# *Turnynge over the leef*: Chaucer and the English Novel

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Chaucer has long been described and fantasized as the father of English poetry, a rather unfair observation that tends to disregard centuries of poetical production on the British Isles. Yet, this notion illustrates our perception of Chaucer's importance in English literature and our need to attribute him a title of some sort. After all, he did change the face of English poetry, invented a verse form that would be used by countless other poets (from King James I of Scotland to W.B. Yeats), and laid the foundations of the English novel. What I offer to do today is to focus on the latter and explain how the polyphonic nature of his poetry, combined with a change of conception of literature as a written medium, turned Chaucer into the father of the English polyphonic prose and, by extension, of the English novel.

That being said, can we really consider Chaucer as an early novelist, like Daniel Defoe or John Bunyan? If we follow the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of the novel as a 'fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism', the answer is: not really. But that is a reductive definition which fails to take into account the role of ancient Rome and Greek narratives and chivalric romance into the evolution of the genre. As E.R. Curtius once remarked, '[w]e have modernized the railroads, but not our system of transmitting tradition[1]'; in other words, the specificities of the 'modern' novel are but the inheritors of a more ancient literature. Mikhail Bakhtin thus finds embryonic traces of the novel in the Antiquity in various genres, such as satires (those of Horace for instance), biographies, autobiographies (*The Apology of Socrates…*), diatribes, epistolary productions (*Letters to Atticus…*) and so on. We can see in all these the 'embryos of a true romantic orchestration of meaning through plurilingualism[2]'. Medieval literature and its narrative or lyrical variants represent a first phase of development. The novel then managed to integrate those elements and allowed them to develop at each stage of evolution of European literature. Bakhtin explains that this particular genre lives in the present, but 'it always REMEMBERS its past, its principle. The genre is, in the literary evolution process, vector of literary memory. And that is precisely what makes it capable of ensuring the UNITY and CONTINUITY of this evolution[3]'

Now, if we go back to the *OED*'s definition, we can notice the word "realism", which quite frankly poses more problems than it solves, especially in Chaucer's case. One of the turning

points of Chaucerian criticism happened at the end of the XVIIth century with the publication of John Dryden's *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700). In its preface, Dryden draws a parallel between Chaucer and Boccaccio, noticing a similar literary style, a common ambition, and describes them both as authors of 'novels[4]'. But Dryden did not mean by novel a 'fictitious prose narrative of book length' but rather had in mind the French word 'nouvelle', that is to say a short story. However, as D.S. Brewer remarked, 'it was a prophetic use of the word[5]' for Dryden was particularly interested in the realism of Chaucer's descriptions in the 'General Prologue' of *The Canterbury Tales*. Dryden somehow managed to create a link between the past and future of Chaucerian criticism:

> The eighteenth century saw the rise of the novel proper, with its claim to represent life with realism, its opportunities for vicarious experience, its unqualified demand for sympathy with people whom the novelist pretends are more or less ordinary[6].

For Dryden, reading the 'General Prologue' made him feel like he was facing his ancestors: 'here is God's plenty', he writes. 'We have our fore-fathers and great-grandames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days.' [7] That encouraged a few generations of critics to look at the realism of Chaucer's descriptions, but Chaucerian realism is rather different from what we expect today from a realist novel. According to M.W. Bloomfield, realism 'used to refer to a work which reproduces […] the details of the external reality of the subject, and (to a lesser extent) an objective, unbiased presentation of the inner reality of the human characters who people the story[8]'. The way we perceive realism, however, tends to change with time. The Aristotelian definition of mimesis is, for instance, similar to Bloomfield's, while giving to the notion a broader meaning. For Aristotle, the artist can represent reality the way it is, it seems to be or the way it should be, so as to imitate or sublimate Nature. This mimetic vision would get us closer to a representation of the world as perceived by the artist at a precise moment. The imitative nature of descriptions would thus be more closely associated with verisimilitude than with 'reality'. Classical culture believed for centuries that the idea of reality could in no way contaminate the conjectural nature of verisimilitude. Medieval realism[9], however, differs from the modern or classical Antiquity approach by its tendency to be more than a simple echo of the world. Curtius insisted that description in a medieval work of fiction is subject to no specific form of realism[10] – and most authors had indeed no trouble in describing lions or olive trees in Scandinavian countries – but rather on a discursive and unreferential verisimilitude. As Roland Barthes explains in "The Effect of

Reality", the only thing that mattered was the 'constraint of the descriptive genre' since it was 'the generic rules of discourse which lay down the law[11]'. Its true purpose was more often to maintain the suspension of disbelief rather than to create a credible representation of the world: the use of a witness narrator or of a dream vision is a way to anchor fiction in verisimilitude. But the bourgeois tradition that developed at the time includes exaggerations and caricatures that turned this verisimilitude into a form of realism that could easily be seen as an imitation of life itself. Chaucer is no Émile Zola, of course, and the realism used in the *Canterbury Tales* could in no way be mistaken with the naturalism developed in the Rougon-Macquart series. Indeed, none of the Tales presented by Chaucer could be thought of as a realistic narrative taken independently from the rest of the work. Deprived of their narrative frame, these fabliaux, fables, romances, and hagiographies can no longer communicate with each other and collapse, reduced to mere literary experiments. For it is the richness of the world Chaucer invites us in that guarantees the authenticity of his narrative: after having played with dream visions and the pseudo-historical mode of representation, the poet takes here a closer look at the social world he knows so well. He commits himself to accompany us in this pilgrimage and in becoming our referent on the way reinforces the illusion of reality. But more importantly, this introductory segment gives us an idea, not so much of the pilgrims' psychology but of their functions. It allows Chaucer to preserve the balance of his short narratives and gives him the opportunity to make his characters interact without having to present or describe them again Polyphony is, as a result, greatly facilitated by an apparently natural cacophony, which is in fact masterfully orchestrated by the poet along the road to Canterbury.

This road turns out to be the backbone of his embryonic English novel. Chaucer has indeed shown, in his previous works, his will to describe a multifarious and moving world, freed from the verticality and rigidity of a certain vision of literature. The chronotope of the road is, as a result, Chaucer's most suitable tool to bring his poem narrative stability while expanding at the same time the horizontality and polyphony of his narration. As Bakhtin points out, it is on the road that 'people usually separated by social hierarchy or distance can meet each other and create all sorts of contrasts; there, a variety of fates can collide or mingle.[12]' Chaucer's stylistic variation and multiplication of vocalities in the *Canterbury Tales* may thus well be seen, as Paul Strohm noticed, as a response to factionalism within his social experience, which turns the aesthetic project of his last work into a social one:

Viewed in relation to this challenge, Chaucer's *aesthetic* enterprise of defining a literary space that permits free interaction of different forms and styles may be placed in reciprocal relation with the *social* enterprise of defining a public space hospitable to different social classes with diverse social impulses[13].

The chronotope of the road is thus a fundamental element in the development of the novel as a genre: whether one refers to the novel of manners or to the travel literature from the Antiquity to picaresque, romantic, historical or chivalric novels, all make use of this particular chronotope. The road might sometimes be metaphorized, but it always remains the dynamic principle of the novel, whether its author is called Cervantes, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Walter Scott or Alexander Pushkin. It might be dominated by fortune and chance, yet it never crosses the borders of the hero's country. Bakhtin makes clear that the exoticism of this chronotope is social, in a clear opposition with travel narratives[14]. The hero does not cover long distances in exotic faraway lands but stays in his homeland and there discovers, thanks to his many meetings, the various socio-historical aspects of his country.

This vision of the world was already present in *Troilus and Criseyde* and is accordingly developed with a greater intensity during this pilgrimage, whose purpose is not any longer to answer Dante's poetical vision but to offer a literary and philosophical alternative to the *Commedia*. The *Canterbury Tales* follow the structure of Dante's journey "[n]el mezzo del cammin di nostra vita[15]" (*Inf.* I, L. 1) in order to give the pilgrimage a similar philosophical value. In both cases, readers are invited to follow a narrator during a journey whose destination switches from a fixed geographical place to a transfiguration of Canterbury into a "Jerusalem celestial" ("The Parson's Prologue", l. 51). Dante's verses remain, however, highly eschatological; he is the poet of beatitude while Chaucer chooses to stay on earth among his fellow human beings. The souls Dante encounters during his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven no longer possess the capacity to change and can only endure their punishment or enjoy their rewards. In Chaucer's case, however, one is faced with a resistance to closure and a refusal of monologism and of the conventions and codes that keep pushing him further away from the absolute of a theological vision. His pilgrims are part of a completely different dynamic and belong to a temporality allowing even to the most despicable of them to repent, should he or she feel the need to. Chaucer does not condemn, nor does he judge his characters, but becomes one of them so as to expose and underline the true plurality of the world and of literature. As Taylor remarks, "[w]hereas Dante had written

a divine comedy, Chaucer writes an earthly comedy about people still in the process of becoming" (Taylor, 1989, 2-3).

In other words, whereas Chaucer had once merely produced plurivocality thanks to dialogism and carnivalesque laughter, he is now able to develop and enhance this effect by a truly extradiegetic dialogue. The first lines of the 'General Prologue' thus establish a connection with the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*: Chaucer's description of the death of his eponymous hero and his travel to the hereafter provoked a movement from the particular to the infinite, but in the opening of the *Tales*, the poet reverses the situation and leads his readers through an inverted movement taking us from a dreamlike description of spring to the inside of the Tabard, with the description of its clients and future pilgrims.

Presenting all of the tales and the many interruptions, contradictions, and answers that constitute the extradiegetic dialogue of the *Canterbury Tales* would be rather long. I will thus only underline a few elements here, especially revealing of Chaucer's undertaking.

After the presentation of the different clients of the Tabard in the 'General Prologue', Harry Bailly proposes to accompany the pilgrims to Canterbury and suggests that each member of the group should tell two tales on the way. Bailly adds that the icing on the cake would be that the pilgrim having told the best tale would be invited to dinner by the other participants on their way back from Canterbury. The promise of a free meal and the Host's threat that whoever refuses to join in the game would have to pay for the travel expenses of the whole group rather unsurprisingly motivates the narrator's companions. Chance thus gives the Knight the occasion to start the game. 'The Knight's Tale' is one of the great classics of the Chaucerian canon and is far from being the poet's first attempt to adapt the matter of Thebes. The fact that Chaucer starts the *Canterbury Tales* with a chivalric romance, a genre that dominated European literature for nearly five hundred years, is not anecdotal. Unlike the realist novel from the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, the chivalric romance does not pretend to tell us an original story; on the contrary, the author joins in a long tradition and gives us a story based on older tales. The codes of the chivalric romance do not impose to the storyteller the need to create 'realistic' (in the modern sense of the word) situations or characters, since the purpose of the work is to produce feelings matching the theme of the narrative. As Larry D. Benson notes, '[t]here is little attempt at creating lifelike characters: the invariably noble heroes and heroines are more types than individuals, and their actions, manners, emotions, and speech represent an ideal of aristocratic conduct[16]'. By beginning the *Canterbury Tales* with a chivalric romance, Chaucer indicates by a subtle *mise en abyme* that his pilgrims

belong to the same diegetic plane of existence than Palamon, Arcite or Theseus, but he also gives us the vision of an aristocratic world that will be used to trigger the extradiegetic dialogue. For once the Knight has finished his tale, his companions expect another noble figure to follow up with a story. Harry Bailly thus invites the Monk to compete with this first tale, but he is rather quickly interrupted by the Miller who is so drunk he can barely stand on his horse (I, L. 3120-3121). And it is precisely at this stage that the ambiguity and particularity of Chaucer's narrative device are revealed. 'The Knight's Tale' and its vision of a chivalric world endowed with aristocratic values could lead us to think that Chaucer intended to keep up this tone throughout the *Tales*. But the Miller's interruption is evidence to the contrary. Harry Bailly himself, leader of the group and figure of authority, tries in vain to restore order (I, L. 3129-3130) before throwing in the towel and just leaving the Miller say whatever he wants to say. The Miller therefore decides to answer the Knight's tale with a story designed as an attack against the Reeve, who does not ease the tensions by interrupting the Miller with a rather courteous "[s]tynt thy clappe!" (I, L. 3144). With this cacophony, Chaucer gives us the feeling that we are, if not in an actual tavern, at least on the market place. The Chaucer pilgrim even refuses to be considered as responsible for the vulgarity of the Miller, Reeve or of the other pilgrims (I, L. 3181) but has to move on with the next tale.

The elements composing 'The Miller's Tale' are typical of the fabliau. Though Chaucer draws here from several fabliaux, he considerably broadens the scale of 'The Miller's Tale' by duplicating its plot. Usually, a fabliau is indeed constituted of a guiding theme around which the different characters interact. But in this particular case, Chaucer reinforces the narrative with a secondary plot and crosses the Flood story with the humiliated lover substory during the conclusion, which both provokes an increased laughter and follows the theme of 'The Knight's Tale'. Although the contrast between those first two tales is extreme, it produces a unique literary experience. By allowing the Miller (fabliau) to answer the Knight (romance) in that way, Chaucer uses the extradiegetic dialogue as a way to reveal the potential of a poetical art that may, on the one hand, serve a specific cause and, on the other, just be used to entertain an audience. The art developed in 'The Miller's Tale' is in no way a corruption of what is offered in 'The Knight's Tale'. On the contrary, each narrative presents a certain vision of the world. The many vagaries of a fabliau (deception, farce, beatings...) are never the result of mere chance but answer to a form of justice specific to the genre. It would never come to the mind of a romance author to punish old age, sluggishness or a character's will not be cheated on by his wife because the internal logic of the fabliau reverses society's expectations and values. This reversal is one of the main principles of grotesque realism and

puts carnivalesque culture at the heart of the fabliau. The most respected members of society (hard workers, prosperous merchants, and chaste women) thus become the victims of lecherous friars and penniless clerks, which turns the fabliau into

> a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of the citizenry, and the idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behavior[17].

Because of its tendency to parody courtly attitudes, 'The Millier's Tale' accordingly becomes an almost perfect answer to 'The Knight's Tale'. Indeed the poet opposes to the balance and dignity of 'The Knight's Tale', a narrative whose lyricism systematically hides a rather ambiguous vision of love. The fabliau thus allows Chaucer to reveal the animalistic impulses that courtly conventions keep at a distance in 'The Knight's Tale'. The association of these two tales gives the poet the opportunity to show us that poetical truth can be found both in the idealism and nobility of the Knight and in the Miller's depravity. He also illustrates that human nature is actually made of needs and appetites whose legitimacy is not less important than chivalric sentimentalism. In other words, Chaucer plays with contrasts and gives us a glimpse of what we should expect of his *Canterbury Tales,* while underlining the complexity and richness of human nature.

Chaucer is also surprisingly capable of sustaining this extradiegetic dialogue while continuing to compose within the limits of the same literary genre. As a result, even though the adventures of 'The Reeve's Tale' do seem similar to those of 'The Miller's Tale', they are also revealing of the development of a unique poetic, that is completely different from the one Chaucer used in his second tale. Chaucer articulates his fabliau around a less elaborate storyline that gives free rein to the characters' instincts. Nicholas had developed a complicated scheme in order to sleep with Alison but John and Alayn do not think for a minute and just jump on their victims. (I, L. 4328-4231) The poet equally switches to a much more popular register that takes us away from the parody and puns of 'The Miller's Tale'. Chaucer's clerks talk, to this end, in a dialect from the North of England. But he does not merely imitate caricatural accents or comical grammatical forms, on the contrary, he reproduces with great care and precision a different variety of English, which shows that Chaucer thought and wrote as a XIXth and XXth century linguist[18]. Indeed, he gives them, for example, a vocabulary that would have been completely foreign to the standard English

spoken in London ("heythen", L. 4033; "ille", L. 4045; "ymel", L. 4171…), which reinforces the contrast between the clerks and the miller. Such a dialectical mimicry is truly unique in Middle English literature and shows the linguistic genius of a poet capable of developing the comedy and polyphony of his narrative by playing with the varieties of English known to his readers and audience. In other words, "[f]or this one tale, and to define its special poetry, Chaucer created a remarkable and sophisticated literary device he was never to use again[19]". And he also reminds us by this use of contrast that the tale told by the Miller is just as idealized as the Knight's since the world is generally peopled by thieving millers and that sex is often synonymous with power and domination.

The atmosphere of the *Canterbury Tales* and the peculiarity of this extradiegetic dialogue are therefore established as soon as the first Fragment of the poem and there is something fundamentally iconoclast in the very structure of the *Tales*. 'Break the images, the forms! Spontaneous life surges in', writes D.S. Brewer[20]. But breaking the codes and staging this liberation requires a rhetorical discipline without which this cacophony, here masterfully orchestrated, would be sheer chaos. The dialogism of his *magnum opus* supports its narrative frame and gives the poet the opportunity to conceive a dialogue between literary genres. He superimposes, to this end, narrative voices: what could be said about this narrator who is naive, shy, yet sociable but dominated by Harry Bailly? Should we ignore one of these voices, deconstruct the Chaucerian poetical *persona* so as to find the very essence of the poet? Of, course not! On the contrary, all these voices resonate at the same time in perfect harmony. The Chaucer pilgrim possesses different sides, as shown by his two tales. Both 'Thopas' and 'Melibee' are the perfect representation of what the poet is doing in the *Canterbury Tales*:

> the totality of voices, all the layers of meaning together, is what gives the tang. Chaucer's poetry is in some ways like medieval polyphony – music in which a number of different voices are singing the same words to different melodic lines. Except that Chaucer's poetic line, until the mind is alerted, may seem deceptively simple, and the careless reader may notice only one of the voices[21].

Chaucer's style is, in other words, nothing if not polyphonic. I think we have seen that today. The European romantic prose evolves from a process of free and transformative translation of various works, and Chaucer has played an undeniable part in that process. He contributed to the evolution of the genre in English, and showed that what Bakhtin considered

as the modern polyphonic novel is just a new iteration of an old literary tradition. Chaucer's verses have nothing to envy to Dostoyevsky's prose.

Can we, then, finally consider Chaucer as an early novelist? The definition of the *OED* insists that to do so, we need to consider whether Chaucer wrote narratives of 'book length' or not. He most certainly did so, but what is of particular interest here is the word 'book'. Forget about realism, and prose! If you ask anyone what a novel is, the answer will probably be: a book. We might thus put the question differently: did Chaucer write books? Chaucer himself might have answered that question differently before and after the 1380s. In his early formative years, he thought of himself as a 'compilator' and translator, not as an *auctor*. His poetry was read aloud to a group of happy few and he had no desire to see his manuscripts circulate in any way. And yet, he somehow started to change his mind on the subject with *Troilus and Criseyde*, a work he was obviously very proud of and which he crowns not with Apollo's laurels but with the title of 'litel bok'(V. v. 1786). As anecdotic as it seems, this shows a true change of perception of literature, no longer read aloud in public, but enjoyed by generations of readers. It turns his poetry from a purely orally transmitted work to a written object, a book. Thinking about his work as book, Chaucer does not hesitate to think about us, his future readers, and even encourages us to turn the leaf and chose another tale (I. l. 3177), if we want to avoid the Miller's vulgarity. Although he died before he was able to sort the Fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* into a proper book, it was instantly become the "Book of the Tales of Canterbury" by its first scribes and editors. As Paul Strohm remarked, 'Its earliest manuscripts announce themselves as books, have the appearance of finished books, and modern editions, fortified with editorially added headnotes, endnotes, and titles, strike readers that way today[22]'.

In a way, Chaucer's invitation to turn over the page was more important than the poet could have expected, for it marked the birth of the English novel. He invited us, throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, to look at the different aspects of medieval literature and to listen to its contradictory voices. In doing so, he seemed to have reached an artistic impasse for he pushed the limits of his and the epoch's art to its limits. The incompleteness of the *Tales* have often been attributed to the poet's death, although his concluding 'Retractions' do give the sense that he had no intention to give any more closure. Chaucer might have passed away suddenly, but one wonders what he could have added to the genre after the *Tales*. Having planted the seeds of the English novel, he had nothing left to do but let them germinate and, laying in the

shade of the Poet's Corner's monuments, wait for his successors, from Charles Dickens to Henry James to turn the page once more and write another tale.

[1] Curtius, 1953/1990, 16.

[2] Bakhtine, 1978, 187

[3] Bakhtine, 1970, 124-125.

[4] Dryden, 1909-1914

[5] Brewer 1966b, 257

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Dryden, John. "Preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern." *The Harvard Classics: Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*. Ed. Charles William Eliot. Vol. 39. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909/2001, 7.

[8] Bloomfield, M.W. "Chaucerian Realism." *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Ed. Piero Boitani & Jill Mann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986/1988, 179.

[9] This is not a reference to the philosophical doctrine made popular by Saint Thomas Aquinas's writings but to a literary form of realism.

[10] See Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Chapter X.

[11] Barthes Roland, "L'effet de réel". In: *Communications*, 11, 1968, p. 86.

[12] Bakhtin, M.M. *Esthétique et théorie du roman*. Trans. Daria Olivier. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1978, 384-385.

[13] Strohm, Paul. *Social Chaucer*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989/1994, 164.

[14] The road in travel narratives has a similar function but includes the notion of distance, which becomes a chronotope parallel to the road, with its own specificities.

[15] "In the middle of the journey of our life"

[16] Chaucer *et al.*, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 1987, 7.

[17] Chaucer *et al.*, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 1987, 8.

[18] See Tolkien, J.R.R. "Chaucer as a Philologist: The Reeve's Tale." *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1934, 1-70. And Fruoco, Jonathan. "Chaucer as a Sociolinguist: Understanding the Role of Language in Chaucer's Internationalism". *Critical Insights: Geoffrey Chaucer.* Ed. James M. Dean. Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2017, 216-230.

[19] Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style,* 1986, 99.

[20] Brewer, D.S. *An Introduction to Chaucer*. London, New York: Longman Group, 1984, 170.

[21] *Ibid.*, 171.

[22] Strohm, Paul, *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury*, New York, Viking Adult, 2014, 242.