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Negotiating the Paradigm: Literary Nominalism and the Theory and Practice of Re-Reading Late Medieval Texts

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LITERARY NOMINALISM
AND THE THEORY OF REREADING
LATE MEDIEVAL TEXTS

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Richard J. Utz:

"Negotiating the Paradigm: Literary Nominalism and the Theory and Practice of Rereading Late Medieval Texts"¹

Now traditionally the only theory which remains in nominalism. But we should not be satisfied in assuming that since realism and conceptis- 
dism have both been shown to be false, nominalism must be true. We must examine the nominalist view in itself.

R.J. Ariew

Perhaps the most obvious connection between Ockhamism and late 
medieval literature lies in the type of theological issues most directly refe-
red to in the poetry.

William J. Courtenay

"Apart from Christian theologians, we are all nominalists nowadays."²

With this pithy, albeit fairly general and unsubstantiated proposition, Stephen 
Knight, in the very first essay (1965) dedicated entirely to discussing possible 
correspondences between late-medieval literature and nominalist philosop- 
hy, attempts to explain twentieth-century readers' predilection for Chaucer. Similarly, 
more theory-driven and detailed accounts of European cultural history from various

¹ This essay is in part based upon research presented at the International Congress on Medieval 
Studies ("The Reading the Late Middle Age: Nominalism and Late Medieval Texts", University of 
Leeds, UK, June, 1994) and the Fourth Conference of the International Society for the Study of 
European Ideas ("Literary Nominalism in Late Medieval England: A Preliminary Paradigm," 
Karl-Franzens Universität Graz, Austria, August, 1994) and upon observations in the author's 
dissertation, Literaturgeschichte als Phänomenologie: Eine Untersuchung an 
Sprache, Charakterausdruck und Struktur in Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde" (unpublished 
dissertation at Main, 1990).

disciplines propose that the rise of nominalism and its final victory over realist positions are among the decisive factors underlying the formation of Modern Europe since the later Middle Ages, particularly since the Reformation. Searching for late-medieval signposts of this development, we should be aware that the objectives and methodologies of our search may well determine what we find; or, to paraphrase Thomas S. Kuhn: as a community of specialists, we are both enabled and constrained by our paradigms, by the currently existing theoretical and terminological framework which can lend support to our theories but which of necessity also narrows down the range of possibilities for our scholarly and critical enterprises. While a certain paradigm is in place, mainstream researchers can operate without having to invent and justify their methodologies at every turn. However, as David Richter reminds us, paradigms are never permanent. For a variety of reasons they break down, and when they do, the field of scholarship moves into a condition in which assumptions and methodologies come under debate and continue in doubt until a new paradigm is established.

The developments in literary theory since the 1960s provide ample evidence for our participation in such a transitional period. With regard to the field of late-medieval English literature, I can explain some of the reasons for and consequences of the specific paradigm shift which has begun to privilege the formerly marginal notion of nominalism as a topical term in the critical lexicon applied to literary texts. Therefore, the objective of this essay is twofold: first, I will concisely survey when, why, and how nominalist readings of late-medieval texts have been generated as part of the complex negotiations of meaning which always take place during periods of shifting cultural paradigms and will delineate how a general paradigm shift in twentieth-century theory (in various disciplines) has helped to bring about the gradual acceptance of a new working-paradigm in medieval studies—which I would like to term literary nominalism. Second, after this foray into the history of criticism, I will supply and discuss examples of re-readings of late medieval literature which are based upon the proposed paradigm of literary nominalism.

1. Nominalism as Marginal

In 1924 Johan Huizinga, in The Waning of the Middle Ages, sketched the comments opinion of modernist (research) in the Humanities about the impact on Western medieval traditions of realist and nominalist thought: we should be careful not to think too much of the quarrel about the universals. We know very well that the realism which declared universa non rem, and attributed essentiality and pre-existence to general ideas, did not dominate medieval thought without a struggle. Undoubtedly there were also nominalists. But it does not seem too bold to affirm that radical nominalism has never been anything but a reaction, an opposition, a countercurrent vacillating against the ground with the fundamental tendencies of the medieval spirit.

In 1954 Huizinga’s book was advertised as studying that crucial moment in history when the Middle Ages gave way to the great energy of the Renaissance. From an analysis of the dominating ideas of the times—those that held the medieval world together, supported its religion and informed its art and literature—emerges the story of a whole culture at the extreme limit of its development.

The language of both Huizinga’s study and the editors’ reading of his study is revealing because it indicates an understanding of the Middle Ages as one unified


6 Experts in philosophy, theology, and history disagree about the definition of late medieval nominalism: on this topic, cf. my discussion in Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte im Selbstverständnis, pp. 13-40. For the purposes of this essay, the concise but excellent summary by Armand Maizer, "Some Aspects of Fourteenth-Century Philosophy," Medieval and Renaissance Studies 7 (1956), 171, must suffice: 1) relative to the proceeding century, a more cautious and critical attitude towards the philosophy of Aristotle, especially at Paris and Oxford; 2) a greater interest in problems concerning what is possible rather than what is actually the case; 3) more rigorous criteria of demonstration with a consequent concern for probability and degrees of probability; 4) a greater emphasis on the individual (the particular) in all areas of thought.

7 (Garden City, NY, 1954), p. 204.

8 Text on the back cover of the 1954 edition (see n. 7).
historical entity, dominated by a clearly identifiable, abstract Medieval Mind. Within this larger idealist construct, the late middle ages are simply an "extreme" extension (a decoration, an "anachronism") to the language and historical tradition of the late medieval period. In this "preference" he claims that history "has always for more engrossed by problems of origin than by those of decline and fall," and that he intended to present evidence against the idea that "the Middle Ages had been little more than the prelude to the Renaissance."

10 CE is in one example, Pierre-Félix Mandroux who, in 1923, celebrated the necessity of Thomas Aquinas' canonization with the following words about the intellectual climate of the late middle ages: "Pierre-philosophiques et philosophiques de Thomas d'Aquin ont été d'ailleurs un immense impére au monde mental." (La conception de nous du monde d'Aquino (Paris, 1923), p. 4.


12 The coinage in revising and recasting the influence of Thomas Aquinas cannot be overestimated; cf. his Collected Articles on Ockham, ed. Paulinus Boeke (St. Bonaventure, NY, 1958); and the concise evaluation of Boeke's impact by Helmut Jungmann, Ockham im Licht der neueren Forschung (Berlin, 1968), pp. 332-14. The critical edition of Ockham's collected works has been in ongoing process under the general editorship of Ockham's Oek. Ockhami Opera Theologica (1667–1741) 17 vols. (St. Bonaventure, NY, 1912), p. 154. The most influential scholarly contribution to the Thomistic paradigm was Thomas Gilson's La philosophie au moyen-àge (Paris, 1922). A similarly broad view can be traced in the history of architecture, where high medieval styles are deemed equivalent to realism, classical perfection, and purity, whereas the late medieval "decor-ii" style (i.e. French "Foncier" and "pittura tassata") receive, from a Renaissance perspective, the label of decadence and destruction. CE. Jacques Heimpel, Le Moyen Âge, Une Impérace (Paris, 1912), pp. 42-44.

13 See, e.g., the historical overview of studies on nominalism and Chaucer in Ut, Literarischer Nominalismus im Spätmittelalter, pp. 41-78; and more recently—William J. Watts and Richard J. Ut, "Nominalist Perspectives on Chaucer's Poetry: A Bibliographical Essay," Medioevalia et Humanistica, N.S. 23 (1993), pp. 147-173. Of course, the medieval division between the 12th and 13th centuries also concentrated on other major figures of authority besides Thomas Aquinas (e.g., Augustine and Boethius) to establish their unified posture of the Catholic medieval mind. While accepting nominalism as a distinct step forward, i.e., away from high medieval Catholicism, Protestant scholars centered on the significance of figures such as John Wyclif and Martin Luther and Functionalized nominalist thinkers as mere forerunners of the Reformation. The Catholic privileging of Thomism and the high middle ages as well as the Protestant privileging of the Reformation utilized nominalism as a supplementary element of their core interests. As a consequence, perhaps with the exception of Philosophy Boeke and the Franciscan order and its publications, research energy was directed away from this marginalized field; critical editions of the numerous nominalist manuscripts were edited and published only if they seemed to conform with the existing paradigmatic mappings. Consequently, there are almost no studies in the tradition of the positivist or older historiographer approaches postulating correspondences between nominalism and late-medieval English literature.
Accordingly, more attention was focused on formerly marginalized fields of study. In Germany, Hans Blumenberg helped to recognize not only the importance of gaucherie but also of nominalism in the history of western thought. In England, Gordon Lees included in his extended study of Ockham a by-now-famous retraction of his own previous understanding of the philosopher/theologian as a mere skeptic. Many other scholars—William Courtenay, David Knowles, Armand Maunier, Jurgen Miethe, Helko A. Oberman, Paul Vignaux and, more recently, Claude Panaccio, Katherine Tachau, and especially Marilyn McCord Adams—have provided literary critics with ample reason for re-evaluating nominalism as an essential movement of thought and the fourteenth century as "more prolific than the thirteenth in these isees-forcers" that were to determine the course of European intellectual life. For England specifically, the fourteenth century was revealed as

the scene of an early Renaissance which somehow became blighted in the fifteenth century. It was ugly where the blooming was to take place, but England had its proto-Renaissance in that great century, the fourteenth. Perhaps it was the rise of civic consciousness,
Since the 1960s, literary critics, encouraged by these developments, have increasingly investigated late-medieval philosophy and literature to find surprising correspondences with their own modern or postmodern ideological or epistemological needs.\(^{21}\) European Marxism, e.g., propagated late medieval nominalism as preparing-on the level of philosophical thought-a modern, antifeudal, and anticausal orientation toward the individual.\(^{22}\) Postmodern theoretical predications with their conscious revisionist remappings of mainstream research areas provide a similarly powerful incentive for critics to establish the area of English late-medieval literature as one strategic site on which the battle against the dominant, existing paradigm can be fought.\(^{23}\) Finally, twenty-century writers have sought to utilize medieval nominalism as a recourse for their poetic theory and practice. Alfred Andersch, the German modern realist par excellence, felt akin to the nominalist epistemological critique of abstractions and chose the description, a genre employing words free from preexisting idealist connotations, to write his nominalist literaturans eingänge.\(^{24}\) The publication of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose can be seen as the single most significant, recent event both indicating and promoting the general and widespread paradigmatic shift toward nominalism inside and outside of the academy. In Eco's book, Sherlock Holmesian deductive reasoning-i.e., science-as well as poststructuralist semiotics are shown only to function in a contingent, nominalistic world and displayed by a William of Ockham modeled after William of Ockham.\(^{25}\)

The trend toward the rise of the term nominalism as an established new paradigm in English medieval studies can further be verified by a historical comparison of bibliographical entries on Chaucer and nominalism. In all the bibliographies of Chaucer studies covering the period before 1974, there is only a single subject entry on *Ockhamist Theology*, while the 1987 edition of *The Essential Chaucer* contains eight entries under the rubric "nominalism," and the 1988 Bibliography of *Chaucer* contains five such entries.\(^{26}\) More generally, according to my own statistical evaluation of studies in English literature which devote at least substantial space to or are entirely dedicated to investigating correspondences between late-medieval nominalism and literature, there are three titles published before and 48 titles published after the year 1970. This count includes the essays in this volume; it does not include, however, several additional

\(^{21}\) For a critic's judgment of Chaucer as a particularly modern, become nominalist writer, cf. Knight, "Chaucer-A Modern Writer?" 37-43.

\(^{22}\) Cf., e.g., the entry "Nominalism" in the *Lexicon der Renaissance*, ed. Günter Grunet, et al. (Cöraup, 1980), and in *Philosophische Wörterbuch*, ed. Georg Kania and Manfred Belz (Leipzig, 1976), vol. 2, col. 874: "Durch die zunehmende Hervorhebung des Einzelnen unter gleichzeitiger stärkerer Abwertung des Allgemeinen hat der Nominalismus schließlich das Postulat der mittelalterlichen katholischen Kirche untergraben... Die nominalistische Einstellung zum Allgemeinen impliziert Hinsichtlichengegengesetzes." Col. 875: "Durch das acuta Menschenein und die veränderte Nominalisierung der Nominalismus die im feudalistischen Weltbild festgelegte menschliche Vielzahl die unserer methodischen Grundlage durch die kritische Bildung zunichte wird."  

\(^{23}\) Cf. Hugo Kiepels's contribution to this volume in which he demonstrates how the 'veins' of some late medieval texts favor, almost demeans, postmodernist readings.


\(^{26}\) Cf. Janna W. Ehr, "Nominalism and Sex," *Heizer 3:4* (Spring, 1991), p. 84: "You can only follow a trail of clues through the labyrinth of the web if you keep reminding yourself that objects and people you are tracing are individuals, and not just ephemeral manifestations of Platonic ideas or general principles." For an investigation of the parallels between William of Ockham and William of Ockham, see Janna W. Ehr, *Umberto Eco's Mimesis in "Der Name der Rose", "Eine finitere und unfinitere Geschichte!,"* Minozische Notizen zu Umberto Eco: Mimesis in "Der Name der Rose", ed. Max Kammer (Darmstadt, 1987), 115-27.

3. Negotiating the New Paradigm: Promises and Problems

The second half of this essay will describe and negotiate the term "literary nominalism" as a preliminary paradigm which can account for the three main approaches chosen by critics when re-reading late-medieval English texts:

A) nominalism or a nominalist thinker as direct (textual) source in the philological sense;

B) nominalism as a corollary philosophical superstructure representing a typical late-medieval Zeitgeist;

C) nominalism as historical reassessment for prevalent modern/postmodern perceptions of literary critics.

The paradigm shift in progress has certainly facilitated a reevaluation of some supposedly closed chapters of philological research and source study. Due to the greater currency of nominalist thought among many scholars, I. Stephen Russell detected a pithy philological saying, "A false abstract comes from a false concrete," in John Skelton's Bewige of Court. The epithet not only suggested nominalist epistemology, the preeminence of individual phenomena over essence to Russell, but it also led him to assert that nominalism "pervaded the grammar, logic, and metaphysics in which Skelton distinguished himself at Oxford." Thus, Russell took the phrase as his textual point of departure to describe the entire Bewige of Court as a nominalist allegory.

In a similar manner, the accepted view of Chaucer's friend, Ralph Strode, as a Thomist/Realist philosopher, can be reexamined. It can be shown that this position was held by scholars clearly as a consequence of the pervasive Thomist hegemony in criticism. Gollance's early entry on Strode in the Dictionary of


29 *National Bibliography* (1909) demonstrates the sparseness of actual evidence on the philosopher's point of view in the "great alteration" of the fourteenth century when it states that Strode's "tendencies seem to have been realistic" and that the philosopher "followed in the footsteps of Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventura." For Herbert B. Workman, in his 1926 study on John Wydyl, Strode's Thomist/Realist orientation has already become a fact when he entitles one of his appendices "Strode, the Thomist." For support, Workman mentions not only Gollance but also an entry in Jacques Quétif's early eighteenth-century biographical study, *Scriptores ordinis praedicatorum*, which names the logician as a Dominican friar who traveled through Germany, Italy, and the Holy Land and who fought against John Wydyl's theological theses. How natural the equation of Thomism with medieval realism had become for most scholars can be revealed when one considers F. N. Robinson's remarks on Chaucer's friend which perturbed the earlier opinions for most Chaucer critics after 1933. Robinson adds a piece of textual evidence to the existing biographical information on Strode. In his discussion of Chaucer's dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde* to Strode and Gower, he mentions that the philosopher must have had strong objections to *Troilus* exaggerated necessitarianism. Robinson completely overlooked the fact that the late-medieval nominalists opposed necessitarianism even more strongly than the moderate Thomists and that it was Ockham and the nominalist movement of thought who stressed most radically human free will and responsibility. Wydyl's responses to Strode's collegial criticism do not identify Chaucer's friend as Thomist or


32 The most recent edition of the *Riviera dei Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), no longer mentions Strode's alleged Thomism. However, it does not contradict Robinson's earlier statement either.
Ockhamist either. However, if one considers that—following Thomas Kueppel’s revision of Quodd’s list of Dominicans—Strode’s membership in the Dominican order can no longer be maintained, the almost automatic identification of the logician as a Thomist/Realist should be considered doubtful, to say the least. Recently, Rodney Dellaanta, in his essay on “Chaucer and Strode,” has reaffirmed the myth of Ralph Strode as a Thomist, a postulate which he bases solely on the authority of Gollancz and Sartoris. Although Dellaanta is aware that “we know Strode’s work only by the survival of his logical treatises, which are of limited use in limning his larger philosophical position,” he has no qualms about charting the parameters of that position by his reputation as an eminent Thomist. That reputation is in dire need of reconsideration.

And even if there was any palpable evidence that Strode was a Dominican, Chaucerians should have included the tenor of his work on logic into their deliberations before labeling him a Thomist. It is telling that the community opinion of scholarship in medieval logic counts Strode among the followers of William of Ockham. Prantl’s classical account, *Geschichte der Logik im Abendlande*, names “Radulphus Strode,” together with “Robert Holkot,” “Gregor von Rimini,” “Johann Buridan,” and “Richard Ferebrich” as “Logik der Occams Spuren” (“logicians following in Ockham’s footsteps”) and characterizes “Waldif” and “Hieronymus von Prag” as outsiders who pursued extreme Platonic realism. A similar categorization is shared in William and Martha Kneale’s study, *The Development of Logic*. Walter Burleigh, John Buridan, Richard Swineshead, Albert of Saxony, Muraltius of Inghen, William Heytesbury, Ralph Strode, and Richard Ferebrigde are all linked with Ockham’s texts on logic: “These were not all followers of Ockham. Burleigh, for example, was a defender of old views about universals. But Ockham’s influence was dominant among them.” For Chaucer’s “philosophical Strode,” the Kneales even postulate a conspicuous textual dependence of his *Concoursement* on Ockham’s theory. The fact that Strode seems to have been a representative of the via moderna does not necessarily mean a similar orientation in all other fields of philosophy and theology. However, it is interesting to recall that two of the manuscripts of *Trovil and Crisypel* dedicate the text to “ophistical Strode,” obviously reminding late medieval readers of Strode’s reputation as an expert in the art of contemporary logical theory, or “ophymes” in the Squire calls them. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that (1) logic was the preferred discipline of nominalist thinkers; that (2) it was their radical application of logic which is the basis of nominalist epistemological and ontological thought; and that (3) most philosophers who followed the via moderna in the field of logic also shared fundamental nominalist tenets in the related realms of theology and philosophy. Thus, the probability of Strode’s nominalist orientation is at least as probable as the one held as a consequence of the Thomism/Realism paradigm. If Chaucer dedicated his *Trovil and Crisypel* to a nominalist logician Strode “to vouchen snf, ther node is, to correcte” (TC, V, 1589), readings which see Trovill as a literary exemplification of a potentially dangerous late medieval realism/determinism/necessitarianism are given a higher degree of plausibility.

One final observation on the possibility of postulating direct nominalist influence on late medieval English writers should be made. Those who include nominalism in their readings of late medieval literature are often accused of lacking direct textual evidence for their claims. Critics of the new paradigm assume that the
pacity of writers who actually mention a late medieval philosopher or text is due to the forbidding academic sophistication of scholastic thought which someone without formal university education could not have understood. However, recent research demonstrates that a wide variety of connections, especially sermons and public disputations, could very well bridge the allegedly unbridgeable gap between learned discourse at the universities and popular discourse outside the institutions of learning. For the region around Vienna, e.g., Ernst Engisch has established that theologians at the University of Vienna translated their Latin treatises into the vernacular to make their opinions accessible to a larger audience. Robert Holceto's *Super Libros Sapientiae* is the best-known example of similar popularizing tendencies among the mendicant orders in Chaucer's England. In his book, Holceto, a radical nominalist, attempted to spread nominalist thought in a more popular mode among the "learned" non-specialists. Because of its plain discussion of topical problems, his text became somewhat of a bestseller in his time; it assured Holceto immediate fame and was a standard acquisition for any good library in the late middle ages. Beryl Smalley expresses the difficulty in assessing the actual impact of sermon books and oral presentations of the examples and stories from collections such as *Super Libros Sapientiae* when she notes: "How many readers were introduced to the skepticism of the schools through Holceto's plain speaking?"

The regular public disputations of the Colleges can be seen as another chance for direct contact between academic philosophy/theology and an interested lay audience. In the calumnious fourteenth century, the number of non-specialists attending these debates increased considerably. Even William of Ockham complained about laymen and old women ("laici et vetulatae") pestering him and his colleagues about free will and the contingency or necessity of earthly events and actions. In order to try out some of their more dangerous opinions *coram publico*, fourteenth-century philosophers/theologians developed new forms of disputations or sophismata. While in the thirteenth century the demonstration of a quasist disputans, i.e., the defense of one's own (actually held) scholarly opinion, was practiced, the fourteenth century favored the so-called perennisio. During this formal discussion, a speaker or preacher would present an opinion for the sake of having a discussion, i.e., *collationis causa or gratia exercitii*. Often enough the nominalist thinkers utilized the *perennisio* because it offered safety against accusations of heresy:

Thus the colleges, simply by insisting on the practice of the *sophismata* and other disputations, became very good agents for the propagation of philosophical nominalism (nominalism, for example, and introduced a new way (via modernus) of approaching the delicate problems of orthodoxy.

The notion of nominalism as a philosophical superstition or a "philosophical analogue" has so far proven to be the most successful path toward establishing correspondences between literature and philosophy. This interdisciplinary approach usually regards nominalism as the academic and sometimes forbiddingly sophisticated expression of a more general, typically late-medieval mentality, mindset, or Zeitgeist. Generally, readings have centered on four interrelated areas of correspondence: (1) epistemology; (2) the problem of language (universals vs. particulars); (3) poetic structure; and (4) the relationship between the
human and the divine. As these areas have recently been discussed at some length, two illustrative examples must suffice for the purposes of this essay. 50

In her essay on "Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought," Sheila Delany discusses Chaucer's text in relation to a Zeitgeist which she describes as the "uncertain theological milieu of the fourteenth century" and utilizes the nominalism paradigm to account for the common but unexplained observation that Chaucer turned away from writing allegory. 51 She offers evidence for a general repudiation of analogical argument and allegorical representation by a significant portion of the late medieval intelligentsia (led by representatives of nominalist thought) in cosmology, logic, physics, poetry, political theory, and the visual arts. She claims that allegory can function only in a well-ordered system that is not subject to change. The fourteenth century, during which many intellectual assumptions and cultural institutions were simultaneously challenged, rendered predictable forms of thought increasingly precarious. Delany asserts that Chaucer gradually chose to abandon allegory because he was looking for particular aesthetic modes in which to render his own varied experiences of a fluctuating society and a contingent universe. Ultimately, she relates this repudiation of allegory to the poet's concern with representing characters capable of exercising their own free will. The radical contingency of Chaucer's literary world and the voluntarism of his characters, both of which Delany reads as recalcitrant to allegorical/analogical representation, can be better understood by comparing them with the connotations of similar features in the theories of fourteenth-century nominalists. Of course, Delany's comparative thesis originate in the theoretical postulation of the unity of a historical period and-as a consequence-the existence of correspondences among the individual constituents of that period. In her work, therefore, one constituent of late medieval culture, nominalism, helps twentieth-century readers to historicize and comprehend what may seem problematic or inconsistent in another late-medieval cultural constituent, namely literature.

50 See the extensive discussion of these four categories in Watts and Uts, "Nominalist Perspectives," passim.


The nominalism paradigm can be applied in a similar way—as a historical analogue—to account for the critical aporia concerning the so-called "Epilogue" of Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde. What Aldous Huxley called "the hurried and boggled conclusion" 53 of the poem is not the deplorable fait accompli of an otherwise genial poet but an example of a structural strategy typical of late medieval problem solving.

The so-called "Epilogue" of Troilus and Criseyde (V, 1786-1896) is one of the most ardently discussed passages in the history of Chaucer criticism. In accordance with the narrator's/Chaucer's famous last words, numerous readers have interpreted the entire poem as just another illustration of the medieval contemptus mundi tradition exemplified by Boethius' Consolation Philosophiae. Perhaps the most famous of these readings is that of Bernard L. Jefferson who, because of the "Epilogue" and 267 other textual parallels, maintained that Chaucer's reason for translating the Consolation was to create not only a quarry of quotations for his own production of Troilus and Criseyde but also a ready source for the text's reception and understanding. 54 This understanding of the whole poem reduces Chaucer, the late-medieval court poet, to a twentieth-century philologist intent on providing reliable sources for generations of scholars to come. Moreover, Troilus' ironic conflation of Boethian argumentation in his long monologue on predestination renders the possibility of a straightforward support of Boethian discourse highly improbable. Finally, the obvious chasm between four-and-three-quarter books which enthusiastically celebrate the value and power of earthly love (for which the narrator is even ready to sell his soul; III, 1317ff.) and the final few lines with their relentless rejection of any earthly feelings (including the mourning of Troilus' death) has surprised, if not alienated, many a reader. For these reasons the "Epilogue" has been viewed as a mere appendix, without aesthetic or logical connection with the main part of the poem; in other words, "the final answers given by Troilus do not match the intelligence and energy of the questions asked.

52 See Literarischer Nominalismus im Spätmittelalter, pp. 193-219.


54 Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius (New York, 1965), p. 130.
and the issues raised.55 Such statements of discontent can be complemented by
Larry Silver's observation that many of Chaucer's texts were left uncompleted. The
House of Fame stops short right when "A man of gret mavorie" might have begun
to categorize and enlighten the narrator's abundance of confusing impressions. The
Legend of Good Women contains two prologues and ends at the very instant when
the narrator had decided to relate his "conclusion" to the "Legend of Hypermentes." The Canterbury Tales, of course, have remained a fragment, just
as the individual tales of the Cook, Squire, and Chaucer, the pilgrim, remain
without closure. Moreover, those texts which have been completed leave the reader
with the uneasy feeling that the closures provided do not satisfactorily resolve the
problems presented in the main parts of the respective poems:

The Book of the Duchess solves a problem different from the one in its
beginning raises; the Parliament of Fowls raises several questions
about value but does not answer them. Troilus and Criseyde, on the
other hand, insists on answers that it, with many other readers of
medieval literature, feel the body of the work neither requests nor
requires. And the Canterbury Tales, by its alternating points of
view, and its way of entertaining debate without adjudicating,
refuses to be conclusive.56

Sklute regards each of Chaucer's texts as an attempt to discuss complex and
conflicting solutions between antinomies such as "experience and authority, belief
and proof, freedom and necessity, truth and opinion.57 As one of the results of
his study, he explains that the contradiction between the "Epilogue" and the main
body of Troilus and Criseyde can be seen as a structural poetic decision typical of
the poet.

55 Elizabeth Salter, "Troilus and Criseyde: A Reconsideration," Patterns of Love and Courtray:
Essays in Memory of C.S. Lewis, ed. John Llewellyn (London, 1966), p. 100. Cf. also Dionis
and J.P. Tolnay, "The Epilogue of Chaucer's Troilus," MP 18 (1920), 636: "The feeling in the
Epilogue is as far as overshadowed at the beginning or elsewhere; it does not illuminate or
modify; it conclusions. The heartfelt worldly tale is interpreted in an unworldly way. [Chaucer]
tells the whole story in one mood and ends in another."

56 Sklute, Voice of Necessity, p. 3.
57 Sklute, Voice of Necessity, p. 3.

Going one step further, one may describe the structural split in Troilus and
Criseyde not only as typical of its author but also as characteristic of his period in
general. The tensions within Chaucer's texts are a literary reaction to the crisis in
the intellectual mentality of the late middle ages, one which is also exemplified—in
philosophical condemnation—by fourteenth-century nominalist thought. As the
nominalists prepared the separation of the formally unified concept of truth in
revealed truth and the truth of human ratios, Chaucer was pressured to discuss a
similar kind of conflict in his poetic practice.58 That "visualizing the mentality of his
age for his audience was problematic for Chaucer is obvious from the extensive
process of revision for Troilus and Criseyde and from the fragmentary character of
many of his other texts. Apparently the poet felt incapable of adapting his source
materials to synthesized, secure, or unified (high medieval) interpretations of
human reality. At the same time, Chaucer, as a Christian writer, felt obliged to end
his story in a mood which would be compatible with the accepted doctrine on love.
In his celebration of earthly love and his final leap of faith in the "Epilogue," the
poet manages "to suggest the ultimate impotence, even irrelevance of
Boethianism"59 for decision-making processes in the secular realm. Moreover,
Chaucer's structural choice closely resembles the academic fideism of his coeval
nominalist counterparts.

Why were nominalist philosophers/nominalists obliged to develop structural
strategies which resemble Chaucer's leap of faith in Troilus and Criseyde? Many
ideological readings define nominalism exclusively according to its radical anti-
feudal or anticlerical consequences in the history of early modern thought.
However, the origin of nominalism in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth

58 Cf. Wili Erziger, "Landgraf Gower-Chaucer," Europäischen Spätmittelalter (Wiesbaden,
1978), p. 238. Erziger was the first to connect Oldham's paradigm of two axial tiers to the
spirtual of the "Epilogue" of Troilus and Criseyde; he states: "Es insbesondere bei Chaucer
ungläubige gesetzte Spannungen durch die Formale Abwendung eines Werkes nicht widersprochen
können. Ob die Bestimmung des Erfahrungenmünchens im Zentrum des Werkes andere
Wirksamkeit, als der eindeutigtheologische Schluss in Troilus und Criseyde oder den
Canterbury Tales-unterliegt. Bewegung von Welt und Abenteuern die Welt im sieben-
dünnellen Werke auf verschiedenen Ebenen der Darstellung und in verschiedenen Kontexten
gegenüber, so daß im Bessereinst. der Deduktion und Gegenwirkung des Spätmittelalters in ihren
Wirkungsbeziehungen steht, Erinnerungen an die Lehre von den zwei Wahrheitsarten bei Occam
centuries are not at all revolutionary but rather conservative. This diachronical difference between nominalism's conservative goals and its revolutionary outcome has left few traces to call late medieval nominalism one of the great paradoxes in the history of philosophy.60 The extremist orientation of nominalist theses was, on the one hand, a strict application of the laws of logic; on the other hand, it was a reaction against rationalistic theses which—under the influence of Latin Averroism and the increased reception of Aristotle—had encouraged philosophers to use the human intellect and logic to explain God's acts. Against what seemed to them an unacceptable restriction of God's omnipotence, nominalists belonged among the movements of thought which intended to save the schools of theology and the university faculties from dangerous pagan influences. The nominalists' most formidable weapon against rationalistic theories was to demonstrate the utter inadequacy of human rational thought to plumb the mysteries of God's free will. They cut the central connections high medieval philosophers had developed between earth and heaven. The highlight of theological treatises in the high middle ages had been to support the belief of God's existence via rational and epistemological deliberations. Like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas was convinced that it was possible to deduce from the things seen in the world of human beings (per visibilia) secure information about the analogues invisible cause of world and universe (ad invisibilia).61 From the hierarchy visible in the existing created order he extrapolated the necessity of the creator's existence.62 According to Ockham's critique of the Thomist synthesis, God's power to change the existing order at any given time through the absolute power (potestas absoluta) of His free and unknowable will rendered any trust in the hierarchy of a radically contingent human world conditional; for some of Ockham's more radical followers the phenomenal world became even more untrustworthy.63 Similarly, nominalist epistemology had irrevocably separated the created world from God by limiting the proof for the existence of a thing to the empirical perception of the thing by the individual. To prove God's existence conclusively, He would have to be immediately perceptible to human beings, a postulate untenable in the light of human daily experience and of religious doctrine. In Ockham's opinion, neither God's existence nor the existence of any of God's other attributes could be understood or held according to the feeble powers of the human intellect; they had to be believed: "Dico quod non potest demonstrari, quod desit est omnino... sed sola fide tenetur."64 Ockham and the nominalists were less and less interested in the power which had created the existing world (God's potestas ordinata) and more and more fascinated by the power which could potentially create any number of other worlds (God's potestas absoluta).65 The theses which the nominalists established between human empirical truth and religious revealed truth is also evident in their concept of science. Ockham, as the first philosopher to apply Aristotle's strict definition of science to the subject of theology, commenced his Commentary on the Sentences with the provocative proposition that theology was not a science in the strict sense.66 Ockham's concept of theology was a voluntaristic and conventional one, "based on willed agreements and conventions, not on common natures and necessary connections."67 For the

62 Cf. the description of 'Thomas' exact traits of thought in Hans Saß's introduction to Thomas von Aquin, Die Kompendien der 'Summe gegen die Heiden' und der 'Summe der Theologie', ed. Hans Saß (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. XIII-XL.
63 Cf. Loffl, William of Ockham, p. xiii: "Within the limits of certainty governing the natural order, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that Ockham totally accepted the regularities of nature and the constancy of moral norms." Edelgrothe ("Boethian Epistemology," 54) also stresses Ockham's cautious reading of his distinction between the potestas absoluta and ordinata. "[M]en can rest assured in the knowledge that God is not ruthlessly going to do something whimsical, like destroy his creation, by the exercise of his absolute power. God simply never acts outside of his ordained power." Cf. also E. A. Moody, "Ockham, Bonaventure, and Nicholas of Autrecourt," Franciscan Studies 7 (1947), 113-46.
64 Quodlibet I, q. 1, in Opera Theologica, vol. 4, p. 31.
Franciscan belief meant the individual's agreement with a proposition without secular evidence but according to a free decision of one's will. Theology had the task of backing up such a voluntaristic religious belief. The distance between Christian belief and the credere of human ratio was so enormous because the intellect could rely only on the doubtle authority of human beings capable of error, while Christian fides had its basis in the revelations of the deity.

The general rule that, when in conflict, deliberations based on theology should always prevail over philosophical or scientific propositions, is nothing new in the history of medieval philosophy/theology. In the wake of the reception of Aristotle, e.g., Pope Gregory IX warned the scholars at the University of Paris in his Parens Scieniarum (1231) that there should be no commissio of philosophy and theology. As G.R. Evans summarizes: 'Theologicae intellectus ought to be the dominant partner: [...] Theology should proceed according to approved tradition. When faith is balanced on a structure of reasoning it is made vain and unprofitable, for faith has no merit if it depends on human reason.'

The same restrictions were still in place in the fourteenth century, when John Buridan remembered the oath taken in the previous century by those accepting the art: they should avoid disputing theological problems if they could; if and if they touched on such matters by chance, they should always decide in favor of the orthodox teachings of the Church. What is new in the fourteenth century is that the nominalists' more radical insistence on a separation of 'truth' resulted in a shift from interest to immanence. The secular sphere lost its character of a mere significant and gained importance as a worthwhile subject of investigation.

This shift of interest pressured the nominalists to invent structural and rhetorical devices which made two separate discourses possible. Of course, due to the powerful influence of reslist (analogical) thought in Christianity, theological authorities had made pronouncements on practically everything which the nominalists believed could be scrutinized by human ratio. The nominalists' solution was to entertain their theses on the contingent secular world in their writings or during academic disputations to the point where they contradicted traditional authority. Then, in a voluntarist leap of faith, they embraced the existing doctrine to escape the danger of being accused of heresy. A relatively well-known example is the case of Nicole Oresme (1320-1382), John Buridan's famous student, who had used logic and mathematics to demonstrate, well before the better-known Renaissance scientists, the possibility of a heliocentric universe.

When challenged, Oresme abandoned his theory into the fictitious remonstration of the Biblical statement that 'Deus enim firmavit orbem.' William of Ockham accepted three kinds of authorities which would instantly outweigh the results of human theorizing: the Bible, certain enactments of the saints, and church dogma. In his Tres Gesta on Quaestio, e.g., he is extremely cautious about contradicting Scripture or the determinatio et doctrina of the Roman Church, or the sententia of doctors approved by the Church and is adamant about not speaking as one who asserts a certain opinion, but solely "in the person" of one who does.

Finally, the fourteenth-century techniques of university disputations, the persuasio at Oxford and the aporia at Paris, seem to have been developed especially to deliver philosophy, the arts, and the natural sciences from their roles as ancilia theologice. These disputations or collations were not merely held gratia exerciti,

69 Cf. Evans, Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages, p. 22.
71 Cf. Hans Blumenau, ""Der hypokratische Ursprung und die Weltsicht des Mundschen,"" Studium Generalis 8 (1955), 617-68, and his The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, p. 328: ""The nominalist theology induces a human relation to the world which implicit consent could have been formulated in the postulate that man had to believe as though God were dead. This induces a treacherous taking stock of the world, which can be designated as the motive power of the age of reason."
73 Cf. Evans, Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages, p. 21.
for they provided a testing ground for the most personal opinions of those involved in them. Through them the masters tried to feel out the reaction of the public. ... When Nicole d'Asteaucourt was under fire because of his unorthodox views, he calmly answered that he had pronounced these dicta as material for disputation without stating anything pertinaciously ("Hoc est dixi disputative et causa colleotum nihil ausserendo pertinaciter.")

The technique of the university disputations mirrors perhaps most tellingly the nominalist's separation of truth into a religious truth which was the only secure truth and which could be attained by faith alone and a contingent, secular truth which could be gained through human rational thinking.

A fundamental change of the premises of medieval thought such as the separation of truth was not limited to the ivory towers of colleges and universities but had immediate consequences for the Christian individual. If the nominalist transformation of the concept of science was far beyond the reach of the majority of medieval people, the practical effects on theology were palpable for everyone. The nominalists, mostly mendicants strongly interested in living up to the daily questions of their uneducated audiences, were intent on spreading some of the theological principles of nominalism thought in popularized form. The English Dominican, Robert Holcot, one of the most widely read philosophers/theologians of the fourteenth century, propagated nominalist thought in a practical and understandable manner in his Super Librum Supplement; the context of his stories and examples reached wide distribution through sermons.

Hocott had already challenged the high-medieval rationalist attempts at proving God's existence in his Commentary on the Sentences. He declared that no scholar, Christian or pagan, had ever come up with satisfying proof for the immortality of the soul or for God's existence. Like Ockham, he was irritated by the questions of many a lay person who demanded from the experts at the

universities rational explanations to bolster their faith. Holcot reacted to these and similar lay questions by functionalizing the nominalist separation of truth in pedagogical form. At least twice he tells the following example which was meant to convince a doubting Christian or an atheist to accept the doctrine of the immortality of the soul without the benefit of intellectual support, in a voluntaristic and fideistic leap of faith:

A simple Dominican lay brother converted a heretic, where good clerks had tried and failed. The heretic, 'a great clerk' himself, persisted in refusing to believe in the immortality of the soul, until the lay brother put it to him that one had better 'play safe'. One would lose nothing by believing even if one's belief were unfounded; one would gain eternal bliss if it should prove to be true.

Hocott's popularizations of current theology would have interested late-medieval writers such as Chaucer and Gower who often transformed—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—their own daily experiences with coeval theological controversy into literature. Chaucer was certainly aware of the medieval Christian distinction between caritas (the selfless kind of love which inspires work for the benefit of all humankind) and cupidity (love turned from God to one's self or to other creatures for their own sake), and he knew which kind of love he would have to favor to live up to the official rules established by the medieval church for the writing of literature. There is no doubt that Chaucer saw himself confronted by the very same religious discourse which obliged Petrarch and Boccaccio to declare any secular literature creation as 'ingenious stratagem for doctor childish man for his own good.' He was conscious that—according to church doctrine—the love he celebrated as a court poet was second rate, was denounced as

75 Cf. Gabriel, "The College System," p. 101: "The fourteenth-century disputations were not ... the 'bare disquisitions' impeigned by the Franciscans; they provided an opportunity to project daring ideas and were a more effective method of learning how to get along without teachers, which must, after all, be the final educational achievement of any teaching." 76 Cf. Smalley, *English Priests and Antiquity*, pp. 186f.
78 Cf. Alastair Minns, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*. Scholastic literary attitudes in the later Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, 1988), p. 165: "Holcot's theology would have interested Chaucer's translation of Boethius, and other writings, attest his interest in predication and related subjects, and the persons representable for Tresinoe and Crinoede could have appreciated and would have approved of what Holcot had to say about the advantages of the 'good pagan'. There is evidence that Gower also was aware of theological controversies." 79 R.C. Griffin, "Heaven and Earth in the Parliament of Fowls," *MLF* /31 (1963), 493.
diverting human attentions from the important, real love which alone could lead to salvation. In his Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer had still tried to attribute equal importance to, to synthesize both kinds of love. When it came to writing Troilus and Criseyde, however, the secular love affair has taken over most of his attention. As in the late-medieval nominalists’ writings, disputations, and their popularizations, the divine truth of revelation can only be rendered as a fixed, inevitable leap of faith, a structural decision necessary to avoid criticism or a bad conscience. The degree of importance which Chaucer intentionally attributes to secular matters in his poem demonstrates that he prefers to be the poet of this earthly, human truth. Thus, the existence of the “Epilogue” is an indication of his awareness that the only universal security is to be found beyond and far away from the contingency of the world he describes and the fallible human words he has at his disposal. Marilyn McCord Adams’ summary of her chapter entitled “Faith and Reason” offers a good opportunity to see the correspondence between the Christian writer, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the Christian nominalist, William of Ockham. It suffices to support Chaucer for Ockham and writer for philosopher in the following quote to comprehend the chasm between the first four and three quarters and the “Epilogue” of Troilus and Criseyde as a similar antinomical strategy:

He [Ockham] thinks that given who we are, we cannot but employ the laws of thought and various principles as reliable guides. As Augustine taught, reason distinguishes us from the beasts, and God intends us to use it to understand the created world. Nevertheless, given who God is, we shall never be able to grasp him fully thereby. When all is said and done, the Christian philosopher must join the rest of the Church in thanking God for grace to acknowledge and worship the mystery.80

80 William Ockham, vol. II, p. 1010. Cf. also Robert M. Jordan, Chaucer’s Poetics and the Modern Reader (Berkeley, CA, 1960), p. 125f. “Chaucer was sub-diveini in the postdrama writer about the efficacy of his language and about his own position as an arbiter between truth and falsehood or between truth and countertruth. But if he was uncertain about his position in the tangible, historical world, he could still place himself, alternatively, in a stable, overarching reality whose language was unambiguously true. He could know the world and the truth of it, as he urged in the formal ‘Truth’ and through prayer to the God of all he could attain the deliverance of truth. Even though that reality was undergoing dissolution in Chaucer’s time and its pervasive power was waning, it nevertheless provided a comprehensive and unified system in which language and reality were represented in a fixed embodiment of truth. Postmodernism offers no such vision beyond itself of an absolute and as such. Unlike Chaucer, the postmodern writer is uncertain about his position in the world, but unlike Chaucer he has no supramundane refuge. He is lost in confusion,” as Walker Percy entitled his book describing his contemporary life.

Due to the modernist/postmodernist notion that the twentieth century depicts a world gone entirely recalcitrant to universals, a contingent world, a world supportive of the individual’s unpredictable free will, i.e., a nominalistic world, another group of critics has looked upon late medieval nominalism as a historical precedent—and therefore, a reassertion—of prevalent modern/postmodern perceptions. As far as late medieval English literature is concerned, critics such as Stephen Knight have made a literary nominalism responsible for the greater attractiveness certain medieval writers, e.g., Chaucer, exert on twentieth-century readers.

Various writers have identified Chaucer’s uniqueness as wit, humor, irony, God’s plenty and so on. But behind the terms that have been used is the inescapable conviction that there is a certain quality that links him firmly with the modern world and its ideas, whereas other medieval writers, although recognized as being of high quality, are somehow to be cut off by more than time from our literature and ways of thinking.81

Knight goes on to say that our modern predilection for Chaucer is due to the novel-like psychological depiction of the characters in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde:

Apart from Christian theologians, we are all nominalists nowadays, and in my view Chaucer’s shift in the method of characterization reflects this major philosophical shift in the late Middle Ages. It is here that the immediacy of his poetry lies—the characters, like the Monk, Wife of Bath, Miller, are as real to us as Shakespeare’s, or Dickens’ characters are and, as no other medieval figures are.82

Knight’s modern Chaucer is an at least partly anachronistic notion in that it shows little awareness of twentieth-century readers’ own natural inclination to find something fundamentally attuned to their own perceptions of art, language, and the situation. Chaucer too, as a writer in the language of this world, was not always sure where he was, though when he looked beyond language he knew where he wanted to go.”

world. More recently, J. Stephen Russell was criticized for attributing to both Ockham and Chaucer a "linguistic relativism" and for stylizing them in post-de Saussurean linguistics. Claims such as Russell's may, of course, be especially tempting when one considers how many modern and postmodern philosophers have developed their theories on the basis of nominalist thought and how much the interplay between logic and (analytic) philosophy of language dominates the fourteenth as well as the twentieth century. Moreover, as the nominalism paradigm has been greatly facilitated by some of the critical theories which evolved in the wake of the more general paradigm shift since the 1960s, more of these recent approaches to medieval English literature are liable to follow. One can only guess which kinds of readings the paradigm will produce when medievalists become sign-searchers after discovering the subchapter entitled "Deconstruction as nominalism" in Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" or Richard Rorty's recent remarks on an ironist/nominalist Derrida.

4. Final Observations

Keeping the demands of contemporary theory in mind, I would like to end on three short observations about the critical methodology underlying my own essay and many of the studies on nominalism and late-medieval English literature. Both appear to follow Thomas S. Kuhn's view of the necessity for paradigm shifts to prepare for advances in scientific/philosophical theory. However, Kuhn's concept of the paradigm shift suffers from its attributing all shifts to the pressure of internal contradictions rather than (as in Marxist theories) to the pressure of external forces which exclude theories which are unable to adapt to new external, societal demands.

Moreover, the accounts of nominalism and its ultimate victory over realist positions suggest a finality of developments which is more befitting what Louis Althusser terms the need of the theorist to move from ideology to science than with Kuhn's theory which suggests no promised land of science but a never-ending series of paradigms replacing other paradigms.

Finally, both this collection of essays and my own contribution are functional in promoting the very paradigm shift (or shift in the ruling ideology) which is being discussed. Can I assume, as I have done in this essay, to make authoritative, evaluative statements on the causes and developments of the paradigm shift while being a participant in it? I strongly believe that critics working with the nominalism paradigm need to stay aware of their own obvious drive to the interpretive mastery of the cultural texts in front of them. They should avoid attempting to position themselves outside of the existing discourse and occupying


what Shoshana Felman has called the textual or critical "blind spot." They should argue for the relationship between literature and nominalism and put forward their various efforts on secure theoretical bases. Then—and only then—will the search for literary nominalism continue to contribute sound re-readings of late medieval texts.

Jay Rund:

**Julian of No**

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