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Prosochê and the Transformation of the Self in Geoffrey Chaucer's Poetry*

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the concept of *prosochê*, defined as concentration on the present moment, in Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry. Even though the Greek term never appears in Chaucer's poetry, the idea of attentive reflection on the self, others, and the cosmos is often articulated by the poet, especially in his courtly poetry, which construes individuals as steeped in apathy and in need of inner transformation. The poet underlines the transformative power of attention through a call to wake up, examples of which will be examined in this article, based on two poems: *The Book of the Duchess* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. It will be shown that Chaucer's engagement with the concept of *prosochê* is testament to the poet's creativity while handling his sources as well as to his moral sensitivity and philosophical reflection.

KEYWORDS: *prosochê*, self-knowledge, the Middle Ages, Geoffrey Chaucer, transformation

STRESZCZENIE

Prosochê i przeobrażenie siebie w poezji Geoffreya Chaucera

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest pojęcie *prosochê*, definiowane jako skupienie się na chwili obecnej, w poezji Geoffreya Chaucera. Mimo iż sam termin grecki nie pojawia się w utworach Chaucera, to idea uważnej refleksji nad samym sobą, innymi oraz kosmosem jest mocno zaakcentowana przez angielskiego poetę, szczególnie w jego poezji dworskiej, która przedstawia postaci pogrążone w apatii oraz potrzebujące wewnętrznej przemiany. Poeta podkreśla transformacyjną moc uwagi poprzez wezwanie do przebudzenia, którego przykłady zostaną omówione w niniejszym artykule na podstawie dwóch utworów: *Księga księżnej* oraz *Troilus i Criseyda*. To, w jaki sposób poeta

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traktuje temat *prosochê*, świadczy o jego twórczym podejściu do źródeł, jak również o wrażliwości moralnej i filozoficznej refleksji.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: *prosochê*, wiedza o sobie, średniowiecze, Geoffrey Chaucer, transformacje

Introduction

Richard Eldridge writes that both literature and philosophy are forms of attention, which – rather than on material actualities – focus on human commitments and passions. While philosophy deals with ideal commitments, generalizing on those that it would be most worthwhile to have, literature turns to the particular, “undertaking to track what is most likely to come, tragically or comically, of the bearing of particular passions in circumstances that remain always in part intractable” (Eldridge, 2009, p. 4). This essay is going to be concerned with a particular kind of attention or concentration, referred to as *prosochê* by ancient philosophers. Most commonly associated with self-awareness and self-improvement, *prosochê* refers not only to attention given to the self, but also to others, to the world and to God; in other words, to seeing oneself *within* the world (Christie, 2012, p. 146). It is a strategy of overcoming self-deception and moral blindness, of clearing space in the mind and reshaping one’s consciousness. Aimed at retrieving a fuller, more encompassing vision of reality, *prosochê* may be understood in terms of a spiritual exercise (see Hadot, 1995, p. 84) or of an art or a habit to be cultivated; in either case, it is “part of a serious, disciplined practice” (Christie, 2012, p. 141).

In Christian contemplative tradition, *prosochê* is related to keeping vigil and goes back to the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, who in the late third and fourth centuries entered into silence and solitude to search for God (Christie, 2012, p. 142). It is also related to *diakrisis* or discernment, that is the capacity of making judgements, and as such it is expected to initiate a gradual transformation in an individual (Christie, 2012, p. 151). The focus on the present moment is intended to encourage reflection on the place of the individuals within a wider scheme of things. “If we think we are rich and noble,” Pierre Hadot notes,

we are to recall that we are made of earth, and ask ourselves where are the famous men who have preceded us now. If, on the contrary, we are poor and in disgrace, we are to take cognizance of the riches and splendors which the cosmos offers us: our body, the earth, the sky, and the stars, and we shall then be reminded of our divine vocation (Hadot, 1995, p. 131).

Such realizations come through the experience of the present moment, for it is in the present that the whole history of the world is contained:

By becoming conscious of one single instant of our lives, one single beat of our hearts, we can feel ourselves linked to the entire immensity of the cosmos, and to the wondrous fact of the world's existence (Hadot, 1995, p. 260).

Hadot sees attention or attentiveness as the fundamental attitude of a philosopher and his argument – even though voiced in a book on Stoic philosophy – applies not only to ancient philosophers, but to all those for whom philosophy is or was a way of life, ancient or modern alike.¹ It also applies to poets, such as Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chaucer's familiarity with philosophy in general² and the Stoic ideas in particular³ has been acknowledged beyond doubt. So has been his interest in the self, which emerges most clearly in the poet's frequent use of the visionary genre concerned as it is with the workings of the individual psyche,⁴ and in the internal monologue, which is most characteristic of Chaucer's courtly poems. It is the courtly poems that most frequently present characters who are in need of transformation. They are characters, such as the Black Knight, who has his "spirites (...) dede" (*BD*, l. 489) and "understondynge lorn" (*BD*, l. 565), or Palamon and Arcite, who live "in angwissh and in wo" (*KnT*, l. 1030).⁵ They represent a subjective mode of consciousness and are unable to disengage from their immediate circumstances, which are not infrequently marked by the pains of love or the loss of separation. They represent figures of abject liminality and may be referred to as 'living' or 'walking dead.'⁶ Chaucer's poems contain a wealth of philosophical passages which are intended to set the characters' experience in proper context and this intention is often signaled by a call to awaken their inner selves, which will be my main focus in this essay. I wish to argue that in his courtly poems, such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer encourages his characters to pay 'attention' to their inner lives, that is to consciously relate to their thoughts

1 In a more contemporary context, the concept of attention or attentiveness has been applied to various forms of introspection known under the name 'mindfulness,' including corporate and ecological mindfulness. See Christie, 2012, pp. 141–178, Chapter 5: *Prosoche: The Art of Attention*; Pigliucci, 2022, pp. 371–382; and Tran, 2021, pp. 463–478.

2 For Chaucer's engagement with philosophy, see Lynch, 2000; Burnley, 1979; and Mogan, 1969.

3 For a survey of criticism on Chaucer and the Stoics, see DeMarco, 2008, p. 135, n. 28.

4 See the definition of dream vision in Wynne-Davies, ed., 1995, p. 538.

5 Citations to Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (ed. L.D. Benson, 1988).

6 See Gilbert, 2011, and Shimomura, 2013, pp. 1–37.

and to see themselves within a wider whole in order to effect change and transformation.

The Book of the Duchess

In *The Book of the Duchess*, the call to attention appears in the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, which frames the main story of the Man in Black mourning the death of his beloved Blanche. As narrated by Chaucer, the story describes Alcyone's desperate plea to find out about her lost husband and her husband's 'return' with the message: "My swete wyf, / Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf, / For in your sorwe there lyth no red; / For, certes, swete, I am but ded" (*BD*, ll. 201–204). The cry "Awake!" signals a moment of great urgency: it is uttered three times by Juno's messenger in order to wake up Morpheus (*BD*, ll. 179, 181, 183), before it is echoed by Ceyx, recovered by the god of sleep from the sea, in his message to Alcyone. It represents a call to self-knowledge and – followed as it is by a commonplace expression of the transience of earthly joy: "To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!" (*BD*, l. 211) – it refers primarily to the awareness of human mortality.⁷

Since Chaucer's poem is grounded in historical reality, memorializing the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster,⁸ the injunction to "awake" seems to express the poet's concern for John of Gaunt's grief, albeit in an indirect and a little shocking manner. Instead of a more comforting message about their beloved's celestial whereabouts and well-being, Alcyone and by extension the Man in Black are told that they will never see them again, for death is final, while earthly life – short. A similar message about the transience of earthly happiness is repeated in a number of other poems by Chaucer.⁹ It has parallels in the Stoic writings which emphasize the cold, empty finality of human experience and reveal a human disappointment that common desires, such as a desire for a long life – whether for ourselves or for our dearests – frequently run contrary to the decrees of fate, providence and natural law.¹⁰ In fact, the method Chaucer suggests

7 To know oneself, as proclaimed through the Delphic dictum *Nosce te ipsum*, was to be aware of man's rational nature, his mortal body and immortal soul. Ann W. Astell notes that these three elements, when taken together, amount to a single 'epic truth,' a truth which during the Middle Ages became dissociated from the epic genre and developed independently. See Astell, 1994, p. 18. On various interpretations of the Delphic dictum, also see Bennett, 1982, pp. 135–172.

8 See Fumo, 2015, pp. 18–19.

9 See *Troilus and Criseyde* (*TC*, IV:1–2); *The Complaint of Mars* (*Mars*, ll. 221–222); "The Man of Law's Tale" (*MLT*, ll. 1132–1133 and 1140–1141).

10 "Man ponders on matters immortal and eternal, forming plans for his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, while in the meantime death surprises him amidst his far-reaching designs,

for dealing with grief resembles the “shock and awe tactics” used by the Stoic philosophers. Addressed to “young men on the cusp of adulthood – hooked on material goods or fearful of loss and irreversible bad luck” (Sherman, 2021, p. 34), this strategy was aimed at waking the listeners up, based on the assumption that virtue is aroused by a shock.¹¹ That Chaucer’s direct addressee might be identified with such young men is shown in the Man in Black’s young age of “four and twenty” (*BD*, l. 455). By being reminded that all earthly joys are transient, Alcyone and by extension the Man in Black are encouraged to see their spouse’s death as inscribed into the natural course of events and thereby as expected rather than unforeseen occurrences.¹² If, as the Stoics propose, we are to desire those things that happen to us, Chaucer’s grieving characters are in a way asked to ‘desire’ their spouse’s death, in the same manner that they might ‘desire’ their future ‘misfortunes,’ including their own deaths, by accepting them in advance.

This tactic for handling grief may seem shocking to a young mind as may Chaucer’s impatience with grief, which becomes apparent when the poet’s rendition of the story of Ceyx and Alcyone is examined against its sources. Chaucer’s Ceyx does not instruct his wife to get up and weep for him and neither are the lovers metamorphosed into deathless birds.¹³ Instead, Alcyone is requested to bury her husband’s body and resume life on her own. This she never does, for she soon joins her husband in the world of the dead. The fact that she does not awaken to a new life without her husband may be variously interpreted. We may say, as Jessica Rosenfeld does, that in giving up life rather than sorrow Alcyone makes “an ethical and existential choice” (Rosenfeld, 2013, p. 102). We may also observe that her ‘decision’ to die situates Alcyone on the side of the spiritual rather than purely philosophical reality; in other words, that she refuses to embrace the stoical response to life’s painful events, based as it is on the effort of self-discipline, and decides to align herself with the more-than-human perspective instead, based on an invisible principle of life, undiscovered and undiscoverable by reason.¹⁴ We may also argue, as I intend to do here,

and even this period that we call old age is only the circling of a handful of years.” See Seneca, “Consolation to Marcia,” in: Seneca, 2007, p. 64.

11 See Seneca, “Letter 94. On the value of advice,” in: Seneca, 2021, p. 348.

12 Epictetus, for instance, says: “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.” See Epictetus, 1983, p. 13, par. 8.

13 For Ovid’s version of the story, see Ovid, “From the *Metamorphoses*,” trans. by Frank Justus Miller, in Miller, ed., 1977, pp. 106–111. For changes introduced to the story by Chaucer, see Phillips, 1997, pp. 34–36; and Rosenfeld, 2013, pp. 101–103.

14 For this definition of the spiritual, see Kotva, 2020, p. 2 & 182, n. 4.

that the call “awake” merely initiates rather than contains the possibility of transformation, which – Chaucer seems to be saying – requires more time than Alcyone is allotted in the short framing tale.

When seen from this perspective, the story of Ceyx and Alcyone offers a negative rather than positive example when it comes to handling grief, for the injunction to wake up is not followed by any other action than the act of death. While Alcyone dedicates all her mental attention to knowing whether her husband is alive or dead, she is not allowed any time to fully activate the power of memory and place their life together in a wider perspective, as the Man in Black does. The many questions that the grieving widower is asked by the dreamer-narrator concerning his situation are in fact intended to direct his attention away from loss and toward the joyful past that he enjoyed with his lady. It is the persistence of the narrator’s questions that keeps the Man in Black ‘awake’ in that it promotes attention as a habitual practice, which needs to be consciously cultivated rather than accessed easily in a brief moment of time. Requested to narrate “[i]n what wyse, how, why, and wherfore” he lost his happiness (*BD*, l. 747), the Man in Black is encouraged to present a full and systematic account of his life. He is asked to present the circumstances of his sorrowful experience “al hooly” (*BD*, l. 746), that is completely, and he requests in return that he is listened to “hooly” (*BD*, l. 751), that is with better attention, which the dreamer assents to, again repeating the word ‘hooly’: “I shal right blythely, so God me save, / Hooly, with al the wit I have, / Here yow as wel as I kan” (*BD*, ll. 755–757).

This spontaneous exchange between the Knight and the narrator may be seen as a follow up on Ceyx’s conversation with Alcyone, which was intended to ‘wake her up,’ for it suggests that attention – when allotted ‘wholly’ to this task – is crucial to developing a coherent narrative. Such a narrative in turn is crucial to healing a fragmented self by bridging the chasm between childhood and adulthood, an idea which is supported by the narrator’s intention to use his “power hool” (*BD*, l. 554) to make the mourning man “hool” (*BD*, l. 553). In the autobiographical account of his life, the Man in Black meets the immature adolescent that he once was. He refers to the days of his “firste youthe” (*BD*, l. 799), which were marked by idleness (*BD*, ll. 800–804), and records the indelible image his lady made on his mind (*BD*, ll. 820–826). He describes how they became one (*BD*, ll. 1289–1295), united in “an ‘alikeness’ born of love and the good itself” (Rosenfeld, 2013, p. 99). It has been noted how the Man in Black’s memories allow him to arrest the flow of time by bringing the past moments into the present.¹⁵ It seems that the future might also be contained in

15 See Murton, 2016, pp. 101–103.

the present moment, for the Man in Black's assertion "She ys ded!" (*BD*, l. 1309; emphasis mine), which concludes the account of his life, might be seen to imply a continuity of life and experience. Even though his dead wife's existence is now restricted by the limits of human memory, it continues despite or beyond her death. From this perspective, to concentrate on the present involves looking back on the past and ahead into the future by drawing them into the present moment, which can only be done through attention.

Troilus and Criseyde

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, the call "Awake!" appears in conversations between Pandarus and Troilus and is aimed at recovering the courtly lover from a state of emotional stupor caused by love. Visiting the lovesick Troilus, Pandarus finds him despondent, sleepless, "langwisshinge" (*TC*, I.569), lying "as stulle as he ded were" (*TC*, I.723),¹⁶ and he immediately declares himself Troilus's healer. He does not begin with diagnosing his 'patient,' however, but with accusing him of lethargy, with his loud cry "Awake!" (*TC*, I.729) being followed by "What! Slombrestow as in a litargie?" (*TC*, I.730). Given that Pandarus's words are addressed to a sleep-deprived, lovesick individual who spends the nights turning on his pillows, the call to wake up is hilariously ironic.¹⁷

The irony gains another dimension when Pandarus's call to action is examined alongside Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, from which it borrows. In prose 2, Lady Philosophy comments on the prisoner's silence in the following way:

And whan sche say me nat oonly stille but withouten office of tunge and al dowmbe, sche leyde hir hand sooftly upon my breest and seide: "Here nys no peril," quod sche; "he is fallen into a litargye, whiche that is a comune seknesse to hertes that been desceyved. He hath a litil foryeten hymselfe, but certes he schal lightly remembren himselfe yif so be that he hath knowen me or now; and that he may so doon, I will wipe a litil his eien that ben dirked by the cloude of mortel thynges" (*Boece*, I.pr2, ll. 15–26).

Having diagnosed the Boethius-persona's disease as forgetfulness of self, Lady Philosophy then proceeds to administer the cure in the form of intellectual recollection. Her 'treatment' is to remind her patient of who he is in

16 On Troilus as a typical sufferer of lovesickness, see Heffernan, 1990, pp. 294–309.

17 Several lines later Pandarus repeats the cry "Awake!" (*TC*, I.751), to which Troilus responds: "Frend, though that I stulle lye, / I am nat deaf" (*TC*, I.752–753). See also *TC*, II.545.

relation to God, that is a mortal creature endowed with reason, and what his main goal is. The medicine administered by Lady Philosophy lies in withdrawing from the distractions and confusions of the material world and turning towards oneself. In a Boethian sense, then, to wake up from lethargy means to regain ‘a sense of self’ by looking up to Heaven and embracing a spiritual rather than merely emotional revival.

Similarly to the Boethius-persona, Chaucer’s Troilus is also construed as a patient, that is an individual who ‘suffers’ or undergoes action rather than carrying it out himself,¹⁸ his reason overcome by passion. He is likewise prompted to overcome his inaction, albeit by very different means. To enable recovery from his desperate condition, he is not encouraged to turn away from the external world, but rather to reject the sorrows of love while embracing the joys of it. “Lat be thy wo and tornyng to the grounde” (*TC*, I.856), Pandarus says. “Look up (...) and telle me what she is” (*TC*, I.862), he adds, encouraging Troilus to reveal the identity of the lady so that measures might be taken to bring the lovers together. This shows that while in *Boece* waking up was related to reinvigorating an individual’s reason in order to enable him to subdue his passion,¹⁹ in *Troilus and Criseyde* it works in the name of following passion. When examined in the context of Boethian philosophy, Pandarus’s words to Troilus sound glaringly ironic, as Gillian Adler notes:

Pandarus encourages a present-oriented gaze that directs the individual to embrace chance occurrences and forego the elongated vision through which to see beyond the ephemeral and mutable world of human experience (...). [H]e turns Boethian philosophy to the new ends of developing the romance and encouraging chance, and even invites the reader to entertain the value of forgetting historical circumstances as a way to open up to love (Adler, 2022, p. 74).

Mary Wack argues that Pandarus’s healing strategy aims to effect sexual solace based on the ‘philosophy of the body’: “He directs his ministrations toward arranging the therapeutic intercourse typical of the medieval physicians’ cures for love. Love, as he attempts to shape it for Troilus, is no more than sexuality dependent on physical presence, a ‘love of kynde’ that is not far from, and threatens to sink into ‘bestialite’” (Wack, 1986, p. 132).

When seen from this perspective, it seems that earthly, physical love is the opposite of self-contemplation that leads to wisdom and is inscribed in the concept of *prosoché*, which – Hadot notes, implies self-mastery and the triumph of reason over passion (Hadot, 1995, p. 135). Accordingly, the joy the

18 For this definition of the Boethian ‘patient,’ see: Lehman, 2012, p. 196.

19 See Lehman, 2012, p. 193.

lovers experience in each other's arms appears as a moment of moral blindness rather than clarity while the celebration of the present moment soon gives way to worry about the future and about what should (or should not) be happening. And yet even in the very brief instances of a joyful and attentive participation in the present moment, the individual is able to clear space in the mind, reshape his consciousness and regain 'a sense of self.' This is illustrated in the consummation scene of Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which – interestingly – seems to parallel Troilus's inner transformation.

Having embraced Criseyde in his arms, Troilus finds himself in heaven and celebrates love with apostrophes, such as "O Love, O Charite!" (*TC*, III.1254), which may be seen as a response to Pandarus's call "Awake!". He opens his heart and eyes to a wider vision of love as the "holy bond of thynges" (*TC*, III.1261). He describes how he had been transported from hell to heaven through the power of "Benigne Love" (*TC*, III.1261) and he refers to "grace" (*TC*, III.1262, 1267, 1269) and "bownte" (*TC*, III.1264, 1274) of cosmic love. He sees himself as created by God in order to serve Criseyde and he construes the lady as his "steere" (*TC*, III.1291) while God as the supreme helmsman, his universal love having "of erthe and se governance" (*TC*, III.1744). Ann W. Astell notes that Troilus's experience of love is simultaneously an experience of Him Who is Love and Who manifests Himself in the created order:

Troilus' own words and actions (...) testify to his inward transformation. Not even Pandarus' busyness and Troilus' collaboration in his reprehensible scheme can nullify the impression that God somehow reveals Himself to Troilus through Criseyde on that rainy night when they first make love (Astell, 1994, p. 148).

It is during the physical union with Criseyde that Troilus experiences Love that binds the physical universe together and becomes immersed in the beauty of all Creation. In that, he moves from self to his beloved as a reflection of the absolute beauty, to the world and to God; in other words, to seeing himself within the world, to evoke Christie's definition of *prosochê* cited earlier (Christie, 2012, p. 146). This is made possible by a joyful and attentive participation in the present moment.

Conclusion

Even though the term *prosochê* never appears in Chaucer's poetry in its Greek name, the idea of concentration on the present moment is given great urgency in his courtly poetry. Chaucer's courtly individuals are often

construed as steeped in lethargy, caused either by grief or the pains of love, and are exhorted to awaken what is inside and put themselves in the path of self-knowledge. The poet often uses the theme of love and loss as a pretext to initiate discussion on topics for which there may have been no other obvious forum, such as the inner self and its relation to others as well as to a wider, universal whole. In this respect his poetry provides a stimulus for inner transformation which is always related to self-knowledge and always preceded by giving attention to the present moment.

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