

Chaucer as A Realist

Introduction:

Legouis in his History of English Literature (written by him in collaboration with Cazamian) pays a high, but just, tribute to Chaucer's realism and his self-effacement in his observation and recording of the life of his age. That he has effectively captured for us the body and soul of his age has been universally recognized. One reason why his work is so authentic and impressive is that he has a tendency to efface himself. Were he more obtrusive and more self-centred, or more didactic and reform-minded, his work would have been proportionally less realistic, less interesting, and less convincing.

Chaucer's Chosen Field:

The vivid and authentic portrayal of the life and manners of his age was Chaucer's chosen field for which nature and experience had equipped him so exquisitely. But Chaucer came to this field after a long journey in the dim valleys of allegory and dream poetry based on his contemporary French and Italian models. It was only when he was about fifty that he realized that his real field lay elsewhere.

With The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer's aim and practice as a poet underwent a sea change. He descended from the ethereal regions of romance and allegory and the dream-world of conventional literature, and planted his feet firmly on the ground. Here, to quote an opinion, "the fantastic world of romance and allegory melts away; Troy and Thebes, palaces made of glass and temples of brass,, allegorical gardens and marvellous fountains evaporate, and in their place we see the whole stream of English society in the fourteenth century." In The Canterbury Tales Nature herself became Chaucer's model. He saw what was, and painted that he saw.

No Complete Self-effacement:

Chaucer could have claimed like Fielding that he gave "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." He was decidedly the first realist in English literature. Much of his realism is indebted to his tendency towards self-effacement which is necessary for a dramatist and very desirable for a novelist. The dramatist himself does not appear on the stage. He reveals his characters through what they say and do and does not offer to interpret for the reader or the spectator their words and deeds. The novelist does likewise, though he is much freer than the dramatist. Chaucer has well been called the first novelist even before the appearance of the novel, as also the first dramatist before the appearance of the drama in England.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that so far as The Canterbury Tales is concerned, Chaucer does not efface himself completely, though he does see what is and does paint it as he sees it. It is particularly true of the Prologue where he himself seems to be very much present like the guide in a picture gallery, nudging the spectator with his elbow and directing his attention to this or that feature of one portrait or the other. In the tales proper, however, the writer disappears completely and presents himself only as a reporter of the words and -deeds of the pilgrims on the road, who go jostling and story-telling and raising a cloud of dust behind them. Thus, whereas in the Prologue Chaucer adopts the static mode of characterization, in the tales he adopts the dramatic mode. In the Prologue it is he who is supposed to be enlightening us about the dress, appearance, habits, and salient traits of the pilgrims; in the tales he lets them do it for themselves.

The Prologue:

Irrespective of the question whether Chaucer effaces himself for not the Prologue, it is commonly conceded that the characters he draws are thoroughly realistic. All of them seem to have been, drawn from life. His portraits show how penetratingly observant an eye he possessed. His record of the minutest details of the appearance, dress, and behaviour of the pilgrims makes their portraits disarmingly convincing. Consider, for instance, the description of the Miller:

is herd as any sowe or fox was rede,
and thereto brode, as though it wer a spade.

"What makes these portraits all the more realistic is the seeming spontaneity with which Chaucer draws them. When Chaucer is telling us something about a pilgrim it seems that he or she is standing right before him and he is looking at what is and painting what he is looking at. Chaucer uses that greatest of arts which lies in concealing all semblance of art. "No small part of the realism of these portraits," says W. H. Clawson, "is their informality, their lack of regular order." The details about the pilgrims seem to be coming from him without any method or design, and that is exactly what induces in the reader a strong feeling of the actuality of the characters who are being so described. Another relevant point to be kept in view is Chaucer's broadmindedness, his lack of prejudice, and his real sympathy with all classes and conditions of people. Irrespective of the fact whether he is dealing with a rascal or a saint, an angel or a devil, he shows no trace of either anger and bitterness or excessive reverence. He rejects nothing but likes all. He leaves the task of improving the world to his contemporaries such as Langland, Wyclif, and the "moral Gower." As for himself, he accepts the world as he finds it. He paints many rascals indeed (most of the pilgrims are in fact rascals), without pillorying or strongly indicting any one of them. He is too indulgent and tolerant for that. His all-embracing human sympathy prevents him from standing between the portrait and the spectator. Let the spectator himself judge and arraign, if he likes, the characters whose portraits he has drawn; the painter's work is over. We may also notice the happy absence of idealization from Chaucer's character-portrayal. The characters of the Knight, the Plowman, and the poor Parson are the only exceptions.

On the whole, the characters are so lifelike that some critics have suggested that Chaucer might have painted from real life. J. M. Manly, for instance, opines that Chaucer had in mind some "definite persons" while portraying the pilgrims in the Prologue. It will be an ideal pastime to contest issues with this critic. We should not approach literature with the attitude of a detective to search into the raw material which a creative artist employs. It is enough for us to recognize the fact that Chaucer's characters are very lifelike. His characters, in the words of Palgrave, are

Seen in his mind so vividly, that we
Know them, more dearly than the men we see.

What we should insist on is not the "actuality" of a writer's work, but its verisimilitude. What a writer gives may not (and should not) be a literal transcription of reality, but only a semblance of it. Aristotle considers poetry more philosophical and more real than history, and he is quite right. To say that Chaucer copied real characters from life will be underrating his literary genius. His is not a mechanic art. Well does A. C. Ward remark: "It would of course be foolish to suppose that everything in the Prologue is 'from the life.' Chaucer was too good an artist and had too lively an imagination to be a mere copyist,

even of life itself. Life was only his raw material, to which he could on occasion give a more convincing and satisfying shape than Nature's own. So we can only guess at how far Chaucer drew upon imparted information and how far upon his own sense of probability."

The Tales:

Unlike in the Prologue, in the tales proper Chaucer effaces himself completely like a perfect dramatist. He is there, of course, and he is one of the pilgrims, too; but he is there as a spectator and an authentic reporter. In the tales the portraits walk out of their frames, as it were, and reveal themselves through the tales they narrate, the comments which they make on each other's tales, and their mutual exchanges and even skirmishes. It is in the tales that the author disappears completely. Right in the beginning of the Prologue Chaucer takes pains to emphasize his role as a mere reporter. He feigns even to have reproduced the very words spoken by the pilgrims in the narration of their tales

For this ye knowen also wel as I,
Who-so shall tell a tale aftere a man,
He moot reherce, as ny as evere he can,
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudelie and large;
Or elles moot tells, his tale untrewre,
Or feyne things orjynde -words newe.

So the author bows out of the scene and assumes the role of a spectator and reporter. Each story is intended to reveal its narrator. Legouis maintains: "It then behoves the author to conceal himself, to sacrifice his own literary talent and sense of proportion, and give place to another, who may be ignorant, garrulous, clumsy, foolish, or coarse, or moved by enthusiasms and prejudices shared by his creator." And what a sacrifice! Says the same critic: "The Canterbury Tales the element of the poet's personality has been subdued, superseded, by pleasure in observing and understanding. Hitherto this degree of peaceful, impartial spectatorship had never been reached by poets."

It is interesting to note how the tale of each pilgrim is in conformity with his or her character a glimpse of which is provided by the poet in the Prologue. In many a case the story gives finishing touches to the portrait of the narrator as initially set forth in the Prologue. Chaucer here seems to have followed the classical principle of decorum without being aware of it. And it is not only the content of each story but also its diction which reveals its narrator. The Prioress, being an ecclesiastic, tells, appropriately enough, the story of a Christian saint murdered by the "cursed Jews". The Knight comes out with a tale of chivalry. The merry, sporting Monk, on being exhorted by the Host to tell a "merry" tale, revengefully narrates a long melancholy tale of the fall of Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, and many more, but he is shut up mid way by the fervent words of the Host:

Sire Monk, no moore of this, so Godyow blesse!
Your tale anoyeth al this campaignye.

He asks the Monk to narrate instead a story of hunting, but the latter does not oblige, and retires sullenly. The tipsy Miller offers to tell a bawdy story of the seduction of a

carpenter's wife by a clerk. The Reeve (who does the work of a carpenter also) protests at the Miller's "lewed dronken harlotrye":

It is a synne and eek a greet folye
To apeyren any man, or hym defame,
And eek to bryngen wyves in swichfame
Thou maystynogh of other thynges seyn.

But the Miller ignores his protest and tells his ribald story. The Reeve in retaliation narrates the story of the seduction of a miller's wife and daughter by two Cambridge scholars. The Friar tells the story of a roguish summoner who is carried by the Devil to hell. The Summoner in reply comes out with the story of a greedy friar who is humbled on account of his greed. The Nun tells a story of miracles. Chaucer himself comes out with perhaps the dullest of tales. His boring narrative is cut short by the Host after he has proceeded to the extent of some thirty stanzas:

"Nameore of this, for Coddess dignitee,"
Quod owe Hooste, "for thou makest me
So wery of thy verray lewednesse
That, also wisly God my soule bless,
Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche... "

Chaucer's choice of the dullest tale for himself is a refreshing example of self-directed irony. Only a great humorist can laugh at himself; and Chaucer is certainly among the greatest humorists. He is really delightful in his laughter at his own expense. How can we believe that he was the least skilled of all the narrators?

As a man, Chaucer depicts himself, in the words of the Host, as ashy, unobtrusive, self-effacing, and shoe-contemplating person. This is the Host addresses him:

And sayde thus, "What man artow?" quod he:
"Thou lookest as thou woldestfynde an hare,
For ever upon the ground I se thee stare."

On being asked to come out with a "tale of mirth" by the Host he pleads his ignorance very politely:

"Hoostee", quod I, "ne beth natyvele apayd,
For other tale certes kan I noone.
But of a rhym I lerned long agoone. "

Conclusion:

Whether or not Chaucer was as unobtrusive a man as he presents himself in The Canterbury Tales, it is true that as an artist he followed the principle of least interference with his material. The degree of his self-effacement is really surprising. He does not project the tint of his likes and dislikes, fads and fetishes, views and prejudices on what he paints. He is no moralist either. "Like Shakespeare", says Compton-Rickett, "he makes it his business, in The Canterbury Tales, to paint life as he sees it, and leaves others to draw the moral." Thus, to conclude, "Chaucer sees what is and paints it as he sees it." And what is more, "he effaces himself in order to look at it better."