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Interpretation

Even more so than the preceding chapter's ambition to treat in the limited space of its pages the ponderously debated topic of canonicity, an attempt to consider the topic of interpretation in the confines of a single chapter would seem at best presumptuous if not merely foolhardy. As with [Chapter 4](#), however, I have sought to calibrate my aim and method to the modest scope of this book's overall project. My objective is simply to explore some of the implications of the ideas so far presented in this book for this particular basic activity of literary scholarship and teaching, in the hope that the very ubiquity of that activity may make the book of some use. My method, as in [Chapter 4](#), is to work dialogically between particular instances of practice and the conceptual knots that they manifest. In no way do I attempt anything resembling a survey of the concept and practice of interpretation. Rather, I follow narrow pathways into the topic, identifying thereby a problem within concrete interpretive practice, considering the problem in light of this book's preliminary theory of literary valuing and, finally, proposing a response.

In the section that follows, I clarify more precisely the chapter's topic and provide an illustrative pair of snapshots of actual literary interpretation in action, so to speak. These examples then serve as touchstones for the next section's identification of a particular problem endemic to the practical activity of interpretation, which takes as its point of departure Stanley Fish's early 1970s critique of the approach to literary study known as stylistics. After suggesting how Fish's critique still applies – and applies generally – to interpretive practice up to the present, at the end of this section I reintroduce my preliminary theory of literary valuing, redescribing in its

terms the problem thus far elaborated. In the third section, I trace within the framework of that preliminary theory some of the implications of the problem and provide another illustrative snapshot of interpretation in action. With the basic contours of the problem then established, the fourth section considers the sustained efforts of one celebrated Chaucer scholar, Lee Patterson, to come to grips with it. Serving as a kind of case study, this consideration brings to the fore several of the specific challenges involved in formulating a response to the problem for the purpose of establishing a firm grounding for academic literary study. Using those challenges as cues, the chapter's final section then proposes an alternative response that, while certainly no solution, may nonetheless be generative. The chapter concludes with a description of a pair of recent medievalist literary interpretations that, although in no sense conceived in this book's terms, exemplify the sort of response that its framework may help to facilitate.

Definitions and examples

Given what Rita Felski has called the 'method wars' within literary criticism over the last fifteen years or so, and heeding her observation that 'the fate of a particular phenomenon turns on how narrowly or broadly one defines one's terms', I should clarify here at the outset how I am using the label *interpretation*.¹ In line with my pragmatic definitions elsewhere in this book, I mean to include under that label all the everyday activities that the field of literary studies has for many decades now more commonly designated as *reading*, as in the ordinary locution of so-and-so's 'reading of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*'. But with the proliferation of qualifiers that critics today may wish to place before the term *reading* – as a recent handbook lists, 'deep, descriptive, denotative, distant, hyper, just, mere, paranoid, reparative, slow, surface, symptomatic, uncritical, even large' – my umbrella use of *interpretation* must necessarily be very basic.² For this book's purposes, I will define the activity of interpretation, I hope uncontroversially, as the registration of some semantic effect of a set of signifiers, for example, the registration of the letters, colours, shape and roadside placement of a stop sign as the command to stop one's vehicle. In the simplest terms,

we may call the set of signifiers a *pattern* and that semantic effect *meaning*, and thus interpretation is ascribing meaning to a pattern. All the aforementioned sorts of reading, I contend, may readily be described in these simple terms, although, that said, I do not mean to suggest their identity. Plainly, significant differences remain, which in my simpler terms are matters of the number of relays between meaning and pattern, and of the frameworks in which one conceives of their relation. (Later in the chapter I briefly consider a couple examples of these differences.)

As Felski has observed, the tendency of literary scholarship to avoid the term *interpretation*, along with its philosophical elaboration as hermeneutics, derives from the perception in some quarters that it refers to 'the dogged pursuit of an ultimate, hidden, all-determining truth'.³ Long before the method wars, the term *reading* was therefore adopted to signal an activity that is in contradistinction more provisional, contingent and plural, in short one that recognises, among other things, the indeterminacy that twentieth-century poststructuralism has taught us to be the condition of all engagements with texts. As Felski elsewhere points out, however, the latter recognition has scarcely impeded the field's actual interpretive activity, when that activity is more generally understood as 'trying to figure out what something means and why it matters'. To the contrary, the poststructuralist axiom of the unreliability of signs has proliferated suspicious approaches to texts, goading 'the impulse to decipher and decode', so that 'more suspicion means ever more interpretation'.⁴

Felski perceives these suspicious approaches to be ubiquitous within literary studies, a perception with which a number of other combatants in the method wars would agree, such as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, who have famously named the approaches 'symptomatic reading' and contrasted them with 'surface reading'.⁵ Nonetheless, while I do not doubt that suspicious or symptomatic reading corresponds to a longstanding scholarly habitus, I would add as a complementary observation that – at least within the subfields with which I am most familiar – a great deal of considerably less paranoid interpretation remains prevalent. And much of that sort of interpretation (as well as, in fact, much of the symptomatic variety) proceeds more-or-less as if the lessons of poststructuralism regarding the indeterminacy of the act of reading and the

intractable uncertainty of establishing meaning had never been aired.⁶ Indeed, at least within these subfields, I would judge that the majority of scholarship over the last several decades, while most likely fully aware of the lessons of poststructuralism, has simply shrugged its shoulders and proceeded to construct interpretations – whether large-scale literary arguments about entire works or just local construal of individual passages toward some other end – as if those lessons do not apply. Most of today's most prominent Chaucer scholars, for example, generally operate in this fashion. I will supply brief instances from just two recent studies, chosen on the basis of how celebrated they have been, how exceptionally perspicacious I have found them and my certain knowledge that both authors are conversant with poststructuralism.

With his monograph *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities*, David Lawton has revitalised how the category of person or subject is conceived in relation to a text's speaker. At one point in Chapter 7's account of the *Squire's* and *Franklin's Tales*, Lawton argues that the frequent use of narratorial *occupatio* in the *Squire's Tale* serves as a device that radically revises the attitude towards cultural otherness found in the narratives 'of friar travellers to Tartary in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries'. In those narratives, the first-person narrators are 'puzzled and repelled by the [Tartar] religious beliefs and social practices ... distrusting the people and their culture, diplomatic, angry, and overawed'. In contrast, with the device of *occupatio*, Chaucer's Squire 'takes all these considerations – beliefs, practices, food, manners, even gender and sexuality – and ascribes inability to describe or internalise them not to the interplay of cultures but to that of genre and style, assimilating what is unknown and unknowable to an Arthurian golden age'. Chaucer's resulting 'great achievement is not to exoticize – or to orientalize – but to naturalize what in the earlier accounts was profoundly and forbiddingly alien'.⁷ There is plainly no trace in this snippet of interpretation of concern over, say, the indeterminacy of language or how a rhetorical device such as *occupatio* might destabilise propositional inference (nor of a suspicious prying into what Chaucer represses). To the contrary, as is readily evident in the larger context of his argument, in this instance Lawton seeks to replace one definite meaning that other critics have assigned to the frequency of *occupatio* in this tale – namely, that it

serves as a characterisation of the narrator, conveying in particular the dramatic irony of the *Squire's* narratorial inadequacy – with a quite different definite meaning, that of a revisionary response to cultural otherness.⁸

Similar moments abound in the otherwise very differently oriented *Chaucer: A European Life* by Marion Turner, a remarkable biography that weaves together a densely textured set of contexts with penetrating readings of Chaucer's oeuvre, developing thereby a capacious account of the meaning and significance of Chaucer's life and works in tandem. In Chapter 19, Turner tackles the end of the *Canterbury Tales* and specifically how readers are to understand the relation of the *Parson's Tale* to the near entirety of the work that precedes it. She acknowledges Lee Patterson's influential account of this relation that 'sees the tale as offering meaning relevant to all human experience, voicing an authority that shifts the text away from the play of the tale-telling contest', so that 'this final tale has a greater authority than the tales that precede it', which suggests in turn 'that Chaucer now capitulates to a religious vision of life, crossing a boundary and closing the text'.⁹ Rejecting this account, Turner argues that the tale 'is presented to us as the partial perspective of an individual, like all the other tales', and this perspective 'has a limited vision', one that in particular 'codifies the self in relentlessly simplifying ways'. For Turner, the Parson assumes a 'natural order of social hierarchy' that emphasises 'the inferiority of churls and women' in a way that 'contrasts starkly with the ethical and compassionate emphasis on gentillesse as a quality not determined by gender, class, or age in other tales'. She concludes, 'We have not passed through the liminal zone of the playful tale-telling contest and ended up in the transcendent world of the spiritual Jerusalem', and so the work remains, at the end, 'radically egalitarian'.¹⁰ The underlying interpretive challenge in this case is what to make of the sprawling prose penitential treatise that terminates the *Canterbury Tales* – whether to take it, to put the question in Chaucer's terms, as in earnest or game. Patterson chooses the former, Turner the latter. Neither entertains the poststructuralist possibility of, say, simultaneously both and neither, that is, of undecidability.

My point with these examples is most certainly not to suggest that Turner or Lawton (or Patterson) ought to have recalled poststructuralism or any of its consequences but rather just to

illustrate that they plainly felt no need to do so, even though each elsewhere shows familiarity with poststructuralist ideas. Moreover, not only do I believe that these critics are much more typical than unusual in this respect (and certainly my own scholarship is filled with similar moments), but I also suspect that many if not most of us approach our pedagogical activities in this way – teaching, say, Derrida in the morning and encouraging a student to formulate a clear, firm interpretative thesis about the *Wife of Bath* in the afternoon. For many of us, therefore, the everyday activity of interpretation harbours an inchoateness similar to that which in prior chapters I have observed within the everyday activity of literary valuing: namely, a gap between theory and practice that characterises our work in its several dimensions. In the rest of this chapter, I will build the case that these two gaps are not just parallel but mutually implicated – that the problem of literary value necessarily reproduces itself within the sphere of interpretation.

The problem, according to Stanley Fish

My simple definition of interpretation – ascribing meaning to a pattern – directs us to one of twentieth-century literary critical history's starkest articulations of problems endemic to interpretation, as that articulation was formulated more-or-less in those terms. This is Stanley Fish's blistering early 1970s critique of the approach to literary study pursued under the label *stylistics*, a critique which, in the heavy lines with which it was drawn, will quickly lead us to the basic crux with which this chapter is most concerned. Stylistics today, perhaps because of Fish's critique, is not as immediately familiar as many other approaches to literary study, especially in the US, although it remains relatively popular – and indeed practicing stylisticians may greet the recent efforts toward a 'descriptive turn' in literary study with a sense of déjà vu.¹¹ One of the lines of development out of Russian formalism, stylistics is at once more broadly conversant with the field of linguistics and more humanist in orientation than its cousin, structuralism.¹² As a pair of recent handbooks attest, its range of linguistic concepts and analytical methods is wide and diverse, having branched out from structural linguistics to incorporate ideas from functional, cognitive

and pragmatic linguistics, among many others. But all flavours of stylistics share an emphasis, as the editor of one of the handbooks puts it, on establishing 'physical evidence in the text that can either support or falsify' what the editor a bit earlier describes as 'critical statements from the world of literary studies of interpretation and evaluation'.¹³ More so than most other approaches to literary study, therefore, stylistics is quite explicit about its identification of pattern as a discrete step in the interpretive process, using linguistic analysis to generate 'physical evidence' that seemingly possesses more-or-less independent status. In this way, the meaning ascribed to pattern, if not free from indeterminacy, in principle obtains a ground firm enough to be verifiable, even falsifiable.

In his 1973 essay 'What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?', Fish surveys a representative sampling of then-recent stylistic studies of literary texts. What he decisively demonstrates – as even the committed stylistician Michael Toolan admits – is that in each case the stylistician's ascription of determinate meaning to pattern is ultimately either unwarranted or simply a restatement of the pattern as meaning.¹⁴ In the most straightforward instance of this, Fish considers an essay by Louis Milic that focuses on Jonathan Swift's 'habit of piling up words in series and [on] Swift's preference for certain kinds of connectives'. When Milic turns to the meaning of these patterns, he declares that Swift 'is a writer who likes transitions and made much of connectives' and that Swift's 'use of series argues a fertile and well stocked mind'. The first claim, as Fish points out, just restates the pattern (transitions and connectives) as meaning, and the second is merely 'asserted rather than proven because there is nothing in the machinery Milic cranks up to authorize the leap (from the data to a specification of their value) he makes'.¹⁵ The same 'data' or pattern might just as easily be attached to a different, even opposite 'value' or meaning, for example that Swift's mind is overgrown and cluttered. The rest of the instances of stylistic analysis that Fish considers are rather more involved, but nonetheless he easily and persuasively arrives at the same conclusion for each.

Far from providing falsifiable evidence for an interpretation, stylistics therefore underscores one of the basic problems of interpretation that it sets out to solve – the problem, most simply stated, of the hermeneutic circle.¹⁶ Stylistics's inevitable restatement of

pattern or unwarranted ascription of meaning really amount to the same sleight of circularity, which is, as Fish remarks in respect to a critique of a stylistic analysis in a later (even more polemical) essay, that 'the pattern emerges under the pressure of an interpretation and does not exist as independent evidence of it'.¹⁷ Either the decision to undertake a particular form of stylistic analysis (e.g., counting connectives) serves the function of an interpretation that is ultimately just restated as the results of that analysis, or an interpretation of another sort directs the stylistician to a pattern that may perhaps plausibly, but in no way necessarily, confirm it. In both cases, like Saussure's signifier, the pattern only materialises through its attachment to meaning.

In the years following Fish's critique, stylisticians have often taken more nuanced or guarded approaches to their work. Toolan, for example, concedes that stylistics cannot serve as 'a discovery procedure for finding interpretations or a means of validating an interpretation', but rather, much more modestly, it establishes 'public' or common evidentiary reference points among readers who might otherwise disagree about a text's meaning.¹⁸ This seems a sound, admirably pragmatic position, but set next to the above examples of Chaucer criticism, it also reveals how much of the ambition of stylistics that it gives up. For plainly those examples of criticism also involve common evidentiary reference points about which readers have disagreed, just ones that have been established in a less systematic, linguistically dense fashion. Yet the fact that the more widespread kind of interpretation that Lawton and Turner practice coincides with stylistics in this respect does not so much further impugn stylistics as it suggests the general applicability of Fish's critique. Just as stylisticians do, Lawton and Turner sight their respective patterns – the *Squire's* use of apostrophe; the tenor, form, position and size of the *Parson's Tale* – well within the horizon of their developing interpretations. As the hermeneutic circle predicts, literary evidence, whether systematically elaborated as in stylistics or more informally established as in the examples of Lawton and Turner, 'emerges under the pressure of an interpretation and does not exist as independent evidence of it'.

Fish's own recognition of the general applicability of his critique, as is well known (and as he charts in *Is There a Text in This Class?*), led him away from the text – as well as from his initial

alternative, the reader – to locate determinations of meaning in the ‘interpretive communities’ in which they occur. Those communities, rather than the text or reader, determine any particular instance of literary meaning by establishing ‘the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force’.¹⁹ This notion, at once intuitive and vague, has provoked no small amount of sometimes heated discussion.²⁰ For this chapter’s purposes, we can put aside Fish’s more categorical claims about it and just accept the relatively straightforward premises that shared ‘interpretive strategies exist prior to the act of reading’, that ‘the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community’ and that any interpretive community involves ‘a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals’.²¹ These premises are generally in line with, say, accounts of the social construction of knowledge, such as the one long ago developed by Thomas Berger and Peter Luckmann, or as extended to practice somewhat less long ago with Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus.²² The three premises may be folded together into the single formulation that interpretations involve mediations of prior interpretive activity that has been institutionalised in some persistent fashion and that carries discernible values.

Put this way, the premises clearly hold for the examples of Chaucer criticism that I have cited and for countless other acts of interpretation in the record of literary scholarship more generally, so much so that the formulation may seem merely a periphrastic amplification of the term *literary criticism*. But I have obviously offered this formulation to emphasise its affinity with the preliminary theory of literary valuing that I developed in [Chapters 2 and 3](#). For whatever in practice actually constitutes an interpretive community (and this remains a sticking point of Fish’s theory), such a community, as it carries ‘a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals’, must be coextensive with some portion of the axiological network. Specifically, what must help to hold an interpretive community together as such, functioning in a sense as its skeleton, are what I have termed *axiological constellations* – diffuse, dynamic sets of actors’ mediations of the value ascriptions of other actors, organised in proximity to some vector of difference, and extending across time and space.

In this light, *contra* Fish, we may then restore the text to the class, as the text, as well as other nonhuman actors, certainly serves as one of these mediating actors, as I have discussed in earlier chapters and will consider again below. Furthermore, what I have referred to in this chapter as *pattern* is clearly equivalent to – or perhaps a subclass of – what I have in those earlier chapters named textual *manner*, and so the ascription of meaning to pattern would seem wholly parallel with the ascription of value to manner. In fact, the activities are not just parallel but two sides of the same coin. According to [Chapter 2](#)'s schema for the activity of literary valuing – 'we register a text as literary when we ascribe value to some aspect of its perceived manner' – the perception of aspects of textual manner is reciprocally enabled by the ascriptions of value to them: to perceive aspects of manner as such is already to ascribe value to them. Hence, since pattern is assimilable to manner, the ascription of value to manner must necessarily accompany the ascription of meaning to pattern, for it is the former ascription that makes that pattern recognisable as such. Moreover, as I discussed in [Chapter 3](#), ascribed value obtains definition only in relation to other ascribed values, and in relation to other kinds of value. Thus, since ascriptions of value involve the mediation of prior ascriptions of value, and ascriptions of value necessarily accompany ascriptions of meaning, the activity of interpretation – defined as involving mediations of prior interpretive activity that carries discernible values – is coextensive with, if not identical to, the activity of literary valuing. To consolidate the points in this and the preceding paragraph into a single formulation: meaning emerges in and through the axiological network, and hence *interpretation, at some level and in some fashion, consists of articulation of mediations of value ascriptions transposed as the content of signification*. Or, more simply, meaning is made through mediation of value ascriptions.

To return to the question of why interpretations may proceed untroublingly despite however much interpreters recognise their intractable uncertainty, we may see that the journey from pattern to meaning may occur unhesitatingly because meaning, as it at some level and in some fashion rests upon value ascription mediations, is what makes the pattern visible in the first place. Hence, if today's literary critics seem so often to push aside the lessons of poststructuralism and offer unqualified meanings for a literary

work, they do so in part because the alternative would be to pretend that they have not already laid the ground for such meanings when recognising that work as literary in the first place. To consider again my examples of Chaucer interpretation, not only do we see that Lawton's recognition of the Squire's use of *occupatio* as a textual pattern is inseparable from prior interpretations of the meaning of that pattern, but we also see that Lawton's own interpretation involves an ascription of value to the device as a means to represent an alternative to cultural chauvinism and intolerance. His specific reading of the device – as an 'inability to describe' that assimilates 'what is unknown and unknowable to an Arthurian golden age' – transposes as the content of signification ethical values pertaining to the encounter with cultural others. Similarly, Turner's recognition of the pattern of the distinctive disposition of the *Parson's Tale* plainly mediates Patterson's interpretation thereof, among those of others. And her reading of that disposition as in fact not so distinctive but rather as presenting the 'limited vision' of its teller 'like all other tales' – in this instance a vision that 'codifies the self in relentlessly simplifying ways' – transposes as the content of signification the value of egalitarianism, 'the ethical and compassionate emphasis on gentillesse as a quality not determined by gender, class, or age in other tales'.

To be sure, in neither case do I mean to suggest that the interpretive process reduces to the critic's ascribing his or her own values to Chaucer. Although in these instances I find it likely that the critics do hold the values identified, elsewhere both critics have not hesitated to ascribe values to Chaucer that they certainly do not hold. Rather, as I will further elucidate in the next section, my point is that the end product of interpretation, while in no way necessarily predetermined by any set of values, cannot be neatly divided between meaning and value, since when interpretation is carried out under the sign of the literary, value permeates meaning from start to finish.

Value permeation

Admittedly, even with the above qualifications, despite all their abstractions my arguments to this point may still seem to reduce

to the commonplace that interpreters' own values, at some level and in some fashion, shape their interpretations – an impression perhaps encouraged by the passages from Lawton and Turner that I selected, which illustrate the general relation between meaning and value unusually straightforwardly. Obviously, countless other instances of interpretation, in their studies and elsewhere, possess more complexity in this regard, and so would require more elaborate unfolding. But in fact my aim here has been not so much to transcend this commonplace as to complicate it, to brush from it the accumulated dust of banality and uncover in the terms of this book's preliminary theory of literary valuing various dimensions of the still vexatious problem underneath. In particular, that the problem of the hermeneutic circle is fed by the spring of the problem of literary value has several implications, a couple of which are readily evident in the Lawton and Turner examples.

First, while I have identified the relation between ascriptions of value and meaning as transpositional, let me reiterate that this does not necessarily – probably not even usually – entail a simple imposition of the interpreter's values upon the text, with 'values' here more narrowly denoting, say, political, ethical, or religious commitments. While such impositions do of course occur, they constitute only a small fraction of possible outcomes. As I described in [Chapters 2 and 3](#), the activity of literary valuing is a reciprocally dynamic one performed in concert with other actors, nonhuman as well as human, and involving a broad and fluid range of kinds of value. Hence, while, say, a particular ethical value may feature prominently in a critic's initial approach to a text, that value's necessary mediations of other actors' ascriptions of that value and others are far from determinate. To see this, we need only to grant (I believe fairly) that Turner and Patterson share the value of egalitarianism. For both of them, in other words, that value was somewhere active in the axiological environment in which they produced their interpretations. What differs, then, are their respective particular sets of mediations of other actors' ascriptions of value that for them in some way connect the disposition of the *Parson's Tale* to the value of egalitarianism – the differences in their respective *pathways* through the network constellations that those mediations trace. Clearly, for example, especially significant are the different ways that each critic mediates Chaucer's relative – even

conflicting – ascriptions of literary and spiritual value to the *Parson's Tale*, which along with other mediations lead them to establish opposing meanings for the tale.

In general, especially given the account of the characteristic loose binding of literary value in [Chapter 3](#), we can expect such pathways to be as numerous as there are interpreters, involving mediations of this and that actor's value ascription in this or that fashion. Importantly, sometimes mediations occur as affirmative relations, as with Turner's association of egalitarianism with Chaucer, and sometimes as disavowing ones, as with Patterson's understanding of Chaucer as turning towards a more authoritarian position. Obviously, though, in practice there is typically a great deal of overlap among pathways, especially when one of the actors is the same physical object (e.g., the *Riverside Chaucer*) and others are those that constitute the same general critical approach (e.g., historicism).

Hence, while it is a commonplace that our values, at some level and in some fashion, shape our interpretations, how they do so in any particular interpretive act does not follow merely from just those values. Moreover, let me reemphasise that the shaping does not occur in a single direction. In the activity of ascribing value to particular aspects of textual manner, those aspects in their material instantiations become themselves actors, relay points of mediation in the pathways through axiological constellations that a specific interpretive act traverses. Aspects of textual manner may therefore have discernible if not necessarily predictable effects on the ascriber/interpreter, which is to say, on the determination of the pathways. Put more simply, the values – and hence also the meanings – that we bring to a text are not necessarily those that we leave with, as our encounter with a text involves a hazy set of value mediations, of encounters with other actors' ascriptions of value, whose outcome is not predetermined. Precisely how this reader-text dynamic works is difficult question that for this book's purposes I can at best dance around.²³ Here I will simply reaffirm another commonplace widely held in the field, which is that, while readers' values shape their interpretations, those values in turn may be shaped by those interpretations. I cannot of course speak for Lawton and Turner on this point, but I am certainly aware of moments in my own activities of interpretation – as I am sure my readers are in theirs – in which my understanding of a value that I hold has been altered in

the course of that activity. Moreover, as elaborated above, these reciprocal relations may have affirmative or disavowing characters, or some ambivalent combination thereof.

The second and related implication evident in the above examples is that the perceived aspects of textual manner involved in interpretive pathways occur at an enormous range of possible scales and quantities, in these examples from instances of a single rhetorical device in a single tale to all the instances of teller/tale relations across the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is easy to see, in fact, that no theoretical limits may be placed on these scales or quantities, inasmuch as the aspects of manner that may potentially emerge in relation to ascriptions of value are limited only by the perceptual acumen, energy, opportunity and interpretive creativity of the ascriber. Most typically, instances of interpretive activity will move up and down the scale, and both zero in on and accumulate examples, however their pathways through axiological constellations lead them. But it is plainly methodologically possible to focus on one end or the other, as in, say, the contrasting formalisms of William Wimsatt and Vladimir Propp. Or, to return to the method wars, we may consider descriptive and distant readings as representing two poles in this regard (although, given that Best and Marcus cite both of these methods as versions of surface reading, and advocates of each understand their practice in contradistinction with interpretation, these methods are by no means opposed in principle). For example, we may sight at one end Heather Love's 'close but not deep' descriptive practice as she illustrates it in her focus on the lexis of point of view in a single passage of *Beloved* – a feature of manner that ultimately (despite her disavowal of interpretation) mediates the value of the disclosure of 'the facts of dehumanization' and 'what is irrecoverable in the historical record'.²⁴ And, at the other end, we may sight a quantitative study by Ted Underwood and Jordan Sellers that aims to establish correlations between diction and literary prestige by applying a statistical model to a large corpus of literature. By taking as their units of analysis such lexical qualities as 'darker' and 'more concrete', they build value ascriptions directly into the identification of their data, only – in this way akin to the manuscript studies scholarship discussed in [Chapter 1](#) – they represent those value ascriptions as someone else's, leaving obscure the mediations that necessary extend to their own activity.²⁵ Value

ascriptions, in short, wholly permeate the activity of interpretation in all its varieties. They are active in ascriptions of meaning from the minutest to the widest levels of pattern, and in the smallest and largest aggregations of examples.

This total permeation by value leads us to another of literary interpretation's familiar conundrums, which is that there is no systematic method or even conventionally agreed upon heuristic for assessing the relative merits of one interpretation in comparison with another. To be sure, such criteria as logical coherence or sound construal of sense are widely shared means for evaluating relative strengths and weaknesses, but by themselves those will not determine the choice between equally accomplished interpretations, such as (in my view) between Turner's and Patterson's of the *Parson's Tale*. Rather – to take myself as an example judge of interpretations – insofar as I might want Chaucer, near the end of his life, to have affirmed an egalitarianism that demotes the *Parson's* dismal view of human life to just one view among others, I might discover that I favour Turner's interpretation. Alternatively, insofar as I might want to mark the distance between Chaucer's situation and that of modernity in order to underscore the values of, say, the latter's secularism and pluralism, or insofar as I might want to recognise the conditions in which an otherwise open-minded individual abandons egalitarianism, I might find myself giving the nod to Patterson's interpretation. I might in fact lean toward Turner's interpretation one day in one context and Patterson's the next in another context. Or I might decide that both hold: that Chaucer, in proto-postmodern fashion, simultaneously embraced and rejected the *Parson's* view. In all instances, inextricably intermixed within my assessment of the critics' argumentation and evidence, though not straightforwardly determinative of it, would be my own ascriptions of literary value to Chaucer in mediation with ascriptions of other values, such as social and ethical ones. To conclude that judgements between interpretations at some level incur value judgements, then, by no means entails a simplistic 'my side or your side' procedure of alignment. It is rather just to say that judgements between interpretations are necessarily made within the axiological network and so are suffused with value at each step. And it is to acknowledge that as a value-permeated activity, responsibly constructed interpretations are not subject to final verification any more than value

commitments are, notwithstanding what some stylisticians, the line of hermeneutical thought leading up to and extending from E. D. Hirsch, and other objectively inclined scholars might argue.²⁶

Let me provide an additional, slightly more detailed example of Chaucer interpretation – this time an artificially constructed one – to illustrate this conundrum of verifiability, as well as several of the other points above. If there is any passage of Middle English poetry that may be said to be widely familiar, it is this:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open eye
 (So Prikeþ hem Nature in hir corages),
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.²⁷

One very frequently noticed pattern in this first sentence of the *Canterbury Tales* is its division into two parts, with its initial eleven lines emphasising renewal of the physical world and the following seven emphasising renewal of the spirit. This division, as Roman Jakobson might have described it, is enacted both within the axis of selection (the lexis of spring and penance, respectively) and within the axis of combination (the syntactical organisation in which the first eleven lines serve as an adverbial clause for the next seven).²⁸ Also usually noticed is how the *rime riche* of the concluding couplet suggests then a blending of the physical and spiritual, in which the spiritual potency of the ‘hooly blissful martir’ carried by the first homophone serves as remedy for the physical malaise of the second.

I would guess that the vast majority of readers would readily agree that the passage contains this pattern, and yet there would also likely be (and obviously there has been) wide disagreement about what it means. Some might extend the pattern to the trajectory of the entire work and argue, for example, that it synecdochically signals the project – the blending of physical and spiritual – that the rest of the work seeks to realise across myriad dimensions of human life. Others might argue precisely the opposite: that the passage's blending of physical and spiritual signals the problem that besets fallen humanity, which the work illustrates in countless ways and which is finally, with the *Parson's Tale*, transcended, at least in theory. Still others – say, those taking a new materialist approach – might question the nature of the pattern as described, and specifically whether the supposed turn to the spiritual in the twelfth line is instead a false turn and really an extension of the physical, since the ensuing seven lines emphasise what was for Chaucer an actual physical journey undertaken by flesh-and-blood human beings seeking relief from their real corporeal ailments. And of course other ascriptions of meaning to the pattern are not just possible but have been compellingly argued in the long recorded history of the commentary on this sentence.

Since some of these ascriptions of meaning are mutually exclusive, they cannot all be 'correct' in the ordinary way that we understand that judgement. But by now we recognise that the question of correctness, assuming more-or-less equivalent critical competence, ultimately involves values and that it finds its basis in the particular pathways through the axiological constellations of any given interpretation and those of our critical responses to it. The decision about whether the first sentence of the *Canterbury Tales* advocates or condemns a blend of spiritual and physical (and about what sort of blend it might be) depends upon a complex set of reciprocal mediations of others' value ascriptions, including, among many possible actors, mediations of the perceived ascriptions of value to that blend by Chaucer, other medieval actors (e.g., Augustine, Aristotle as transmitted by Arabic writers, etc.) and select modern ones (e.g., global warming, the reader's church, etc.) – mediations that may be affirmative, disavowing or somewhere in between. Furthermore, while the majority of readers will recognise this pattern, that recognition in fact depends upon particular axiological pathways.

Namely, to perceive the pattern as interpretively significant is already to ascribe some sort of value to the very distinction between spiritual and physical, since only within such a metaphysically binary axiological system (and, say, its accompanying masculinist ideology, as Emma Margaret Solberg has trenchantly identified) would the pattern be visible as such.²⁹ The sentence's syntax, lexis, *rime riche*, and so on, so observed, all become interpretively visible only within that axiology. In sum, as in the snapshots of Lawton's, Turner's and Patterson's interpretations, our construal of the sentence's meaning, whatever it happens to be at the moment, will be wholly permeated by ascriptions of value.

This general condition of permeation, and the consequent inability to develop broadly accepted principles of correctness among competing readings, scarcely entails, however, that the choice among interpretations is arbitrary or that all responsibly constructed interpretations are equivalent. For in few if any pragmatic situations are value commitments experienced as arbitrary, or competing values (such as, for example, justice and mercy) experienced as interchangeable. Nonetheless, inasmuch as the academic field of literary studies is largely constituted by this value-permeated activity of interpretation, the field does face the practical (and sometimes embarrassing) challenge of defining its work in a way persuasively reconcilable with the discourse of rational inquiry that governs the academy. For indeed the annoyingly familiar charge – from sceptical students, colleagues in other disciplines and interlocutors outside the academy – that *our* interpretations are merely just that cannot finally be wholly disavowed. As a result, our endeavours can generate some friction with the usual demand of the discourse of rational inquiry to issue judgements about our objects of study that lend themselves to some sort of shared criteria of evaluation. And this friction in turn takes us back to the gap between theory and practice that I mentioned earlier in this chapter.

I suspect that most of us within the field of literary studies pursue our everyday activities as if this reconciliation with the discourse of rational inquiry has been successfully achieved, even though we are probably aware that at some level it remains a challenge. In our research, we diligently work out carefully constructed rational arguments for textual meaning (*mutatis mutandis*, depending on one's approach and methods), explaining why our readings of

the text deserve attention alongside or at the expense of others' readings. And in our teaching we likewise ask students to back up their claims with logic and evidence in order to learn how to intervene responsibly in critical conversations so that they, too, can aspire to producing readings deserving of attention. Most likely, we perform these activities at some level aware of, but probably not very anxious about, the fact that these judgements of critical merit, while we make them all the time, have no firm ultimate ground. Only in situations in which we find ourselves uncomfortably confronted by the value-permeated nature of our work are we likely to find this underlying challenge actually challenging in practice. When, for example, we must determine a grade for a student essay that offers a reading informed by values that we find reprehensible, but which is otherwise logical and well supported, we may find ourselves torn between our commitment to our own values and our commitment to the strictures of the rational discourse of the university.³⁰ Or when we are asked as part of programme assessment to provide language that substantiates a numerical scale for measuring the learning outcome of, say, 'insight of reading', we may find ourselves struggling to complete that task in a way that will satisfy the university's assessment experts.

To sum up my argument to this point, the particular problem of interpretation that I have so far adumbrated is ultimately inseparable from the problem of literary value that this book has explored in the preceding chapters, and our various inchoate responses to the former problem are essentially a repetition in a different register of our inchoate responses to the latter. As I elaborated in [Chapter 4](#), the problem of literary value, in that case as manifested in canonicity, underlies our regular inability or reluctance to articulate why this or that author or text is more valuable than another, despite those estimations continuing to organise our praxis. What I have argued so far in this chapter is that insofar as we do not then have ready frameworks for accounting for literary value, we also lack frameworks for accounting for the activity of interpretation in those situations in which the value-permeated nature of that activity comes to the fore.

Obviously, however, as this book's several glances back at the history of literary studies attest, those inchoate responses belie the field's virtually continuous attempts to supply precisely

those frameworks for value, interpretation and their relation. In [Chapter 1](#), for example, I considered (albeit in a different context) a few of the many ways in which the field has sought to reconcile itself with the discourse of rational inquiry, and indeed it would be accurate, if only part of the story, to say that the field's history consists of these attempts. As reviewed in that chapter, one especially powerful proffered solution has been formalism, since it insists (to collapse together its many varieties and massively oversimplify their nuances) that the field's object of study is in fact a particular class of object, one that possesses something akin to objective properties. Of course, among formalism's difficulties has been (again to oversimplify) how to account for the historical contingency of this class of object, which was the very condition that its predecessor, philology, had taken as its object. If the supposedly objective properties of the formalist text actually vary according to time and place, then, in accordance with the discourse of rational inquiry, the task of the scholar must be one of the objective reconstruction of those times and places, whether that be in the form of philology in its narrow sense of recovery of linguistic usage or its broader one of describing a whole way of life of another time and place. As we know, though, one of the principal reasons why formalism so overtook philology in prominence was that in the latter approach the literary object as such often seemed to disappear (at least according to the formalists). And so the pendulum of literary scholarship swings.³¹

Nonetheless, in both cases the basic conundrum remains the same: the academy's discourse of rational inquiry wants to draw some sort of line between interpreting subject and interpreted object, but the axiologically reciprocal, value-permeated nature of literary study makes this line impossible to draw with any certainty or finality.³² As a kind of case study, then, it will be instructive to take sustained look at one of the field's more-or-less programmatic attempts to solve this conundrum: the proposed marriage, of sorts, between formalism and philology represented by late twentieth-century historicism, in particular as described and practiced by Lee Patterson. Through this case study, we may identify *in situ*, in more detail and more precisely the conundrum's knotty perplexities. Then, cued by this attempt's relative successes and failures, we may begin to sight a way forward.

The case of Lee Patterson

Among the several prompts behind the development of late twentieth-century historicism, the particular problem of interpretation elucidated above was no small one. In this approach to literary study, the challenge of the entanglement of interpreting subject and interpreted object could be fruitfully engaged in the form of the entanglement of the present and the past. Feeding off of the literary theoretical innovations of the decades that preceded, and in contrast with the philological tradition, this approach embraced those entanglements, seeing them not as an obstacle to be overcome but as the fertile soil for a more expansive form of literary scholarship, as in (to cite just the most famous example) Stephen Greenblatt's 'cultural poetics'.³³ Within Chaucer studies, no historicist devoted more of his career to thinking through these entanglements and their implications than Patterson.³⁴ Indeed, it is no overstatement to observe that interpretation, and specifically interpretation's permeation by values, was one of Patterson's primary concerns across the span of his career. In the preface to his first book, 1987's *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature*, after noting the ineluctable conditioning of the historian's view of the past by the historian's present situation, Patterson asserts that 'the various forms of resolution at which historicist negotiations arrive are governed neither by empirical necessity, nor (least of all) by theoretical correctness, but by values and commitments that are in the last analysis political'.³⁵ Similarly, if rather more simply, in the brief preface to his final book (a 2010 collection of mostly previously published essays), Patterson remarks, '[T]hose of us who seek to understand the past ... are simultaneously trying to understand the present – and, even more pertinently, our own lives, both professional and personal'.³⁶ And in a series of dense, bracing metacritical excursions spanning these years, Patterson repeatedly grapples with the tangled relations within and between these dyads of understanding and value and past and present, seeking to forge a coherent organisation of them as the basis for literary critical practice.

The [second chapter](#) of *Negotiating the Past* represents Patterson's first sustained attempt at this project. At the chapter's outset, Patterson rejects 'the ostensibly value-free procedures and materials

of objectivist scholarship' that he perceives much of medieval studies as endorsing, and he instead insists 'that the objects with which the human sciences deal can never be wholly other from the interpreting self over against which they stand; on the contrary, they are themselves constituted by means of the very subjectivity that characterizes the interpreter', and so 'political values operate even at the microlevel of historicist methodology'. This leads him to conclude that 'however much we may be committed to the idea of original meaning, we must finally acknowledge that, in every way it counts, "original meaning" is indistinguishable from "meaning to us"'.³⁷ The problem of interpretation these points establish is clearly of the same genus as the one that I have aired above; the value-permeated nature of interpretation, for example, indeed makes 'original meaning' inextricable from 'meaning to us'. But Patterson's aim is as much prescriptive as critical. In response to the problem, he advocates a scholarly method that makes explicit the 'values and commitments' that, as he notes in his preface, necessarily underlie one's research, arguing that stating one's 'political commitment' does not entail, as 'traditional historicism' has disparaged, 'constraining dogmatisms' but instead may serve as 'enabling assumptions'. He exhorts the literary researcher 'to locate one's scholarly work ... in a way consistent with what one takes one's political values to be', as such an alignment 'endows the critic's activity with historical consequence: the past we reconstruct will shape the future we must live'.³⁸ Or, as he reiterates this point a few years later, 'The question is not whether we are going to engage in politically charged critical activity or not. It is, rather, to recognize that since all forms of criticism are evidently and by definition political, which form we choose to practice is an act with consequences.'³⁹

So far, then, the way forward that Patterson proposes is (in my terms) to embrace the value-permeated activity of interpretation as such – to use one's value commitments as springboards into interpretation rather than to see them as barriers in the way of the object. As a result, our scholarship may become a mode of activism, one that helps to 'shape the future' in a consequential manner. To put this proposal into practice, the necessary first step would seem to be to articulate one's political values, and, while Patterson does not devote abundant pages to this topic, neither is he reticent. Revealingly, *Negotiating the Past* is dedicated to the

memory of Jim Renwick, a leader in Ontario's New Democratic Party with whom Patterson worked. Near the end of the book's *second chapter*, Patterson indicates an abiding interest in 'adopting an antagonistic stance to the depersonalized, depoliticized, and tranquilized homogenization accomplished by American [individualistic] culture', yet a stance that nonetheless does not 'dispense with the category of individualism altogether', as that would 'deprive the human agent of any purchase upon the social world' and so 'signal the end of a politics we desperately need'.⁴⁰ Subsequently, in his 1991 magnum opus, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Patterson addresses the topic more expansively, beginning the book not with Chaucer but with the sentence, 'In late-twentieth-century America ... human life is conceived in terms of a basic unit, the autonomous, free, self-determining individual.'⁴¹ In what follows in the book's introduction, Patterson – sympathetically drawing on, among other prompts, the 1985 sociological study *Habits of the Heart* – seeks to chart a path through the Scylla of the politically enfeebling ideology of individualism and the Charybdis of the antihumanist implications of Marxist, psychoanalytic and structuralist accounts of the individual, which he characterises as totalisations that deprive the human subject of any self-determination.⁴² Patterson does not offer a label for this political position, but for convenience *social humanism* is perhaps one that we can imagine him as accepting.

With his political commitments on the table, then, the next step in the forging of a coherent literary critical praxis is to clarify the relation between those commitments and the procedures of interpretation in a way that will satisfy the strictures of academic rational inquiry. Building upon his formulations in *Negotiating the Past*, in *The Subject of History*, Patterson develops an intricate, dovetailing two-part strategy for accomplishing this task that will in turn serve as the framework for the chapters on Chaucer that follow. On the one hand, he claims that one of the key manifestations of the ills of individualism is disconnection with the past: 'If the category of the social has faded from view, so too has the category of the historical. Instead of understanding themselves as products of determinative historical processes, modern individuals tend to see themselves as autonomous and self-made.'⁴³ On the other hand, he argues (and here I am especially oversimplifying) that Chaucer is a particularly worthy object of study not only because he stands on

the cusp between medieval and modern conceptions of the subject but also because in his literary works he meditates on the nature of both conceptions and on tensions between them. For these reasons, Chaucer models a path between Scylla and Charybdis from which we may learn. Because Chaucer's 'poetry everywhere records the attraction of modernity but is finally unwilling to annul its own historicity', it is 'worth' studying 'Chaucerian subjectivity', since 'it can perhaps contribute to understanding the issues involved in the dialectical process of self-construction per se'.⁴⁴ Put together, these two claims neatly both distinguish and conflate Chaucer's 'original meaning' and his 'meaning to us', as it is precisely by way of the former, which in *The Subject of History* consists of Chaucer's historically specific situation and his distinctive response to it, that the latter – Patterson's commitment to social humanism – may be furthered. In effect, a line emerges between interpreting subject and interpreted object because the value ascriptions that, in general, deny a categorical distinction between subject and object are, in the case of Patterson's brand of historicism, ascribing value to that very line as part of the recognition of that very denial.

There are obviously paradoxes if not simply contradictions in this strategy, which I will consider shortly. But first, to see how Patterson puts this strategy into practice, we may review one of the interpretive episodes in *The Subject of History*. For the book's readings of the *Canterbury Tales*, Patterson shrewdly refurbishes one of the predominant interpretive lenses through which the *Tales* had been read for nearly the entire twentieth century: the so-called dramatic approach, in which the primary literary function of each tale is understood to be the drawing of a portrait of its teller.⁴⁵ Patterson, in place of seeing each tale as an elucidation its teller's character, sees them as a series of competing, developing meditations upon character per se, that is, on the nature of subjectivity in relation to history. But the dramatic approach's underlying assumption, that Chaucer closely calibrated each tale to its teller, remains Patterson's enabling one. What Patterson adds is the assumption that Chaucer did so as part of seeking the aforementioned path between Scylla and Charybdis.

For example, Patterson reads the *Merchant's Tale* as a depiction of a proto-modern instance of the autonomous bourgeois subject, one that emerges as such because the mercantile subject,

having no class-specific ideology of its own, experiences itself as socially undetermined. Patterson sees this experience of subjectivity exhibited in the tale in the way that its capacious and diverse array of topics all reduce to the limning of the Merchant's interiority:

it is the *absence* of representability – of, that is, a social identity derived from a confidently articulated class ideology – that renders the Merchant vulnerable to merely personal feelings. Denied a secure prospect upon the world, the Merchant's gaze instead focuses with obsessive attention upon the inner landscape of unsatisfied desire that is staged in his own failed marriage. Lacking an ideology that would legitimize his commercial life and secure his participation in the political world of events, the bourgeois turns instead to the inner world of the self as the space of self-definition ... The *Tale* is pervaded with the contradictions of the Merchant's own feelings about himself: his shame and self-hatred for humiliating himself, his self-pity and anger at having been victimized.⁴⁶

I have quoted this passage at length in order to highlight the proximity of Patterson's reading to the standard dramatic one. In the latter, the *Merchant's Tale* is understood as contributing to the so-called marriage group of tales because the Merchant, prompted by his feelings of 'shame and self-hatred' about 'his own failed marriage', responds to the Clerk's preceding story about an obedient wife with a sardonic story about an adulterous one. What Patterson adds is that it is the Merchant's proto-bourgeois social condition that produces his wholesale fixation on his inner bitterness, as expressed through the tale that he tells: 'Lacking a secure social identity, the Merchant is overwhelmed by an inner selfhood, what he calls at the outset the "soory herte" (1244) that his *Tale* seeks to silence but everywhere expresses.'⁴⁷

For those who have doubted either the applicability of the dramatic approach in general or just its bearing in this fashion on the *Merchant's Tale* in particular, the sleight of hand here will be evident. For the dramatic approach to reading the *Tales*, no matter what one may believe to be its critical value, itself quite plainly issues from the ideology of bourgeois subjectivity. This approach, invented in the twentieth century as an outgrowth of the nineteenth century's increasingly novelistic understanding of the *Tales*, is wholly infused with the ascription of value to the individual that eventually develops into the late twentieth-century

individualism that Patterson wishes to resist. In his introduction, Patterson briefly entertains the possibility that the dramatic approach may not in fact correspond to Chaucer's design for the *Tales* and may even be a gross distortion of it. In support of the approach, he cites the Ellesmere manuscript's portraits of the pilgrims and then quickly dismisses doubts by stating that 'it is not by definition anachronistic'.⁴⁸ Although this is not the place to contest that dismissal, those familiar with the history of Chaucer criticism will recognise that it is assuredly quite contestable. In short (and to mix metaphors), in his refurbishment of the dramatic approach, Patterson has stacked the deck: he arrives at his conclusion about the proto-bourgeois significance of the Merchant's 'soory herte' because, in mediating the preceding dramatic interpretation, he has infused the text with that significance to begin with. Insofar as Patterson's reading of the Merchant is representative of his method, it is thus on this rather unstable platform that his metacritical arguments about interpretation rest.

In the terms of those arguments, the instability of the platform derives from the possibility that the line between interpreting subject (Patterson) and interpreted object (the *Merchant's Tale*) is not so much paradoxically simultaneously present and absent but rather just absent. The value that Patterson ascribes, as an enactment of his political commitments, to Chaucer's historical distinctiveness may instead just be an ascription of value to a projection of those commitments onto Chaucer. His interpretive method, rather than enacting the reconnection with the past that he sees as essential to resisting the ideology of individualism, may be instancing that very ideology by recasting the past in its likeness.

In fact, in *Negotiating the Past* Patterson foresees this very difficulty. There, alongside his advocating for the political importance of reconnecting with the past, he characterises the identification of past and present as methodological error, a form of 'historicism that would reduce difference and opposition to sameness by collapsing together subject and object'. Instead, 'our work should seek to preserve and understand threatened categories of difference', and '[n]ot the least of these categories ... is that between the present-as-subject and the past-as-object'. But lest we think that he has merely reversed here what we have seen to be his earlier denial of that very difference (e.g., 'they [the objects of the human sciences]

are themselves constituted by means of the very subjectivity that characterizes the interpreter'), he quickly qualifies the point. First, recalling 'the failure of objectivism' that he previously established, he states, 'This is not, it must be insisted, a difference that can be theorized.' He then characterises the attempt 'to understand the past' as consisting of 'elaborate and endless negotiations, struggles between desire and knowledge that can never be granted closure'. And these negotiations, he adds, 'can take place only between two equal and independent parties, and this fiction – a fiction because the past can never exist independently of our memory of it – must be consciously and painfully maintained'.⁴⁹ There is much to query about this reasoning (e.g., if the difference cannot be theorised, then how can it be recognised?), but to take it in the pragmatic spirit in which it was likely intended, we may focus on the way that Patterson finally reconciles hermeneutic sophistication with the demand for historical difference. By declaring the latter difference a *fiction*, he in effect puts the question of historical authenticity on the shelf as ultimately not applicable; to adapt Sir Philip Sidney's aphorism, fiction 'nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth'.⁵⁰ The identification of historical difference thus becomes at base a hermeneutic strategy linked to the hermeneut's political values, and its success will finally depend less on correspondence to historical actuality than on the rhetorical potency of the conscious and painful efforts to maintain the fiction of that correspondence.

We should hence not be surprised, then, when in the afterword to *The Subject of History* Patterson circles back to how the book 'witnesses to its author's political values', which he here encapsulates in the exhortation to 'think socially'. He states that in the preceding chapters he has sought to enact this practice by locating Chaucer's texts 'in relation to a discourse ... that can make explicit the social meaning of his poetry', such as the discourses of late medieval 'history, class, gender, family, and religion'. The ultimate aim, he flatly states, is not thereby to produce 'correct' interpretations, since (here recalling formulations from *Negotiating the Past*) 'historical description can never provide a norm of interpretive rectitude'. Such description, he says, rather serves to generate interpretations that emphasise Chaucer's value for the present-day political project of thinking socially, as it 'can make visible social meanings and so show how Chaucer, both in his championing of a sovereign

selfhood and in his critique of it, participated and continues to participate in the making of our world. And perhaps', he adds, 'it can help us to think socially about other, more urgent matters as well'.⁵¹ Thus, at the end of *The Subject of History*, Chaucer's literary value and Patterson's political values wholly coincide, which is of course the axiological condition that has been in place from the start. Patterson, in short, has made good on his call for literary critics to foreground the connections between their value commitments and their interpretive practice.

Nevertheless, I expect that most readers of *The Subject of History* will agree that the deep erudition and dazzling argumentation of its several hundred pages of Chaucer interpretation seem rather disproportionate to the aim of exhorting us to think socially about Chaucer and 'other, more urgent matters as well'. Manifestly, the book presents its capacious and detailed readings of Chaucer as attempts to understand Chaucer's writings better than before, thereby maintaining a commitment to the discourse of rational inquiry in this particular respect that the book belatedly disavows. Once more a lacuna emerges between theory and practice, which in this case arises because, if the difference between Patterson's values and his historical description is, as he says in *Negotiating the Past*, a fiction, Patterson may not actually be thinking socially according to how he has defined that activity. As a consequence, even though he recognises the value-permeated nature of interpretation, his very values demand that in practice he act sometimes as if that were not the case, which entails his acting as if his interpretations were more historically authentic than others. In fact, I would credit him with, more often than not, *believing* his interpretations are more historically authentic, thereby avoiding bad faith in one direction while incurring it in another.

In the aftermath of *The Subject History*, I suspect that Patterson in some fashion recognised this double-bind. Not coincidentally, also in the years between then and his work on *Negotiating the Past*, the perception of the relative dearth of explicit political commitments in medievalist scholarship that he bemoaned in the latter was replaced by a perception of relative ubiquity, and this more recent scholarship sometimes took the form of interpretations (and commitments) that he found inferior, most notoriously, those which were informed by psychoanalysis.⁵² Strikingly, then, in the

1996 essay 'The Disenchanted Classroom', which at times comes across as a *de facto* methodological palinode, Patterson turns his attention, not to how align one's scholarship and teaching with one's values, but to how to insulate the former from the latter. (Written as a contribution to a symposium on 'Teaching Chaucer in the Nineties', the essay, as its title indicates, foregrounds the question of value in pedagogy. But in his consideration of the question Patterson seamlessly blends the activities of teaching and scholarship, since, in the elucidation of his methods in contrast with those of others, he must necessarily refer, as he admits, 'to the critical arguments of other Chaucerians'.)⁵³

Early on in the essay, Patterson reiterates his recognition 'that the practical choices one makes derive from value commitments', but just a few sentences later presents the 'two components' of 'the debate about course content' in a way that appears to defer, if not just to disavow, this derivation:

First, if for the purposes of analysis we think of our teaching in terms of knowledge and values, where should our emphasis fall? Second, should we teach medieval literature primarily in terms of its relevance to or difference from contemporary life?⁵⁴

In the light of Patterson's own formulations in *Negotiating the Past*, it is not difficult to see that here, simply by articulating these questions as choices *between* 'knowledge' and 'values' and 'relevance to' and 'difference from contemporary life', he has already solved the problem (in my terms, the permeation of interpretation by values) that he sets out to address. For if knowledge and value, and past and present, are separable in the practical, instrumental way implied, then that permeation has evaporated.

In what follows, Patterson turns to Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' in order to articulate as a matter of scholarly/pedagogical method these binary distinctions that he has already put into place.⁵⁵ He follows Weber's insistence 'that values remain incapable of scientific – that is, empirical – demonstration', but, rather than concluding, as he did in *Negotiating the Past*, that the value-permeated activity of interpretation is therefore not ultimately a matter of empirical demonstration, he seeks instead to position his method of historical description as a version of the latter. Accordingly, following Weber he characterises the foregrounding

of values in scholarship and teaching as the practice of an 'ethic of commitment', which is an ill-advised choice 'because the teacher should not promote values that are by definition beyond empirical demonstration'. The better, contrasting choice is an 'ethic of responsibility', in which 'the teacher must distinguish, as best he or she can, between the meaning of the cultural objects under scrutiny and their value', maintain 'a reticence about questions of value', provide 'knowledge not about what ought to be but about what is', and 'to explain ... historical causes and meanings ... rather than their *significance*, in the sense of their value to us'. Although again acknowledging, this time via Weber, 'that all knowledge is developed within a value-laden sociohistorical context that determines not merely the object of inquiry but the methodology and, to an important degree, the results', he nonetheless insists that a measure of *Wertfreiheit*, or 'value-freedom', is achievable by means of a 'rigorous application of empirical methods within the context of a project that is necessarily defined by the investigator's values'.⁵⁶

Weber's arguments, of course, were directed towards sociologists. Hence, regardless of whether or how much 'the rigorous application of empirical methods' may achieve value-freedom in that sort of work, for Patterson the question must be how the interpretive methods of literary studies can be conceived as somehow empirical. Suddenly, that is, Patterson is in a boat that oddly resembles the one of the pre-Fish-critique stylisticians, only with historical rather than linguistic description serving as the proposed empirical basis of practice. Revealingly, the manner in which Patterson seeks to substantiate his position is by yoking together the rather mismatched pair of Paul de Man and E. D. Hirsch. He turns to the former to argue that while political values inevitably eventually enter into the literary critical enterprise, that entry can and should be deferred by means of 'careful textual reading', quoting de Man's emphasis on 'attention to the philological or rhetorical devices of language'.⁵⁷ He then explains the nature of this 'attention' within the Hirschian framework that he earlier imported with the distinction, as quoted above, between *meaning* and *significance* (an importation that he acknowledges in an endnote).⁵⁸ He defines 'careful textual reading' as the establishment of a text's *meaning*, which now corresponds to Weber's emphasis on empirical methods, and contrasts this activity with an articulation of a text's *significance*, which corresponds to

an ascription of values that may not, as Weber says, be empirically demonstrated. On this basis, Patterson asserts that 'the central ambition' of his historical method 'is to discover original meaning'. And in a virtually complete reversal of the formulation in *Negotiating the Past* that states that 'in every way it counts, "original meaning" is indistinguishable from "meaning to us"', he declares, 'The last question it [Patterson's historicism] asks of a text is not "What does this mean to us?" but "What might it have meant to them?"' Consequently, Patterson's interpretive method, instead of serving, as he insists in *The Subject of History*, as a means to enact one's value commitments, now 'erects systemic barriers that can help to protect us from our own enthusiasms'.⁵⁹ And so, by the end of the essay, the political commitments that he so stirringly solders to academic work in his earlier writings now appear wholly severed. Whereas in 1990 he affirms the aspiration to make our 'choices ... as literary historians ... consistent with the choices we make as citizens', in 1996 he avers, 'But civic duty is a different part of life; and while all of us want to understand our lives as wholes, the way we achieve that understanding is a personal matter that is strictly irrelevant to our professional practice.'⁶⁰

In the next and final section of this chapter, Patterson's decades-long grappling with the problem of the value permeation of interpretation will provide a point of departure for how we might reconcile ourselves to that problem in a generative fashion. For that purpose, then, we need not pick apart Patterson's sometimes eyebrow-raising reasoning in 'The Disenchanted Classroom'. It perhaps suffices to point out that de Man would likely have laughed out loud at seeing his arguments, which of course emphasise the sheer undecidability of literary meaning, being used to bolster a case for interpretive empiricism. Indeed, Patterson himself was likely aware of the sheer audacity of this ungainly move, as he quotes de Man's declaration that 'it is not ... certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything'.⁶¹ (Equally audacious is his using de Man's arguments to advocate for a deferral of political values in scholarship and teaching, given that by the mid-1990s Patterson was obviously aware of de Man's notorious wartime writings.) To be fair, Patterson does, as I have noted, consistently qualify his claims in ways that recall his positions in *Negotiating the Past*. Nonetheless, as is evident in his final sustained

metacritical reflections in the introduction to a 2006 collection of his essays, through the rest of his career Patterson retains both those earlier positions and the quasi-empiricist ones that he voices in 'The Disenchanted Classroom'.⁶² Taken altogether, this spectrum of positions rather poignantly illustrates the personal remark that Patterson offers early in the 2006 introduction, when looking back on his political work for the New Democratic Party: 'One of the challenges that most perplexed me was how to link my political life with my scholarship.'⁶³

Where we might go from here

For this book's purposes, one helpful cue in Patterson's struggle with the value permeation of interpretation is that on a few occasions in 'The Disenchanted Classroom' he indicates that Weber's motivation for the advocacy of value-free scholarship was actually itself political. Specifically, Weber was wary of 'the growth of nationalist pan-Germanism', and 'much of Weber's methodological pronouncements were delivered in response to the growing pressure of the right-wing nationalism that would, after his death in 1920, develop into Nazism'. By arguing against an 'ethic of commitment', therefore, Weber was resisting 'the deep complicity of the German universities with the state that financed them'.⁶⁴ Just like Patterson, then, Weber disavows value commitments in the name of a value commitment, exemplifying the same double-bind that leads Patterson down the path of apparent contradiction. As we have seen, Patterson exhibits an unwillingness wholly to accept what he nonetheless frequently does acknowledge – the permeation of literary study by value – because he perceives that one of his deeply held value commitments, his abiding concern to resist the ideology of individualism, prohibits that full acceptance. The basic problem, as he sees it – as the contrasting epigraphs from Johan Huizinga and Søren Kierkegaard in the preface to *Negotiating the Past* signal – is that value commitments are rooted in individual subjectivity, whereas 'to think socially' demands that one seek to transcend the confines of one's subjectivity and to reach out toward, if not quite touch, subject positions that are authentically – even empirically – other. To reduce literary study to values, then, is to capitulate to the

ideology of individualism, the resistance to which was Patterson's motivation for his approach to literary study in the first place.

At first glance it may seem easy enough to extract oneself from this double-bind simply by adopting a different centrally motivating value commitment, say, resistance to white supremacy. But by itself this move would just reinstall the same problem in a different guise. As long as value commitments are understood as rooted in individual subjectivity, the relation between those commitments and the object of academic literary study is at best arbitrary if not always, as in Patterson's case, paradoxical. Why study literature in order to resist white supremacy? To be sure, many literary texts would seem to have much to teach us about this resistance. But that by itself does not justify the study of literature as an academic field or lay the ground for a methodology that would distinguish that field from others, as the widespread consideration of literary texts in other disciplines readily attests. Rather, the logic of the discipline-justifying claim must go the other direction, asserting, say, that an already established distinctive methodology of literary study contributes something to the resistance of white supremacy that cannot otherwise be achieved. But this in effect puts us back with Patterson. On the one hand, in the same way that he installs an *a priori* subjective value of resistance to individualism within the historicist method that he recommends for literary study, we will have installed an *a priori* subjective value of resistance to white supremacy into whatever literary methodology we choose. On the other hand, to satisfy the strictures of the discourse of rational inquiry, like Patterson we will then be left with the task of explaining how our respective methodology does not ultimately reduce to that *a priori* subjective value commitment – how the methodology remains something more than that commitment precisely in order to serve as a discipline-justifying means of furthering it (or other commitments). We must explain, in short, how value and method are at once independent of and bear a necessary relation to each other.

This is where this book's preliminary theory of literary valuing may be of some help. For in that theory value commitments are not rooted in individual subjectivity. Rather, such 'commitments' emerge only in the activity of ascribing value, an activity that consists of the mediation of the value ascriptions of other actors, human and non-human, across a network extending indefinitely, temporally and

spatially. Although each actor, as the label denotes, possesses mediating agency, any one actor's value ascriptions cannot be isolated from those of the other actors that they mediate. Any given value commitment is hence in no way distinct from the pathways through the axiological constellations in which it is enacted. Accordingly, such a commitment is certainly not housed within an individual's subjectivity but is always already social, and in fact, inasmuch as *social* is understood to refer only to human actors, it is more precisely always already *environmental*. In short, our values are never simply just ours. In my preliminary theory of literary valuing (and reflecting its derivations from ANT), the dichotomy between subject and object does not hold, and so the demand to delineate the latter from the former simply does not apply.

That this points to a way forward rather than just compounding the problem becomes evident if we consider the question of what might constitute literary study if we put aside the dichotomy between subject and object. What remains is the study of the pathways through the axiological constellations that constitute our experience of the literary. In being neither subjective nor objective, these pathways are simultaneously both us and not us, both self and other. They are, moreover, as 'real' (which is to say, as historically authentic) as anything else, as they involve flesh-and-blood people, physical books, course syllabi, and so on, as well as the ideas, information and interpretations necessarily carried by material things. What literary study can be – or, as I argued in [Chapter 3](#), what it in fact already is – is a generative and reflexive account of these pathways, which are no more or no less objective than anything else in the humanities, if not across the academy more generally.

There is no need to repeat here [Chapter 3's](#) explanation of how various activities currently pursued under the banner of literary studies may be understood in these terms.⁶⁵ Rather, the point to reemphasise at this juncture is that pathways through axiological constellations always necessarily include, at some level of mediation, the literary scholar as one of the actors. Thus we may reaffirm Patterson's exhortation to be explicit about the value commitments that motivate our work, as that constitutes a key part of a reflexive account of that work's pathways. And we may also reaffirm his method of locating Chaucer's texts 'in relation to a discourse ... that can make explicit the social meaning of

his poetry' as one pathway-generative practice, among many other possibilities, wholly reconcilable with the academy's strictures of rational inquiry. But we must recognise, too, that in literary study, 'discourse' and 'social meaning' are themselves transpositions of mediations of value ascriptions within axiological constellations that include the interpreter and hence are no more or no less 'empirical' than other mediations. Yet neither are they, as Patterson seems to fear, therefore merely subjective. Rather, insofar as they necessarily include actors other than the interpreter, they are subject to inquiry in a way that has the potential for interpreters to gain knowledge and insight beyond that which they bring to the task. As I mentioned above, interpretation, as it involves mediations of value ascriptions, is reciprocal; it may shape the interpreter as much as the interpreter shapes that which is under consideration. One form of this shaping of the interpreter is what we may call, with all the necessary caveats, the positive knowledge of literary inquiry. So, for example, quite plainly Patterson's grasp of the ideology of individualism was shaped by his placing Chaucer's poetry alongside fourteenth-century social discourses. That knowledge is real, but in the final analysis it is not so because of whatever historical authenticity those discourses may possess but rather because the axiological constellations that join Patterson to an array of other value-ascribing actors, extending from the 1990s to the late fourteenth century and beyond, are real.

The formalists' famous notion of defamiliarisation can, as I suggested in [Chapter 3](#), be understood as a name for this kind of knowledge. Not in fact a property of the literary object, it names the experience of becoming aware of the other as such that scrutiny of one's mediation of the value ascriptions of other actors makes possible. It names the conscious recognition that our knowledge of our values always involves some mediation of the values of others. As in [Chapter 3](#), therefore, what I am recommending is not necessarily any practical changes to the robust variety of approaches to literary study currently being pursued. Rather, in the first instance I am simply proposing that we more fully acknowledge what we are actually doing in those approaches, with the aim of thereby closing the gap between theory and practice in a way compelling both to ourselves within the field and to those outside who may have interest in or be sceptical of our work. I believe that this response to

the particular problem of interpretation under consideration here, while it makes it no less problematic, may well be among the most distinctive assets that the field has to offer.

Rather than retreading this ground any further, however, in conclusion let me briefly turn to a couple of recent examples of medievalist literary scholarship, ones that have struck me as not merely redescribable in my framework but as illustrations of its potential usefulness (unbeknownst to their authors, of course). In particular, I have found these studies methodologically innovative in ways that exemplify the reflexive tracing of their own generated pathways through axiological constellations. In contrast with Patterson, who produces interpretations that may not finally be fully accounted for by his claims about his methods, these scholars adopt an interpretive practice that regularly and explicitly foregrounds the mediations of value ascriptions that constitute those pathways. In regard to the future of the field, I find this work promising in its scholarly nimbleness and reflexive rigour, although, to be sure, I am by no means suggesting that other kinds of work are necessarily any less so. Moreover, this pair of studies represents just two among many others that possess similar qualities.⁶⁶

In *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, Carissa Harris's overall project is to investigate the 'capacity of obscenity to educate and change minds ... in order to understand its meanings in the later Middle Ages and to uncover its present-day implications'. She accordingly from the start foregrounds the mediations of value ascriptions (especially social, political and ethical ones) that inextricably connect 'the later Middle Ages' and 'present-day implications', which include relations between her own experiences of the book's topics and the presence of those topics in the texts that she interprets. As she describes,

I link my discussion of medieval texts with my own experience, bringing personal histories into conversation with literary and cultural ones ... I cannot help but see the larger issues I write about – power, inequality, oppression, misogyny – at work in my everyday experiences, just as I cannot help but notice how the quotidian violations of inhabiting this body have structural causes and political import.

At the same time, she recognises that these linkages are simultaneously distinctions – that it is as much the differences as it is the

continuity between her experiences and those represented in the texts that demand attention. While she avers that ‘we need to trace the deep roots of violence and misogyny stretching back to the Middle Ages’, she also remains alert to ‘the differences between then and now’, arguing ‘for linkages without collapsing differences’.⁶⁷ In these ways her project, in my terms, takes as its object neither precisely her experiences nor medieval texts but rather the pathways of mediations through axiological constellations that include both and that are generated by the study itself.

Throughout the book, Harris pursues a methodology that juxtaposes present-day experiences, sometimes her own, with readings of late medieval texts (readings that often involve historicist collocations of the sort that Patterson recommends). For example, [Chapter 1](#) begins with the woman raped by Ched Evans, considers the ensuing legal case that resulted in both a 2012 conviction and a 2016 acquittal, and then uses this as a springboard to examine the culture that fostered both the crime and the acquittal as that culture is reflected in, and even in part produced by, the Miller-Cook sequence in the *Canterbury Tales*. In particular, Harris identifies in that tale sequence a “felawe masculinity” ... centered on men teaching their peers to perpetuate rape culture’. With this juxtaposition between present and past, she produces a reading that highlights a key aspect of the tale sequence’s artistic design that has gone underappreciated: its unification not just by an exhibition of toxic masculinity but as the representation of a linked series of instructional narratives – ‘overtly pedagogical’ tales – from men to other men about the normative modes of performance of that masculinity in relation to violence and particularly sexual assault.⁶⁸ She compellingly delineates a distinctive late medieval genre of toxic pedagogy, while keeping in view its continuities with the present. The close attention that she gives to Chaucer’s text manifestly ascribes literary value to it, but she follows this value through a complex set of mediations that are as disavowing as affirming, if not more so the former. As in Patterson’s reading of the *Merchant’s Tale*, the interpretive framework that she brings to the *Canterbury Tales* plainly originates with her present-day value commitments, but, in contrast to Patterson’s reading, the distinctions and continuities between present and past, and the mediations that necessarily create them, are much more prominently part of Harris’s explicit method. In tracing in this fashion axiological pathways among

actors that include herself, Chaucer, Ched Evans's rape victim, Evans and a range of others, Harris provides us with a generous helping of what I tentatively called above the positive knowledge of literary study, in this case knowledge of both the *Canterbury Tales* and rape culture.

The work of Seeta Chaganti, as most capaciously on display in her book *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages*, offers a similarly innovative methodology, one that foregrounds, particularly with the latter study's technique of narrative reenactment, both the continuities and distinctions between past and present.⁶⁹ But for this chapter's purposes the most germane example of Chaganti's work is her plenary address for the 2021 Sewanee Medieval Colloquium, 'Boethian Privilege and the Abolitionist Position'.⁷⁰ In this talk, Chaganti's method involves a strikingly bold juxtaposition between present and past that is motivated by an exceptionally focused value commitment, a juxtaposition that at first may seem a non-sequitur. Specifically, Chaganti asks us to bring the meditations of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* on Providence and temporality into conversation with twenty-first-century arguments for abolition. She sets out, as she puts it, 'to read Boethius through the abolitionist position and read the abolitionist position through Boethius'.

Chaganti begins with Derek Chauvin's trial for the murder of George Floyd, but her point of contact between this event and Boethius is not so much, as she notes, the dubious workings of the justice system then and now, as respectively instanced by the modern carceral system and Boethius's imprisonment. Rather, the considerably more complex juxtaposition that she presents is between the experience and perception then and now of inevitability – specifically, the experience and perception, on the one hand, of the inevitable necessity of the modern carceral system, and the consequent fate of its victims such as Floyd, and, on the other hand, that of human fate categorically within a system of divine Providence. What motivates this inquiry, she makes clear, is her commitment to countering the modern liberal reformist position that seeks not to abolish the carceral system but just to rid it of its problems, a position that she characterises as believing that the need for such a system, in some form, is inevitable. In a dazzling series of mediations that I cannot hope to summarise adequately, she identifies the scholarly tradition

of focusing on Boethius's concern with free will as a product of the same liberalism that sees the carceral system as inevitable and, for that very reason, as providing a springboard for understanding Boethius's more crucial concern with futurity and collectivity. She suggests that bringing the lens of the apparently anachronistic abolitionist position to bear on the *Consolation of Philosophy* helps to clear away some of the smoke of liberal individualism that intervenes between our twenty-first-century present and the sixth-century *Consolation*. Reciprocally, the reading of the *Consolation* that results may speak to possibilities that twenty-first-century liberalism cannot imagine. Hence, she claims, the scholarly habitus of medievalist scholarship, once adjusted in this fashion, may help make more legible the abolitionist position. As she proposes, our 'familiarity with Boethius' may allow us

to inhabit perhaps a somewhat rarer position as an academic, one from which [we] are focused on the fact that the structure has some outer limits whether [we] can access those or not, and thus [we] understand that what [we] can discern of the structure is bad, and thus [we] can set [our] sights and energy on breaking it down.

Importantly, however, Chaganti makes clear that she does not mean to reclaim Boethius as a kind of abolitionist *avant la lettre*. She fully acknowledges not just the immense historical span in this mediation but also the equally profound ideological differences between Boethius's work – and the tradition of scholarship on it – and the abolitionist position. 'I have every reason to believe', she remarks, 'that [Boethius] would have had no problem enacting the kinds of oppressions that his own philosophical system may have helped pave the way for'. Neither is Chaganti interested in recuperating 'the European Middle Ages' generally by attempting 'to make the argument that it existed in a time prior to white supremacy and is thus innocent'. Rather, the reciprocal power of her juxtapositional interpretation of Boethius and the abolitionist position arises as much out of their historical and ideological discontinuity as their continuity. Indeed, inasmuch as the philosophical tradition of liberalism runs through the eighteenth century on back to its mediation of figures such as Boethius, Chaganti's ideological antagonism in this regard serves also as reflexive scrutiny of the historiographical tradition in which her reading of Boethius necessarily occurs.

As I hope is evident from this summary, explicit identifications of value ascriptions and of those that they mediate, in both affirmative and disavowing fashions, pervade Chaganti's talk in a way that makes them inextricable from her interpretive arguments. The value commitment with which she begins is also the one with which she ends: the positive literary knowledge that her talk offers regarding Boethius's practical recommendations for living within a Providential system is in no way detachable from the exhortation that she makes to her auditors to involve themselves in abolition – for it is the practical imperative to engage in the latter activity that enables her to discern the nature of Boethius's advice.⁷¹ Methodologically, Chaganti's talk illustrates that in literary study, value ascription mediation need not necessarily involve the sort of manifest topical overlap that we saw with Harris's delineation of 'felwae masculinity' in both the *Canterbury Tales* and the present. Since our axiological environments have no definitive temporal or spatial boundaries, and since our ceaseless value ascription mediations branch out in myriad directions, there is no methodological throttle limiting the germane set of mediations in any given act of interpretation, as long as the interpreter is, like Chaganti, careful to trace her pathways through axiological constellations. Literary study, precisely because it is literary in the way that I have described in this book, may for these reasons cast into relief relations among our and others' values, even very different values of very distant others, in manners that we had not before so fully appreciated.

Nonetheless – to end this chapter on a cautionary note – such a self-congratulatory account of literary studies must be tempered by recognition of the necessarily uncertain bearing of the results of an interpretive project upon the value commitments that always (if not always explicitly) inaugurate it. Some degree of this uncertainty must always remain because, while the positive literary knowledge gained by tracing one's pathways through axiological constellations cannot be separated from the value commitments that prompt the journey, there can be no assurance that that knowledge will further that commitment. Not only may the experience of interpretation, with its reciprocal dynamic, potentially affect the interpreter in a way that hinders her commitment, but more obviously the efficacy of the interpretation in respect to this commitment depends to some degree upon the unpredetermined value ascriptions of the

interpretation's subsequent mediators (e.g., its human auditors, its institutional reception, etc.). Chaganti, acutely aware of this provisionality, accordingly concludes her talk by having her audience consider, for example, 'whether it is possible to take an abolitionist position as connected to a disciplinary identity, or whether that position itself is inherently contradictory because of the power dynamics that disciplinary protocol inevitably reproduces'. She wonders aloud, 'Would committing to abolition for all of us mean getting out *there*, not in *here*?' With Patterson, then, she is clearly still contemplating the nature of the linkages between her value commitments and her scholarship. And for all its abstruse axiological terminology, that sort of contemplation is primarily what this present book has sought to encourage in its readers.

Notes

- 1 Rita Felski, Introduction to a special issue on 'Interpretation and Its Rivals', *NLH*, 45:2 (2014), v–xi (v, vi).
- 2 Matthew Rubery and Leah Price, 'Introduction', in Matthew Rubery and Leah Price, *Further Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1–11 (1).
- 3 Felski, Introduction, p. vi.
- 4 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 10, 33.
- 5 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108:1 (2009), 1–21, the formulations of which continue to be debated.
- 6 I assume these lessons require no elaboration. For a paradigmatic instance, see J. Hillis Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', *The Georgia Review*, 30:2 (1976), 330–48.
- 7 David Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 166–7.
- 8 The debate about irony in the *Squire's Tale* is longstanding. Lawton's position here builds upon his earlier intervention in *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985). I take a position in Chapter 3 of *Literary Value and Social Identity in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- 9 Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 477–8. Turner is summarising the argument of Lee Patterson, 'The Parson's Tale and the Quitting of the

Canterbury Tales', *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 331–80, whose findings about the Parson Tale's more localised responses to earlier tales she cites approvingly in her preceding paragraph.

- 10 Turner, *Chaucer*, pp. 478–9, 364. Turner develops this general line of argument about the *Tales* in many other places across the biography, from one of which I have taken the final two-word quotation. In that discussion, she states that with the *Tales*, Chaucer 'embraced the idea of equivalence', and '[t]his ability to equalize without homogenizing is central to Chaucer's ethical stance and to his poetic art' (pp. 366–7).
- 11 For the descriptive turn, see, e.g., Heather Love, 'Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *NLH*, 41:2 (2010), 371–91; Sharon Marcus, Heather Love and Stephen Best, 'Building a Better Description', *Representations*, 135:1 (2016), 1–21; Heather Love, 'Care, Concern, and the Ethics of Description', in Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke (eds), *Latour and the Humanities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), pp. 107–31. In the latter essay, Love remarks, 'Most critics point to close reading as the core method of the field, without necessarily being willing to commit to a definition, let alone a step-by-step protocol or directives for training students' (p. 127). It is precisely such protocols that characterise stylistics.
- 12 For the relation of present-day stylistics to Russian formalism, see especially the introduction to Violeta Sotirova, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
- 13 Michael Burke, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 2. Burke here is drawing on Mick Short, *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (London: Longman, 1996).
- 14 See the first chapter in Michael Toolan, *The Stylistics of Fiction: A Literary-Linguistics Approach* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–27. As Toolan avers, 'Fish's book has been an invaluable corrective to the objectivist mentalist tendencies that stylistics had long nurtured' (p. 19). Toolan, however, does not see Fish's critique as making stylistics any less valid than any other sort of literary study, once stylisticians recognise what they are actually doing.
- 15 I quote Fish's essay from Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 71, 72, 77. The original publication is Fish, 'What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?', in Seymour Benjamin Chatman (ed.), *Approaches to Poetics: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 109–52. For the quotations of Milic, see Louis T. Milac, 'Unconscious Ordering in the Prose of Swift', in Jacob Leed (ed.), *The Computer and Literary*

- Style: Introductory Essays and Studies* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1966), pp. 79–106 (104).
- 16 For an account (largely Gadamerian) of the hermeneutic circle as it applies to literary interpretation, see David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
- 17 Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 253. The original publication is Fish, 'What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?--Part II', *Boundary 2*, 8:1 (1979), 129–46.
- 18 Toolan, *Stylistics of Fiction*, p. 21. Toolan here is following the argument of George L. Dillon, 'Whorfian Stylistics', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 11:2 (1982), 73–7, and approvingly quotes Dillon's point that the best response one can hope for from a sceptical interlocutor of stylistic analysis is 'I see' rather than 'You've proved your point' (Toolan, p. 21; Dillon, p. 75). Other stylisticians, however, have not given up so easily. Burke's remarks about falsifiability suggest as much, and indeed Burke goes on to figure the stylistician as a 'Sherlock Holmes character' who uncovers 'the linguistic data' that thereby undergirds a 'relatively objective interpretation' (*Routledge Handbook*, pp. 2–3).
- 19 Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. vii.
- 20 For just one response, see Toolan, *Stylistics of Fiction*, pp. 12–20, who points out some clear deficiencies.
- 21 Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 14.
- 22 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 23 One notable if ultimately only partially successful attempt to address this question was the Konstanz school of reader-response criticism and especially that of Wolfgang Iser. See, e.g., Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Fish, whose early work held many affinities with this approach, infamously took it to task in 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser', *Diacritics*, 11:1 (1981), 2–13. For a reflection on the impact of this moment on the history of literary criticism, and its implications for interpretation, see Michael Bérubé, *Rhetorical Occasions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 97–110. A more recent attempt to address this question is one of the projects of the approach to literary study known as cognitive poetics. For a recent handbook, see Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 24 Love, 'Close but not Deep', p. 387.

- 25 Ted Underwood and Jordan Sellers, 'The Longue Durée of Literary Prestige', *MLQ*, 77:3 (2016), 321–44 (335). John Frow, 'On Midlevel Concepts', *NLH*, 41:2 (2010), 237–52, recognises a similar dependency on value ascription at the level of data identification in the work of Franco Moretti – as in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007).
- 26 I refer, of course, to E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
- 27 Cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 28 For the famous formulation upon which I am riffing, see Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in Thomas Albert Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), pp. 350–77.
- 29 Emma Margaret Solberg, 'Response to "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy"', *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*, 2:2 (2021), 134–53 (138).
- 30 I expect that this is not an uncommon experience. My most difficult case was with a student who wrote a tightly argued, reasonably well-informed paper about the *Physician's Tale* in which she claimed that Virginius makes the correct choice to decapitate his daughter.
- 31 Among the many sources informing this paragraph's admittedly crayon-level depiction of the relation of formalism and philology, the most proximate are Lee Patterson's introduction to his *Temporal Circumstances: Form and History in the Canterbury Tales* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and his 'The Return to Philology', in John H. Van Engen (ed.), *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 231–44. For the deep history of the emergence of literary study from within philology, see the sixth and tenth chapters of James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), which, among other things, explain how the perceived antagonism between philology and evaluative criticism on the basis of form emerges only in the decades after 1910.
- 32 I recognise that when put this way, the conundrum appears as just one species of the vastly more general observer effect and thus this point is by no means limited to literary study. But for the reasons that I have elaborated in [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#), literary study is among the fields for which this effect is most palpable and fraught.
- 33 As articulated in, e.g., Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

- 34 Patterson's work has attracted no small amount of commentary of its own, as well as its share of controversy, with which I cannot hope adequately to engage without turning this entire chapter into a study of his legacy. If one were to pursue such a project, the place to begin is Kathy Cawsey, *Twentieth-Century Chaucer Criticism: Reading Audiences* (Farnham: Routledge, 2011), 131–53. See also, *inter alia*, Elizabeth Scala, 'Historicists and Their Discontents: Reading Psychoanalytically in Medieval Studies', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 44:1 (2002), 108–31; John T. Sebastian, 'Chaucer and the Theory Wars: Attack of the Historicists? The Psychoanalysts Strike Back? Or a New Hope?', *Literature Compass*, 3:4 (2006), 767–77; Scala's response to Sebastian (among others) in 'The Gender of Historicism', in Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (eds), *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 191–214; and, in that same volume, George Edmondson, 'Naked Chaucer', pp. 139–60.
- 35 Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. x.
- 36 Lee Patterson, *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. viii.
- 37 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 42–4. Patterson doubles down on these points in 'Introduction: Critical Historicism and Medieval Studies', in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 1–14., asserting that, e.g., 'textual interpretation confronts the critic with acts of judgment that require continual recourse to his or her own values' (p. 3).
- 38 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 57, 69, 45.
- 39 Patterson, 'Critical Historicism', p. 14.
- 40 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 72.
- 41 Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 3.
- 42 *Habits of the Heart* is now in its third edition: Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 43 Patterson, *Subject of History*, p. 4. See also the related formulations in Lee Patterson, 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies', *Speculum*, 65:1 (1990), 87–108. Important to this claim of Patterson's, here and elsewhere, is Paul de Man's conception of modernity as consisting of the impossible desire to effect a definitive rupture with the past, for the present to be its own point

- of origin. See de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 142–65.
- 44 Patterson, *Subject of History*, pp. 21, 12.
 - 45 Greatly prompted by George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915), this approach reached a kind of apotheosis with R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), which includes actual visual portraits of the pilgrims.
 - 46 Patterson, *Subject of History*, p. 338, emphasis in original.
 - 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 337–8. For just one of the many instances of dramatic, marriage-group readings of the *Merchant's Tale*, see Clair C. Olson, 'The Interludes of the Marriage Group in the *Canterbury Tales*', in Beryl Rowland (ed.), *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1974), pp. 164–72.
 - 48 Patterson, *Subject of History*, p. 45. Patterson mentions the critiques of Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*; and C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). To those we may add, *inter alia*, two studies by A. C. Spearing: *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and *Medieval Autographies: The 'I' of the Text* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), in the latter of which Spearing notes Patterson's dependence on the approach. In the second chapter of *Literary Value and Social Identity*, I review the critical history of reading the *Merchant's Tale* as expressing its teller's bitterness and find those arguments, for a variety of reasons, wanting.
 - 49 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, pp. 72–3.
 - 50 Quoted from Vincent B. Leitch *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), p. 279.
 - 51 Patterson, *Subject of History*, pp. 423–4.
 - 52 Patterson articulates this view most trenchantly in 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clío in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum*, 76:3 (2001), 638–80.
 - 53 Lee Patterson, 'The Disenchanted Classroom', *Exemplaria*, 8:2 (1996), 513–45, although I quote from the essay's republication in *Acts of Recognition*, here at p. 36.
 - 54 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, p. 36.

- 55 For a translation of Weber's famous essay, see *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004).
- 56 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, pp. 39, 41, 42, 43, 44; emphasis in original.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 45; Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 24.
- 58 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, p. 269 n. 27. In contrast, in *Negotiating the Past*, Patterson identifies Hirsch's hermeneutics as the 'lingua franca' (p. 44) of the objectivist historical scholarship that he finds so conceptually dubious.
- 59 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, pp. 46, 48.
- 60 Patterson, 'Critical Historicism', p. 10; *Acts of Recognition*, p. 53.
- 61 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, p. 45. Patterson drops the conclusion of de Man's sentence: 'anything but its own language' (*Resistance to Theory*, p. 11). Patterson develops his odd use of de Man to underwrite old-school philology in more detail, if not with more persuasiveness, in 'The Return to Philology', which obviously takes its title from de Man's famous essay. In fact, that relatively brief 1994 essay anticipates several of the positions that Patterson takes in 'The Disenchanted Classroom', including the introduction of Weber and the idea of disenchantment into the debate about literary critical method. Patterson airs the possibility, for example, that the 'whole enterprise [of literary studies] *cannot* be justified in terms of social effectiveness' (p. 239, emphasis in original).
- 62 One gets that sense that with these final metacritical reflections, Patterson is not so much seeking to reconcile his conflicting positions on interpretation as he is just gathering them together in one place (as the sometimes verbatim incorporation of material from those earlier forays would seem to confirm). Interestingly, in a personal communication, Seeta Chaganti has reported to me a conversation with Patterson in 2000 in which he reflected on how his teaching was increasingly gravitating toward an emphasis on moral purpose, and so perhaps at least in practice he had abandoned some of the more categorical positions he takes in 'The Disenchanted Classroom'.
- 63 Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*, p. 2.
- 64 Patterson, *Acts of Recognition*, pp. 38, 41.
- 65 Although it is perhaps useful to reiterate that at this level of accounting for literary studies, the otherwise different methods of surface and symptomatic reading look very much the same. They both trace pathways through axiological constellations; what differs are the actors involved and the nature of mediations among them.

- 66 For example, less recent but clearly a precedent for these studies are Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1999); and *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 67 Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 3, 7, 9. Harris's Biennial Lecturer plenary at the 2022 New Chaucer Society Congress, entitled 'Chaucer's Wenches', extended this approach further into Chaucer's writings. The article version of this talk should appear in the 2023 volume of SAC.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 29, 30.
- 69 Seeta Chaganti, *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 70 Seeta Chaganti, 'Boethian Privilege and the Abolitionist Position' (lecture given at the Sewanee Medieval Colloquium, University of the South, 9 April 2021). A somewhat different version of this paper oriented toward a wider audience for a cluster on 'rethinking exceptionalism' appears as Seeta Chaganti, 'Boethian Abolition', *PMLA*, 137:1 (2021), 144–54. I thank Professor Chaganti for providing me access to a recording of the talk and an advanced copy of the article. For more informal reflections that make use of a similar methodology, but aimed at an even wider audience, see Chaganti's 'B-Sides: Chaucer's "The House of Fame"', *Public Books*, www.publicbooks.org/b-sides-chaucers-the-house-of-fame/ (2019; accessed 14 September 2021); and 'B-Sides: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Public Books*, www.publicbooks.org/b-sides-sir-gawain-green-knight/ (2017; accessed 14 September 2021).
- 71 In this respect, Walter Benjamin's famous notion of synchronicity – the idea, as his recent editors put it, 'that certain historical moments and forms become legible only at a later moment' – might be usefully set alongside of Chaganti's approach. See *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 5–6.