IV. “Of Storial Thing”: Anelida and Arcite and Troilus and Criseyde

Chaucer continued to be fascinated by dreams and their relation to truth, and to write dream visions until late in his career. He continued to develop his poetic technique of representing experience through a first-person narrator, and, as we shall see, he used the form of the dream vision abstractly to fashion the outer form of the Canterbury Tales. But the dream vision represents only one major narrative kind that occupied him throughout his career. More than half of the bulk of his work is comprised of third-person narratives that, after him, I am calling “storial.” Whether these narratives come from his own mouth, as in Troilus and Criseyde, or from the mouths of characters whom he invents to tell them, as in the Canterbury Tales, their forms and their power derive only partially from Chaucer’s literary interest in how to express personal experience. They derive as well from his interest in how to translate and indite materials from “olde bokes.” It is the purpose of this chapter to explore some ways by which Chaucer fashions earlier, not necessarily inconclusive, works by others into narrative forms whose conclusiveness is as problematical as those of his dream visions. As with my argument about Chaucer’s dream visions, my purpose here is to show how Chaucer created from traditional literary forms an inconclusive kind of narrative literature.

Anelida and Arcite and Troilus and Criseyde are two early examples of Chaucer’s storial narratives. Each is different in genre and form, yet each exemplifies how the narrator creates peculiar effects that ultimately render his storial materials inconclusive. Let us examine first Anelida, not the best of Chaucer’s works, to see the nature of inconclusiveness in its form; we shall then be able to confront Troilus, perhaps the best of Chaucer’s works, to see the immensely more complicated ways in which the poet creates inconclusiveness from a source that is originally conclusive.
The abortive *Anelida* is so brief that its inconclusiveness seems caused more by its fragmentary state than by the conception and rendering of its form. Yet, strictly speaking, even the fragment that Chaucer left us is formally inconclusive, since it breaks off at a point where it has not accomplished anything like what it alleges it will do at the beginning. For all its claim to be a “noble storie” (13), requiring epic invocation to Mars, *Anelida* is actually an ignoble story about an abandoned woman, whose stylized complaint occupies the bulk of its lines. In this sense the fragment is not unlike the fragment known as the *Squire’s Tale*, which also promises to do many things, but does something different in its short space. It may be argued, however, that the *Squire’s Tale* is ironically intended, that in it Chaucer is working to demonstrate a young man’s inability to organize, order, and deploy poetic materials appropriately and that he wants to suggest by the story the Squire’s immature artistry in the face of good intentions or high pretensions. *Anelida*, on the other hand, cannot receive so charitable an interpretation since the narrator who tells the story is Chaucer himself and since the work does not suggest an ironic intention.

Yet, *Anelida* is not without its felicities, mostly found in the non-narrative portion of the poem. The complaint, which imitates in strophic stanzas French models of the *compleynte d’amour*, is actually a remarkable tour de force. In fact, the sure hand with which Chaucer creates, orders, and rhymes Anelida’s complaint makes the awkwardness of the narration that precedes it seem more egregious. After the epic invocation and a beginning of action, there is no development of plot. We move from mention of Theseus, Ipolita, and Emilye to Thebes and to the catastrophe after the war of the Seven against Thebes; we then settle on Anelida, the “quene of Ermony” (71–72), who is outstanding both for her beauty and her “stidfastness.” The narrator then introduces us to Arcite the Theban knight (85) and two lines later tells us that “he was double in love and no thing pleyn (87).” The narrator neither tells the story that has caused this evaluation nor depicts a developing relationship between the two main characters. Instead, he pitches the narrative forward to the complaint, suggesting by the procedure that the narrative materials and the questions they raise are insignificant paraphernalia used simply to prepare for the lyrical portion.
In the woodleness of its narrative structure, Anelida resembles some of the tales of the later Legend of Good Women. But in its form—at least in the form of the fragment we have—the poem resembles the Book of the Duchess, in which the narrative leads up to (and away from) an elaborately rhetorical set piece like a complaint. Moreover, its compositional method is also like that of the Book of the Duchess in the way Chaucer uses one source to begin, echoes others as he proceeds, but mostly depends on his own invention and imagination. To be sure, the narrator of the poem claims specific authority, which establishes the venerable, storial nature of the piece. He tells us, in fact, the story is so venerable that most of us have forgotten it entirely:

That elde, which that al can frete and bite,
As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,
Hath nygh devoured out of oure memorie. [12-14]

This striking image of age as a voracious beast devouring stories recalls the instability of literary materials suggested by the melting names at the foundation of Fame's house. Here, however, the narrator is intent on doing something about it. He wants to rescue the story from oblivion, to claim for his own time its significant meaning, and to preserve it for posterity. To do this, he names Statius and Corinna as his authorities, uses epic invocation to elevate the style, and quotes Statius directly as an epigraph. Yet, only the beginning derives from Statius, actually from Statius by way of Boccaccio's Teseida. The remainder of the narrative portion sometimes echoes Statius, sometimes Boccaccio, sometimes Dante and Ovid; the lyrical portion, Anelida's complaint, has no specific authority, except in its Ovidian mood. Like Chaucer's earlier dream visions, which echo and translate Froissart, Dante, and Alanus de Insulis, among others, Anelida, for all its suggestion of being a different kind of narrative form, a storial narrative, uses the dream vision as its model.

One difference between Anelida and a dream vision like the Book of the Duchess, however, is that whereas the Book of the Duchess is successfully realized, Anelida is not. The reason lies, I believe, in the nature of the modes in which Chaucer casts each poem. The Book of the Duchess is a dream vision, using subjective experience for its narrative;
Anelida, on the other hand, begins with an epic, storial format but moves so quickly away from its storial beginning to the complaint that its form appears more like a dream vision and less like a storial narrative. The action seems primarily intended for the lyrical set piece. One reason why Chaucer may have abandoned the piece is that the work’s form does not accommodate comfortably or subordinate appropriately the elements of epic and of dream vision that coexist within it. There is, of course, the possibility that the parts may ultimately have cohered in proper subordination when the work was finished. But that is unlikely, for the problem with the portion we have is not so much one of coherence, as in the House of Fame, but one of incongruity or lack of intelligible sequence in the elements of its form.

Chaucer returned to the materials of Anelida when he “made” the book of Palamon and Arcite, which became the Knight’s Tale in the Canterbury Tales. The Knight’s Tale has no trouble accommodating into its epic form the long rhetorical complaints, like those by Arcite in Thebes and Palamon in prison. In fact, the lyrical intensity of the complaints seems as appropriate to the otherwise leisurely pacing of the narrative as do Theseus’ two speeches about the nature of love, and even more in keeping with the expectations of the form than the Knight’s lengthy refusal to narrate Arcite’s funeral. The complaint in Anelida, by contrast, overwhelms the narrative portion that precedes it, making the narrative appear to exist expressly for the purpose of the love complaint. The subheading of Anelida—The Compleynt of feire Anelida and fals Arcite—suggests, however, that the poem should not be taken as an epic narrative, despite its opening, but as a set of complaints, the one by Anelida, the other by Arcite, held together by a narrative filigree. As such, the form of Anelida resembles the form of the Broche of Thebes (the complaints of Mars and Venus), in which a narrative filigree binds together the elaborate complaints of the two planet-deities. The elaborate astrological references that constitute much of the narrative of the Broche of Thebes keep that piece squarely in the tradition of allegorical dream visions, or at least in the tradition of the love-complaint; hence its form is successfully realized. This is not true for Anelida, however, because the genre in which it is conceived is
not clear. On the one hand, we expect from the subtitle a complaint, commonly cast in the form of dream visions. On the other, we expect from the invocation to Mars, to Pallas, and to the Muses on “Parnasso” an epic, an expectation sustained by three hexameters from Statius that the narrator quotes at the beginning of the story, and by the narrator’s storial intention in the invocation:

For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde,
With pitous hert in Englyssh to endyte
This olde storie, in Latyn which I fynde,
Of quene Anelida and fals Arcite.

[8–11]

Although the sad mood of the passage sustains our expectation of a complaint form, the intention to render into English an “olde storie” found in Latin suggests another form.

We do not have enough of Anelida to tell us whether, and in what ways, the inconclusiveness of the poem’s form derives from its mixture of genres and of narrative modes, from the way its narrator uses authority and sources, or from its fragmentary state. The inconclusiveness of the poem’s form may derive from all of these, or inconclusiveness may simply be a narrative condition of all of Chaucer’s poetry because of his compositional method. Let us therefore turn to Troilus, Chaucer’s longest and most complex storial narrative, a complete poem with a beginning, middle, and end, a work identified generically as a tragedy, whose plot derives from one primary source, Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato. By examining Troilus, we shall be able to understand more completely than we can from Anelida the relationship of Chaucerian inconclusiveness to generic choice and how, and in what ways, the nature of the narrator who is rendering the storial narrative from his source ultimately contributes to the inconclusiveness of the new work’s form, despite the conclusiveness of the plot in the original source. I shall examine the ways in which the narrator’s rendering of Boccaccio’s conclusive plot, and his involvement with the characters of that plot, create a narrative form whose conclusiveness is problematic. Finally, I shall discuss both the genre and the ending of Troilus to show how Chaucer’s alterations reinforce the inconclusiveness of the form by undercutting our tragic expectations.
II

The plot of Chaucer’s *Troilus* is conclusive. The events work themselves out in the fashion expected from the very first action of the story, Calchas’s betrayal. The dedication at the end subjects the poem first to “alle poesie,” namely, to the writers in the epic tradition, then to “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode,” both of whom, whatever their personal involvement with the poem’s creation, the adjectives preceding their names characterize as appropriate to its concerns. Yet, despite the conclusiveness of the plot and the appropriateness of the dedications, there is a sense of inconclusiveness in the form of *Troilus* not related to the plot and its concerns but to the narrator rendering the plot.

It is easy to recognize in the narrator of *Troilus* a character consistent with the persona who told his experiences in the dream visions. Although this character appears more sober, he is no more earnest than the persona of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*. The self-portrait of Chaucer in the second book of the *House of Fame*—the studious, serious, almost cloistered academic-by-night, not the frightened actor in that poem—seems to represent the sense of character Chaucer wanted his narrator to possess in *Troilus*. The simplistic naïveté of the persona of the *Book of the Duchess* is overwhelmed in the *House of Fame* by the complexities that his studiousness has produced. The result is a more sober character who appears as the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* and the narrator of *Troilus*. But by the time of *Troilus*, the objects of the narrator’s interests have altered somewhat. Whereas previously the persona was filled with wonder about his experiences, whereas he suffered and was frightened by the implications of his dreams because they taught him a skepticism that he apparently feared, the narrator of *Troilus* is no longer a seeker after answers to theoretical questions. Rather, he has become a translator of other people’s works. In the earlier poems, he wondered about many general things; now he has a purpose, an intention to render a historical aspect of the matter of Troy. The student of personal dreams and of poetic experiences has given way to the maker in English of other people’s stories. It is as if the younger man has matured into a professional being, not an unlikely change if the persona is at all modeled upon the real Chaucer.
Similar as are Chaucer the narrator of *Troilus* and Chaucer the persona of the dream visions, they differ in their function to the form and in their relationship to the content. In a dream vision, a persona tells of his own experiences in a situation. The narrator of a storial work, however, most often describes a situation that is not his own. A dream vision persona by nature is more intimate, more involved with his telling, whereas a storial narrator tends to be more aloof because he is telling someone else's story. But in *Troilus* something curious happens. Although we expect the narrator to remain aloof from the story, we discover that he gets frequently and intensely involved with his fiction, appearing at once as a narrator of someone else's story and as a persona in the experience of his own poem. This narrator, then, has two functions: he is the historian of someone else's plot, responsible to his author to get it right, and an actor in the experience of rendering that plot, drawn for his own reasons to alter the effect of the plot on us. These two functions are not always integrated, and at times they create a tension in the poem's form that undercuts the authority that the story's author, the fictional Lollius, originally gave it and causes ambiguity in the meaning of the work. The result of this tension is inconclusiveness in the poem's form. Let us look at this complicated use of the narrator in *Troilus* to see how it creates an inconclusive form in a narrative whose plot is otherwise conclusive.

Morton Bloomfield has argued that the narrator of *Troilus* evokes and controls "distance" in the poem, an aloofness from the materials of his source that separates us from the plot in "temporal, spatial, aesthetic and religious ways." The narrator's formal concerns in the poems repeatedly distance us from the inner events of the plot and "make us more aware of Chaucer the narrator than ordinarily." By contrast, but to our same ultimate awareness of the narrator's centrality, the actor in the experience of rendering this plot collapses the distance by calling attention to his own sympathies for the characters and their activities. For example, the narrator renders Troilus's love behavior in book one ironically, thereby controlling the impatience we would otherwise feel at the hero's self-indulgence. Yet his feelings about the value of such love and his sympathy for his hero's suffering make us feel the poignancy of Troilus's pain more intensely and cause us to identify with him even while we feel the irony and distance that it creates. Speaking of style, Muscatine, after Bethel, calls this effect one of "multi-
consciousness, the simultaneous awareness of different and opposite planes of reality." \[13\]

The double role of the narrator, as historian and as involved actor, affects the presentation of Criseyde even more complexly than it does the presentation of Troilus. On the one hand, the narrator's warnings of Criseyde's falseness and its effects, and his apparently heavy dependence on his presumed source, especially in the fourth and fifth books of the poem, distance us from her actions by preparing us for them. On the other hand, his emotional response to her and his view of her as a "hevenyssh perfit creature" (1.104), as well as his repeated attempts to avoid confronting the moral conclusions he must necessarily draw from her actions, break down the distance between us and her and make us feel more intensely about her. Distinguishing between Chaucer the narrator and Chaucer the poet—not between Chaucer the historian and Chaucer the actor, as I have been—Donaldson describes the complicated effect of this double mediation on our responses to Criseyde:

At some of the moments when his narrator is striving most laboriously to palliate Criseide's behavior, Chaucer, standing behind him, jogs his elbow, causing him to fall into verbal imprecision, or into anticlimax, or making it redundant—generally doing these things in such a way that the reader will be encouraged almost insensibly to see Criseide in a light quite different from the one that the narrator is so earnestly trying to place her in. \[14\]

This double role for the narrator causes an affective inconclusiveness in the perceived form of the work. It blurs issues, confuses reader response, and makes ambiguous the fictive reality of the poem. It also interferes with our responses to the events of the plot by making us so aware of Chaucer the narrator as the teller of the tale that we cannot read this poem simply as a story, as we would other storial narratives like romances. We are forced to read it as a subjective narrative, a story being told by a character whose consciousness and even unconsciousness mediate and control the effect, the significance, even the truth contained within the form.

In the dream vision poems, we have often been aware of the complicated persona. In fact, we have frequently been as aware of him as we have been of the objects of his experience. But in those works, we
do not find anything particularly unusual about this awareness, for, after all, the experiences of the poem are the persona's and he is the subject. *Troilus*, by contrast, is storial in its mode; Troilus and his “double sorwe” are both the subject and the experience to which we are invited to attend. Thus the narrator's intense involvement in *Troilus* seems peculiar.

Narrators mediate our experience of the text. In the narrative literature preceding Chaucer, the narrative voice of a Chrétien de Troyes or of a Wolfram von Eschenbach is clearly heard and strongly felt, but it does not generally interfere with the workings of the fiction to the extent that Chaucer's voice does. Generally, the narrative voice leads us into the fiction and moves us from episode to episode or from book to book when the work is an extended one. Frequently, it tells us what to feel—pity for a lover's pain, fear for a hero's life, and so on. The narrator uses his power to chasten or reassure us morally as well as to criticize others for not telling the story properly. But the narrator of *Troilus* manipulates us in two directions. He creates distance from his text by telling us of its ending, by separating us in time from it, by philosophizing action; and he abridges distance by identifying with the action, by making the judgments as if he were a part of, or close to, the action, and by psychologizing action. More important, the narrator of *Troilus* manipulates us not so much by telling us what to feel or where to turn our attention but rather by telling us how he feels or where he is taking us. It is as if Chaucer is mediating the history he derives from his stated source Lollius through a character whose consciousness is as central to our total sense of the poem's form as is the plot.

Bloomfield tells us that “the Chaucerian sense of distance and aloofness is the artistic correlative of the concept of predestination.” I have already argued that the sense of distance in *Troilus* is not simply one of aloofness but of a sliding scale, now aloof, now close, now moving away from the plot, now closing space between the plot and our experience, always asserting the narrator's consciousness as the sieve through which the plot must be pressed. In context of Bloomfield's argument, I take "predestination" to mean the necessity that God knows by virtue of His ability to see all time and all action in one point. Just as the reader must accept the events of *Troilus* through the narrator's point of view and with his insistence on the end, and just as Lady Philosophy would
argue to Boethius, and a theologian to us, that we must accept the
meaning and end of our being through an awareness of God’s vision,
which is different from our own, so we must accept the events and the
end of any fiction through the consciousness of any narrator who, no
matter what his relation to the author, claims to be the maker of the
fiction. In this way the sense of distance that a narrator establishes
between us and the events of his text provides an artistic correlative to
determinacy of life, or of plot. The narrator, like God, can be om-
niscient. But when the narrator gets involved with his fiction, as does
the narrator of Troilus, or as do many of the pilgrims who tell tales on
their way to Canterbury, the form becomes inconclusive because the
narrator’s particular psychology qualifies a total awareness of reality
and places greater emotional weight on certain elements of the story
than would be expected from a truly omniscient being like God. Such a
narrator becomes, thus, a character different from the author in that he
is finite and perceives finitely. In Troilus the narrator is a character
who has grown familiar to us from earlier works; he is a lover manqui,
a curious and skeptical scholar, a historian with a kind of frightened
interest in philosophical questions about love, about necessity, about
the ends of poetry. This character is limited by the particulars of his
own psychology, by his fears, his skepticism, his sympathies.

Chaucer could have developed as a poet in any number of ways and
with any number of interests. From the first, however, his chief
interest in literary representation was psychology, and his chief re-
sponses to the issues that his personae encountered were psychologistic.
Whereas Aristotle insists on the primacy of action over character,
Chaucer, who did not know the Poetics, emphasizes from the begin-
ing character and psychology (Aristotle’s “Thought”) over action.17
The dream vision as a narrative form in which Chaucer chose original-
ly to write his narratives never required a sense of plausible plot. The
form of dreams is by nature determined by psychological need and
association, not by plausible consequences to people’s activities. When
we consider Chaucer’s early works, we think not of their plots, for the
journeys the persona undertakes hardly cohere as plots. We think of
these works as narrative experiences not so much of what happened but
of who or what was encountered, like the Black Knight, the eagle,
Fama, Affricanus, Lady Nature, a goose, a turtledove, a duck, a whelp. Most of all, we recall the consciousness of the character named Geffrey, whose dream experiences Chaucer narrated.

In *Troilus*, where plot is a significant factor and where events create the tragedy of the story, we might expect an emphasis on action over character. Thus Muscatine argues that in this poem “characterization is a device, not an end.” Yet, aside from the first action of Calchas' betrayal, which is necessary to begin the story, the opinions and feelings of the characters in the poem appear more significant than the action of the plot. For all its discussion of fortune and its relation to human action, for all its consideration of the actions of the war between Troy and the Greeks, *Troilus* is a tragedy of character. Not only is the narrator the central consciousness in control of audience response, the characters and their feelings within the plot occupy our concern more significantly than the plot itself. Charles Owen puts the matter thus:

The action in the poem is determined in large measure by the character of the actors. Troilus may be struck suddenly by love, but his response to the situation is an expression of his character. Throughout the poem we watch men and women moving and thinking and feeling. Frequently they are victims of their own self-deception. But their actions emerge; they are not imposed.

The abuse that love creates in Troilus in book one, the satisfaction that he finds in book three, and the disabuse that he receives in book five are of a piece and belong to the category of character rather than of action. Troilus's psychology motivates his behavior. Although Troilus's disillusionment finally results from his perception of Criseyde's action of giving Diomede his brooch, the action is made known to Troilus beforehand in a dream and his responses proceed from his psychology.

In another way, Criseyde's interior monologue in book two (701–812) is ultimately as significant as any action she subsequently performs, for her psychology, which is revealed there, motivates her subsequent actions. It even functions as an action, for its length and development represent Chaucer's way of convincing us through narration of inner thought that Criseyde's love for Troilus was not a "sodeyn
love” (2. 667), as opposed later to Diomede’s (5. 1024). In fact, in Criseyde’s case, action seems to function as a revelation of character, rather than the other way around.

The first thing we learn of Criseyde, even before we meet Troilus, is that she takes personally her father’s treason—she was “in gret penaunce” (1. 94). Her first conclusion about her father’s action reveals immediately the intense ambivalence that motivates her character throughout: She “nyste what was best to rede” (1. 96). The first look she casts at Troilus in the temple, which causes him to be struck down by Love’s arrow, reveals the psychological complexity with which Chaucer imbues her from the beginning:

To Troilus right wonder wel with alle
Gan for to like hire mevynge and hire chere,
Which somdel deignous was, for she let falle
Hir look a lite aside in swich manere,
Ascaunces, “What! may I nat stonden here?”
And after that hir lokynge gan she lighte.

Although Criseyde’s look is “somdel deignous,” it is caused by the way she drops her eyes and from the corner of them seems to ask an ambiguous question. Is the question a challenge, or is it a fearful response to her sense that as the daughter of Calchas she might be out of place in the temple and its society? Finally, the lightening of her look dissolves the tension of what the side-glance suggests and appears flirtatious, as if to undo both the challenge and the fear. This response to a situation reveals a woman who is both proud and afraid, who is uncomfortable in a situation and who handles the situation with a look that defends her in her discomfort, yet conceals the discomfort in a stereotypically feminine way. The look is above all one of a woman who is insecure. All subsequent action that Criseyde performs or to which she allows herself to be subject may be explained by what can be interpreted from this look, although the gullible narrator and the many male critics who follow the narrator in their affection for her fail to recognize in their responses their own susceptibilities to an insecure woman in a difficult plight. This is not to say that critics should not be interested in Criseyde. Chaucer was himself so interested in the complexities of her psychology and their relation to her actions that he
considerably altered Boccaccio's less complex Criseida by psychologizing the actions of his heroine. Whereas her actions cannot be defended morally, they are psychologically explicable, and the narrator's interest in the psychological explanation of her character continually preempts his interest in, and evaluation of, her actions.

Pandarus is the final example in *Troilus* of Chaucer's intense interest in character. Boccaccio's Pandare is a young contemporary of Troilo. His role in the plot is significant, as the role of the go-between in any romance would be. He functions, for example, as "Ami" in *Le Roman de la Rose* or as Lunete in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*. But in *Troilus*, Chaucer has transformed and individuated the type. He has extended Pandarus's role beyond the requirements of the plot. Pandarus is developed as a character not unlike the persona of Chaucer we have known in the earlier dream visions and not even unlike the character of Chaucer the narrator. His guileless proverbial nature is totally winning, and his role may be extensive precisely because of Chaucer the poet's continuing interest in the literary representation of himself as a character.

When we first encounter Pandarus in book one, we get a sense that he is selflessly motivated to do anything that would alleviate his friend's suffering. In fact, there is no reason to suspect that he will be anything but typical in a courtly love story. But as the narrative progresses, we notice that Pandarus's involvement with the lovers is extraordinarily manipulative, as if his own disappointed amorousness, discussed at the beginning of book two, can receive voyeuristic satisfaction in bringing his friend and his niece together. The comic mileage Chaucer gets from Pandarus's control of the situation that precipitates the night of love in book three causes us to forget that here is a lovable busybody who may somehow be finding his own gratification in being close to and, perhaps, overseeing the sexual consummation of the relationship. His maturity, moreover, makes it plausible that he is conscious enough of his own motives to offer the long disavowal in book three (238–343), the so-called "baud" speech, in which he explains his distaste for his role and discredits the baser motives that may have created it.

This interest in character over plot in *Troilus* is not peculiar to Chaucer. Courtly romances provided the dream vision writers of the
thirteenth century with a model for their own interest in character, and Chaucer’s dream visions followed the model of his predecessors by emphasizing the kind of interiority congenial to a work concentrating on character. In fact, the romance as a narrative genre may be distinguished from other contemporary narrative genres, like the chansons de geste, precisely because of its interest in character. Thus, by Chaucer’s time, the priority of character—plausible if conventional character—over plot—plausible and consequential action—had been developing for centuries. What is peculiar to Troilus is the way in which Chaucer’s interest in character led him to develop a narrator of finite consciousness and strong desires, who does not feel free to report events according to his own wishes but who claims to be tied to a given history. Throughout Troilus the narrator as a character plays off his own opinions and desires against the givens of Lollius’s story, manipulating our responses as he sees fit, yet remaining true to the facts of the history as Lollius said they occurred. The result is a poem whose form contains a tension between a narrator’s consciousness of what he wants and the facts he is required to report. It is a tension between objective fact and subjective desire that is never resolved, although it is rendered irrelevant by the narrator’s final turn away from the matter entirely to embrace at the end of his work the tranquility of religious truth.

This tension has been so frequently remarked that it needs no reiteration here, except to claim that because of it the poem is never felt as a conclusive form. We can understand better the sense of inconclusiveness that the tension creates by examining elements of the poems superstructure, the beginnings and ends of the books that call attention to the narrator’s manipulation of distance. For example, the narrator brings book two to an end at a point in the action that might otherwise appear inappropriate. Book one had ended with the narrator claiming he was going to “stynye of Troilus a stounde” (1086), after having brought us through the hero’s first serious bout with despair. Book two begins, after its proem, with a signification of time in May and with Pandarus bent on making Criseyde aware of Troilus’ love for her. The changes of time, scene, and concern seem appropriate for the beginning of a new section. The book concludes with the anxious expectation of a first confrontation between Troilus and Criseyde. It leaves the hero in a “kankedort” (1752). It may be argued, of course,
that this is a good point to end a book, for the felt tension of the hero might make us curious to continue. But since Criseyde has already made clear to Pandarus that she would meet Troilus, although she has not made clear how much she would commit herself to him, the tension we perceive in the form at the end of book two is misleading. It is Troilus's tension, not ours. Besides, the book ends right in the middle of the scene at Deiphebus's house, and when the action gets under way again after the proem to book three, the scene at Deiphebus's house continues to its natural end. The unity of action and place that authors who compose in chapters or books commonly respect here is violated. The reason for the violation, of course, is clear. This is not the point where Troilus's fortunes change, for they began to change in book two; nor is this the point in the narrative where Troilus and Criseyde realize their love for each other, for that too has occurred previously. Book two ends and book three begins at this point in the plot because it is the place where the hero and heroine actually meet each other face to face for the first time. The need to begin a book at the point in the narrative where the lovers meet may explain why Chaucer has split the scene in two. But the split also has the tangential effect of beginning the action of book three in the middle of things, making the consummation of the love between Troilus and Criseyde—the central concern of book three and the only emotional gratification of the entire poem—appear the most epic fact of the poem. This structure also allows the narrator to write in his proem stanzas dedicated to Venus and to the praise of love and its law, subjects appropriate to the events that are about to occur in book three; yet the interruption of the consecutive action of the scene also enables Chaucer to emphasize the narrator's presence at a place where, it could be argued, we need him least, a place where the action has built to a pitch of excitement capable of propelling itself to its natural end without the narrator's formal interruption.

Oppositely, but ultimately to the same effect, book four ends abruptly on perhaps the most seriously desperate note in the poem:

For mannes hed yimagynen ne kan,
N'entendement considere, ne tonge telle
The cruele peynes of this sorwful man,
That passen every torment down in helle.
For whan he saugh that she ne myghte dwelle,
Which that his soule out of his herte renne,
Withouten more, out of the chaumbre he wente.

[1695-1701]

The stanza offers us a hyperbolic analogy for Troilus's pain with which the narrator bows out; then with spare, unadorned language, it suggests Troilus's desperation, the finality with which he accepts his inability to change her mind. Book five begins abruptly without the introduction of a proem or the emotional mediation that it can offer:

Aprochen gan the fatal destyne
That Joves hath in disposicion,
And to yow, angry Parcas, sustren thre,
Committh, to don execucion;
For which Criseyde moste out of the town,
And Troilus shal dwellen forth in pyne
Til Lachesis his thred no lenger twyne.

[1-7]

One more stanza records the length of time that the affair has continued, then, without further ado, turns to Diomede, who is waiting to retrieve Criseyde. This is the point in the story where the audience most needs the narrator to help. Instead, he keeps himself as much out of the opening of the book as he can and consequently forces us more closely than before into the fiction and the pain that it is describing. It may be that Chaucer did not compose a proem for book five because he saw the end of the book as the most appropriate place to present his narrator's formal observations. But the effect of no formal proem is almost devastating on the reader who, without a mediator, is forced to identify with the lover's pain more intensely. Arguments have been advanced that in an earlier version of Troilus books four and five were one book that Chaucer separated into two when he revised the poem. But insofar as we accept the version of the poem Chaucer left us as complete, whether or not it was ever revised, we must accept Chaucer's failure to provide the narrator's accustomed proem as intentional, purposely breaching the narrative distance that the former proems of former books maintained. Moreover, since Chaucer must have known that book five required a proem for the consistency of its structure and that his audience would have been conditioned to expect it there, after he had provided proems for the other books, I can only conclude that
its absence functions slyly to disappoint us of our expectation of finding a narrator, making us thereby consider his absence, even while the absence forces us to identify more intensely with Troilus's pain.

The narrator's involvements, or lack of them, with the formal structure of his poem are akin to the sliding distance that the narrator's involvement with his characters and plot created, and they contribute to the sense of tension that is felt in the poem's total form. The tension occurs precisely because of the narrator's control of our responses to the text he is presenting. On the one hand, he causes us to feel aloof from the narrative by warning us of its sad end, by presenting his own philosophical observations about the nature of fortune and of love, and by forcing us to be involved with his sentiments as well as with him as a fact in the poem. On the other hand, he can beguile us so profoundly by the fictive magic of both his text and his rhetoric that by the end we recognize that our responses have been completely in his control. The narrator has become the first principle of the poem; his consciousness, now intensely pained, now involved, now sympathetic, now moralistic, has challenged the power of the story itself to offer us both "sentence" and "solaas." When the narrator is ambivalent about the values of the actions and of the forces within the world of his poem, we feel ambivalently about them; when he falls in love, so to speak, with the heroine of his own making, so do we; when he grows impatient with Troilus's love-pains and creates humor from them in book one, we grow impatient yet smile; when he sees humor in Troilus's clumsy initiation to love-making in book three, so do we; when he suffers with Troilus in books four and five, excuses or criticizes Criseyde, or feels distaste for Diomede's oily experienced art, so do we. So much are our responses in the narrator's control, so much has his presence enthralled us in the historical world of his making, that we rarely question his motives.

The narrator's complex involvement, then, greatly contributes to our sense of the poem's inconclusiveness, for the tension that he creates in the form is rarely resolved. Rather, it creates in turn a sense of disjunction between the otherwise conclusive storial materials and the narrative consciousness who, though committed to rendering the facts accurately, repeatedly struggles to ameliorate the moral conclusions that the historical materials require us to draw.25 No reader of Chaucer's final treatment of Criseyde in book five can avoid the sense of
moral inconclusiveness that the narrator creates as he both faces the
facts of his heroine’s actions yet tries nonetheless to understand, to
mitigate, even to overlook if possible what she has done. The narrator’s
refusal to draw moral conclusions about Criseyde—“men seyn—I not”
(5. 1050)—prepares us for a similar treatment of the hero and of the
world of the story as we approach the end of the poem. However, the
ending that the narrator offers at that time so strongly contradicts both
his sympathetic treatment of his heroine and his sympathetic presenta-
tion of the world in which his lovers lived that the ending of Troilus
comes as a surprise whose effect is not to conclude but to reinforce,
even to extend, our sense of the inconclusiveness of meaning in the
poem.26 It is with the ending of Troilus, and with its effects, therefore,
that I shall be concerned for the remainder of this chapter.

III

There are actually two endings to Troilus, a situation that must
inevitably affect the conclusiveness of any poem’s form. The first
ending (5. 1765—98) brings the plot of Troilus’s love to its close. It
offers a moralitas about the proper decorum of lovers, names the
poem’s genre as a tragedy, and subjects the work to the evaluation of
the epic poets, hence to epic tradition. This ending is conclusive, for its
morality grows directly out of the poem’s action; its envoy and dedica-
tion are completely in keeping with the expectations for the genre that
the poem has manifested from its first lines. However, the second
ending (5. 1799—1869), sometimes called the epilogue, undercuts the
sense of conclusiveness we feel from the first. It extends the plot
through the death and apotheosis of the hero; it Christianizes the
moralitas of the first ending by urging young lovers—“he or she”
(1835)—to love God before all else; it condemns the activities of the
plot and the aspirations of even the most noble characters within it; it
even questions the value of “olde clerkis speche / in poetrie” (1854—
55) and rededicates the book to the guardianship of a contemporary
philosopher and a contemporary moral poet; finally it concludes with a
prayer. Needless to say, this double ending creates a peculiar disjunc-
tion in the work’s form, for its meaning seems to be contradictory. In
the context of the rest of the poem, the second ending abruptly opposes
the values for which the poem has stood and makes all the sorrow and
suffering within it appear both unnecessary and, finally, “untragic.”
Although Chaucer does not name the genre of his poem until he reaches the first ending, it is clear from the first lines that the work is a tragedy. Following Aristotle, we think of tragedy as a mimetic form whose plot describes an action, the movement of a hero toward his inexorable destiny, over the course of which he (and the audience) realizes certain truths about justice, human limitation, fallibility, power. D. W. Robertson has argued that Chaucer meant something different by tragedy than we do because he was using not a Greek but a Boethian model of both human fallibility and cosmic providence. Whatever differences exist between Chaucer’s understanding of fortune in a Christian universe and our sense of the Greek concept of fate, Chaucer’s practice in Troilus, and the definitions of tragedy we find in the Monk’s Tale, show that he was aware of at least two essential qualities inherent in the tragic genre: the sad or disastrous ending, and the suggestion through its form of the limits of human power in a universe greater than human consciousness can reasonably apprehend. What is missing from Chaucer’s tragic form is the positive sense of the value of human action that Sophocles before him or Shakespeare after him maintained. Nowhere does Chaucer construct a tragic form whose darkness grows light by the sense of human dignity that an Oedipus can realize by putting out his eyes or a Hamlet can retrieve by his death. The plot of Troilus, like the plots of the stories in the Monk’s Tale, reaches its end in the falling off of man’s power at the hands of Fortune. It ends on a pessimistic note of the betrayal of love and the disabuse of an idealistic lover whose mistress has followed the most practical, most opportunistic, course. The world of Chaucer’s tragedy is thus bleaker than most other tragedies we know. Ironically, however, the pessimism of the tragic form of Troilus occurs because of Chaucer’s paradoxical treatment of love, whose carnal and spiritual sides he never distinguishes in the plot, but whose carnal side he condemns at the end.

By means of his narrator and his characters, Chaucer analyzes the nature of love, which he presents both as necessary to the human condition and as the highest good for which man can strive. Early in book one, the narrator offers us a striking simile to describe the necessitarian nature of love:

As proude Bayard gynneth for to skippe
Out of the weye, so pryketh hym his corn,
Til he a lasshe have of the long whippe;
Than thynketh he, "Though I praunce al byforn
First in the trays, ful fat and newe shorn,
Yet am I but an hors, and horses lawe
I moot endure, and with my feres drawe";

So ferde it by this fiercely and proude knyght:
Though he a worthy kynges sone were,
And wende nothing hadde had swich myght
Ayeyns his wille that shuld his herte stere,
Yet with a look his herte wax a-fere,
That he that now was moost in pride above,
Was sodeynly moost subgit unto love.

The didactic amplification surrounding this simile asserts what the image describes, that love is a condition from which man is not free—"for kaught is proud, and kaught is debonaire" (214)—that all men must love:

For evere it was, and evere it shall byfalle,
That Love is he that alle thing may bynde,
For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde.

In the proem to book three and in Troilus's praise of love later in that book (1254-74), Chaucer speaks of this necessary condition as the highest good of man's aspirations, the goal to which all nature tends. Never, however, does he distinguish fleshly and spiritual love. Rather, he represents love as a general principle that motivates all action within the poem, as it does within nature. It motivates the narrator to tell his story in the first place; it motivates Troilus both to suffer and to try to win Criseyde; it motivates Criseyde both mysteriously—"who yaf me drynke" (2. 651)—and pragmatically in her choice first of Troilus and then of Diomede; it also motivates Pandarus to bring together the two lovers, to support their relationship, and to support Troilus after Criseyde departs for the Greek camp. Ironically, and to the ultimate dissolution of the relationship, love even motivates Calchas to seek his daughter from Troy in exchange for Antenor.

The tragedy of Troilus is thus a tragedy of earthly love, which the narrator repeatedly asserts is both necessary and good, but which the action of the last two books reveals to be merely necessary. From the
beginning the narrator, Troilus, and Criseyde alternately consider the value of earthly love with respect to necessity. When in book four necessity begins to work against the lovers, Troilus seeks to resolve his practical problems by philosophy. In Jove's Temple he tries to reason himself out of necessity toward a sense of possible freedom for his actions, but a lover and not a theologian, he encounters only frustration. Like the Nun's Priest who cannot "bulte it to the bren" (7. 3240), Troilus can only bring himself to a notion of conditional necessity, the limited end that even Boethius could not transcend without metaphysical help from Lady Philosophy. Consequently, he abandons his will and depends with implicit faith on Jove's benignity. But the Jove to whom Troilus prays, in whose temple he tries to reason, not only remains silent as the denouement of the plot occurs but holds "in disposicioun" the "fatal destyne" (5. 1-2) of the poem's protagonists.

Critics as different as Robertson and Bloomfield have argued that by this dark philosophical turn Chaucer intended to show both the failure of human ability to reason oneself to answers about the nature of man's free will and the uselessness of the pagan gods whom the narrator condemns in his religious ending to the poem. They feel similarly that as a Christian, with full knowledge of salvation, and as a didactic poet, expected to exemplify for his audience the failure of even the most virtuous of pagans, Chaucer intended from the beginning the Christian ending for the tragic form of his poem. Yet, if we consider the Knight's Tale, which Chaucer was composing at about the same time, we can see that his Christianity was not necessarily the cause for the tragic form of Troilus. The conception of the genre in which he was writing may equally well account for it.

The Knight's Tale is similar to Troilus in its mixture of seriousness and humor and in its ironic technique to accommodate the disjunction of values in its form. It differs, however, from Troilus by virtue of its being, finally, a comedy, cautiously optimistic about man's power to figure out, and in some ways to control, his own destiny. Despite its sad and tragic moments, the tale ends happily, and without the need to transcend its pagan setting. One of the ways in which Chaucer averts the tragic implications of the Knight's Tale is by refusing to render from his source, Boccaccio's Teseida, Arcita's spiritual flight. Thus he avoids making his audience consider from the perspective of eternity
the pettiness or uselessness of human action even in the face of the third book's suggestion of the planet-god's involvement in human affairs. By not using Arcita's flight, Chaucer makes it necessary for a character like Theseus to reason his own way to the meaning of the mysterious accidents that a universe greater than man has imposed upon human will and action.

When Arcite dies in the *Knight's Tale*, the Knight-narrator disclaims knowing the place to which his character's soul has gone. He says he is "no divinistre" (1. 2811). Answers to the important questions that Arcite asks before he dies—"What is this world? What asketh men to have?" (1. 2777)—must be left to the human characters in the story to figure out. Egeus offers a pessimistic, though reality-oriented, apothegm about the limits of life:

This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
And we been pilgrymes, passynge to an fro.
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore."

[1. 2847-49]

Somehow these truisms gladden Theseus for a while so that, according to human custom, he can have Arcite buried in a traditionally heroic way. At Egeus's suggestion, Theseus has been forced to consider the ultimate necessity of all human beings, namely, that death may not be avoided. By the time the poem reaches its conclusion in the "Chain of Love" speech, however, we find that Theseus has made a virtue of the necessity of death by reasoning his way for his subjects and for us to the idea of continuation through succession. The poem thus becomes tentatively optimistic, for Theseus can suggest how man may soften the pain of mortality and answer Arcite's valedictory questions.

Although it is ironic in connection with *Troilus*, what men ask to have of the world in the *Knight's Tale* is love, which binds together nature and supernature in a chain and enables man to have power over mortality by means of succession. The *Knight's Tale* ends, as all comedy ends, with the universe perceived in a balanced order and with a marriage supposedly ensuring succession. A philosophical attitude, not a religious faith, has averted the pessimistic view of life implicit in Arcite's death and in Egeus's response to it. The heavenly perspective that Arcite's spirit supplies in the *Teseida* is not needed for the *Knight's*
Tale because man has reasoned his way to a solution, and, as Theseus' last speech indicates, can even test his philosophical conclusions empirically by observing material phenomena and human institutions like stones, trees, rivers, and civilizations (I. 3016–26). By the end of the Knight's Tale, Chaucer has brought us to recognize not only the limits of man's power and the failure of human agency in a world of fortune, as Troilus posits, but he has shown us as well the extent of man's power and his ability to discover it.

Unlike the Knight's Tale, Troilus from the first is without any optimism that might mitigate the bleak universe inherent in its tragic vision. Despite all the praise for the power and value of love in the poem, love actually works to devastating effect. No appropriate solution is available to any of the characters of the plot, not even to the narrator outside the plot, except the death of the hero and the defamation of the heroine. The tragic form of the poem shows how historical events necessarily dominate the human spirit and how human beings are impotent to act with lasting efficacy.

In light of both the tragic form of Troilus and the irony that imposes the consequences of historical events on human desires, what I have called the first ending of the poem seems too trivial, insufficient to the task of the ending. To be sure, Boccaccio's Filostrato had concluded with an admonition to men not to get involved with such sensual and fickle women as Criseida, and Chaucer's first ending, urging "every lady bright of hewe / and every gentil woman" (5. 1772-73), not to be like Criseyde, represents a similar moral conclusion. But the world of Troilus is too complicated, too charged with ambiguous philosophical and complex psychological issues, never implied by Boccaccio's version, to allow a comment about the decorum of lovers to suffice for a conclusion. We may assume that Chaucer understood this and found in Arcite's flight above the earth, and in the changed perspective on earthly activity that the Teseida provided, a more appropriate way to end his poem satisfactorily. But just as the first ending of Troilus seems insufficient to the complex meaning of the poem, so his second ending seems oversufficient, for it actually denies tragedy as a necessary condition and makes all the talk in the poem about necessity in love, in will, in history, seem unimportant in a way it had not seemed until that point.
Despite all the pain and disappointment that Fortune and Criseyde's actions have caused, Chaucer has made *Troilus* so clearly a poem in praise of the wondrous vicissitudes of earthly love that when the narrator turns, after the envoy in which he calls his poem a tragedy, to deny the value of love, many readers feel uneasy, if not embarrassed, about their own previous involvement with the lovers and their plight. From the vantage point of the eighth sphere, the sublunary world must truly appear no greater than a mustard seed. The timelessness of eternity, to which we are exhorted to repair at the end, makes the cell of earth and the behavior of its inhabitants appear as busy as an anthill. Yet, just as an ant’s-eye view of his own world would undoubtedly see order and meaning in the activity, so we have seen order and meaning in the world of human action, in its wars, its wooing, its religious observances, albeit pagan, and in its parties and politics. Although the narrator has warned us throughout the poem that the story would end wretchedly, the plot has continually beguiled us away from those warnings. The narrator, moreover, has encouraged our interest in the hopes and fears of his characters and has continually caused us to take seriously both the power and the weakness of the human condition. Ours is not the first age to recognize *Troilus* as an important and meaningful statement about the relationship between necessity and human aspirations before the age of grace. But in our day, we need exegetes like Robertson to remind us that the Christian message implicit throughout the poem is related to *contemptus mundi*, for Chaucer the narrator refuses to remind us.

Because the narrator refuses to remind us of this message, although he warns us of the sad end of the story, the standard Christian *moralitas* that readers of medieval literature expect as a matter of course and that the narrator finally provides at the end does not feel appropriate, not at least in the intensity with which he admonishes us with it. Not only does he have the spirit of the dead hero “lough” at the weeping mourners and damn “al oure werk that foloweth so / the blynde lust, the which that may not laste” (1823-24); he addresses us in formal exemplary rhetoric about the ultimate worthlessness of the values that his poem has incorporated:

Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!  
Swich fyn hath al his grete worthynesse!
Swich fyn hath his estat real above,  
Swich fyn his lust, swich fyn hath his noblesse!  
Swich fyn hath false worldes brotelnesse!

[1828-32]

And again three stanzas later:

Lo here, of payens corses olde rites,  
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle;  
Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites;  
Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille  
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!

[1849-53]

He even rejects the value of his own endeavors as a scholar and poet whose literary career has been spent in reading the poetry of others.

Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche  
In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.

[1854-55]

The intensity and extent of these condemnations make us feel that the narrator might be overreacting, the consequence of which, in this case, is to overconclude.

It is a commonplace of psychology that overreactions are immoderate responses to a situation, motivated by a feeling of the insufficiency of a more measured response. The second ending of *Troilus* appears to be such an overreaction, motivated by a sense of the insufficiency of the first ending to the demands of the work. As a result, it is an overconclusion that not only overwhelms the moral implications of the first ending but undercuts as well our sense of the poem's genre. I do not believe that the second ending may be read merely as an aspect of what C. S. Lewis has called Chaucer's practice of "medievalizing" Boccaccio's Renaissance work by opening out his story didactically to the topic of salvation, the ultimate Christian purpose of all literature. Rather, the ending denies the magnificent tragic meaning about the ultimate pain of the human condition—a central concern of all tragedy—whose conclusions were clear from the poem's first lines. With this second ending, Chaucer is implying the critical notion, often held since his time, that tragedy cannot truly exist in a Christian universe. The shift in perspective away from a concern with earth and its affairs, which constitutes the second ending of *Troilus*, creates an
inconclusiveness in the poem's form. The overreactive last stanzas of heavy moral rhetoric function as a structural correlative to Chaucer's ironic technique throughout the narrative, working as the narrator's involvement with his materials has been working.

In *Troilus* Chaucer has presented us with a form of fiction in which the content is mediated through a persona with an individuated psychology. Although this kind of persona-mediated fiction is intrinsic to the dream vision form, in *Troilus* it manifests itself differently because of the storial nature of the material to which the narrator commits himself. We can see in the procedure a clear anticipation of Chaucer's procedure in the more complex form of the *Canterbury Tales*, where a narrator will tell a storial narrative completely in the control of his or her own narrative consciousness. There are great differences between the two forms, in part because the narrator of *Troilus* claims to be the author himself at work on a text, whereas the narrators of the *Canterbury Tales* are not. But the devices of composition in *Troilus*, like the proems, work like a frame and a framed matter and control the felt distance between the audience and the text. Chaucer will use this device again and again in his last work. Having developed himself as a character in his earlier poems, Chaucer now in *Troilus* develops his power as a poet who can determine and control a storial narrative through that same fictional consciousness. For this reason, perhaps, *Troilus* has been called the first modern novel, if by novel we mean a fiction determined and controlled by a narrator created separate (though not necessarily different) from the author. The inconclusiveness of such a literary form resides in the narrator's individual psychology combined with his total control of his materials, which make the view of things he represents necessarily partial.

The *Legend of Good Women*, which depends on *Troilus* for its motive, and which Chaucer presumably was writing during the time when he was composing the earlier part of the *Canterbury Tales*, continues to develop the persona of Geffrey in the dream vision part and the narrator Chaucer in the storial part. It is at once a dream vision and a set of storial narratives, using the technique of mediating a narrative through a narrator's psychology. As I shall show in the next chapter, the poem is unsuccessful not only because it is incomplete and desultory but because, curiously, it is Chaucer's only major work whose form is not inconclusive.