VIRTUE OF NECESSITY
Geoffrey Chaucer left many of his poems unfinished. The *House of Fame* breaks off shortly before its end; the *Legend of Good Women* has two prologues and stops immediately before the narrator gives us the conclusion to the *Legend of Hypermnestra*. The *Canterbury Tales* is a work of fragments; within these fragments the tales by the Cook, the Squire, the Monk, and the Pilgrim Chaucer are incomplete. The incompleteness of these works becomes particularly interesting when we consider that Chaucer's completed narratives fascinate most by their inconclusiveness. The *Book of the Duchess* solves a problem different from the one its beginning raises; the *Parliament of Fowls* raises several questions about value but does not answer them. *Troilus and Criseyde*, on the other hand, insists on answers that I, with many other readers of medieval literature, feel the body of the work neither requests nor requires. And the *Canterbury Tales*, by its fragmentary structure, by its alternating points of view, and its way of entertaining debate without adjudicating, refuses to be conclusive.

Although readers frequently have noticed these characteristics of Chaucer's works, no one yet has tried to understand their relationship to the development of Chaucer's narrative forms. I propose to do just that. I shall explain the complex nature of Chaucer's inconclusiveness as it is revealed within and throughout the development of his poetry, suggest some historical reasons for it, and examine how it both creates and affects meaning in his work. I read each work as Chaucer's attempt to represent the complex and conflicting relationship between antinomies such as experience and authority, belief and proof, freedom and necessity, truth and opinion. I take the incomplete and inconclusive state of his poetry to indicate that he was not always satisfied with how well his inherited narrative forms embodied human experience. I see the shape of Chaucer's literary career as a search for an appropriate form able to accommodate the inconclusiveness that these antinomies
create. My goal is ultimately to explain how the inconclusiveness that prevails throughout Chaucer’s literary career leads him to discover in the *Canterbury Tales* a kind of narrative unique for the Middle Ages, a form that provides an early model for modern fiction.

Before discussing the inconclusive nature of the forms of Chaucer’s fiction, however, it is necessary to define both *inconclusive* and *form*, and to distinguish between incompleteness, the state of a text, and inconclusiveness, the nature of the meaning a form expresses. *Inconclusiveness* is a quality of not shutting together, of not bringing to a close or end, of not deciding, or determining, or coming to an agreement about something. It is an attribute of literary form as skepticism is a character of thought and ambivalence a trait of feeling. *Form* is a more complex term to define. I understand it to mean the intrinsic character of a literary work, its combination of qualities, its nature, or way of being. I take it to represent at once the writer’s initial concept of the whole work and the design by which he arranges his content. I necessarily understand the design through my own perception of the content, its shape, and the effect of its shape on my feelings as the work proceeds. In an important essay on Chaucer, J. V. Cunningham has succinctly defined form in a way that reflects my understanding of the term and suits well my purpose in this study.

A literary form is not simply an external principle of classification of literary works . . . , nor is it an Idea. It is rather a principle operative in the production of works. It is a scheme of experience recognized in the tradition. It is, moreover, a scheme that directs the discovery of material and detail and that orders the disposition of the whole. If a literary form is an Idea, it is an idea that the writer and reader have of the form.¹

A conclusive literary form satisfies an author’s and an audience’s expectations either by answering in some way the questions the content implies or by resolving comfortably the affective tensions the content creates.² An inconclusive literary form either fails to answer the questions the work raises or offers answers that do not sit comfortably with the reading experience. Although an incomplete work may indicate that a poet does not wish to be decisive, final, conclusive about meaning, it does not necessarily indicate inconclusiveness. A poet may leave his work unfinished for several reasons. He may lose interest in his
subject, his patronage may change or dry up, or he may die. There is nothing in the records of Chaucer's public life to tell us why he did not finish so many of his poems. But there is ample evidence in his poetry not only to suggest why he was inconclusive but to imply a relationship between the incompleteness of his texts and the inconclusiveness of his poetry.

Chaucer's narratives repeatedly express conflicting perceptions and beliefs that are left unresolved. His much-admired ironic technique indicates one major way in which he controlled these conflicts, for an ironic technique postpones resolution of a problem by creating instead a kind of stasis between opposing possibilities that need not be resolved. Irony clouds, rather than clears, the air. It indicates an attitude torn between at least two possible options. If it settles anything at all, an ironic technique settles the irresolvability of the options, implying that the poet feels ambivalent about the matter at hand. Ambivalence is to emotion what inconclusiveness is to form.

In this study I shall examine Chaucer's narrative poems, which range in length from the very brief *Anelida and Arcite* to the enormous *Canterbury Tales*, itself comprising discreet and various narrative forms. I shall maintain that some of these forms are complete and conclusive, like the *Miller's Tale* or the *Second Nun's Tale*, and that some are complete and inconclusive, like the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. I shall also argue that some of Chaucer's narratives are incomplete and inconclusive, like the *House of Fame*, the *Canterbury Tales*, or for that matter, each fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, and that some are incomplete but conclusive, like the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Monk's Tale*. Although I shall confront the incompleteness of some of these texts, I shall be chiefly concerned with the inconclusiveness of the form, since I believe that inconclusiveness characterizes more exactly than incompleteness the nature of Chaucer's forms and the nature of his mind.

The earliest narratives of Chaucer's career are dream visions whose concerns are quite different from each other yet whose forms are inconclusive for similar reasons. The *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls* are similar in the way they avoid directing a reader's attention either to a clearly announced subject or to a developing theme. In this way they differ from the *Consolation of
Philosophy, possibly the prototype for dream-vision form in the Middle Ages; also, they differ from the cosmological allegories of the twelfth-century "Chartrians," which direct their philosophical investigations toward an affirmation of an appropriately ordered hierarchy; they even differ from *Le Roman de la Rose*, which became the model for the French *dits amoureux* and in turn for these very dream visions. Chaucer's poems stick neither to one central problem nor to several related problems. Rather they are splayed. Their contents seem structured by a process of associations, neither reaching a main subject until the end nor subordinating less important elements to more important ones. John Manly observed some time ago that the *Book of the Duchess* follows "long and tortuous corridors" before it arrives at its central intention—the confessional interchange between persona and Black Knight that epitomizes the dead Duchess as an ideal courtly lady. Similarly the *House of Fame* meanders through more than six hundred and fifty lines before the eagle mentions explicitly that the purpose of the experience is to bring the persona to the House of Fame. He does not arrive there, however, until five hundred lines later, and he never learns the tiding the eagle has announced as the purpose for the journey. Not until the very last episode of the *Parliament of Fowls*, moreover, does the persona encounter the altercation between the birds that is the poem's subject. Until these very late points, the purpose for each of the poems remains unknown. Along the way to the ultimate presentation of each subject, Chaucer incorporates so many related and unrelated issues that the apparent subjects of the poems constitute only one part of the meaning of each, and the organization of narrative units seems random and frequently mysterious.

Critics have praised the mysterious and undirected structure of Chaucer's early dream visions as convincing imitations of the dream work we all experience. Anyone interested in understanding how a narrative form embodies meaning, however, encounters frustration as the possibility for conclusive meaning dissolves from scene to scene in these fluidly structured works. No sooner does the persona raise a problematic issue, such as the cause of insomnia, the value of literary representation, or the relation of love to the common weal, than he shifts to other issues without resolving the first. The elements of structure within each poem are so loosely coordinated, the narrative direc-
tion so unexplicit, that a reader rarely feels secure grounding in one or even in several related subjects and themes. By the end of the poem, if indeed the poem reaches an end, whatever conclusion the poet presents about the experience, if indeed he presents a conclusion, seems insufficient to all the issues the poem has handled.

The shifting structures of these poems would not in themselves be unsettling were the persona, "oure aller hoste," less discomfited by his experience. His confusion, ambivalence, and fear continually affect our understanding of the dream-vision conventions the poems express. His responses to his experience cause us to doubt the purpose of the experience and the function of the conventions—many of them familiar to Chaucer's audience from the dits amoreux. The persona's reticent and skeptical responses to most elements of his dreams and the poems' peculiar principles of structure create forms in which meaning becomes less than certain. In fact, once we become accustomed to the patterns of uncertainty in each of the poems, the elusiveness of meaning appears to be a part of their design, and we follow, more comfortably than at the beginning, the persona through his surprising and frequently worrisome journeys, fascinated both by his wonder and by his self-consciousness in relation to the elements of his experience.

The self-consciousness of Chaucer the persona is quite unusual, for, especially after the Book of the Duchess, it continually suggests Chaucer the poet's interest in the problem of meaning in poetry, in the kind of truth a poem can express, and in the relation of subjective experience to the expression of objective truth through poetry. Later, I shall confront directly Chaucer's interest in the relation of individual perception to the representation of truth in narrative form, and I shall discuss some ways in which this interest contributes to inconclusiveness. Now, I wish merely to suggest that Chaucer's ambivalent attraction to the problem leads him to construct dream visions that address themselves to traditional though various subjects but express a relatively unconventional attitude toward the nature of poetic truth and the function of poetry. Inconclusiveness in the forms of the dream visions derives directly from the persona's ambivalent self-consciousness in response to the elements of subject and theme that the poems examine, express, and, when possible, resolve.

When Chaucer turns from the dream-vision form to write legendary
narratives in what is commonly thought of as his middle period, his mode of narrative changes but his narrator's concerns remain the same as the persona's were. Because many of the poems of this period have been incorporated into the large form of the *Canterbury Tales*, where they exist as stories told by a character other than Chaucer, it is impossible to consider them as independent fictions exhibiting a direct relationship between Chaucer the narrator and his materials. A second level of fictionalizing has intervened, and any argument about conclusiveness or inconclusiveness in the forms of works like the *Knight's Tale* and the *Monk's Tale*, probably written during this period of Chaucer's career, must take into account the characters of the Knight and the Monk as tellers. However, the form of a narrative like *Troilus*, which Chaucer never attached to the *Canterbury Tales*, is also inconclusive, although inconclusiveness is not created by a peculiar structure, as it was in the dream visions. Indeed, the plot and structure of *Troilus* are clear. We are never confused about its direction or its themes. Rather, inconclusiveness in its form derives from the narrator's involvement with the materials of others, which he claims to be rendering for his own time. The narrator's frequently ambivalent responses to the content affects, and at times obscures, the meaning and conclusiveness that the narrative expresses. For example, the narrator repeatedly claims he has no power over the content, yet he controls the form and our responses to it by his ironic technique, by his decision to moralize certain elements of content as opposed to others, and by his rhetoric, which causes us to respond or not to respond, as he sees fit, to the content of his "auctor." Even in a fragment as brief as *Anelida and Arcite*, this control has the effect of undercutting whatever conclusiveness his received material possesses, for it interferes with the moral implications of the content.

Just as the forms of Chaucer's early dream visions appear inconclusive because the persona skeptically questions both meaning and value in many aspects of his experience, so the forms of the legendary narratives of the middle period appear inconclusive because the narrator continually qualifies authority, telling us what to think and what not to think about his characters and their actions. In fact, the narrator involves himself so dynamically with the content of *Troilus* that the relationship between narrator and narrative becomes as significant an
element of meaning in the poem’s form as the love between Troilus and Criseyde, as Pandarus’ relationship with the lovers, and as the history itself of the war at Troy. This involvement creates an inconclusiveness in the form that suggests Chaucer’s continuing interest in how a narrator affects meaning in traditional literary materials, how he changes the truth value that resides in those materials. It also indicates that the problems with certainty apparent everywhere through the dream visions may not be attributed merely to inexperience in writing poetry, a charge that might otherwise be leveled against Chaucer’s dream visions, his “juvenilia.” It indicates a continuing quality of mind that leads him to impose the subjective perceptions of his narrator on literary meaning even when the narrative mode is not subjective.

The *Legend of Good Women* marks a new development in Chaucer’s creation of narrative form and thus may be said to belong to another, later, period. By attaching a set of legendary narratives to a dream vision prologue, Chaucer creates in the *Legend of Good Women* a composite form that combines the two modes of narrative in which he had previously written. This new form exhibits even more strongly than the form of *Troilus* Chaucer’s growing tendency to absorb legendary materials into the consciousness of a narrator, making the otherwise objective nature of the third-person legendary narratives appear to be a part of a subjective experience. Put in another way, the form of the *Legend of Good Women* allows Chaucer to establish a character in a dream-vision prologue who then projects a set of venerable narratives the purpose of which is not to render the legends authoritatively, as it was in *Anelida* and *Troilus*, but to sustain a fictive identity of repentent sinner that the god of love assigns to him. In consequence, meaning in the legends as they exist elsewhere becomes significant only insofar as it is appropriate to the teller of them. Having created this new form, Chaucer frees himself from the problem of authority, which seems to have concerned him from the beginning of his career, and from the problem of what truth poetry can demonstrate. He has also discovered, as I shall later argue more fully, that a poet can create narratives that need not claim to represent truth and whose values need not be his own.

It is precisely this discovery that enabled Chaucer to create the *Canterbury Tales*, his most complex and extensive experiment in narrative form. The *Canterbury Tales* is a composite form like the *Legend
of Good Women, and it is encyclopedic like the Decameron or the Confessio Amantis, to name but two of the many sets of stories, often framed by a fictive action, that the Middle Ages enjoyed. Yet the presence in the Canterbury Tales of many characters who tell tales makes it a more complex form than the Legend of Good Women; moreover, the high level of integration between the characters of the pilgrims and the nature of the tales they tell—even of the genres in which they tell their stories—makes it a more mimetic form than the Decameron, and less concerned with a univocal didacticism than the Confessio Amantis. Using lessons learned from his earlier works about the limits of poetry to express truth, Chaucer creates in the Canterbury Tales characters whose individual psychologies and motives influence, even determine, the nature of meaning in poetry. Chaucer uses many voices, personalities, or consciousnesses to describe individual and at times contradictory opinions about the world and its values. No one opinion represents the truth of any matter, yet each is, generally speaking, valid in light of what we know about the respondent. As a whole, the Canterbury Tales is not only a set of stories but a cornucopia of opinions, of convictions, of attitudes, whose form suggests a sense of pluralistic reality.

Unlike Chaucer's earlier works, whose forms are not necessarily inconclusive by intention, the Canterbury Tales is a purposely inconclusive form from which it is impossible to ascertain a univocal truth, for knowledge is embedded in opinion and opinion is presented through fiction, at times through hearsay, as opposed to dream or historical work. But the uncertainty that this kind of inconclusive form offers represents in the Canterbury Tales a strength not a weakness, a virtue not a fault. In later chapters I shall argue that inconclusiveness was potential in the original conception of the Canterbury Tales, that Chaucer found it useful for expressing a sense of a pluralistic reality in which certainty was no longer a problem for the form, though it remained an issue in the content, that it led to the creation of a work whose effect strikes us as uniquely modern. Here, however, I want to suggest that the form of the Canterbury Tales moves in the direction of more extreme inconclusiveness as Chaucer develops it. The introduction of the Canon and the Canon's Yeoman into the Canterbury Tales offers a clear indication that Chaucer was experimenting with his
already inconclusive form by making it yet more inconclusive. Let us look specifically at what changes in the form the introduction of these characters causes.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer tells us that there were thirty pilgrims, twenty-six of whom he describes, “preestes three,” a nun, and himself. Harry Bailly originally stipulates that each pilgrim will tell two tales going and two coming. The complete Canterbury Tales, then, will comprise one hundred and twenty stories (or more if the count of pilgrims were to come to thirty-one) that a pilgrimage frame will enclose and effect. It will be a large but not unprecedented encyclopedic work, the complex lines of whose structure the first fragment begins to work out. After fragment one breaks off, however, we can no longer be certain of the order or the structure of the remainder of the Canterbury Tales, although the appearance of Chaucer’s retraction at the end of the Parson’s Tale makes certain that fragment ten will be the last. Despite the incomplete state of the Canterbury Tales, then, and despite a changed intention expressed in fragment ten that the parson should end the tale-telling as the pilgrim’s approach Canterbury at the end of the day, Chaucer must at one time have conceived of the form of the Canterbury Tales as closed and “completable.” But when the Canon and his Yeoman ride up to the pilgrims in fragment seven, composed late in the order of the fragments, Chaucer is substantially altering the form of the Canterbury Tales, for he is opening a form that had been closed until that point. Although this is the only place in the Canterbury Tales where Chaucer intrudes characters from outside the fictive realm he has established in the General Prologue, it is significant, for the intrusion changes our ultimate expectations of the shape and “completability” of the work. Theoretically, Chaucer can now continue to expand his form indefinitely, despite its clearly intended completion point. He can insert new characters who could plausibly join the pilgrimage anywhere along the route from Southwerk to Canterbury even as he decides not to use original characters like the Knight’s Yeoman, the Guildsmen, or the Plowman.

It might, of course, be argued that Chaucer ultimately would have placed the Canon’s Yeoman among the original pilgrims, an argument like the one already advanced about the Manciple. But such an argument would have to speculate that Chaucer would have canceled
the stunning dramatic interplay between the Canon, his Yeoman, and Harry Bailly, a speculation I find distasteful in light of the excellence of the material. Moreover, appearing where it does after the Second Nun's Tale, having essentially the same message about belief and the nature of belief, although different in form and style from the Nun's tale, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale would lose much of its powerful driving force if the Yeoman had been present to hear the legend of Saint Cecilia. It is equally likely that Chaucer incorporated his earlier tale of Saint Cecilia into the form of the Canterbury Tales because he recognized the possibility of its effect before the Canon's Yeoman, describing his situation, warns us in his tale not to “multiplye” and not to seek the meaning of the philosopher's stone. The presence of fragment seven indicates that at the height of his constructional powers, Chaucer conceived a way to open a form that had been closed until then. It suggests, further, that Chaucer preferred ultimately to work with an open literary form and that whatever motivated him to create inconclusive narrative forms earlier in his career continued to motivate him late in his career.

I have no doubt that some will greet my argument about inconclusiveness and narrative form in Chaucer's poetry as unhistorical since I have been using the term form as we think of it, not as Chaucer thought of it, and since conclusiveness is a problem of particular relevance to our time. Yet the fragmentary nature of much poetry of the late Middle Ages, the formal and self-conscious interest in discovering what poetry can tell about reality in the works, say, of Martianus Capella and Alanus de Insulis, and the often painful confusion of meaning in the versions of Piers Plowman that Chaucer's contemporary left us, convince me that this modern problem, mutatis mutandis, was also relevant to Chaucer and that it is not historically inaccurate to view Chaucer's career as a series of experiments in narrative form, as I have defined the term, culminating in the creation of a form like the Canterbury Tales that offers a sense of pluralistic meaning comfortably in place of a sense of certainty. The historical likelihood of this conviction can be demonstrated by examining some shifting patterns of thought in the late Middle Ages and their epistemological consequences.
Until the twelfth century, Saint Augustine's Neoplatonic premises, epistemology, and method of reasoning prevailed throughout Christian Europe with little challenge. Like all Platonic philosophy, Augustinianism locates the Real ultimately in the Ideal Mind, Nous, God, the divine principle. Reasoning begins with the notion of a first cause outside human consciousness, from which there are traceable effects such as the world and the individual within it.

During the twelfth century, however, a developing interest in the individual consciousness produced an alternative epistemology that offered a changed direction of reasoning. Some writers grew interested in reasoning not only from God to man, as the Augustinians had been doing, but also from man and his effects to God. For instance, as a first step in understanding the universe outside himself, and ultimately of understanding God, Richard of Saint Victor began by looking inward:

Frusta cordis oculum erigit ad videndum Deum, qui nondum idoneus est ad videndum seipsum. Prius discat homo cognoscere invisibilia sua, quam praesumat posse apprehendere invisibilia divina. Prius est ut cognoscere invisibilia spiritus tui, quam possis esse idoneus ad cognoscendum invisibilia Dei. Aliquim si non potes cognoscere te, qua fronte prae sumis apparende ea quae sunt suprane?!

[In vain man raises his heart's eye to see God, if he is not yet fit to see himself. First let man come to know the invisible things of himself before he presume to grasp divine invisibilia. You must first understand your own spirit before you can be fit to understand the invisible things of God. In general, if you are not able to understand yourself, how can you presume to grasp those things which are above you?]

Richard was neither alone in this procedure nor the first. Eadmer, the biographer of Saint Anselm, tells us that the ontological proof for the existence of God that Anselm proposed occurred because Anselm began with the individual mind, his own, at the center of thought and excluded everything from it but the word "God." Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, though less interested than Anselm in logic or analysis, more interested rather in spiritual growth, outlined his program for
Cistercian mysticism by beginning with man’s love for himself as the first step in his search for God. In his Liber de Diligendo Deo, Bernard describes love, which arises first from “amor carnalis quo ante omnia homo diligit seipsum propter seipsum” [love of the flesh by which man loves himself before everything on account of himself] and arrives at the spiritual level “cum nec seipsum diligit homo nisi propter Deum” [whenever man does not love himself except on account of God].

This alternative epistemology also manifests itself in both the writings on friendship of Aelred de Rivalx\(^2\) and the writings on preaching of Guibert de Nogent. Here is Guibert:

Nulla enim praedicatio salubrior mihi videtur quam illa quae hominem sibimet ostendat, et foras extra se sparsum in interiori suo, hoc est in mente, restituat atque eum coarquens quodammodo depictum ante faciem suam statuat.\(^2\)

[Truly no preaching seems to me more beneficial than that which displays a man to himself, replaces in his inner self, that is in his mind, what is extended outside of himself, and which in a certain way places him conclusively represented before his own eyes.]

Although this epistemology pervades the thinking of many significant writers of the twelfth century, like Peter Damiani, William of Saint Thierry, and John of Salisbury, it finds its most famous proponent in Peter Abelard, for whom it substantiated as famous a series of actions as works. The headnote of Abelard’s Ethics reads: “Incipit Liber Magistri Petri Abelardi Qui Dicitur Scito Te Ipsum.” Moreover, whatever may have been the doctrinal or moral reasons for writing Historia Calamitatum, in it Abelard offers a method of discovering meaning and purpose in life by the analytic scrutiny of one’s own actions.\(^2\)

The emphasis on self that this epistemology at once enabled and produced appeared no less strongly in the realm of vernacular writing than it did in the realm of Latin. The first generation of writers of chivalric romance in the twelfth century explored a world centered upon the individual in which the subjective interpretation of reality was the norm, although “a reaction against the individual centered world-view of the twelfth century literature” seems to have taken place
in the prose cycles that developed early in the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, philosophers of the thirteenth century continued to develop the alternative epistemological method that begins with the self and the senses. In consequence, they separated themselves increasingly from theologians, to whom the metaphysical premise of God as a first cause remained the prior consideration. Their attempts at systematizing this alternative epistemological method were sustained by newly translated commentaries on Aristotle, which reached the Christian West from Spain.

It is well known that the "new" Aristotle generated an enormous amount of philosophical activity in the thirteenth century. Like Augustinianism, the new Aristotelianism was interested in metaphysics. Unlike Augustinianism, however, it emphasized the sensible world and our awareness of it. Saint Thomas Aquinas's famous axiom encapsulates the matter succinctly: "Nihil in intellectu, nisi prius fuerit in sensu" [Nothing is in the intellect unless it was first in the senses]. Since the senses give us our first awareness, the system of reality that the mind constructs from experience must first rest on sensory apprehension of the world. Whereas Augustinianism, like all Platonic epistemology, begins with the metaphysical assumption that the Creator reveals or illumines us with the truth of his existence, i.e., his Essence, the Aristotelian epistemology that philosophers like Aquinas investigate accents the prior importance of the senses to all knowledge and the process of existence and its fulfillment (haecceity) as the mind reasons itself toward that same metaphysical understanding.

Actually, Aquinas never intended to abandon the Augustinian epistemological method in favor of the Aristotelian. In fact, his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258) in large measure attacks the implications of certain of Averroes' Aristotelian principles that, if accepted, threatened the validity of Augustinian theology. Rather, much of Averroes' writing attempts to undo this threat by trying to align the role of reason, which the philosopher explored, and the role of revelation, which the theologian explored, for the ultimate and same metaphysical end of knowing God.

Other philosophers, however, like Siger of Brabant and Boetius of Dacia, known as the "radical Aristotelians," sought to defend Averroes' doctrines by developing the concept of the double truth. Accord-
ing to the concept of the double truth, when a conclusion in philosophy is logically reached but contradicts the conclusion of theology, the truths of both conclusions may stand as long as they are kept categorically separate, the one true for philosophy, the other true for theology. Historians of philosophy find the idea of the double truth significant because it means the separation of theology from philosophy. I find the idea interesting because it suggests that as early as the thirteenth century people understood truth to exist in kinds and to reside in alternatives; moreover philosophers were willing to allow contradiction to remain unresolved. The idea of the double truth thus provides an early philosophical analogue for the skepticism of certainty that Chaucer, among other writers of the late Middle Ages, expresses in his poetry.27

The official church consistently condemned such a possibility as a double truth. Yet the notion enjoyed wide consideration in the universities throughout the last decades of the thirteenth century and created vigorous intellectual controversies.28 For the most part, these controversies, like the double truth itself, result from the competition between Augustinian and Aristotelian methods for understanding reality. Assuming that metaphysics was possible and demonstrable, Aristotelians emphasized deduction through the evidence of the senses. The direction of their reasoning thus changed the process by which the will moved to an understanding of God. Opposed to these thinkers were Augustinians, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham the most famous of them, who believed that this method of reasoning ultimately determined God’s motives by making them susceptible to man’s reasoning power. They sought to insure the freedom of the will of both God and man by denying that commonly held theological conclusions, like God’s existence, His free will, and man’s understanding of it, could be rationally demonstrated. Rather they argued that such truths could only be known in the light of revelation.29

William of Ockham’s ideas are most significant for us not only because they won widest favor in the English universities of Chaucer’s day but because they are pivotal in the development of our modern way of understanding reality. According to Ockham intuitive knowledge, what the mind knows only by experience, is the only knowledge that represents reality existing outside one’s mind. Ockham tells us: “Nihil
potest naturaliter cognosci in se nisi cognoscat intuitive” [Nothing can be known naturally in itself unless it is known intuitively]. Abstraction, the process by which the mind systematizes and universalizes particulars—a kind of knowledge since it involves a mental process—is actually a reflection that the mind makes, not necessarily a part of the object the mind perceives: “Abstractiva autem est ista virtute cuius de re contingenti non potest sciri evidenter utrum sit vel non sit” [Abstractive ability, moreover, is that by whose power concerning a contingent matter there can be no evident knowledge of whether it exists or does not exist]. Since abstract knowledge derives from the perceiving mind and not from the object that the senses experience, universals exist only within the mind. Value, which inheres in the universal and from which ethics derives, cannot reside in experiential reality. It is rather a mental construct, intrinsic in the mind and having reference to systems within the mind.

Ockham’s philosophy not only isolates intuitive from abstract knowledge in a way that had not been done before; in effect it denies an intrinsic, independent reality to anything that the senses do not perceive. Particulars are intrinsically real, but they are not ethically charged in themselves. Universals and the things pertaining to them, like ethical principles, are purely mental concepts, deriving from an authority that ranges from the wisdom of the ancient teachers like Aristotle and Augustine to the incontrovertible and free will of God revealed by grace, as in the Ten Commandments. Universals have no existence within the bounds of sense experience.

Although Ockham’s ideas enjoyed widespread popularity in the universities throughout the fourteenth century, there is no indication of how many people actually believed with the philosophers of the via moderna, those who followed Ockham, that reality could be known from within the mind and intentionally by means of authority or conceptualization and from outside the mind by the experience of sense data. There is an indication that theologians like Bishop Bradwardine and John Wycliff attacked the principles and attitudes of the via moderna, particularly the skepticism about knowledge that these Ockhamist principles implied. The vehemence of the attacks suggests first that there was something profoundly threatening to Christian tradition in what these philosophers were saying and, second, that the subversive
tendencies that they were manifesting were significant. The threatening quality lay in the separation of physics from metaphysics and of particulars from universals. The subversive significance lay in the fact that one had a fragmented knowledge and was consequently unable to make a total statement about the meaning and purpose of God's entire creation on the basis of experiential knowledge. It was not that the universe became, thus, purposeless; it was rather that its purpose was unknowable. As a further and perhaps more significant consequence, God's will became more distant than had heretofore been felt, and man's will and its freedom were not clearly aligned with that of God.

The followers of the *via moderna* in the fourteenth century were led by their reasoning to establish a new epistemological category of possibility, which the philosophers themselves called neutrality. Until that time a proposition had been considered either true or false. But motivated by the premise of the absolute freedom and limitlessness of God's will, and accepting Ockham's distinction between experiential and conceptual, or mental, knowledge, these philosophers argued that future contingency was neither true nor false until the will of God had been made manifest. Hence propositions dealing with contingency, formerly considered true or false, now could be possible. Gordon Leff explains the matter thus:

> Once it is conceded that an object need not be *A* to the exclusion of *B* it follows that either is possible. It is by this means that the skeptics discussed God and His ways, allowing that it was possible for Him to follow any course of action. This in turn led to indeterminacy: the lack of any certain order to which possibility gives rise. Thus when one course is as likely for God as another (neutrality), any is possible (possibility), and there is no means of determining the outcome (indeterminacy).

In their original zeal to protect God's omniscience, these thinkers were led to doubt the ability of the individual mind to know His plans. If we cannot know God's plans by experience, then the meaning of experience becomes uncertain.

Ockham and his followers had argued that the mind could not know universality in an experiential way. Reality thus could be known from within the mind and intentionally by means of conceptualization or authority, and it could be known from outside the mind by the experi-
ence of sense data. This notion of cognitive indeterminacy provides a philosophical analogue to what I am calling inconclusiveness in Chaucer's poetry: a frequent inability on the part of the Chaucerian "voice" to derive universal or certain meaning from the elements of his experience, an inclination to avoid drawing conclusions. As we shall see, inconclusiveness has epistemological and psychological correlates within Chaucer's poetry in the skepticism and ambivalence that the Chaucerian "voice" continually manifests.

III

Despite the information that social and philosophical historians have provided, most attempts to place Chaucer in a historical context that is not Augustinian have been based on the idea of a Gothic style of architecture that flourished roughly from the twelfth through the first half of the fourteenth centuries in Western Europe. Insofar as the style and structure of a Gothic cathedral expresses through stone and glass a perceived idea of reality, the analogy with literature of the time is apt, and literary criticism must be grateful to art history for the paradigm of the Gothic vision of reality. Chaucerians such as Muscatine, Robertson, Payne, Jordan, and Howard, different as they are in their interpretations of Chaucer, assume and use this architectural analogy of a poised balance, a spatially harmonized synthesis of disparate parts. Yet the zeal with which Chaucerians have undertaken to establish a "Gothic" Chaucer has had two limiting effects: it has imposed upon Chaucer's verbal medium of representation a terminology from a plastic medium; and, perhaps in consequence of this imposition, it has made Chaucer's poetry appear to represent a reality far more monolithic, secure, and static than I think it actually represents.

Long ago Lessing argued in his *Laocoon* for the distinction in criticism between the spatial and the temporal arts, a distinction that "Gothic" criticism must of necessity minimize. The eye perceives the total form of a spatial structure. Only afterward does the mind analyze the dimension, the particular diversity and variety of its form. The ear/eye perceives the total form of a narrative temporally, especially in the Middle Ages, when silent reading was unusual. The mind expects wholeness from a narrative, but that expectation is not fulfilled until the reader has experienced all its parts piecemeal in a flow of patterns.
Meaning develops in narrative periodically as the mind relates part to part and eventually part to whole. Medieval rhetoricians lavished attention on beginnings and transitions because they provide audiences with conventional directional signals and create expectations that may or may not be fulfilled as the work unfolds through time. Even granting that Gothic art's spatial paradigm represents a functional concept of reality in a temporal medium like a Chaucerian narrative, the tenor of thought that the model offers, although sustained at times by an optimistic sense that all might be ordered, was never as monolithic in the centuries during which it developed and flourished as the architectural analogy implies.

The energy and optimism of the twelfth century produced a series of cohesive and eloquent structures, spatial and temporal, artistic and intellectual, that glorified God and God's creation by delighting in man and the creativity of his mind. Structures like a Gothic cathedral or a scholastic *summa* indicate a commitment well into the thirteenth century to understanding a transcendent reality in God by analyzing parts of the whole. Although their ordering principle is different from our own, the diverse parts of both cathedral and *summa* express an idea of totality. Whether or not they have been completed, they indicate a belief in attaining wholeness by attention to parts. They understand totality, the physical and metaphysical, to be contained within the particular. People of the first half of the thirteenth century were able to see heaven in a grain of sand.

But attitudes changed as the thirteenth century moved toward its close. Skepticism of the possibility of achieving wholeness increased, and thought grew disillusioned with the idea of totality it had earlier entertained. By the end of the thirteenth century and through the early decades of the fourteenth, as we have seen, philosophers were challenging the notion of wholeness, even delighting in the mind's ability to extend its completest knowledge to the part. Historians of art are generally aware of this changing attitude toward the idea of totality during the period they call Gothic. Chaucerians notice the fact but tend not to let it interfere with their paradigm of Gothic by which they interpret Chaucer. In consequence, the notion of the Gothic Chaucer is limiting because it freezes meaning, suggesting a unified sense of reality, when in fact Chaucer's poetry offers a fluid and by no means
harmonious sense of reality, especially when examined from the point of view of its development.

A corollary to what I am calling the limiting notion of a Gothic Chaucer is the equally unsatisfying concept of the moral Chaucer whose didactic purpose is clear. If criticism seeks to explain meaning in a work of art, morally based interpretations are indeed useful. Yet every reader of Chaucer knows that the didactic nature of his poetry is neither simple nor always clear. Chaucer's abiding interest in the value of experience and authority and in the extent and limits of earthly love and human power rarely reveal a consistent or conclusive morality. More often than not, they suggest how difficult it is to evaluate human behavior and human goals in light of traditional ethical doctrines. Because Chaucer composes in narrative forms that are either subjective and interior, like his dream visions, or heavily mediated by a subjective consciousness with particular rather than universal desires and claims, like Troilus and the Canterbury Tales, and because Chaucer is the master of a complicated ironic technique, his didacticism is hard to define. In fact, it seems closer to the experience of Chaucer's works to say that he is more interested in exploring what poetry can say about reality than he is in evaluating human behavior for a didactic purpose. Therefore, instead of focusing on Chaucer's didactic concerns, I shall examine how his poetry expresses epistemological concerns.

My reasons for doing so are three. First, what is unclear or inconclusive about the moral nature of Chaucer's work can be better explained by examining his epistemology, for the moral nature of the poetry depends on the poet's interest in the ways in which one can know, in what kind of knowledge is certain and what merely possible, in the perceptual relationship of subject and object in the act of knowing, and in the end of knowing, especially by means of poetry. In short, Chaucer wants to know how a poet can understand and articulate his world and human behavior in it. Second, emphasizing epistemology in Chaucer's poetry will help us recognize why and in what ways the poetry is inconclusive, for the inconclusiveness of many of the narratives has its source in epistemological problems of certainty that Chaucer repeatedly confronts. Finally, this shift in critical focus will explain how Chaucer's inconclusiveness accounts for his experiments with narrative form throughout his career that culminate in the discov-
ery of the unique form of the *Canterbury Tales*. Such an examination should not be thought of as inimical to didactic or thematic interpretations, but rather as related to them in its attempt to get at meaning and expression in Chaucer. Ethics and epistemology, like content and form, may be discreet categories of thought, but they are neither mutually exclusive nor independent of each other.