous of Fame will do is make its dreamer’s insomnium our own insomnium as well and then wake us up.

The poem begins with what seems a striking departure from convention, a departure which, I suspect, has led Curry, Lewis, Koonce, and others to see the Hous of Fame as a somnium coeleste, a revelatory dream and no insomnium at all. Instead of elliptical autobiography or hints at the dreamer’s distress as in Pearl or the Book of the Duchess and other dream visions, the Proem to the Hous of Fame offers a long, rather panicked synopsis of dream lore:

God turne us every drem to goode!  
For hyt is wonder, be the roode,  
To my wyt, what causeth swevenes  
Eyther on morwes or on evenes;  
And why th’effect folweth of somme,  
And of somme hit shal never come;  
Why that is an avisioun  
And this a revelacioun,  
Why this a drem, why that a sweven,  
And noght to every man lyche even;  
Why this a fantome, why these oracles,  
I not; but whoso of these miracles  
The causes knoweth bet then I,  
Devyn he; for I certeinly  
Ne kan hem noght, ne never thinke  
To besily my wyt to swinke,  
To knowe of hir signifiaunce  
The gendres, neyther the distaunce  
Of tymes of hem, ne the causes,  
Or why this more than that cause is;  
As yf folkys complexions  
Make hem dreme of reflexions;  
Or ellys thus, as other sayn,  
For to gret feblenesse of her brayn,
By abstinence, or by seknesse,  
Prison, stewe, or gret distresse,  
Or ellys by disordynaunce  
Of naturel acustumaunce,  
That som man is to curious  
In studye, or melancolyous,  
Or thus, so inly ful of drede,  
That no man may hym botc bede;  
Or elles that devocion  
Of somme, and contemplacion  
Causeth suche dremes ofte;  
Or that the cruel lyf unsofte  
Which these ilke lovers leden  
That hopen over-muche or dreden,  
That purely her impressions  
Causen hem to have visions;  
Or yf that spirites have the myght  
To make folk to dreme a-nyght;  
Or yf the soule, of propre kynde,  
Be so parfit, as men fynde,  
That yt forwot that ys to come,  
And that hyt warneth alle and some  
Of everych of her aventures  
Be avisions, or be figures,  
But that oure flessh ne hath no myght  
To understonde hyt ariyght,  
For hyt is warned to derkly;—  
But why the cause is, noght wot I.

(lines 1–52)

While many claim that these lines are a tour de force reflecting Chaucer’s wide knowledge of oneiromancy, this is clearly not their dramatic, radical lyric force. The lines bespeak familiarity with dream lore sure enough, but they emphasize this lore’s eclectic, inconclusive, and aimless expanse and not its (arguable) status as a coherent body of knowledge. We have seen that such a sense of medieval oneiromancy is justified—as righteous as the almost exclusive emphasis here on pathological or somatic causes for
dreams—but we should nonetheless beware of taking this precision
and show of knowledge too seriously, for the passage as a whole
shows that Geffrey's bewilderment is at least equal to his expertise.
Taken as an example of the radical lyricism that begins the dream
vision, the Proem is more outburst than dissertation, a frantic, ram­
brling speech enunciated by a nervous persona who has read the au­
thorities and has discovered that they cannot be made to agree. The
long passage just quoted, a single 296-word sentence in the Robin­
son edition, hardly suggests the calm, measured, confident style of
the author of the Treatise of the Astrolabe or the Equatorie of the
Planets. The repeated prayer, "God turne us every dreme to goode!"
which frames the Proem like praying hands bookends, adds to the
sense that this is a dramatic production, the monologue of a "mased
thyng" who (for once) is bewildered and anxious, even unnerved. To
recall Delany's title, "fideism" here brackets "scepticism" and the
structure holds only by the grace of God. And Geffrey asks God, not
for inspiration, guidance, or wisdom in interpreting dreams, but
only, naively, that He turn all our dreams to good event. He is thus
far more serious than his namesakes in the Book of the Duchess,
whose concerns seem banal by comparison: the stakes are much
higher, somehow, here.

Thus, the Proem to the Hous of Fame is actually not a departure
from the convention of introducing the dreamer as distressed or
anxious; it simply establishes this element through dramatic mono­
logue rather than through explicit statement or innuendo. After
reading the Proem, the reader knows, just as surely as if Chaucer has
said so outright, that this fellow has problems. Far from suggesting
a Dantesque apocalypse or a somnium coeleste, this errant, quirky
proem presents readers with a worried, confused persona who has
discovered to his dismay just what we discovered for ourselves in
chapter 2 above—that the dream authorities cannot be made to
make any practical, usable sense. The nightmare has begun.

Its end is not in sight. The three books that follow this proem
constitute a steady, unrelenting accretion of evidence for a conclu­
sion that is, perhaps, inherent in that proem: that truth in this world
is either unavailable or indeterminate.37 Like the nightmare expe-
rience of fleeing an enemy but finding him again and again at every turn, or like the nightmarish experience of learned men of the fourteenth century like Ockham or Abelard who found contingency in every branch of knowledge, this poem is a fictive record of Geffrey’s dream of history, philosophy, and science, rehearsing his repeated attempts to find solid foundations for these three *artes*. Like all nightmares, this is a personal, even idiosyncratic vision; like all visions, its personal perspective comes to be fully shared by all who read and see aright.

Book One of the *Hous of Fame* is an exercise in textuality, a revelation of the contingency of history, a deconstruction of the discourse of history. In the temple of glass, Geffrey comes upon a text:

But as I romed up and doun,  
I fond that on a wall ther was  
Thus written on a table of bras:  
"I wol now singen, yif I kan,  
The armes, and also the man  
That first cam, thurgh his destinee,  
Fugityf of Troy contree,  
In Itayle, with ful moche pyne  
Unto the strondes of Layvne."  
And tho began the story anoon,  
As I shal telle yow echon.

(lines 140–50)

As the quotation suggests, history, the record of the adventures of Aeneas as inscribed by Vergil ("*Arma virumque cano* . . .") has become a story, one subject to rehearsal or retelling, one that can now be "told" yet again by Geffrey. Its stability seems, as it begins, to inhere both in its familiarity—no author is attached to the text—and equally by its being engraved in brass, solidity symbolizing stability.

This very stability is immediately called into question in the next lines, as Geffrey’s relationship with his source becomes less clear:

First sawgh I the destruction  
Of Troye, thurgh the Grek Synon,
That with his false forswerynge,  
And his chere and his lesygne,  
Made the hors broght into Troye,  
 Thorgh which Troyens loste al her joye.  
And aftir this was grave, alas!  
How Ilyon assayled was  
And wonne, and kyng Priam yslayn  
And Polytes, his sone, certayn,  
Dispitously, of daun Pirrus.

(lines 151–61)

The crucial question here is how we are to take the verb “sawgh.” Whether it is simply shorthand for “read” or a reference to representational carvings is not clear, though if it is the latter, it is peculiar that Chaucer fails to tell us directly. Whatever the correct sense may be, though, the word "sawgh" moves the narrative of events of the Aeneid away from Vergil’s text. What is reported here is, to say the least, at several removes from the events being described: the destruction of Troy (through, notice, the lies of Sinon) as recorded by Vergil, as, it seems, reinterpreted by the mysterious artisan of the temple, as described by Geoffrey. But this is a dream and, as such, the mind of Geoffrey is the ultimate source of all he reports. Thus the double contingency of history is introduced: history (and especially medieval history) is a sequence of representations, each dependent on the accuracy of its predecessors and all dependent on the integrity of the human mind, here represented at its least trustworthy through the dream frame.

The second, anterior contingency is emphasized more and more in the rehearsal of the Troy story in Book One, as Geoffrey introduces value judgments and emotional expletives:

And I saugh next, in al thys fere,  
How Creusa, daun Eneas wif,  
Which that he lovede as hys lyf,  
And hir yonge sone Iulo,  
And eke Askanius also,  
Fledden eke with drye chere,  
That hyt was pitee for to here;
And in a forest, as they wente,
At a turnynge of a wente,
How Creusa was ylost, alias!
That ded, not I how, she was;
How he hir soughte, and how hir gost
Bad hym to flee the Grekes host,
And seyde he moste unto Itayle,
As was his destinee, sauns faille;
That hyt was pitee for to here,
When hir spirit gan appere,
The wordes that she to him seyde,
And for to kepe hir sone hym preyde.

(lines 174–92)

The random, nonsequential character of the narrative is evident from these lines; through Geoffrey, Chaucer is intentionally giving readers a partial, impressionistic picture of a scene inspired by the Aeneid, a far cry from “I wol now singen” much closer to “yif I kan.” The intrusive “That hyt was pitee for to here” (lines 180 and 189), like the intrusive “yif I kan,” are emblems of contingency, of history’s dependence on fallible human historians. More than this, the mystery surrounding Creusa’s death demonstrates that history is always subject to gaps and lacunae, which may be silently supplied, like emotional responses or moral judgments, by individual talents in the tradition.

Inclusions and exclusions figure prominently in the climax of the Aeneid redaction—if it is still accurate to call it this—as the story of Aeneas suddenly takes on a decidedly un-Vergilian project, the rehabilitation of Dido:

But let us speke of Eneas,
How he betrayed hir, alias!
And lefte hir ful unkyndely.
So when she saw al utterly,
That he wolde hir of trouthe fayle,
And wende fro hir to Itayle,
She gan to wringe hir hondes two.
“Alias!” quod she, “what me ys woo!

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APPLICATIONS: THREE DECONSTRUCTIVE DREAM VISIONS

Alias! is every man thus trewe,
That every yer wolde have a newe,
Yf hit so longe tyme dure,
Or elles three, peraventure?
As thus: of oon he wolde have fame
In magnifyinge of hys name;
Another for frendshippe, seyth he;
And yet ther shal the thridde be
That shal be take for delyt,
Loo, or for synguler profit.”

This speech is one of the most interesting in the Hous of Fame because it shows so clearly the nightmarish quality of this strange vision of contingency. First, of course, Dido never speaks these words in the Aeneid: Vergil is quite unforgiving to this woman who turned his hero’s head. This, therefore, is a reprise of the “source problem”—words or sights?—introduced earlier. Where does this Dido come from? How is Geffrey hearing her? Whose words is she saying? Second, Dido’s words themselves are subtly troublesome. The three women to whom she alludes can be safely identified as Creusa (fame), Dido herself (friendship, etc.), and lastly Lavinia (delight and profit)—of the last of whom Vergil’s Dido was obviously unaware. This “Dido” whose complaint Geffrey duly records is, thus, a strangely ahistorical creature, not wholly Vergil’s Dido by virtue of her foreknowledge (and her “freedom of speech”) but not wholly un-Vergilian by virtue of her biography. In some ways, she is Ovid’s Dido, of course, but if she is, she still is so in a redaction of the Aeneid and not of the Heroides, an alternate “authority” Geffrey will not mention until it is too late.

As if to emphasize this very problem of sources and especially of the apparent sourcelessness of this prescient Dido, Geffrey interrupts her speech at this very point to offer a curious but not terribly reassuring disclaimer:

In suche wordes gan to pleyne
Dydo of her grete peyne,
Such a statement dramatizes the readers’ ambivalence with the mode of the dream vision, which hovers between lyric and narrative, between dream as emotional correlative and dream as story. This statement of "authority" is, by this point in the text, both true and false. It is true, of course, because, when all is said and done, this is Geffrey’s *insomnium*, an experience for which there can be no “auctour” or source other than the *figmenta* of the dreamer. It is simultaneously false, however, because this Dido—any Dido—is not wholly a creature of Geffrey’s imagination: she is a creature of history given by Vergil to the world (and therefore an example of narrative normalization, in that she is identifiable independent of the dream frame). She has never spoken these words before—"non other auctour alegge I"—but the matter of her complaint is just and familiar, at least to readers of the *Heroides*. Thus, Dido is a creature sprung contradictorily to life, a character seemingly free from textual contingency but in fact free only to bemoan that contingency:

"O, wel-awey that I was born!
For thorgh yow [Aeneas? Vergil?] is my name lorn,
And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al thys lond, on every tonge.
O wikke Fame! for ther nys
Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!
O, soth ys, every thing ys wyst,
Though hit be kevered with the myst.
Eke, though I myghte duren ever,
That I have don, rekever I never,
That I ne shal be seyd, allass,
Yshamed be through Eneas,
And that I shal thus juged be—
‘Loo, ryght as she hath don, now she
Wol doo eft-sones, hardely;’
Thus seyth the peple prively."
But that is don, is not to done;
Al hir compleynct ne al hir moone,
Certeyn, avayleth hir not a stre.

(lines 345-63)

It is to the point here to mention that Dido is factually incorrect when she claims that her side of the story is untold. Aside from the *Heroides* (which Jeffreys will mention at line 379), she is allowed her day in court in this present text, a fact which makes her complaint untrue by virtue of its utterance. More than this, Dido is actually complaining not against Aeneas or even against Vergil but against Fame, an antagonist she unsuccessfully attempts to apostrophize in lines 349-50: because Vergil, the agent of Fame, has immortalized her villainy in verse, she is doomed forever to do again what she did before (each time the *Aeneid* is opened and read) and so doomed to ever-renewed ill Fame.40

Such maddening contradictions take their toll on poor Geffrey, who seems here to be searching for a stable ontological basis for his art of versecraft and for the source of the putative solidity of “rydings” among the “lesynges” of men’s mouths. The bewildering experience with Dido calls even the sainted Vergil into question and, forsaking him who was Dante’s first guide and master, Geffrey responds to the perplexity with calculated uncertainty:

When I had seen al this syghte,
In this noble temple thus,
“A Lord!” thoughte I, “that madest us,
Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
Of ymages, ne such richesse,
As I saugh graven in this chirche;
But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,
Ne where I am, ne in what contree.
But now wol I goo out and see,
Ryght at the wyket, yf y kan
See owhere any stiryng man,
That may me telle where I am.”

(lines 468-79)
The "rich and noble images," so awesome and yet so problematic, make the question of their authority and source all the more crucial to Geffrey, who flees the temple to get his bearings. Outside, he finds a trackless wasteland, the emblem of the contingent web of lore. Without markings or landmarks, either geographic or textual, Geffrey panics:

"O Crist!" thoughte I, "that art in blysse,
Fro fantome and illusion
Me save!" and with devotion
Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.

(lines 492-95)

In true nightmare fashion, this prayer for truth amid contingency is answered, not by the Second Coming of the Logos, but by the second coming of Dante's eagle, another contingent creature truant from its text.

Book Two of the Hous of Fame is a new beginning, complete with a new invocation designed to leave behind the confusing clash of authorities manifest in the Dido debacle:

Now faire blisfull, O Cipris,
So be my favour at this tyme!
And ye, me to endite and ryme
Helpeth, that on Parnaso duelle,
Be Elicon, the clere welle.
O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,
And in the tresorye hyt sherte
Of my brayn, now shal men se
Yf any vertu in the be,
To tellen al my drem aryght.

(lines 518-27)

Leaving behind Vergil, Ovid, and the myths of history, Geffrey grounds his vision once more in his own mind: in the dream, in what he "mette," and in his conscious mind, "thought," which records and processes his memories. The quest remains the same, but now, turn-
ing away from the unstable authority of old books, Geffrey flies toward a personal revelation.

And this revelation can be found in Book Two in the words of the eagle, who begins his chirping dissertation with the significant command, "Awak!" The eagle calls on Geffrey to awaken indeed: to awaken from the dreamlike belief in words, to awaken to the cold light of reason and the axia of science. The eagle's carefully wrought disquisition on "kyndely enclynyng" (lines 729–864) is the perfect methodological counterpart to the chaotic experience of the temple of glass, throwing a stark backlight on the grim lessons learned in the confrontation with Dido.

The revelation comes innocently enough. In explaining how the Palace of Fame can be the repository of all sound and thus of all speech, the eagle demythologizes verbal noise, reducing it to its unimpressive essence:

"Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken,
And every speche that ys spoken,
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
In his substaunce ys but air;
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke.
But this may be in many wyse,
Of which I wil the twoo devyse,
As soun that cometh of pipe or harpe.
For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe,
The air ys twyst with violence
And rent; loo, thys ys my sentence;
Eke, whan men harpe-strynges smyte,
Whether hyt be moche or lyte,
Loo, with the strok the ayr tobreketh;
And ryght so breketh it when men speketh.
Thus wost thou wel what thing is speche."

(lines 765–81)

This "proves" inductively how it can be that all speech might reside in the Palace of Fame, but it does so at great cost. The cost, of course, is the truth that speech is nothing more than noise, a breaking of air
no different from the noise of the harp, the insensible accompaniment to the “noise” of the singer-poet. This explanation may eerily recall a passage from *De Doctrina Christiana*:

>Sed quia verberato aere statim transeunt, nec diutius manent quam sonant, instituta sunt per litteras signa verborum. Ita voces oculis ostenduntur, non per seipsas, sed per signa quaedam sua.

But because vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound, signs of words have been constructed by means of letters. Thus words are shown to the eyes, not in themselves but through certain signs which stand for them.41

When we recall that the resident of the House of Fame is the goddess who *uses* the craftsmen of the written word to lend solidity to the broken air of speech, we can see that the eagle is a true Augustinian who has simply replaced Augustine’s written signs “instituta . . . per litteras” with the goddess who orders these engravings of the stammerings of fallible humans.

In concluding his explanation, the eagle asks Geffrey if he is convinced, not by rhetoric and figure but by the sheer logic and reasonableness of the argument:

>"Telle me this now feythfully,  
Have y not preved thus symply,  
Withoute any subtilite  
Of speche, or gret prolixite  
Of termes of philosophie,  
Of figures of poetrie,  
Or colours of rethorike?  
Pardde, hit oughte thee to lyke!  
For hard langage and hard matere  
Ys encombrous for to here  
Attones; wost thou not wel this?"  
And y answered and seyde, “Yis.”

(lines 853–64)

The muttered “Yis” speaks volumes. In convincing Geffrey that the Palace of Fame is his wonted destination, the eagle has completely devalued the object of Geffrey’s quest. Speech (true or lying speech)
is mere sonic stuff and hidden behind that quiet "Yis" is perhaps Geffrey's realization that the tidings for which he searches will not be quite so easy to find.

In keeping with this sense of Book Two as the book of awakening, it contains several references to apotheoses and to the structure of the Platonic universe. From their shared vantage point, the eagle and Geffrey recall Alexander and, of course, Scipio:

"Seest thou any toun
Or ought thou knowest yonder doun?"
I seyde, "Nay." "No wonder nys,"
Quod he, "for half so high as this
Nas Alixandre Macedo;
Ne the kyng, Daun Scipio,
That saw in drem, at poynst devys,
Helle and erthe and paradys;
Ne eke the wrechche Dedalus,
Ne his child, nyce Ykarus,
That fleigh so highe that the hete
Hys wynges malt, and he fel wete
In myd the sec, and ther he dreynte,
For whom was maked moch compleynte."
(lines 911–24)

Echoing a now-familiar phrase from St. Paul, Geffrey expresses his new belief in the apotheoses of his fellow literati:

Thoo gan y wexen in a were,
And seyde, "Y wot wel y am here;
But wher in body or in gost
I not, ywys; both God, thou wost!"
For more clere entendement
Nas me never yit ysent.
And than thoughte y on Marcian,
And eke on Anteclaudian,
That sooth was her descripsion
Of alle the hevenes region,
As fer as that y sey the preve;
Therfore y kan hem now beleve.
(lines 979–90)
To which the eagle responds pointedly, "'Lat be,' quod he, 'thy fantasye!'" (992). The references to Scipio, Martianus Capella, Alanus, and so on should not suggest that this is a Chaucerian apotheosis or a feigned somnium coeleste; the eagle's rebuke and especially his calling these musings "fantasye" preclude this. In referring all that he sees to books he has read, Geffrey shows that, like the Pearl narrator, he has failed to learn the fundamental message of this experience, has not awakened from the dream of earthly truth and authorial authority. To the eagle's offer to name the stars for him, that is, to tell him their true names, Geffrey demurs, leaving such matters to earthbound "authorities" inferior to his guide in intelligence as well as in vantage point:

"No fors," quod y, "hyt is no nede:  
I leve as wel, so God me spede,  
Hem that write of this mater,  
As though I knew her places here;  
And eke they shynen here so bryghte,  
Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte,  
To loke on hem."

(lines 1011–17)

To which the eagle, again reassessing his ward, replies quietly, "That may wel be" (1017). Throughout this second book, Geffrey remains the naive, bookish fellow staring straight at the truth and refusing to recognize it or, as here, averting his eyes in fear that its brilliance will blind him. Like the dreamer of the Book of the Duchess and even more of Pearl, this dreamer can be seen to lag far behind the readers, who have embraced the pseudonarrative and, at this stage, recognize John of Gaunt or desire to see the Procession of the Elect or yearn for knowledge of the "true" names of the stars. In repeated such moments of narrative normalization, Geffrey is confronted again and again with the contingency of earthly knowledge, in which history is as transitory as Augustinian "vibrations of the air" or in which this world is as a mote in the universe and yet, at an epistemological distance at which even "touns" are no longer recognizable, Geffrey fails to draw the Stoic lessons of Boethius or Troy-
lus, turns his back on the truth, squints towards earth, and longs to get home to his old books.

Book Three of the *Hous of Fame* begins with yet another prologue, yet another attempt to reground the vision in the radical personal authority of the dream. Reminding readers rather backhandedly of his profession (and possibly echoing the eagle's humbling judgment on his artistry), Geffrey prays:

> O God of science and of lyght,  
> Appollo, thurgh thy grete myght,  
> This lytel laste bok thou gye!  
> Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,  
> Here art poerical he shewed;  
> But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,  
> Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,  
> Though som vers fayle in a sillable;  
> And that I do no diligence  
> To shewe craft, but o sentence.  
> And yif, devyne vertu, thow  
> Wilt helpe me to shewe now  
> That in myn hed ymarked ys—  
> Loo, that is for to menen this,  
> The Hous of Fame for to descriye—  
> Thou shalt se me go as blyve  
> Unto the nexte laure y see,  
> And kysse yt, for hyt is thy tree.  
> Now entre in my brest anoon!

(lines 1091-1109)

By this point, intentions such as these (and an orientation towards discourse such as this) should have a decidedly hollow ring. Chastened by his experiences with Dido and the eagle, Geffrey now has a more radical view of the poetic art and will now be content if the form is only "agreable" provided the *sentence* is accurate.42 This noble intention is devalued, however, as we remember that—"non other auctour alegge I"—the source of the vision and all its *sentence* is none other than Geffrey's dream. As if to underscore this increasing hollowness of the authorial voice as the final vision of Fame and
Rumour approach, notice, as in the opening of the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer's careful, self-effacing use of quotation here. Here, Chaucer's (or perhaps Geffrey's) source is *Paradiso* I (lines 13–27) and the translation is accurate but punctuated with asides and other elements which deflate its original high seriousness. Specifically, lines 1104–05, a stumbling appositive explaining to Apollo what he means, are an emblem of Geffrey's and the poem's increasing nervousness with discourse, with the poetic art, and even with simple reference. Further, like "I have gret wonder, be thys lyght," in the *Book of the Duchess*, this eclectic moment in the *Hous of Fame* bungles its lush source with excess and indecorous detail: while Dante says that he will make himself a laurel crown in honor of Apollo, Geffrey promises to kiss the tree.

Moments like these are not examples of Chaucer's fabled default of high seriousness: they are serious indeed, though their seriousness derives from Chaucerian sentence and not "craft," a poetic art that uses the dreamer-persona as a foil for the reader and not as a representative. Such moments are, again, moments of narrative normalization, moments when the perspective of the poetic persona is gently subverted to involve the reader fully in the developing *drama* of the dream vision.

It is hard to tell whether Apollo answers Geffrey's prayer here, but it is easy to see that the object of Geffrey's description is not conducive to pithy rime emphasizing *sentence*. Atop the mount of icy words—a perfect emblem for the contingency of language—Geffrey beholds the palace, itself *all craft no sentence*:

And eke in ech of the pynacles
Weren sondry habitacles,
In which stoden, al withoute—
Ful the castel, al aboute—
Of alle maner of mynstralles,
And gestiours, that tellen tales
Both of wepinge and of game,
Of al that longeth unto Fame.
    Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe
That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,
Orpheus, ful craftely,
And on his syde, faste by,
Sat the harper Orion,
And Eacides Chiron,
And other harpers many oon,
And the Bret Glascurion;
And smale harpers with her gleës
Sate under hem in dyvers sees,
And gunne on hem upward to gape,
And countrefete hem as an ape,
Or as craft countrefeteth kynde.

(lines 1193-1213)

The word "craft" here, which appeared with negative connotations only a hundred lines earlier in the Invocation (line 1100), emphasizes the richness and splendor of the palace, but it should also represent a caution to the reader. In each of the "pynacles" craft is visible counterfeiting not "kynde" but more craft—recall the several removes at which Geffrey received the Aeneid story. Further, it is relevant to note that the "smale harpers" of line 1209, playing the very instrument that the eagle used to illustrate the insubstantiality of sound, look up to and "ape" not real historical characters but Orpheus, Orion, Chiron, and Glascurion, figures from myth and literature.

The events of Book Three, while spectacular, need not detain us here. They are, once more, a continuous emblem of the contingency and capriciousness of written, literary discourse, which bestows authority on Augustine's "vibrations of the air" simply when the oral, airy words are written down, "authored." This intimation of the truth that has lain latent throughout the poem brings the *Hous of Fame* to a thematic, though not dramatic, climax. The descriptions of the Domus Dedaly and of the goddess Fame, with their rich and wondrous detail, are final proof for the reader that Fame is a capricious lady who regales true or false noise as she will (the lesson of Book One), and that the raw material for such "befaming" is the sonic flotsam and jetsam merrily warehoused across the road from her palace (the lesson of Book Two).
In the end, the *Hous of Fame* transcends even its own form. The poem ends, not with the reawakening of the dreamer and the consequent return to the lyric mode, but with an ellipsis within the dream, making this poem quite literally the dream vision from which we do not awaken. Many argue sensibly that the poem is merely unfinished and there is not solid evidence to settle the issue finally, but I am forced to side with those who see the poem as a complete work of art, even if it is unfinished grammatically:

I herde a gret noyse withalle
In a corner of the halle,
Ther men of love-tydynges tolde,
And I gan thiderward beholde;
For I saugh rennynge every wight,
As faste as that they hadden myght;
And everych cried, "What thing is that?"
And somme sayde, "I not never what."
And whan they were alle on an hepe,
Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
And clamben up on other faste,
And up the nose and yēn kaste,
And troden fast on others heles,
And stampen, as men doon aftir eles.
Atte laste y saugh a man,
Which that y nevene nat ne kan;
But he semed for to be
A man of gret auctorite. . . .

(lines 2141-58)

I need not rehearse the several theories raised to explain these lines or, more improbably, to identify the "man of gret auctorite"; the controversy will endure as long will the *Hous of Fame* itself. I wish only to suggest a rhetorical force for the lines, not a meaning but a strategy. As we have seen, the *Hous of Fame* is a series of failed attempts to locate fruit amidst the chaff, truth within the welter of authorities and, throughout, Geffey has been the naive, troubled but always intrepid searcher for these. We have watched his face fall as the Dido authorities dismantled themselves before his eyes, shared
his morbid curiosity as the eagle demythologized human language, and watched in knowing amusement his futile search for a stable basis for fame. The lessons have all been negative, and the reader has learned them all.

Has Geffrey? The answer must be no. Disappointment after disappointment has not daunted him: he has pressed on despite our growing surety that his search for stability amid contingency will be a failure. At the end of the poem, Geffrey is literally and figuratively incarcerated in his own nightmare world—the poem does not allow him to awaken—for Geffrey's dream of final authority and unpol-luted truth in this world is one from which the mind does not allow escape.

Awakening and escape can only come through the will, and the choice offered the free will of readers of the Hous of Fame can best be expressed in the terms that I introduced in chapter 4 above. The Hous of Fame has no third stage, no ultimate return to the lyric mode and reassertion of the identity of the two dreamer-figures. Thus, if a reader sees this poem as unfinished, then this reader is incarcerated, like Geffrey, in the dark irrelevancy of the cuniculus figurarum, trapped in the bowels of the poem instead of being liberated at the terminus of the maze. Like Geffrey, this reader is doomed forever to follow the mob in the Domus Dedaly in search of the recognizable word of truth in all that noise.

So the choice is to "stay" in the poem with Geffrey or to "Awak!" as the eagle commanded, to impose one's own personal lyric closure on this dream vision, to recreate Geffrey the dreamer and to under-stand the futility of the quest, to forsake forever the search for truth among men, even those of "gret auctorite . . . ."