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## Voice of Authority: Free Indirect Discourse in Chaucer's *General Prologue*

*Helen Fulton*

In a book which has become a classic of Chaucerian scholarship, *Chaucer's Narrators*, David Lawton explored the heteroglossia of Chaucer's writing, the multiple voices which negotiate 'the dialogue between text and context'.<sup>1</sup> Early in the book, Lawton mentions in passing the phenomenon of 'free indirect discourse' (FID), the narrative technique by which one utterance contains within itself 'two speech manners, two styles, two "languages", two semantic and axiological belief systems', but finds the term of limited value, since it encompasses only two voices when there often seem to be more than that, or when we are not in fact certain whose voice we are hearing at all.<sup>2</sup> Lawton went on in his book to discuss, with great subtlety and a deep understanding of Chaucer's writing, the various narratorial *personae* that appear throughout Chaucer's work. What I propose here is to return to the concept of 'free indirect discourse' as a linguistic device and to investigate its usefulness as one of a range of interpretive strategies that can be applied to the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Lawton's book belongs to that strand of commentary on Chaucer's *General Prologue* identified in Larry Benson's bibliographic survey as 'the question of the relation of the narrator of the Prologue to Chaucer himself'.<sup>3</sup> Lawton distinguishes between 'narrator' and 'persona' as two separate entities: 'not every narrator is a *persona*, and not every *persona* really amounts to more than a narratorial voice', arguing that 'in medieval poetry most narrators are part of, rather than subsume, the rhetoric of a work'.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the concept

of ‘persona’ and its different manifestations in various works by Chaucer is a key issue in Lawton’s study, with the *Canterbury Tales* characterised particularly by its multiple ‘narratorial *personae*’ (p. 13). This multiplicity was noted also by Robert R. Edwards, who added a third entity to Benson’s binary of ‘narrator and Chaucer’:

Twentieth-century critics have debated how one might differentiate the historical Chaucer of London and Westminster (Chaucer the man) from the artist who creates the narrative fictions (Chaucer the poet) and the character who recounts the story (Chaucer the narrator); most would allow some overlap or uncertainty among the roles, especially in their potential for comedy and irony.<sup>5</sup>

While few critics would now argue that there is a complete identification between the *Prologue*’s narrator and ‘Chaucer the poet’, the precise nature of the gap between them throws up an existential difficulty, since ‘Chaucer the man’ is, according to the common-sense view, responsible for both the other two voices. E. Talbot Donaldson tried to reconcile this common-sense view with a somewhat sketchy understanding of narrative *persona* – ‘the fact that these are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability, or rather the certainty, that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body. But that does not excuse us from keeping them distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task’ – though his conclusion that ‘Chaucer the pilgrim [resembles] in so many ways Chaucer the poet’ hardly

accounts for how we might distinguish between the two or indeed reconcile them with 'Chaucer the man'.<sup>6</sup>

This narratorial gap also poses a problem of authority – where is it located? Morton W. Bloomfield stated that: 'In the *Canterbury Tales* the reporting pilgrim is the Chaucer figure, and it is on his authority that we must accept the truth of his story about events and tales.'<sup>7</sup> Conflating the pilgrim-narrator with the authorial voice (of Chaucer), Bloomfield assumes that this is where authority (that is, the guarantee of truth) lies. This theoretical model does not allow the pilgrim-narrator to have a perspective of his own, which he assuredly does; nor does it offer us a means of questioning his authority, of judging him to be an unreliable or partial witness of events, which, again, he undoubtedly is at times. Charles Muscatine argued for a single 'Chaucerian Narrator' figure, who functions as an intermediary between poet and audience but who is otherwise indistinguishable from 'Chaucer' and who therefore conveys Chaucer's authority: 'the final editorial voice is his'.<sup>8</sup>

These kinds of conceptual difficulties about narrative and authorial *personae*, and the location of authority, can be reviewed in the light of contemporary narrative theory. In this essay I am taking a linguistic view of how narrative perspective is constructed in the *General Prologue*, starting from the premise that we can distinguish a number of voices in the Prologue and none of them should be identified as the voice of 'Chaucer the man', as a pre-existing 'real' person, since narrative voices are, by their nature, constructed as an effect of discourse. Instead, I am starting from the assumption that there are a number of 'narrators' in the *General Prologue* (and indeed throughout Chaucer's work), each of which has a specific position relative to the narration, and the task of identifying these different positions – and therefore how meanings are constructed in the text – can be as fruitful as trying (and failing)

to decide which narrator is 'Chaucer', since in one sense all of them are, and in another sense, none of them is.<sup>9</sup>

### Voice and Focalisation

The concept of 'voice' in narrative has been theorised in various ways, one of the most influential being that of Gérard Genette, whose model of 'voice' starts with the distinction between first-person and third-person narration (the former located inside the world of the text, or 'homodiegetic', and the latter located outside the text, or 'heterodiegetic').<sup>10</sup> Closely related to voice is the concept of 'focalisation' as modelled by Genette and further described by Mieke Bal.<sup>11</sup> This represents the idea that a 'voice' has to speak from somewhere, in a particular time and place, and this positioning determines what can be known or said.

Replacing the older critical term, 'point of view' (which focuses on the 'viewer' or viewing position at the expense of the 'viewed'), focalisation includes the concepts of 'focaliser' and 'focalised object' and the relationship(s) between them. Most crucially, both Genette and Bal recognise within focalisation a difference between 'who sees' (the orientation from which events are perceived) and 'who speaks' (the person telling the events), entities which are not always located in a single individual.<sup>12</sup>

Focalisation in the *General Prologue* is a complex matter, as Lawton understood. The echoes that we find in the *General Prologue* of a number of the pilgrims, whose voices are ventriloquised through the narrator, constitute what Thomas J. Farrell has called a 'hybridized narration': 'The *Prologue* chooses very consistently to present a single narrative discourse that blends those pilgrims' voices, and other forms of discourse, into a distinctively hybridized narration.'<sup>13</sup> Another way to describe this effect is that the 'single narrative

discourse' is itself comprised of a number of focalisations. The narration appears to be in the first person, a voice that is normatively situated within the diegesis (as in Genette's 'homodiegetic' narration), but the dominant focalisation is, in its orientation, that of a third-person extradiegetic narrator who knows far more than any internal focaliser could know about the pilgrims being described. The 'I' of the narration is therefore similar to the third-person 'omniscient' narrator of a nineteenth-century author such as Anthony Trollope who not infrequently pauses to address his readers directly. At the same time, however, there is an 'I' in the text who is situated within the diegesis, as one of the pilgrims, and whose focalisation is therefore limited to what he sees and knows among the group of pilgrims assembled at the Tabard inn. There is thus an 'I' who sees, from outside the diegesis, and an 'I' who speaks within the diegesis.

The narration of the *General Prologue* is characterised by this constant slippage between an internal focalisation located in one or more of the characters (including the pilgrim-narrator) and an external narrator-focalisation who provides information beyond the scope of any of the character-focalisers.<sup>14</sup> These different focalisations can be illustrated by the opening to the *General Prologue*, when the narratorial 'I', speaking firstly from an external orientation about the month of April and the general practice of pilgrimage, then moves to an internal focalisation to describe his meeting with the pilgrims at the Tabard. There is then a further movement from an external to an internal focalisation:

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,  
 Er that I ferther in this tale pace,  
 Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun

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To telle yow al the condicioun  
 Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,  
 And whiche they weren, and of what degree... (lines 35–40)

The phrase ‘whil I have tyme and space’ (35) locates the focalisation outside the story-world, as do the references to ‘this tale’ (36) and to his audience as ‘yow’ (38). The orientation is of someone looking from the outside, in another time and place, into the world of the Tabard inn as it existed at a particular time. But the phrase ‘so as it semed me’ (39) returns the focalisation briefly to the internal diegetic context in which the narrator knows only what perceptions he received of the pilgrims at the time that he met them. There is thus a double focalisation at work throughout the *General Prologue*, the ‘I’ of an external narrator who is oriented towards past events and people from an omniscient perspective, and the ‘I’ of an internal narrator who is able to describe only what he saw and knew at the time of the events he is recounting.

This example from the portrait of the Wife of Bath illustrates the first-person extra-diegetic narration of the focaliser ‘who sees’:

In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon	
That to the offrynge bfore hire sholde goon;	
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she	<i>angry</i>
That she was out of alle charitee.	
Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground;	<i>were of the finest texture</i>
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound	<i>weighed</i>

That on a Sonday weren upon hir heed. (lines 449–55)

In this portrait, the narrator is oriented as an external focaliser, describing the Wife of Bath's appearance and her deafness and her five husbands. The use of first-person markers, such as the modal adverb 'certeyn' ('indeed'), and the modal phrase 'I dorste swere' ('I dare swear'), conveys a positioning which belongs to the narrator 'speaking' in direct discourse to an audience outside the text. The focalisation is external, since the narrator tells us something that an internal character-focaliser could not have known, that the Wife regularly wears so many head-dressings on a Sunday that they must have 'weyeden ten pound' (454). This positions the narrative 'I' as external to the diegesis in which a group of pilgrims assemble to make a journey together, while constructing an audience who is also positioned outside the text.

Elsewhere, the first-person narration alternates between external and internal focalisations, as in this example from the portrait of the Physician:

With us ther was a ~~Doctour of Physik~~ DOCTOUR OF PHISIK;

In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik,

To speke of phisik and of surgerye,

For he was grounded in astronome

[...]—

He was a verray, parfit praktisour— *practitioner*

[...]

And yet he was but esy of dispenche: *careful in expenditure*



He kepte that he wan in pestilence.                      *what he gained during a plague*  
 For gold in phisik is a cordial,                      *tonic*  
 Therefore he lovede gold in special. (lines 411–14, 422, 441–4)

For most of the portrait, the narrator speaks as a focaliser who is oriented externally towards the focalised object, describing the Physician's learning, practice, and appearance in a privileged narrative which also claims to know the Physician's personality. But an internal focalisation intrudes, belonging to the character-focaliser who 'speaks' in direct discourse, evident in the deictic use of the plural pronoun, 'with us' (411), which locates the speaker in amongst the group of pilgrims; and again in the evaluative phrase, 'he was a verray, parfit praktisour' (422), a somewhat hackneyed combination of adjectives (found also in the portrait of the Knight, line 72) suggesting that the pilgrim-narrator is easily impressed by the Physician's self-presentation. But the external focalisation is able to 'see' what cannot be known from inside the diegesis, namely the Physician's tendency to be a miser ('he was but esy of dispenche', 441), his profits from the misery of plague (442), and his love of gold (444). The Physician, as the focalised object, is thus presented to the reader or listener from two alternating (and indeed competing) focalisations, one extradiegetic which positions the Physician as he might be seen in the world at large and which claims an omniscient knowledge of his practices and temperament, and one homodiegetic which takes the Physician at face value, in the way that he appears to the group of pilgrims.

The narration of the *General Prologue* therefore displays, at times, a kind of embedded focalisation, in which the external focaliser (the narrative agent) shows us a character (the pilgrim-narrator) who in turn acts as internal focaliser for other characters.<sup>15</sup> Thus the

relationship between the 'I' of the external narrator and the 'I' of the character is one in which the vision of the latter is embedded in that of the former. In other words, the external focaliser 'sees' more than the internal focaliser, and thus might be assumed to be more authoritative, to carry the authority of meaning in the text. Yet the internal focalisation of the pilgrim-narrator has its own integrity, and we are left with two competing views of the Physician, for example, which might both be true – that he is a 'verray parfit praktisour' (422) and yet also keen on amassing money. The two narrative perspectives work to create characters who are rich in personality and inconsistency, and thus far removed from simple stereotypes of class or occupation.

Narration is not the only means by which focalisation can be indicated in a text. The characters themselves can provide focalisation, represented as direct speech, indirect or reported speech, or 'free indirect speech' (FID). Apart from brief appearances by the Host and the Knight, there is very little direct speech in the *General Prologue*, which precludes a variety of internal focalisations. Nonetheless, the focalisation of the characters is not completely excluded. The most persuasive method of conveying speech habits, apart from direct discourse, is free indirect discourse, and this Chaucer uses on a number of occasions to represent voices other than that of the first-person narrator. The use of FID is thus an important aspect of focalisation in the *General Prologue*, providing some variety of voice and orientation within the diegesis beyond that of the narrator.

### The Structures of Free Indirect Discourse

The concept of 'free indirect discourse' belongs to the discourse of linguistic narrative theory.<sup>16</sup> At its simplest, it signifies a means of representing direct speech through the

syntactic mode of indirect speech. A third-person narrative voice mimics the voice of another participant or character, without allowing that participant to speak directly in their own voice. The discourse is 'free' because there are no authorial signposts such as 'She said that...' The device is associated particularly with the mode of realism in the modern (post-eighteenth century) novel, and its early appearance in Chaucer's work indicates the incipient emergence of realist narrative in medieval English writing. As a sub-type of focalisation it provides access to one of the strategies by which Chaucer has created his tapestry of voices and perspectives.

Free indirect discourse (FID) is most readily illustrated in the modern realist novel, such as this example from *The Concert Pianist*, by Robert Conrad, first published in 2006:

Marguerite had phoned him the day before. A pitiful call. He could hear her baby screaming. Vadim had deserted her, it seemed, walked out as if she did not exist and did not matter. She copiously wept, lapsing into French. Did Vadim no longer find her attractive or interesting? Was he bored with the mother of his baby boy? How could he leave her on her own like this? He was inhuman, a bastard. She should never have got involved with him. Poor Vadim, if only he knew how much she cared for him. She had left three messages on his mobile declaring her love but now regretted this sign of weakness because he deserved not love but a decanter over the head, or a dinner plate, or a knife in the 'eart, the imbecile, the blackguard.<sup>17</sup>

Although this passage is written entirely in the third person, the voice alternates between that of the narrator and that of Marguerite, the wronged wife. The series of questions, ‘Did Vadim no longer find her attractive or interesting?’ and so on, are those asked by Marguerite, not the narrator. The first half of the last sentence, ‘She had left three messages on his mobile declaring her love but now regretted this sign of weakness’, is announced in the narrator’s voice, cool and detached, but then the second half of the sentence captures Marguerite’s despairing anger and the French accent to which we have already been alerted: ‘because he deserved not love but a decanter over the head, or a dinner plate, or a knife in the ’eart’ (note the non-standard spelling to convey Marguerite’s accent), ‘the imbecile, the blackguard’.

Free indirect discourse, then, is a means of representing speech in writing, one that occupies a space somewhere between the direct speech of a character, speaking in their own voice as internal focaliser, and the indirect speech of the narrator as external focaliser, telling us how we should be responding to what is being narrated. I have plotted this on a chart as follows:<sup>18</sup>

	Diegetic summary	Indirect discourse	Free indirect discourse	Direct discourse	Free direct discourse
Definition	Narrative statement that a speech act has occurred	Narrative account of the content of a speech act	Narrative imitation of a speech act	A participant speaks in their own words, signified by quotation marks	A participant speaks in their own words, with no quotation marks
Example	‘Marguerite had phoned him the day before.’	‘She had left three messages...declaring her love.’	‘Was he bored with the mother of his baby boy?’	*‘Is he bored with me, the mother of his baby boy?’	‘a knife in the ’eart, the imbecile’
Voice	3rd person narrative	3rd person narrative	3rd person narrative	1st/3rd person dialogue	1st person narration/interior monologue

Fig. 1: Ways of representing speech in writing

Free indirect discourse is thus essentially a negotiation between ‘who sees’ and ‘who speaks’, between the diegetic account of events ‘seen’ by a narrator, telling us what we need to know, and the mimetic quality of direct speech, which imitates a participant’s voice, capturing for us the way in which that person speaks and therefore how they reveal themselves to us, apparently unmediated by any narrative control.

How is FID constructed linguistically? Typically, free indirect discourse combines features of both direct and indirect speech. Thus FID uses third-person pronouns and a past-tense narration, just as in indirect narrative reportage, whereas characters speaking mimetically in direct discourse use first-person pronouns and the present tense where appropriate. Compare these two sentences:

A    FID:            Poor Vadim, if only he knew how much she cared for him.

Direct speech: \*Poor Vadim, if only he knew how much I care for him.

On the other hand, FID uses syntactic inversion to form questions, using the interrogative word order of Verb + Subject + Object, as in direct speech, whereas indirect speech uses the normal declarative order of Subject + Verb + Object. Compare:

B    FID:            Did Vadim no longer find her attractive or interesting?

Indirect speech: \*She wondered if Vadim no longer found her attractive or  
interesting.

A third feature of FID is its use of deictics, words such as ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘now’, ‘this’, ‘that’ and so on. FID makes use of the deictics of here and now, as in direct speech, rather than the more distant deictics of indirect speech. For example:

C FID:                   How could he leave her on her own like this?

Direct speech:   \*How could he leave me on my own like this?

Indirect speech: \*She wondered how he could have left her on her own like that.

A fourth feature is the use of modality markers: that is, words or phrases which express some kind of judgment relating to the desirability, obligation, usualness or probability of a particular statement. Modal verbs include ‘must’, ‘ought to’, ‘should’; modal adverbs include ‘normally’, ‘usually’, ‘rarely’, ‘positively’, ‘maybe’. The sentence, ‘She should never have got involved with him’, expresses a modality of obligation that belongs to Marguerite, not to the narrator.

Finally, FID is characterised by the use of markers of orality – words or phrases which capture the spoken voice. These include vocatives, evaluative words, interjections, phatic terms (fillers), and colloquial or idiolectal forms. Phrases such as ‘poor Vadim’, ‘the imbecile, the blackguard’, imitate Marguerite’s voice, conveying her evaluation of Vadim and her emotional attitude towards him (as distinct from the attitude of the narrator). The orthographic form, ‘a knife in the ’eart’, captures an echo of Marguerite’s pronunciation as she speaks (or might have spoken) the words.

We can summarise these linguistic features of FID as follows, showing that FID shares features with both direct and indirect speech:<sup>19</sup>

FID	Indirect speech	Direct speech
3rd person pronouns	3rd person pronouns	1st person pronouns
Past tense	Past tense	Present tense
Interrogative word order	Declarative word order	Interrogative word order
Deictics of 'here and now'	Deictics of distance	Deictics of 'here and now'
High modality	Low modality	High modality
Features of orality	Features of written discourse	Features of orality

Fig. 2: Grammar of FID

Are these features of FID to be found in Chaucer's *General Prologue*? A small number of commentators have found examples, though a full linguistic survey remains to be done.<sup>20</sup> One of the most extended examples of FID in the *General Prologue* occurs in the portrait of the Monk:

173 The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit –  
 174 By cause that it was old and somdel streit *strict*  
 175 This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace, *let old things go*  
 176 And heeld after the newe world the space.  
 177 He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,  
 178 That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,  
 179 Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees, *when he breaks the rules*  
 180 Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees –

- 181 This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.  
 182 But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;  
 183 And I seyde his opinion was good.  
 184 What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood *mad*  
 185 Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,  
 186 Or swynken with his handes, and laboure, *work*  
 187 As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served? *demande*  
 188 Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved! *work* (lines 173–88)

In effect, there is a dialogue going on here between two pilgrims, between the narrator and the Monk, mediated by a third voice, the external narrator-focaliser who tells us that the Monk was someone who did not care for the old ways of doing things and wanted to follow modern practices. Then we hear the Monk's voice saying 'he yaf nat of that text a pulled hen...' (177), using the past tense of FID, and in [line](#) 181, the external narrator glosses what the Monk has just said, explaining that the Monk does not believe that monks should always stay in the cloister. Then the Monk's voice says that the precept was not 'worth an oyster' (182), a modal phrase that belongs to the Monk, not to the internal pilgrim-narrator. The Monk's voice continues in FID to the end of the section, railing against the teachings of Augustine.

There are three levels of embedded focalisation here: firstly, the external narrator, who already knows everything about the Monk, before the Monk has spoken ('this ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace') (176); secondly, the internal character-narrator, who uses an indirect discourse to report his own speech, 'I seyde his opinion was good' (183), and also that of the Monk, as focalised object: 'thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre' (182); and thirdly, the



focalisation of the Monk himself, represented through free indirect discourse. Many of the features of FID which I previously identified are present here. There is the use of third-person pronouns, 'he', and the past tense, 'he yaf nat of that text a pulled hen' (177) (compare direct speech: \*'I don't give a plucked hen for that text'). There is the interrogative (verb-subject) syntax used for the questions: 'what sholde he studie...?' (184), rather than: \*'he asked why he should study' (indirect discourse) or \*'why should I study?' (direct discourse). The homodiegetic orientation of the 'here and now' is conveyed not through deictic markers but through the present tense of direct speech that breaks through from time to time: 'that text...that seith (177-8)' and 'whan he is recchelees' (179), conveying the timeframe occupied by the Monk when asserting his views. There is a high modality of obligation and frequency, as in 'what sholde he' (184) and 'alwey' (185), representing the attitude of the Monk. There is a high level of orality in the colloquialisms: 'he yaf nat...a pulled hen' (177), 'nat worth an oystre' (182). The final line, 'Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!' (188), is indistinguishable from direct speech: it is in the present tense, it contains an imperative, 'let', which assumes an interlocutor, and it implies a modality of obligation and evaluation, expressing a personal opinion, with the orality of an exclamation. The focalisation, with its strong opinions and its understanding of Augustinian doctrine, is clearly that of the Monk, focalised through the pilgrim-narrator.

The use of free indirect discourse in this section works to locate both the pilgrim-narrator and the Monk as part of the same diegetic conversation, a conversation happening inside the world of the text. Meanwhile, there is another focalisation somewhere outside the text, an extradiegetic perspective which 'sees', and thus subtly positions and critiques not only the Monk but the internal narrator as well. This extradiegetic voice tells us that the views

expressed by the Monk are not radical and new, as the narrator thinks, but deeply subversive and challenging to the entire theological basis of monasticism. The pilgrim-narrator is impressed by the Monk – ‘I seyde his opinion was good’. But the extradiegetic voice positions us, through the FID, to critique both the Monk’s contemptuous attitude and the narrator’s compliance.

There is another substantial example of free indirect discourse in the portrait of the Parson, another character of whom the pilgrim-narrator seems to approve whole-heartedly but, from an external orientation, misguidedly:

496 This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,	<i>flock [i.e. parishioners]</i>
497 That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte.	<i>worked</i>
498 Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,	
499 And this figure he added eek therto,	<i>figure of speech</i>
500 That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?	
501 For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,	<i>corrupt</i>
502 No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;	<i>ordinary man</i>
503 And shame it is, if a preest take keep,	<i>where a priest is concerned</i>
504 A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.	<i>[to have] a filthy shepherd</i>
505 Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,	
506 By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde lyve.	
507 He sette nat his benefice to hyre	<i>he did not farm out his living</i>
508 And leet his sheep encombred in the myre	<i>leave</i>
509 And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules	

510 To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,      *a chantry [singing] for souls*  
 511 Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;      *to be retained by a guild fraternity*  
 512 But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde, *flock*  
 513 So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;  
 514 He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie. (lines 496–514)

The external narrator, who is positioned to ‘see’ the Parson’s learning and his far-flung parish, merges his voice with that of the Parson at line 500, ‘if gold ruste, what shal iren do?’, with its interrogative word order. The use of the introductory ‘that’ implies indirect speech (\*‘he said that...’), but the use of the present tense, down to line 506, constructs direct speech in which the focalisation belongs to the Parson himself as he delivers a sermon to his flock. The rhetorical question suggests a listening audience and the language of the pulpit, with the metaphor about gold and iron forming the text of the sermon. The direct speech becomes the voice of the Parson in his pulpit, suggesting how easily the Parson slips into the discourse of a sermon to a live congregation. It is only the use of the first-person pronoun, ‘on whom we truste’ (501), which introduces a different focaliser, who is now the internal, rather than external, narrator: the pronoun acts as a deictic signifying free indirect discourse, rather than words spoken directly by the Parson himself, who, in delivering a sermon to his flock, would be more likely to have said: \*‘in whom you can trust’.

From [line 507](#), there is a change to the past tense of FID, and the voice continues to be that of the Parson. Technical terms such as ‘his benefice to hyre’ (507), ‘ran...unto Seinte Poules’ (509), ‘to seken hym a chaunterie’ (510), are idiolectal forms constructing the perspective of an occupational insider, someone who knows how the system works and what

the shortcuts and dubious practices are. The emphatic rejection of such practices is couched rhetorically through repetition and syntactic parallelism, capturing once more the echo of the pulpit. The indignant rejection of these activities also implies a value judgment on those who employ them, a judgment that makes better sense coming from a priest rather than from the pilgrim-narrator. The metaphor of the priest as shepherd of his flock is sustained throughout this section, and suggests that this is the Parson's own view of himself, relayed to us through the FID. The final line, 'he was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie' (514), is an odd claim for the narrator to make about the Parson, but becomes more convincing if we read it as the Parson's own description of himself, a favourite way of describing his occupation which identifies him with peace rather than war, with the church rather than with the secular world of military campaigning, and with those driven by a vocation rather than money.

Reading through the ventriloquised speech of this FID to catch the voice of the Parson himself, what we hear is a register of complacency and self-righteousness. He may indeed be a good and pious man who cares for his flock, but he also claims for himself a level of self-sacrificing virtue which brings into question the motivation for his way of life. The reference later on in the portrait to his lack of tolerance for any obstinate people who refuse to follow his example of tub-thumping piety (521–3), an externally-focalised observation, confirms an impression that the Parson has a fanatical side to him, and that his insistence on the purity of his priesthood and his own selfless motives in pursuing the life of a poor parish priest is as much about his own sense of identity and status as it is about saving the souls of his parishioners.

Once again, through the narrative device of FID, the text marks out the difference between an external narrator focalisation, the internal voice of the pilgrim-narrator, and the

character-focalisation of an individual pilgrim. The result is that the focalised object, the Parson, like many of the characters in the *General Prologue*, is presented as a complex and inconsistent personality, rather than a type. As in the portraits of the Monk and Physician, we are shown how the internal narrator becomes complicit in the Parson's self-presentation, saying 'A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys' (524), ignoring what has just been said about the Parson's hostility to anyone who disagreed with him. Like all the portraits, this is less an objective account of a man's deeds and occupations than an uncritical acceptance, by the internal narrator, of the way in which the Parson projects himself to others.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

An analysis of narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse enables us to say something meaningful about the way in which voices and perspectives are represented and mediated through a written text. If we think in terms of focalisation, we can legitimately and usefully distinguish between the various narrative orientations in the *General Prologue*, inside and outside the diegesis, and how they construct a set of embedded focalisations. The question is not so much whose voice we are hearing, the extradiegetic poet-narrator or the homodiegetic pilgrim-narrator or other character-focalisers (since all are effects of language), but whose angle of vision are we being offered at any particular point, since that controls what can be seen or known. As for the voice of authority, that too is an effect of discourse, conveyed most persuasively by the extradiegetic third-person 'omniscient' narration. As we have seen, however, the layers of focalisation in the *General Prologue* work to resist any single site of authority, offering instead a range of perspectives from which the audience can consider the story-world and its characters.

The effect of free indirect discourse, and of other types of focalisation, in the *General Prologue* is to draw attention to the constructedness of each of the narrative discourses, including the one we are most tempted to assign to 'Chaucer the poet', or even to 'Chaucer the man', as if an author can somehow narrate from a place outside their own writing. That gap which has so often been commented on, the gap between the narrator's perception ('Chaucer the pilgrim') and our own sense of an authorial (and authoritative) guiding spirit directing us to a more critically nuanced (or 'ironic') reading of events ('Chaucer the poet') is actually a movement between different focalisations or orientations relative to the text.

Chaucer's skilled handling of what we now recognise as free indirect discourse adds a performative dimension to a text which may well have been read aloud to a listening audience, at least in some contexts.<sup>22</sup> The mingling of different voices in the *General Prologue*, through a combination of third-person narrative, first-person direct speech, reported or indirect speech, and free indirect discourse, provides rich opportunities for a creative delivery of the text as a dramatic performance, with the different voices marked out by differences in delivery, accent and intonation. As Paul Cobley has said in relation to free indirect discourse, it 'has the potential to restore the freedom of the oral storyteller'.<sup>23</sup> With our growing awareness of the orality of many medieval texts, it is not hard to imagine that the *General Prologue*, as much as the tales which follow it, was intended to be read aloud as a humorous way of holding its characters up to a searching spotlight.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> D. Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 2. I was fortunate to be a graduate student at the University of Sydney when David was teaching there. I was thus the beneficiary of an extraordinarily rich culture of literary theory in the Department of English at that time, including post-structuralism and critical discourse analysis, circulated mainly (and unusually) by the medievalists in the department, including David himself, Stephen Knight, Terry Threadgold, Alex Jones, Rosemary Huisman, and Bernard K. Martin, while Michael Halliday, the first professor of Linguistics at the university and the progenitor of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), was a crucial influence.

<sup>2</sup> Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, p. 3. Lawton proposes instead the terms 'hybrid construction' (p. 3) and 'apocryphal voices' which are 'equally alienated from their ostensible, presumed or possible source' (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> L. D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1987]), p. 798. All quotations from Chaucer's work, cited in-text with line numbers, are from this edition. I should emphasise that Lawton's book extends well beyond the *Canterbury Tales* and its *General Prologue*.

<sup>4</sup> Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, p. 8. This statement comes close to the poststructuralist position that narrative voice is constructed in discourse, though Lawton does not expand on this.

<sup>5</sup> R. R. Edwards, 'Narrative', in P. Brown (ed.), *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 312–31 (315).

<sup>6</sup> E. T. Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 928–36 (928 and 936).

<sup>7</sup> M. W. Bloomfield, 'Chaucerian realism', in P. Boitani and J. Mann (eds), *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 179–93 (186).

<sup>8</sup> C. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> The apparent authority of the first-person narrator, as Chaucer positions himself in the *General Prologue* (and elsewhere), has been dismantled by a series of theorists starting with T. Todorov, who recognised that the 'I' of the narrator (the subject of the *énonciation*, or the telling of the story) is simultaneously situated in the text as a character within the text (that is, as a subject of the *énoncé*, the direct speech of various characters who also appear as 'I'). In other words, the 'I' of the *énonciation* can never be simplistically equated with the author of the text who, by representing themselves in the first person, is inescapably creating a fictionalised discursive 'self'. See Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. R. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977 [orig. pub. 1971]), and for a useful discussion of textual subjectivity see C. Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), pp. 30–31 and 64–7.

<sup>10</sup> Gérard Genette's structuralist approach to the narratology of the novel is set out in his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), translated from the third volume of Genette's collected essays, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972). David Lawton himself explored the concept of 'voice' in his book, *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public*

*Interiorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), though from a literary rather than linguistic or narratological perspective, he distinguishes 'three different modalities of voice: dramatic; textual or discursive; and rhetorical' (p. 152). [We would suggest cutting the final sentence as it does not necessarily add anything vital but invites questions regarding his distinctions into different modalities.]

<sup>11</sup> See Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 4th edn, 2017, orig. pub. 1985).

<sup>12</sup> This difference is not acknowledged by the concept of 'point of view'. See M. J. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 67–74, where he suggests 'orientation' as an alternative term for 'focalisation', in order to avoid 'the great and continuing nuisance perpetuated by the term "point of view"' (p. 68). [We think you can safely skip this footnote as well as it is not critical to the discussion. If you do the full bibliographical information for Toolan needs to be added in footnote 16 below.]

<sup>13</sup> T. J. Farrell, 'Hybrid Discourse in the *General Prologue* Portraits', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 30:1 (2008), 39–93 (42).

<sup>14</sup> In my discussion of external and internal focalisation, I am following S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 74, and Bal, *Narratology*, who distinguishes between an external focaliser (EF) and an internal 'character focaliser' (CF) (p. 136). Both depart from Genette's structuralist model, which assumed that an external 'omniscient narrator' represented 'zero focalization', that is, could not be a focaliser.

<sup>15</sup> Bal discusses an example of this kind of embedded focalization in *Narratology*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>16</sup> For my discussion of free indirect discourse, I have relied particularly on the following accounts: Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*; M. J. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Bal, *Narratology*. See also M. Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 398–432.

<sup>17</sup> C. Williams, *The Concert Pianist* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006, paperback 2007), p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Fig. 1 is adapted from Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 109–10. I use the asterisk symbol to indicate a sentence that does not appear in the text but has been reconstructed.

<sup>19</sup> Fig. 2 is based on the description of FID by Toolan in *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, pp. 122–5.

<sup>20</sup> As well as Farrell, 'Hybrid Discourse' (who rejects FID in favour of Bakhtin's concept of hybrid narration), see also H. Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). I have identified the following substantial examples of FID in the *General Prologue*: the Monk, lines 173–88; the Friar, lines 225–32 and 240–48; the Parson, lines 498–506; the Summoner, lines 649–57. Smaller traces can be found in the portraits of the Merchant, lines 276–7; the Clerk, lines 293–6 and 308; the Guildsmen, lines 373–8; the Manciple, lines 573–5; and the Pardoner, lines 696–8.

<sup>21</sup> Another example can be found in the portrait of the Summoner, lines 649–57, where the approbation of the internal focaliser – 'a bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde'



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(648) – is immediately followed by some lines of FID which reveal the Summoner's character in a less positive light.

<sup>22</sup> According to Stephen Penn, 'it is quite likely that Chaucer would have had opportunities to read publicly from his work, and, on occasion, to speak before a courtly audience. Nevertheless, it would be rash to assume that all, or even most, of his poetry would have been delivered formally in this way.' See Penn, 'Literacy and literary production', in S. Ellis (ed.), *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 113–29 (119–20).

<sup>23</sup> P. Copley, *Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 86.