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Chaucer and Aesthetics

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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When I say that beauty has been banished, I do not mean that beautiful things have themselves been banished, for the humanities are made up of beautiful poems, stories, paintings,

sketches, sculpture, film, essays, debates, and it is this that every day draws us to them. I mean something much more modest: that conversation about the beauty of these things has been banished, so that we coinhabit the space of these objects (even putting them inside us, learning them by heart, carrying one wedged at all times between the upper arm and the breast, placing as many as possible into our bookbags) yet speak about their beauty only in whispers.

Elaine Scarry¹

[P]oetry, as a form of "literature," exploits potentialities in language, especially metaphorical potentialities, that are not exploited by other forms of discourse. Words in poetry, in the way they are chosen and arranged, have a wider range of possible meanings than they have in ordinary discourse, and not in any way confined to denotation; the language is richer, more suggestive, more elusive, more open; meaning can be dwelt upon, and fresh meanings can emerge in the process of rereading, already there but newly discovered.

Derek Pearsall²

When as a poet in his twenties Geoffrey Chaucer composed the *Book of the Duchess*, he inaugurated what we now regard as his authorial career by declaring in his distanced narrative voice that "sorwful ymagynacioun / Ys alway hooly in my mynde" (14-15).³ Distinct from memory (which fosters history) and reason (which grounds philosophy), imagination was for the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance the quintessential poetic faculty. In this word one may read Chaucer as claiming for himself a mind **[End Page 225]** so steeped in the poetic faculty that he thinks of nothing else. Alternatively, one may read him as asserting for this faculty something so profound as to be spiritual. Some readers, drawn to an artist who "exploits potentialities in language," will see both meanings.

Regardless of one's interpretive choice, one finds a poet whose artistry is daringly self-aware. Early in the *Book of the Duchess* the narrator

aligns himself with other poets, when he turns to a book in which

were written fables
That clerkes had in olde tyme,
And other poetes, put in rime
To rede and for to be in minde.

(52-55)

And he does so at poem's end, when he announces his intention to record his dream in verse:

"I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best."

(1331-33)

The *Book of the Duchess* may be seen as Chaucer's attempt to fashion an English poetic diction to match that of the continental writers whose vernacular translations and romances he has been reading.⁴

The language of poetry, Pearsall contends, differs from ordinary discourse in that it "is richer, more suggestive, more elusive, more open." Such a statement challenges the claim, made by ideological critique, that imaginative literature does not possess value distinct unto itself. It is altogether fitting, in our "post"-postmodern critical climate, that the study of aesthetics be renewed with vigor and intensity. Recent books such as Piero Boitani's *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (1989), Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), George Levine's *Aesthetics and Ideology* (1994), Warren Ginsberg's *Dante's Aesthetic of Being* (2000), John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas's *The New Aestheticism* (2003), Christopher Butler's *Pleasure and the Arts* (2004), and Frank Kermode's *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (2004) testify to a willingness among critics to delineate the distinguishing characteristics of literary language alongside matters of ethics, ideology,

and social theory.⁵ It is particularly appropriate to see such conversation resume in Chaucer studies because of this poet's sustained self-representation as a writer concerned with the artistic possibilities of language. **[End Page 226]**

A short passage in the *Book of the Duchess* conveys Chaucer's portrayal of an entrenched aesthetic sensibility. The narrator has been awakened by the "noyse and swetnesse" (297) of a multitude of small birds. The...

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