

Passion and Precision



Psalter page c. 1470 (private collection)

Passion and Precision

*Collected Essays on English
Poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer
to Geoffrey Hill*

By

A. V. C. Schmidt

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In memory of Dan Lewis
best of teachers, best of friends

Where passion and precision have been one

The finished poem [i]s an impressive thing in itself but somehow more impressive because of a threshold of difficulties now overcome.

—Seamus Heaney

straight to the word
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
At the exactest point at which it is itself...

—Wallace Stevens

The great poem moves us to assent as much by the integrity of its final imperfection as by the amazing grace of its detailed perfection.

—Geoffrey Hill

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c. 'T. S. Eliot and William Cowper: A New *Waste Land* Source,' *NQ* 29 (1982) 347.

- d. 'Whirling World, Dancing Words: Further Echoes of Sir John Davies in T. S. Eliot,' *NQ* 54 (2007) 164-167.
- e. 'T. S. Eliot, Bernard Berenson and the Theory of Impersonality in Art,' *NQ* 58 (2011) 112-17.

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- V. '“Latent Content” and “The Testimony in the Text”: Symbolic Meaning in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *RES* 38 (1987) 145-68.
- XIX. '“Darkness Echoing”: Reflections on the Return of Mythopoeia in Some Recent Poems of Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney,' *RES* 36 (1985) 199-225.

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- XI. 'Classical Studies at Balliol in the 1860s: the Undergraduate Essays of Gerard Manley Hopkins', in *Balliol Studies*, ed. J. Prest (1982) 159-84.
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VI. ‘The Poet of *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*’ in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. C. Saunders (Oxford, 2010) 369-84.

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XX. ‘“The self which, as it could, loved them”’: some recent poems of remembering by Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney,’ in *Modernism and Postmodernism*, ed. M. Gelashvili (Tbilisi, 2012) 110-17.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|--|
| BL | British Library |
| CA | Gower's <i>Confessio Amantis</i> |
| ChR | <i>Chaucer Review</i> |
| CT | Chaucer's <i>Canterbury Tales</i> |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library |
| EC | <i>Essays in Criticism</i> |
| EETS | <i>Early English Text Society</i> |
| EHT | <i>Earthly Honest Things</i> (Schmidt) |
| ELH | <i>English Literary History</i> |
| e.s | extra series (EETS) |
| JEGP | <i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i> |
| MÆ | <i>Medium Ævum</i> |
| MED | <i>Middle English Dictionary</i> |
| MLN | <i>Modern Language Notes</i> |
| MP | <i>Modern Philology</i> |
| NM | <i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i> |
| NQ | <i>Notes and Queries</i> |
| OED | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> |
| o.s. | ordinary series (EETS) |
| PL | <i>Patrologia Latina</i> |
| PP | Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> |
| PQ | <i>Philological Quarterly</i> |
| P-T | <i>Piers Plowman Parallel-Text</i> (ed. Schmidt, 2 vols, 2011) |
| RES | <i>Review of English Studies</i> |
| SAC | <i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i> |
| SGGK | <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> |
| SP | <i>Studies in Philology</i> |
| ST | <i>Summa Theologiae of St Thomas Aquinas</i> |
| STS | Scottish Text Society |
| s.s. | special series (EETS) |
| TLS | <i>Times Literary Supplement</i> |
| YLS | <i>Yearbook of Langland Studies</i> |

FOREWORD

The essays collected in this volume, which forms a companion to *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on 'Piers Plowman'* (CSP, 2012), were written between 1968 and 2014. About a third of *Passion and Precision* consists of previously unpublished studies of Chaucer, the *Pearl*-poet, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Jones and Auden. Of these, Chapters IV and XVI supplement, and Chapter X builds upon, other pieces included in this volume (chapters III, XIII and IX). Some pioneering pieces such as Chapters XII and XIV, which appeared in relatively inaccessible journals, will benefit from being presented here in the context of other related studies of T. S. Eliot. The previously published essays have all been revised, in some cases extensively (e.g. Chapters I and XIX). As in my Langland volume, I have endeavoured to integrate the separate chapters with the help of cross-references and a lexical index, as well as the usual index of authors and works.

Most of these studies are intended for non-specialist readers with a serious interest in the art of poetry as it was practised in the two periods of English literature that have been my lifelong interest, the second half of the fourteenth century (the Age of Chaucer) and the first half of the twentieth (the Age of Eliot). The major emphasis in Part I is on longer texts, but Part II deals mainly with shorter 'lyrical' poems (Shelley, Hopkins, Yeats, Hill, Heaney). Although there is a special focus on style, structure, texture and verse-technique, broader themes and ideas are also handled in Chapters II and VIII (love), IV (chivalry), VII (sexuality), XI and XVIII (religion), XII and XIII (literary language), XVI (culture), I and XIX (myth). Three review-articles (in adapted form) are included because they complement and add to the main arguments of the chapters to which they are appended (II, XI and XV on, respectively, Chaucer, Hopkins and Eliot). In Part I equal space has been accorded to Chaucer and his great anonymous contemporary, the *Pearl*-Poet, and Chapter IV deals with both poets. In Part II Eliot is the subject of nearly a dozen pieces long and short, as well as being frequently referred to elsewhere.

I am grateful to the Oxford University English Faculty for the opportunity to give its first lectures in 1971 for the newly introduced Eliot and Yeats special paper, which encouraged me to think seriously about two poets I have admired since my schooldays. I gained much over the

course of some forty years from the enthusiastic audiences who took part in classes and seminars on many aspects of Eliot's poetry and criticism. I owe particular thanks to my Balliol College verse-reading group Sprung Rhythm, whose dedicated preparation and sensitive performances helped me to appreciate first Eliot and then Hopkins in rewarding new ways.

In preparing this collection I am deeply obliged to Judith Schmidt for reading Chapters X, XI and XVIII, and for invaluable help in putting the printed material into an electronic form suitable for me to work on. I am indebted to Nicolas Jacobs for encouraging me to explore the work of that strange but richly rewarding writer David Jones, and for commenting helpfully on Chapter XVIII. I am also grateful for Barry Windeatt's shrewd observations on Chapter II, while remaining impenitent about Troilus's Predestination Soliloquy. And I apologise to Richard Stanton, who urged me to put Langland aside and write on Yeats's poetry, for taking such a long time to do so.

My earliest debt is to the dedicatee of this book, the English teacher I was fortunate enough to have at St Aloysius' College, Highgate. Dan Lewis inspired me to discover for myself how passion and precision are never separated in the greatest poetry. I benefited immeasurably from his wisdom, support and friendship during many conversations in and out of the classroom, about literature, criticism and much else besides. I have tried to write essays that he might have enjoyed reading.

I have cited the medieval works most frequently discussed in the main text from two widely available standard editions that print Middle English vocalic *v* as *u*, thorn as *th* and yogh as *gh* / *y* / *z* as appropriate, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson (1988) and *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (2nd edn. revised and corrected, 2011). But for the *Pearl*-poet I have used *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. M. Andrew & R. Waldron, rev. edn. Exeter, 1987, which retains the original spelling, as do all other medieval texts cited, including (for the other versions of Langland's poem) my *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions* (2nd edn., 2011). Dante's *Divine Comedy* I cite from the 3-vol. text and translation by John Sinclair (1975-9); the English Bible from the *Douay-Rheims Version* (1941); and the Latin Vulgate Bible from *Biblia Sacra* ed. by Colunga & Turrado (1965). For all other quoted passages in Latin and French the translations provided are my own unless otherwise stated.

NEWLAND MILL, WITNEY, OXON
 IN FESTO OMNIUM SANCTORUM MMXIV

PART ONE

MEDIEVAL: CHAUCER AND THE *GAWAIN*-POET

*Houen vpon þis auter watz aþel vessel
Dat wyth so curious a crafte coruen watz wyly*

CHAPTER I

STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE AND MYTH IN CHAUCER'S *THE FORMER AGE*

*What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present*
—T. S. Eliot

I

Chaucer's 'The Former Age' is a fascinating document for the history of ideas. Yet what first strikes the reader of this long 'Boethian Ballade' is not its argument but the passion and precision of the writing. The English poem's sonority and strength owe much to Chaucer's long acquaintance with French and Italian verse, with Machaut, Deschamps and Granson, and with Dante. They owe relatively little to the two Latin writers who were his main sources, or to the *Roman de la Rose* (of which ll. 8353-8402 were an important secondary source). Ovid's hexameters are smooth and flowing, while the anapaestic dimeters of Boethius possess an almost epigrammatic crispness. But the poem's sonority arises from Chaucer's linguistic resourcefulness and metrical mastery, and its strength from the architecture of the stanza-form that he employed.

Chaucer had used the octave ballade stanza (rhyming *ababbcbc*) as early as his 'ABC', a translation of the 'Prière de Notre Dame,' composed in stanzas of twelve decasyllabic lines, that appears in Guillaume de Deguillville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine* (1331-55).¹ Another octave stanza that Chaucer knew was the triple-rhymed *ottava rima* of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Rhyming *abababcc*, its concluding couplet gives the form a tendency to sententiousness that it shares to some extent with the seven-line rime royal into which Chaucer translated it (the *ababbcc* stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde* is 'ottava rima minus the third a-rhyme,' producing two couplets instead of one at the end). Chaucer's choice for 'The Former Age' of the octave ballade form rather than the rime royal he

used for 'Truth', 'Gentilesse' and 'Lak of Stedefastnesse' reinforces the poem's moral weightiness and passionate feeling.

Chaucer's stanza, which I shall call by the name King James VI gave it, ballade royal,² resembles an *extended* rime royal, with a b-rhymed line inserted between the c-rhymed lines of that stanza's concluding couplet. In its arch-like structure the 'keystone' is the central *bb* couplet, which recalls the rime royal's b-rhymed couplet at lines four and five. The 'keystone' couplet is flanked by two 3-line groups linked to it and to each other by the shared b-rhyme (*ababbcbc*) so that within each flanking group the b-rhyme's central position answers to the central position of the *bb* couplet in the whole stanza. The result is a harmony and balance suggestive of a musical chord on the fourth and sixth (e.g. C-F-A). This stanza also offers variety and freedom, for since the 'flanking' groups *aba* / *cbc* share only the central b-rhyme, their *a~a* / *c~c* pattern provides true symmetry, but of the non-mirroring type. An arrangement that begins and ends the stanza with a different rhyme thus allows a measure of independence to each of the three rhyme-groups that form the framework.

To meet the demands of ballade royal the syntax of 'The Former Age' is dexterously moulded and adapted. Thus stanza two varies the 'not yet' formula that highlights its pattern of negations³ by combining the repetition of *yit* with reversed word-order to heighten the tone and avoid monotony (though Chaucer is happy enough to use *repetitio* without any word-order variation in the next stanza):

Yit nas the ground ...
 No man yit knew ...
 No man the fyr.....yit fond...
 No man yit....spyces grond.⁴

Stanza three, which begins each line with the negative particle (*No, ne*) builds up an even more emphatic rhetorical pattern as the key *variatio* 'knew' has only one *varians* 'wiste':

No mader, welde, or wood no litestere
 Ne knew; . . .
 No flesh ne wiste offence . . .
 No coyn ne knew man . . .
 No trompes for the werres folk ne knewe.....

In stanza four, question and exclamation, closely following the Boethian original (see Appendix I), rise to a powerful climax at the end:

Allas! than sprong up al the cursednesse
Of coveytyse, that first our sorwe broghte!

In Chaucer's mature verse, rhetorical devices like *repetitio* are used to serve meaning and not for mere decorative enrichment. So stanza two's repeated 'yet' ominously suggests that the happiness of the Golden Age was fated to pass. And in a similar way, stanza three's thrice-repeated 'know' hints at the disasters that 'knowing how' to manipulate nature will bring upon mankind. In the 'former age' evoked, 'not knowing evil' is equated with 'not possessing knowledge' from which evil may spring – for instance, knowledge of how to make fire, wine and weapons. In the eighth and last stanza, the double 'alas' (taking up the 'Heu' of Boethius's original and the 'alas' of line 31 earlier) testifies to the poet's passionate regret for the lost content of the *prior aetas*: 'Allas, allas! now may men wepe and crye!' That 'blisful' time, the transience of which is underlined by the eighth successive appearance of 'Yit' at l. 56, is sharply contrasted both with the 'cursed tyme' (27) that ended it and with 'our dayes', and their catalogue of climactic evils:

. . . covetyse,
Doublenesse, and tresoun, and envye,
Poyson, manslawhtre, and mordre in sondry wyse.

Almost without exception, Chaucer's use of *amplificatio* serves to elaborate the conditions of the *stato felice* (as Dante calls it in *Purgatorio*, xxviii, 140) under a variety of moral, social and political aspects.

The same controlled art revealed in the handling of syntax appears in the poem's rhythmic movement and the texture of its rhymes and alliteration.⁵ The rhythm faithfully reflects the curve of emotion in the agitated fourth stanza, which rises to the *exclamatio* of ll. 31-2, with its run-over alliteration on /k/:

Allas! than sprong up al the cursednesse
Of coveytyse, that first our sorwe broghte!

In stanza eight the actual climax occurs at mid-point (l. 60), with the *repetitio* of doubled 'Allas, allas!' exactly thirty lines later⁶ being followed by three further lines that close the poem on a note of protesting despair without passive resignation.

In the choice of rhymes, the ratio of feminine to masculine (8:1) needs no special remark,⁷ though the foregrounded masculine rhymes in stanza two (3:2) contribute to its abrupt, staccato effect. The resonant internal rhyme of l. 9, which begins this stanza, with its combination of sonority

and strength, effectively mimics the earth flinching beneath an attack: 'Yit nas the *ground* nat *wounded* with the plough.' Chaucer's rhyme-words are nearly always semantically important, the main exceptions being in stanza five, where thinness of thought is locally reflected in the inert rhyme-phrase 'as seith *Diogenes*.' In stanza four, too, *seye*, occurring at l. 27 as part of a common tag, is plainly less strong than, for example, *blewe* (21), which is a 'full' and not merely a 'form' word like *therinne* (37), and imparts an almost surrealistic vividness to its line: 'No ship yit karf the wawes grene and blewe.' In l. 6, the Kentish form *melle* 'mill' (apparently determined by *welle* in l. 8, the second *c*-rhyme) shows Chaucer benefiting from the flexibility of dialectal word-choice that helped him cope with the 'skarsete' of 'rym in English' (*Complaint of Venus* 80) revealed by his study of French and Italian poetry.

Alliteration is a feature of all Chaucer's poetry, and here as in many of his lyrics it serves to toughen the poem's textural 'weave'.⁸ In the second stanza's 'No man the fyr out of the flint yit fond' (13) three heavily stressed voiceless fricatives graphically 'enact' the meaning. More commonly, the alliteration trails in a loose 'musical' pattern through a stanza, as on /g/ in stanza two (*ground*, *gnodded*, *grobbed*, *grond*, *galantine*); on /p/ in stanza one (*Paisible*, *payed*, *forpampred*, *pounage*) and on /f/ in stanza three (*flees*, *former*, *flesh*, *offence*, *fals*, *fette*). But stanza three also shows how alliteration, like rhyme (and here in combination with a form of it), reinforces meaning. In l. 22 Chaucer adroitly links *ware* (merchandise) with the pararhyming *werres* (wars) in line 23, which in turn alliteratively attracts *walles* (24) into its semantic field, implying defensive fortifications rather than innocuous civilian architecture. These examples illustrate how the poem's density of texture 'dramatises concentration brought to the point of consummation' (Heaney, Epigraph).

The vocabulary of 'The Former Age' contains two words that may be coinages, 'forpampred' and 'lambish'. Others occur only once in Chaucer, the rare 'pounage' and 'gnodde' and the more familiar 'former' 'outlandish,' 'unforged' and 'bleched'. 'Swety', 'wildness', 'forwes' and '(un)grobbed' are not especially unusual but they are rare in Chaucer, while 'taylage' and 'galles' are found only twice, and the technical terms from dyeing 'mader', 'weld', 'wood' and 'litestere' only here. Altogether, some sixteen words are of unique occurrence in the canon, a high proportion for a piece of sixty-three lines. Such a distinctive lexis imparts a learned and solemn tone to the poem, suggesting that Chaucer had in view for his moral ballades not the court-audience of the long poems but a more restricted readership of like-minded people, such as Strode and

Gower (whose invocation in the epilogue of *Troilus* provides a surprising contrast to that poem's 'inner' audience of *lovers*). There is in fact a decidedly anti-courtly tone to Chaucer's allusions to various features of the aristocracy's way of life: their dainty eating-habits ('No man yit in the mortar spyces grond / To clarre, ne to sause of galantyne,' 15-16), their lavish dwellings ('Yit were no paleis-chaumbres, ne non halles,' 41) and their luxurious bedding ('Ne doun of fetheres, ne no bleched shete,' 45).

As important as Chaucer's lexical adventurousness is his exploitation of the associative possibilities of simple words, verbal juxtaposition, and larger syntactical relationships. He invests *in* with unusual force in line 46: 'no bleched shete / Was kid to hem, but *in* seurtee they slepte'. The preceding lines have established a contrast between the sleeping conditions of the Golden Age people ('In caves' and 'On gras or leves') and that of people today (in their 'paleis-chaumbres' and 'halles'). Civilised man sleeps in sheets, 'bleched' (45) evoking their stiff whiteness by contrast with 'the flees...of his former hewe' (undyed fleece [18]). Golden Age man slept 'in seurtee' (*securitas*, 'freedom from anxiety'), which was more valuable than physical comfort because it enabled him to rest 'softe and swete' even in his rugged equivalents of the private and public sleeping-places of rich households. Like the preposition *in*, the verb *lay* in 'Unkorven and ungrobbed *lay* the vyne' (14) demonstrates the poem's stylistic concision, seeming to imply 'lying at peace, undisturbed' in its natural state. Before being intensively cultivated ('grobben' has the technical sense of 'dig round the roots of something')⁹ the grape was only eaten as fruit, not crushed as a source of fermentable juice. The charged *use* of a normally neutral word like 'lie' may be compared with the subtle manipulation of the charged *word* 'lurk', here in probable reference to gold and silver: 'To grobbe up metal, lurking in derknesse' (29). Since 'lurk' normally has a human referent, we might logically think of thieves out to rob men's gold, like those the Canon's Yeoman describes 'Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde' (*CT* VIII 658). But there is an ironic aptness here to Chaucer's 'logic of the imagination' (in T. S. Eliot's phrase)¹⁰, which sees in the discovery of gold something that 'robs' men of a 'blisful' and 'paisible' state of mind and 'enriches' them only with the 'cursednesse / Of coveytyse' (31-2).

Verbal juxtaposition operates very effectively in l. 29, where two types of misfortune produced by civilisation – greed (*avaryce* 53) and luxury (*delicacye* 56) – are brought together through the recall of 'grobbe' (29) in 'Unkorven and *ungrobbed* lay the vyne' (14). Two actions of digging, to cultivate vines and to mine precious ores, become closely associated through economical resort to a single word 'grobbe'. (In Chaucer's use of

'verbal echo,' *ideas* are 'juxtaposed' even when the words expressing them stand some distance apart). A similarly pregnant effect is achieved through two slightly varied verbal forms, a compound and a phrasal verb. Line 10 describes how in the Golden Age 'corn *up-sprong*, unsowe of mannes hond;' and line 31 uses the same verbal elements in a metaphorical sense ('than *sprong up* al the cursednesse / Of covetytse') to make what could seem a fortuitous echo yield the suggestive idea that wholesome corn grew spontaneously out of the bountifulness of unaided nature, whereas *coveytyse* is of all-too-human origin. A world of dead (or half-living) metaphor connecting sowing, virtue and vice is brought to life, aided by half-conscious reminiscences of the New Testament parables of the Sower and the Seed (Mk 4:3) and of the Wheat and the Cockle (Mt 13:24). But the absence of direct Scriptural allusion from the poem is unsurprising, for the non-Christian Golden Age myth, instead of offering an explanation for the origin of evil as the Bible does, sees it as something that 'grows' from man's heart like the 'unsown' wheat of nature.

Appreciating the special qualities of the poem's style and tone is aided by comparison with its sources, *Metamorphoses*, Book I, 89-106 and *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Book II, Metrum V.¹¹ In a passage as dependent on Boethius as stanza one, Chaucer characteristically substitutes for the static Latin noun-and-participle constructions active verbal forms that create a less reflective and more dramatic tone: *Ledden, helde, yave, eten, dronken* as against *Contenta* and *perdita* (II, m. V, 22, 3). He modifies normal English word-order to meet the stanza's requirements and provide varied phrasing in place of the variable word-arrangement of the inflected source-language. It was possibly awareness of the stylistic challenge posed by his Latin originals that stimulated Chaucer to cultivate a manner so much less relaxed and colloquial than that of his longer poems (though paralleled to some degree in 'Venus' and 'Fortune', which are also written in ballade royal). Nonetheless, Chaucer's penchant for the teasingly elliptical effects common in *Troilus and Criseyde* is instanced in ll. 10-11:

. . . corn up-sprong . . .
The which they gnodded, *and eete nat half ynough*.

Here, concentrating on the contrast between corn rubbed (*gnodded*) to be eaten, husks and all, and corn ground to make bread-flour may conceal from the reader that *and eete nat half ynough* (derived from Ovid's *contentique cibus* 'satisfied with their food' [*Met.* I. 114]) is an ellipsis for 'and ate [what would be thought] not half enough [by our decadent modern standards]'. This example again shows how some of the most

telling effects in Chaucer's mature poetry are found in verbally unexceptional lines and phrases.

II

Chaucer's first treatment of the Golden Age myth was in the *Boece*, his translation of Boethius (c. 1380), and it throws light on his final adaptation of a passage that acquired a special importance for him. Some additions to his source-text, carried out with reference to the French translation of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* by Jean de Meun,¹² at times spell out the sense of each word with an almost Elizabethan insistence. Thus, rendering *hospes* in Metrum ii. 5 by 'Ne no gest ne straunger' (*Boece* l. 15) shows that he knew both meanings of the Latin word (though only the second is relevant here). His rendering 'Ne blood . . . ne hadde nat deyed yit armures' for 'neque . . . / Cruor . . . tinxerat arua' (ll. 17-18) has lost the poetic richness of the original, in which the 'staining' of the fields (*arua*) with blood is associated with the bright fleeces (*lucida uellera*, l. 8) stained by the Tyrian dye that Boethius calls 'poison' (*ueneno*, 9). The explanation of the 'mistranslation' may be that Chaucer's manuscript of the *De Consolatione* contained the easily made scribal error *arma* for *arua*, as do several surviving copies.¹³ But his fussy fullness and occasional inaccuracy are less interesting and significant in this context than the poetic specificity of such phrases as 'the gobbetes or the weyghtes of gold' for *Auri pondera* (where 'gobbetes' fills out rather than merely duplicating or supplying an alternative sense) or, in ll. 23-4, the evocative 'ful hust and ful stille' for *tacebant*. This tendency in the *Boece* is intensified in the poem and helps to generate its distinctive combination of Latin *gravitas* and English concreteness.

Boethius's own source was the passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I, 89-112 already mentioned, as is clear not only from general similarities but from verbal echoes such as lines 14-15, *Nec mercibus undique lectis / Noua litora uiderat hospes* 'Nor had foreigners visited new shores with goods gathered from every quarter', recalling Ovid 96 *nullaque mortales praeter sua litora norant* 'and men no other shores knew than their own'. The Ovid passage was as important as the Boethius to Chaucer, who draws from the classical poet's description of the *Aurea...prima aetas* 'the golden first age' such details as the fortifications, the fear of tyrannical rulers and the idea of earth yielding food spontaneously. He owes his plangent line 'Yit nas the ground nat wounded with the plough' (9) to Ovid's *ipsa quoque immunis rastrisque intacta nec ullis / saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus* 'earth, too, unforced, untouched by any hoe, /

gave everything, unwounded by the plough' (101-2). His reference to the people of the First Age sleeping 'in seurtee' (noticed earlier) echoes Ovid's *mollia securae peragebant otia gentes* 'unworried they passed time in pleasant leisure' (100). The reference to Jupiter at 56 almost certainly comes from Ovid (114), whose account of the world 'under Jove' links the notion of 'rule' with the coming of agriculture in the Silver Age (though violence and greed arrive only with the following Age of Bronze). Finally, Chaucer's main moral point, that people in the First Age were 'true' to each other, is also Ovidian in origin. 'Everich of hem his feith to other kepte' (48) derives from *prima ... aetas ... /... fidem rectumque colebat* 'the first age cultivated faith and right' (89-90). Here Chaucer's 'feith' exactly renders Ovid's *fidem*, for which a synonym was 'trouthe', the keyword in the Boethian ballades 'Gentilesse' (9), 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' (15, 27) and 'Truth'.

It may be safely assumed that Chaucer would not have praised the primitive simplicity of Golden Age life and regretted its loss had he not believed it was productive of moral excellence. Yet in some aspects he characteristically 'medievalises' the Roman poet. On the question of what the people of the Golden Age drank, Ovid in ll. 107-12 (which round out and complete the lines printed in the Appendix of Sources) tells how earth's perpetual Spring bountifully yielded milk, nectar and honey (the nectar at least being a fabulous or heavenly, not a purely natural benefit). Chaucer's more medieval and ascetic picture is influenced by Boethius, who mentions honey as one of the *Bacchica munera* 'gifts of Bacchus' that the Golden Age people did *not* have. This detail Chaucer's gloss in *Boece* modernises by explaining that they did not know how to make 'pymment' and 'clarree' (popular postprandial drinks in courtly circles).¹⁴ The poem elaborates this point in referring at l. 16 to the absence of 'spices grond / To clarre' (Chaucer would have been aware of the connexion between ignorance of oriental spices and absence of trade [22]). Compared with Ovid's, Chaucer's austere Golden Age world resembles less an earthly paradise than a hermit's wilderness. Its inhabitants are 'protected' from civilisation, not merely from luxury, as they drink only spring-water and eat 'pounage' (the swine-feed consumed in the Gospel parable by the Prodigal Son in the depths of his misery). Yet its very harshness, anticipating that of Shakespeare's rigorous 'golden world' in *As You Like It* (I i 109, I i 3-18), endows it with a greater moral seriousness than Ovid's idyll, which points forward to Renaissance Arcadian pastoral. Chaucer's changes in this direction show their indebtedness to Boethius, who under Stoic and Christian-ascetic influence had made the flowing stream-water (*lubricus amnis* 11) the Golden Age people's only drink, and

replaced Ovid's varied diet of nuts and berries with the *patula Iovis arbore glandes* 'acorns from Jove's spreading tree' as the food with which they broke their protracted fasts (*sera solebat / Ieunia soluere glande*, 4-5).

That Chaucer may have intended his poem for a limited circle of educated and sympathetic readers, as suggested above, finds support in the rich allusiveness of the writing. In 'No man the fyr out of the flint yit fond' (13), the mention of fire in a context of food both implies its function in cooking and hints at its less innocent use for melting ore-bearing rocks and making weapons. The line may thus be anticipating the statement in 49, 'Unforged was the hauberk and the plate', that in the Golden Age there were no instruments of violence because the flint had not yet been struck with violence to release its fatal spark. A similar, more definite allusiveness attends line 9, where paradoxically it is not the plough, the traditional emblem of peaceful toil, that is being opposed to the sword, emblem of war, as in the Biblical prophets (Is 2:4; Micah 4:3) but *the plough itself* that 'wounds' a primal state of nature older than agriculturalism.¹⁵ A final example of an image with an implied further meaning is that of the merchant ships 'cutting' the waves (l. 21), an innocuous near-cliché that acquires disturbing overtones in the context of the preceding 'No flesh ne wiste offence of egge or spere' (19) and the linkage of mercantilism (*ware*) with militarism (*werre*) in ll. 22-3.

III

In 'The Former Age' Chaucer does something very unusual: he re-creates a myth. Without broaching the controversial question of the nature of myth, literary critics may find a helpful tool at hand in what Joseph Campbell calls 'creative mythology'. Campbell means by this the mythology that is produced not by a folk or a community but by a particular artist¹⁶ and arises from the artist's impulsion to use a mythic form in the work engaging his imagination:

The individual has had an experience of his own – of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration – which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realisation has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth.¹⁷

Campbell's formulation, in which the key terms are 'realisation' and 'communication', fits well with an attempt to understand Chaucer as someone possessed (like his contemporaries Gower and Langland) by 'an experience of his own' of the life of his time: a time marked by destructive wars, growing commercialism and the attendant vices of avarice, envy,

luxury, tyranny and lack of 'trouthe'. His 'realisation' was 'of a certain depth and import', which he sought 'to communicate through signs.' These were inherited from an ancient tradition, which the intensity of his experience of 'order, horror, beauty,' together with his poetic skill, enabled him to give 'the value and the force of *living* myth.' The exact date of 'The Former Age' is not known; it may be as late at the 1390s, but it cannot be earlier than the mid-1380s, the period of the *Boece* and *Troilus*. The issue is in any case of little consequence since there are no precise topical allusions, and if Chaucer's mentions of tyrants and tyranny at ll. 33 and 54 recall the 'authorial' protest against both in the G Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1394), that protest was already present in the F version of c. 1385-8. Whether or not it is universally valid, Thomas Mann's perceptive remark *apropos* of 'creative mythology' seems apt in relation to Chaucer's poem: '[W]hile in the life of the human race the mythical is an early and primitive stage, in the life of an individual it is a late and mature one.'¹⁸ The accomplished handling of myth in 'The Former Age' comes across as impressively 'mature'.

The mode of existence Chaucer describes resembles life in the Upper Palaeolithic Age, when people lived in woods and caves as food-gatherers and hunters, not farmers (except that Chaucer's idealised version leaves out the hunting). But in his Ovidian source, the 'Eras Prima' (as the colophon to the poem in MS CUL Hh. 4. 12 calls it) is *Aurea prima aetas*, 'the first, the Golden Age'. Tracing the sources of Chaucer's 'creative mythology' therefore involves attending to the Classical idea of the 'Golden Age,' which is not explicitly mentioned in the poem. Unlike the terms 'Age of Bronze' and 'Age of Iron', which occur in Classical sources long before becoming tools for scientific archaeology, 'Golden Age' is a purely mythic term, in a twofold sense. Firstly, the idea has been used to explain the present through the past. Most myths, anthropologists agree, have a historical orientation, and whatever ethical lesson mythical narrations may convey, their purpose tends to be explanatory as well as normative. Secondly, certain myths refer to a purely ideal state of affairs, and the mythologem functions in part – as in Chaucer's poem – as the embodiment of a culture's moral aspirations. The Golden Age, from its first appearance in Hesiod, possesses this dual aspect, which one could call somewhat inelegantly the 'historical-explanatory' and the 'imaginary-ideal.'

Hesiod's account of the Golden Age in the opening of his *Works and Days* is highly idealised, but he may well have believed it to have some historical basis. Myth in Hesiod (8th cent. BC) shares with primitive myth the property of being timelessly exemplary but also of looking back to a

special kind of time, *illud tempus*. This ‘sacred’ or ‘mythic time’ cannot be simply equated with the archaeologist’s ‘Pre-history’, the era of objects to be excavated preceding that of written documents to be deciphered and interpreted. For it comes ‘before’ history in the sense of metaphysical priority as much as temporal anteriority; and only when ‘mythic time’ is finished does ‘history’ begin. As Mircea Eliade puts it:

[T]he myth is thought to express the absolute truth, because it narrates a sacred history, that is, a trans-human revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time . . . (*in illo tempore*). Being real and sacred, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently repeatable, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions . . . which provides the pattern for human behaviour.¹⁹

Chaucer’s ‘First Age’ is not modelled on such a ‘sacred time’ of the interaction of the gods with men. But the exemplary force of ‘creative mythology’ is not undermined by its lack of an ‘historical’ or ‘sacral’ basis, as existential interpretations of the Christian myth of the Fall of Man prove, not to mention the sinister but groundless ideological myths that have plagued our time. What Chaucer assuredly intends is that the way of life he describes is ‘a model...for...human actions’, though he apparently does not see it as constituting (like primitive myths) ‘a pattern for human behaviour’. His treatment reverses the movement of primitive myth, imparting a different dynamic; for he shows modern men’s falling-off from the pristine state as so complete that the myth of the First Age serves only to condemn them. What his exemplary model ‘justifies’ is its relevance for human behaviour at *any* time, not as something ‘repeatable’ by human effort but as a reminder of what has been lost: *Finit Etas Prima*, as the colophon in CUL MS Hh puts it with unintentional appropriateness. This realisation accounts for the poem’s sombre and pessimistic tone, which find no parallel in Chaucer’s work.

With the exception of a single reference to a personage from the Book of Genesis, Nimrod,²⁰ ‘The Former Age’ relies solely on the Classical tradition. This is the tradition that Bodo Gatz, in his study of the ‘Golden Age idea’,²¹ calls the ‘pessimistic-descending’ theory of human history. As a result, the poem excludes not just a naturalistic concept of progress through the advance of civilisation and technology but the Christian doctrine of eschatological hope.²² Whatever Chaucer’s purpose in writing the poem, it is hard to see it as a holiday from his habitual standards and beliefs. The intensity of tone and absence of irony are compelling signs of his *ernest*.²³ What seems clear is that he would have found it difficult to handle this particular theme from an overtly religious standpoint. For the

Biblical story of the Fall of Man from a paradisaical state is not a variant of the pagan Golden Age myth but an alternative to it. The two accounts are mutually exclusive.

Chaucer's attitude to civilisation and technology appears wholly negative; but he would have failed to find support for this view in the Bible, whether or not he was familiar with Augustine's Commentary on it.²⁴ For the Book of Genesis shows technology not as caused by the Fall but as *occasioned* by it, whereas the Golden Age myth describes a 'Fall' caused by technology. In Scripture, man is (as Augustine argues) condemned to labour, which involves the use of tools, the first beginnings of technology. But agriculture in the Bible is not depicted in the terms of the Classical Golden Age, where Earth produces food spontaneously and men do not have to work. For in Genesis, the 'natural order' is a divine order that is broken by man's sin, causing a need for labour and an occasion for technology. But since man's labour *after* the Fall is also divinely ordained it can become a kind of benefit, a punishment for sin out of which good is drawn. The Cain story does not link the husbandman's depravity with his occupation as such; it is a manifestation of the sin of pride more than a reflection of the sinner's environment (heredity plays a more important part in the matter). It would thus be misleading to find in Christian tradition the attitude to technology found in the Classical tradition from Hesiod on. Genesis may show technology used to evil ends, as in the building of the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11; but the sin of the people of the plain of Senaar is not that they bake bricks with fire but that they aim to scale heaven. What is condemned is the wickedness of the human will, not the inventiveness of the human mind.

The medieval explanation of the evils that beset human existence was the 'aboriginal catastrophe' (in John Henry Newman's phrase) that is called the 'Fall of Man'. But the myth that Chaucer presents in his poem has no explanatory force or intention. Man's immediate loss of innocence is ascribed not to sin but to civilisation, which is based on technology; its ultimate cause remains unaccounted for. Unlike primitive myths, 'The Former Age' does not tell a story, it presents a set of images: of regret, but not of nostalgia, though also, if we employ the word with due care, of aspiration.²⁵ Chaucer is not affirming the Golden Age as a historical fact, although he may well have believed that the evils of his own age, such as war, economic exploitation, the failure of human social bonds and moral anarchy, had not and could not always have existed. Instead, what his poem offers is a deeply felt response to a 'perpetual possibility' like those that T. S. Eliot speaks of in *Burnt Norton*. And since a successful poem is

'always present' in its readers' minds, 'The Former Age' remains, thanks to its passion and precision, a poem for our age.

Notes

¹ The early 'ABC' (?c. 1370) has twenty-three stanzas totalling 184 lines and is a virtuoso piece of writing. At l. 39 *That but thou at that day correcte* [*vice*], the b-rhyme in the second flanking group is textually uncertain; Riverside's *vice* (after Avril Henry's conjectural emendation) is idiomatically awkward and I prefer *me chastyse* of MSS A⁶ and Ff² (BL Addl 36983 and CUL Ff.5.30), with preceding *day* treated disyllabically. The stanza is used in 'Rosemounde' and the Monk's Tale (of uncertain date), the 'Complaint of Venus' (c. 1385), 'Fortune', the other 'Boethian' balade not in rime royal (c. 1390), and the 'Envoy to Bukton' (1390s), which is misdescribed in *Riverside* 1087b as being in rime royal.

² King James VI in his *Short Treatise on Verse* of 1584 (Gregory Smith 1904:I, 222) prescribed for 'any heich and graue subiectis, specially drawin out of learnit authors' the eight-line 'Ballat Royal', a term already found in the mid-fifteenth century (*MED* s.v. *balade* 2(a); *OED* s.v. *ballade* 3). He illustrates the form not from Chaucer, who first used it in English, but with a stanza of his own composition. In French it was used by Machaut and favoured by Deschamps and Granson (Wimsatt 1991:30). Chaucer himself applies the term *balade* to his 'Hyd Absolon', which is in rime royal (*Legend of Good Women*, G Prol. 202; F 248 has 'song'). John Shirley in Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.20 calls 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' (which is likewise in rime royal) a 'Balade Royal', a term he also applies to poems of Lydgate in rime royal (after 1456). And a 1450 reference from 'Who that list to loke' is to Gower's *Traitié*, which is in rime royal (cited *MED* s.v. *balade* 2(a)). But since rime royal (a form so called after James I adopted it for *The Kyngis Quair*) is the accepted name for the 'Chaucerian' seven-line stanza rhymed *ababbcc*, 'ballade royal' is best kept for the eight-line stanza and rhyme-scheme of the six poems in which Chaucer used it. The eight-line form appears among Chaucer's fourteenth and fifteenth century followers in lyrical poems by Charles d'Orléans and Lydgate ('Mydsomer Rose') and in longer works like Hoccleve's *Male Regle* and Palladius's *Husbandry* (the anonymous translator of which calls it simply *balade* at Pr 7). It was used skilfully by John Walton in Books 1-3 of his 1410 translation of Boethius, and his rendering of Bk II, m. 5 (printed in Appendix Ia to this chapter) shows knowledge of both *Boece* and 'The Former Age'.

³ The particles *ne/nat* appear thirteen times (thrice in double negation for emphasis), *no* twenty-two times and the privative prefix *un-* four times.

⁴ All Chaucer quotations here and in subsequent chapters are from *The Riverside Chaucer* 1987:650-1. 'The Former Age' is preserved in two MSS in the Cambridge University Library, Ii.3.21 and Hh.4.12. The former is a text of *Boece* with the poem inserted immediately after the translation of Bk II, m. 5, its main source, and the title 'Chaucer upon this fyfte meter of the second book'; it is followed by 'Fortune', also in ballade royal form. 'The Former Age' has been thought by some to be unfinished, but the abrupt ending of st. 8 is dramatically convincing and the