II. "I Have Gret Wonder": Inconclusiveness and the *Book of the Duchess*

Any examination of the development of Chaucer's narrative poetry must begin with the dream visions. Chaucer wrote them first and developed in them an unusual persona whose "voice" pervades all his later works. Like all visionary literature, the dream vision is a complexly subjective form. The poet takes a version of self, generally in a benighted state, and provides him with experiences, generally in the allegorical mode, intended to lead to some kind of understanding. The audience identifies with the persona's heightened state of emotion, yet the sympathy is condescending because the persona is naïve, obtuse, limited. He does not always achieve understanding by the end, but the audience usually experiences some relevant moral enlightenment or emotional satisfaction.

Chaucer's dream visions are considerably different from most visionary literature and create considerably different effects. Although each poem uses allegorization, its mode is not allegorical. Consequently the persona is not an element of self, like *L'Amant* or *Will*, encountering other aspects of self, like *Reson* or *Imaginatif*. In Chaucer's dream visions, the persona is always a whole character, and we feel as whole the other characters he meets, like the Black Knight, the Eagle, the anonymous "frend" of the *House of Fame*. To ensure that we experience the persona within the dream as a complete personality, Chaucer takes pains to have him describe his activities and feelings before the dream, and periodically within the dream to refer to his waking self and its particular history.

Chaucer's persona in the dream visions is a consistent character. He is an anxiety-ridden, muddleheaded but well-intentioned, shy, sentimental, bedazzled poet, seeking knowledge and experience for his poetry, and continually amazed by the complexity of the world around him. He is insecure about his ability to articulate clearly and justly the
meaning of all he sees, reads, and dreams, yet he is determined to try, while asking the indulgence of his audience for his own tentativeness. Chaucer's persona is essentially a bookish personality, less comfortable even in dreams with grand flights above the earth than with sitting in his study reading. There is no particular order to his reading, no particular subject he pursues. He reads for the sake of reading. Sometimes his books are classical poems, like those of Vergil and Ovid (or versions of Vergil and Ovid); sometimes they are dream allegories; sometimes they are works about love; and sometimes they are moral and philosophical treatises. More important than any order to his reading is his insatiable appetite for books, the frequent listings of which direct our attention to his serious epistemological concerns.

Geffrey is not, however, only a poet and a voracious reader. He was once a lover, he has a wife and a job, he likes to eat, he is acquainted with the night, and apparently he has trouble getting up in the morning. The objects of Chaucer's dream visions change, but the persona remains a consistently presented subject who matures but never loses his charmingly inept nature.3

Without the allegorical mode common to visionary literature, this remarkable subject takes on mimetic complexity, and his narratives become highly specialized fictions in which he seeks personal meaning from experience and generally does not find it. Other authors who choose the visionary form generally know what they want to say about an issue. Chaucer chooses the form, rather, to explore what of significance he can say. He offers not a guided vision but only a first person who mediates all he encounters through the prism of his own uncertainty. An apparent connection rarely exists between the persona's serious concerns and the didactic information that the figures in the dream offer him. In fact, a frequent lack of connection between the persona's concerns and the phenomena of his experience produces a sense of incongruity in which meaning remains tentative. As we read, our continuing uncertainty keeps us wondering about what the enigmatic phenomena signify—a whelp, waves of petitioning spirits, a gate with contradictory signs. Chaucer's early dream visions concern the ways in which the mind tries to make sense of the hubbub of experience. But they do not make that sense for us.

Just as the philosophers of the fourteenth century investigated and
developed an epistemology that offered as an end in itself the notion of possibility, or neutrality, Chaucer’s early dream visions investigate and develop indeterminate, possible meaning as an end of the literary enterprise. Chaucer develops a narrative form in which meaning is either incongruous or indeterminate. Questions the persona asks do not get answered, confused issues and concepts do not get cleared up, experiences are not generally illuminating. The ambivalence of the persona provides a psychological corollary to indeterminacy. As early as the Book of the Duchess, we experience a world not only mediated through a persona’s experience, as in all dream visions, but a world in which the persona’s ambivalence charges the atmosphere of the poems with ambivalence.

In the House of Fame, Chaucer illustrates why indeterminacy of meaning may have to serve as an end in itself in literature. Late in book three, the persona notices “a lesynge and a sad soth” (2089) brought together “of aventure” in an attempt to get out the window of the whirling House of Rumor. Neither of them can leave through the window, presumably to fly to earth via Fame’s house, because one is “achekked” by the other. In order to expedite the matter, the two make a pact to merge, to become one so that what is true and what is false in the rumor will never again be separable:

“Lat me go first!” “Nay, but let me!
And her I wol ensuren the
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,
That I shal never fro the go,
But be thyn owne sworn brother!
We wil medle us ech with other,
That no man, be they never so wrothe,
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
At ones, al besyde his leve,
Come we a-morwe or on eve,
Be we cried or stille yrouned."
Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
Togeder fie for oo tydynge.

Chaucer may have found the admixture of truth and falsehood in Metamorphoses 12. 54–55; however, he invented the dramatic statement, the bargaining, the language with its metaphor of sworn
brotherhood. These lines show how rumor is a compounding of in­
imical polarities, how each must sacrifice the clear outline of its identi­
ty to ensure that it will reach its destination.

The combination of truth and falsehood that constitutes rumor may
also be said to constitute reputation and, by extension, the varied,
authoritative, and famous documents from which the Chaucerian per­
sona, and presumably the poet himself, seeks knowledge and answers
to his many questions. It underlies the skepticism about knowing with
certainty nonexperiential truths that appear throughout the dream
visions. Because Chaucer is a poet and not a philosopher, however, he
expresses this epistemological theme not logically but imaginatively,
using the subjective dream experience as the denominator of value in
his quest for answers.

Let us look specifically at each of Chaucer's early dream visions.
Although they are traditionally placed together because they were writ­
ten during the first segment of Chaucer's career, I shall treat the Book
of the Duchess separately in this chapter, holding until the next my
examination of the House of Fame and the Parliament of Fowls. Where­
as the two later poems deal squarely with epistemological issues, the
Book of the Duchess, more heavily dependent on the French dits
amoreux, has an affective concern—how to alleviate grief. Despite its
difference, however, the Book of the Duchess is important for our
consideration because it exhibits problems with conclusiveness that its
structural indirection and a complicated use of the persona create.

II

The subject of the Book of the Duchess is grief, its theme how to use
grief constructively to face the fact of death. Continued critical interest
in the poem suggests that although the meaning of its content is by and
large clear, its form expresses that meaning unusually. About one­
third through the poem, the Black Knight's grief becomes the poem's
subject as his voice assumes proportions of greater significance than the
persona's. Only then do its conventions begin to feel consequent, does
its direction begin to grow clear, its meaning begin to cohere. From
the beginning until this point, however—more than four hundred and
fifty lines—the subject of the Book of the Duchess is never clear. Con-
ventions appear and disappear in a sequence of such subtle indirection that first readers, without memory of a coherent last part, grow confused.

The first thirty lines thrust us immediately into an intense dramatic situation with no explanation for its cause. A persona suffers from insomnia, which creates affectlessness in him—"for I have felynge in nothynge" (11). The first nine lines are a translation of Froissart's *Paradis d'Amours*. The next twenty lines amplify the material in the first nine, assimilating elements from poems by Machaut. The loss of "quiykness," of "al lustyhide" (20) described in the opening is a familiar enough convention of the *dis amoreux*. It leads us to believe that this will be a poem about love in which a persona, probably a lover, will eventually fall asleep and dream either about the nature of love or the nature of his beloved. The conventionality of the opening leads us to expect that the persona's insomnia and his "sorwfull ymagynacioun" (14) derive from love-longing. Some lines later the persona explicitly directs our attention to the cause of his state when he voices the question that the opening lines have raised:

But men myght axe me why soo
I may not sleepe, and what me is.

[30-31]

But to our surprise he tells us that he does not know—"Myselven can not telle why / the sothe" (34—35). He refers to an eight-year illness and to an unavailable physician, but he refuses to give the details of the situation, "passe we over untill eft." Instead he returns to "our first mater" (43).

The persona's refusal does not function like a standard *occupatio*, abbreviating the presentation of content by telling us in a clause or two what it claims not to be doing. It leads us rather to puzzle about the illness and the unavailable physician, a rhetorical commonplace for the mistress of courtly tradition:

For there is phisicien but oon
That may me hele; but that is don.
Passe we over untill eft;
That wil not be mot nede be left.

[39-42]
The finality in the persona's tone is unusual. When a troubadour, or a minnesinger, or any courtly poet complains about rejection by his lady, the poet's tone is generally different. It either remains optimistically faithful despite bleak prospects, or it turns bitter and directs an ego-saving satire at the previously wonderful qualities of the beloved. Wyatt's famous concluding question, "Pray what hath she deserved?", indicates the bitter mood as it came to be expressed in English. In the Book of the Duchess, however, the lover accepts the end of the relationship. Despite his statement that he will return to this problem later, which he never specifically does, there is a nonjudgmental finality in the proverb, suggesting that the persona is trying to come to terms with his problem, even if his desperate insomnia indicates that he is not as successful as he would like to be.

Returning to the first matter of his insomnia, then, the persona leads us away from the answer to the question that the opening poses, leaving us only with our earlier expectations that this work might after all be a dream vision in the standard sense. Since the persona wants to fall asleep and decides to read "a romaine" that will "drive the night away" (49) if he cannot, we expect the kind of dream poem in which a persona will fall asleep while reading a book. But instead of falling asleep, this persona gets involved with the significance of reading itself—a topos Chaucer will use again in the Legend of Good Women. "Clerkes" and "other poets," he tells us, put stories in rhyme

To rede, and for to be in minde,
While men loved the lawe of kinde,
This bok ne spak but of such thinges,
Of quenes lives, and of kingses,
And many other thinges smale.

[55-59]

To understand human nature from the exemplary conduct of kings and queens is a common moralitas, but the persona lightens the seriousness of the issue when he tells us that his manuscript contains less serious matters as well, "other thinges smale." He then directs our attention to one specific story, the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, which he finds "a wonder thing" (61) and decides to retell.

So far we have covered only sixty lines, which can probably be read
or heard in less time than it has taken to read these pages about them. Chaucer’s opening, however, has not given us any particular sense of direction. Rather, it has undercut whatever sense of direction the standard conventions would otherwise suggest. If we have not begun to doubt by this time that the poem will be a dream vision, we certainly begin to doubt the matter over the course of the next two hundred lines, which reiterate Ovid’s story with Chaucer’s own long additions. Like the opening, these lines generally concern grief, death, and sleep, but not in any way that appears an assertive move in a particular direction. From the beginning of the poem through the point where the persona actually does fall asleep, he has been circling around points, implying, suggesting, but never stating or showing the subject of his poem. What has opened as a poem about a persona’s experience, suggesting by its conventions that the experience will be related to love in the form of a dream, has turned into a poem recounting an Ovidian tale at which an audience familiar with the story would have been surprised when Chaucer humorously interpolated the incident in the cave of sleep. However, the serious nature of this story suggests a relationship between the persona’s insomnia and a grave loss, recognition of which leads us to reconsider the tenor of the persona’s metaphor about the skilled physician and the implications of the proverb that follows it. From the Ovidian tale, we have intuited a model that might represent the cause of the persona’s condition. But the humorous interpolation of the cave of sleep that follows avoids articulating the cause by returning us to the persona’s condition, his insomnia. We follow his interest in the “goddess of sleeping,” (230) his protestation that he “ne knew never god but oon” (237) and his offer of a featherbed covered with imported silk and gold for the gift of sleep. As if these gods accept his offer, he immediately falls asleep and has a dream “so wonderful” that he offers us a catalogue of the finest interpreters of dreams who would not be able to interpret his dream properly (275—90).

Actually, the challenge to interpret the upcoming dream should not be surprising, since the persona has thrown out several possible hints on what the dream might be about. Consequently, the audience cannot understand where the poem is heading, what its subject will be, or for what purpose the persona is telling us his tale. After nearly three hundred lines of meanderings, startings and stoppings, significances
implied but never asserted, conventions that do not cohere according even to standard medieval expectations, the most that can be asserted about the disorder of the opening of the Book of the Duchess is that the persona suffers from lack of sleep. The convention of the sleepless lover that Froissart had used as a springboard to his poem has been extended beyond its function as an introductory commonplace. It has been made the poem’s subject, to which the persona has continually returned after sundry excursions into other matters. Even the story of Ceyx and Alcyone has functioned, to this point at least, only to introduce the persona to Morpheus. The metamorphosis of Ceyx and Alcyone into seabirds who maintain their conjugal condition could have provided a splendid emblem of love and Christian salvation, but it has been dropped.

The only consistent response that the audience has been invited to feel about the many elements of the first three hundred lines of the Book of the Duchess is wonder. From the opening line, in which the persona tells us he has “gret wonder” that he cannot sleep, through the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, which he tells us “me thoughte a wonder thing” (61), through Alcyone’s “wonder that the king ne com / hom” (78–79), through the persona’s “wonder” that there might be gods who grant sleep (233–36), and finally to the dream itself, which was “so wonderful” (276) that no expert could interpret it, Chaucer has presented us with a persona in wonderland, where all things are strange, marvelous, and apparently make little sense. As our guide in this wonderland, the persona leaves us with the same sense of bemused wonder that he himself feels about all aspects of his experience. Nor does this wonder stop within the dream.

The elements of the dream that the persona experiences before he meets the Black Knight are as wondrous as those elements before the dream. They also lack a specific sense of direction. The aviary choirs, the stained glass windows with scenes of various historical romances that greet the persona as he wakes into his dream, have the unspecific conventionality that we expect from the genre. The images are noisy, glorious, potentially signifying. To these images Chaucer adds, either by sloppy technique or by intention, the not-so-conventional image of the naked persona (293) responding to hunting horns by leaving his chamber with a horse who also resides in the chamber. In any case,
these elements have about them the effect of a real dreamwork. When the persona meets the hunter, we learn of a hart-hunting expedition under the auspices of Emperor Octavian. The conventional implications of the hunt and the symbolic implications of the emperor's name suggest that the dream might concern some possibly occasional matter about love. But Chaucer neither develops the symbolic implications nor suggests any relationship between the hunt and the first part of the poem. He does not even develop the incident. Instead a whelp guides the persona away from the activity into the peaceable kingdom of the forest where he overhears the Black Knight at his song.

The Knight's lyric, in a complicated rhyme scheme that modern editions tend to obscure, marks the core of meaning in the poem's form and begins the narrative section concerned with the process of consolation:

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I have of sorwe so gret won
That joye get I never non,
Now that I see my lady bryght,
Which I have loved with al my myght,
Is fro me ded and ys agoon.
Allas, deth, what ayleth the,
That thou noldest have taken me,
Whan 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!
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[475–86]

The attentive reader might associate the content and mood of the Knight's song with the story of Ceyx and Alcyone. But the association would remain tentative, especially since the persona disregards what the lyric says. Because courtly love lyrics represent emotional states through conventional metaphors, the lyric appears less a statement of truth or fact at the time of its utterance than a "making," one more wondrous, unconnected element in the narrative.

Because we have been following the persona through his experiences, we do not recognize that the lyric represents the poem's central concern. This recognition occurs much later. More than three hundred lines after the lyric, the Black Knight remarks at being misunderstood:
Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;  
I have lost more than thou weneest.  

Four hundred lines later, the exasperated knight reiterates the charge; then two hundred lines later, just before the end of the poem, he says it again. The repetition becomes a widely spaced refrain of frustration that directs the conversation between persona and Black Knight toward a resolution.¹³ Until this late point in the poem, however, when we recognize the statement as a refrain, the interchange between the Knight and persona has appeared incongruous, like all the elements that preceded it. The problem has been one of mixed modes of communication, the Knight speaking about personal loss in conventional tropes, the persona taking the tropes to be expressing actuality. For instance, the Knight has represented the loss of his beloved through the extended metaphor of a chess game with Fortune:

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For fals Fortune hath pleyd a game  
Atte ches with me, alias the while!  
.................................  
With hir false draughtes dyvers  
She staal on me, and tok my fers.
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To which the persona has literalistically responded:

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But ther is no man alyve her  
Wolde for a fers make this woo!
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By the end of the conversation, we have recognized how the persona’s responses have frustrated the Knight, forcing him to peel off the metaphorical layers with which he has been smothering the plain fact that his mistress is dead. During the exchange, however, we have been primarily aware of the incongruous mixture of humor with pathos that the indirection earlier in the poem at once prepared us to experience and reinforced.

The Book of the Duchess is Chaucer’s first testing ground for what poetry can and cannot do, what it can and cannot tell about the nature of reality, in this case emotional reality. The conclusive elements in the poem occur precisely because Chaucer retains in the section containing
the Black Knight's complaint the objectifying conventionalism of the tradition. This section, for which Chaucer ostensibly wrote the entire poem, feels more conclusive than all the parts leading to it because Chaucer has used the Black Knight as a courtly lover and poet. The Knight's diction and his point of view represent a literal phenomenon metaphorically. Ironically, the metaphor, not the phenomenon, keeps this section of the poem squarely in the tradition of internalized dream vision and makes it identifiable and understood. In fact, the conventionalism of the dream vision always functions as an objectifying force in an essentially subjective form. From the Black Knight, for example, we learn the courtly way of expressing perception. It is a universalizing way, painting the lady with a long series of conventional attributes of goodness and beauty and himself as the equally conventional lover who flourishes in her grace (759–1297).

On the other hand, the inconclusive elements within the poem's form occur because of the energy and intensity with which Chaucer uses the naive and literal-minded persona. The *Book of the Duchess* is the first of Chaucer's narrative works taking the self as a character whose experiences in a dream do not produce the enlightenment the character seeks. The persona begins his discourse as a lover unable to sleep and ends up a poet who has experienced a manifold and confusing set of wonders.

Thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best, and that anoon.

[1330–33]

The dream has had a salubrious effect on his insomnia, but it has not satisfied his literalistic and quite dogged curiosity, a curiosity he will express even more clearly in the dream visions following this one.

In the persona of the *Book of the Duchess*, we see Chaucer's first creation of a character who functions in a psychologically plausible way, whose needs shape the forms of the first-person narratives Chaucer writes, but whose experiences within the narratives are so different from the needs that appear to have produced them that we do not feel strongly the enlightenment we expect from visionary poetry. The more Chaucer emphasizes himself as a character with particular questions
and needs, the more the form of his poetry grows inconclusive. The less this character provides a didactic, exemplary quality, the less the form provides the conclusive values that other poems in the tradition do.

The *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* develop more fully than the *Book of the Duchess* this character of the self as an individual with a complicated emotional life. Despite the persona's earnest attempts to establish certainty in them, he responds with considerable ambivalence to the conventional characters and objectifying elements he encounters. He is, moreover, ambivalent about the certainty of physical and metaphysical facts, of literal and metaphorical perceptions, and of particular and general judgments. As a result he is unable to conclude the issues that motivate his reading, his searching, his desire to be able to express the truth about reality in poetry. The difference between the two dream-vision experiments that follow the *Book of the Duchess* is that one is an uncomfortably inconclusive narrative form and the other is comfortably inconclusive.