

# The Challenge of Corporeity: Fictionalising the Emotional Body

Ioana BALGRADEAN

## ABSTRACT

*Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde (ca. 1380) writes emotions as corporeal events unfolding as specific sensorimotor, cognitive actions, which, in particular cases, may develop pathological offshoots. This paper explores the unstable, organic quality of the emotional phenomenon, and its fluid formal potential. Indeed, while emotion resists definitive categorical and conceptual containment, it must be named, made sense of, thus signalling the power of corporeity to shape language and thought. Crucially, this allows us to measure the importance of cognitive and epistemological modes we activate with the purpose of grasping emotion as irreducible aspect of the human. In this sense, poetic expression emerges as a necessity: through continuous actualisation of its formal plasticity, literature enables the provisory encoding and circulation of emotional phenomena, by exploring the interface between a perceiving body and its phenomenal environment, while allowing for the emergence of new modes of thinking. I proceed to a transepistemic examination of the text in question, by means of historically-informed conceptual tools, beyond the inappropriate categorical dissonances between body and mind, affect and intellect, philosophy, literature, and science.*

**Keywords:** emotion, corporeity, sensorimotricity, cognition, literature

**G**eoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1380) writes emotions as complex corporeal events, unfolding as sensorimotor, cognitive actions. This specific writing inscribes itself in the Aristotelian tradition as theorised, for example, by Thomas Aquinas, tradition which views intelligence and sensation as the form, or the act, of a body (1). This paper explores the unstable, organic quality of emotional phenomena, which elude fixed categorical and conceptual containment, while pointing to the power of corporeity to shape

language and thought. In this sense, I argue that literary expression emerges as a necessity. Through continuous actualisation of its formal plasticity – be it narrative, lexical, grammatical or tropological – literature enables the provisory encoding and the fluid circulation and transformation of emotion, while emphasising the necessity of epistemological mobility, of thinking about the human as a body in action. While bearing in mind that corporeity informs literary narrative in crucial ways (2), I propose to examine how Chaucer's text tackles the difficult question of emotion, by tracing various

*Address for correspondence:*

Ioana Balgradean

E-mail: ioana\_balgradean@hotmail.com

Article received on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2013. Article accepted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2013.

threads from medical, physiological, or philosophical discourse, which intersect in his poem so as to participate in the writing of original emotional events.

At the moment of his first appearance in the poem, Troilus, prince of Troy, is pacing up and down the temple during a festival in honour of Pallas, mocking his companions' love sighs. Significantly, this is the first and last time the reader witnesses Troilus' expansive intellectual and social behaviour, alongside an outstandingly free spatial mobility doubled by emotional indifference. While he is laughing at his knights' folly and cognitive blindness, the text specifies that Troilus' brows rise, elongating his face and opening wide his eyes, as if to say (3): "Behold! Isn't this wisely spoken?"; "And with that word he gan caste up the brow / Ascaunces, «Loo! is this not wisely spoken?»" (bk. I, vv. 204-205) (And with that word he began to raise his brow, as if to say, «Look! Isn't this wisely spoken?). It is at this very moment, when Troilus' face expresses superior knowledge and conviction, through the gesture of raising and dilating its upper features, that the offended God of Love grabs his bow and strikes the prince of Troy with his arrows, in an original actualisation of the topos of the love-wound. Point at which, it is the narrator's turn to exclaim on the blindness of the world and of human intention (3):

O blynde world, O blynde entencioun!

.....

This Troilus is clomben on the staire,

And litel weneth that he mot descenden;  
(bk. I, vv. 211; 215-16)

(Oh blind world, Oh blind intention! Troilus has climbed the stairs and little does he know that he must come down.)

It is the way of the human to stumble and fall, no matter what one intended or willed. The image of Troilus conquering altitude by climbing stairs, totally ignorant of the upcoming countermovement, is a remarkably eloquent metaphor of corporeal and epistemological instability. As such, the figural pattern suggests that knowledge of oneself and of the world is orchestrated by the movement of one's feet experimenting with the verticality of space. In the poem's lapsarian phenomenology of emotion and cognition, the emergence of Troilus' identity as lover is signalled by the image of a descending body.

Specifically, this latter is narrated as synonymous of an ambiguously constructed visual perception. Troilus' elevating pride, or the superpower of superior knowledge expressed through an arching of the brows, is immediately corrected by the advent of an emotional bond, effected by means of a look (3):

Yet with a look his herte wex afere,

That he that now was moost in pride above,  
Wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love. (bk. I,  
vv. 229-231)

(Yet with a look his heart caught fire, so that he who just now was highest in pride, suddenly became most subjected unto love.)

Indeed, while Troilus' rambling feet are moving lightly across the temple, doubled by his sweeping gaze, his wide-open eyes eventually smite Criseyde's body, as one would a stumbling block (3):

Withinne the temple he wente hym forth  
pleyinge...

On this lady, and now on that, lokyng...

And upon cas bifel that thorough a route

His eye percede, and so depe it wente,

Til on Criseyde it smot and there it stente.

And sodeynly he wax therwith astoned. (bk.  
I vv. 267; 269; 271-274)

(Within the temple he went forth playing... looking now on this, now on that lady. And it happened by chance that his eye pierced through a crowd, and went in so deep, till it smote Criseyde and came to an arrest. And suddenly he grew astounded by it.)

The poem says that while Troilus' predatory eye pierces through the massive depth of the crowd, "it so happens" that it hits specifically against Criseyde. The distinctive lexical and syntactical formulation of this passage, organised around an omitted subject and the impersonal verb *bifel*, displaces the vector of intention and ethical responsibility from Troilus' action of beholding Criseyde, to the arbitrariness of an accidental clash. The collision performs the effect of thunder, and such is the moment of origin of an emotional phenomenon that will unfold throughout the five books of the poem: Troilus gradually becomes *astoned* (from French *estonné*, and Latin *tonare*, "to thunder"), literally, hit by the stroke of thunder, stupefied by the violence of the shock. A few

lines down we are told that Troilus is "... full unwar that Love hadde his dwellynge / Withinne the subtil stremes of hire yen" (bk. I, vv. 304-305) (... fully unaware that Love had his dwelling within the subtle streams of her eyes). Thus, the agency of Criseyde's body and eye is said to be doubled by personified Love's action, further complicating the agency scenario of the sequence. It is clear that the narrative proceeds to intersect the various lines of intention and action, and to actively blur their definite origin, in an endeavour to displace the focus to the point of intersection (4). In the poem, this node marks the ground zero of possible encounters and emerging knowledge.

Interestingly, this narrative section closely echoes some of the scientific tenets underpinning Roger Bacon's optical theory. In his *Opus Majus* (completed in 1267), the polymath synthesises Alhazen's intromissive optics, Robert Grosseteste's Neoplatonic theory of species, and Aristotle's physical system of perceptual knowledge, to provide an accurate continuation between external reality and intellectual processes. According to Bacon, the condition for the emergence of visual perception is the prior manifestation or *species* of a visible object. During this phenomenal encounter the eye that sees shoots out its own sensitive form or force (*species*), which travels out across the space separating it from potentially visible objects, which in turn emit their own species. Precisely, species is not an actual object but a "corporeal form" (*forma corporalis*), generated by an actualisation of the force of the matter of the air, activated by the agent (5).

Hence – and this is Bacon's original scientific intuition – vision is *both* active and passive. This theory, mixing Greek philosophy (Bacon mostly refers to Aristotle) and the geometrical and physiological optics of Alhazen, establishes that perception occurs as an encounter of forces, along the pyramid whose vertex is in the eye and base in the thing seen. The perception thus created travels back through the eye, through the optic nerve and to the faculty of phantasy (*phantasia*), which will pass it on to the estimative (*aestimatio*), memorative (*virtus memorativa*) and cogitative (*cogitatio*) faculties for further sensorial and intellectual processing. As the supreme force of the sensitive soul, *cogitation* enables the formation of species in the intellectual soul. Which is to say that sensorial perception and concept-making belong to a

unique, continuous phenomenon. Bacon's species is a bridging agent, manifesting itself as sensible forms which link external objects and intellect, by travelling to and fro between the mind and the world, mutually affecting and transforming both (6).

The various faculties involved in sensorimotor and cognitive processing are interchangeably located in the heart or the brain, for Bacon clearly points out that the sensitive soul has a twofold organ: namely, the brain *and* the heart – heart which is the seat of the vital spirit and origin of all nerves, veins, and faculties of the soul. His theory thus blends the medical tradition which locates the sensitive soul in the brain with the philosophical tradition inherited from Aristotle and Avicenna, who located it in the heart (5). A point of clarification is in order. By breaking away from the Galenic tradition which located sensation in the brain, Aristotle's biology designed a new somatography (or body mapping) with, at the centre, the heart as unique principle and organ of life, vital movement, nutrition, sensation, and emotion (7). To medieval medical doctors the Aristotelian doctrine poses more than one problem. First of all, there is the mighty Galenic heritage of tripartite somatography, based on the three powers (*virtutes*) vehicled by three spirits or *pneumata* – i.e. the nutritive power active in the liver, the psychic power active in the brain, and the vital power active in the heart – circulating in the Latin West as of the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (7). It is Avicenna who proposes a theory where the heart is established as the "principle of the primary faculty and of life" (*cor quod est principium virtutis prime et vite*), and chief organ of the anima (soul). He explains that the heart generates and distributes the pneuma in charge of empowering the various body parts with sensation, motricity, or the operations of life (i.e. nutrition, growth, reproduction), readying them for action; as part of its more specific functions, it is responsible for cardiac and arterial pulsation, or movements of contraction and dilatation, such as those due to fear and anger (7). Jacquart points out that in the *De Animalibus* and the *De Viribus Cordis*, Avicenna, echoing Aristotle, refers to the heart as the primary organ of life, origin of arteries, nerves, and veins. Avicenna the philosopher is here questioning the traditional medical theory which establishes the brain as the origin of nerves and therefore sensation and motricity, and the liver as

the origin of veins and the nutritive function. However, he does insist that sensory dysfunctions should be treated as brain affections (7). Be that as it may, his *Canon of Medicine* evinces the central function of the heart in the generation of *pneuma*, which receives and vehicles the vital power throughout the body, enabling the various organs to carry out their faculties (7). Although, as we have seen, Bacon acknowledges both somatographic possibilities, he finally opts for the Aristotelian and Avicennian cardiac location of the soul, thus bypassing the traditional medical preference for the brain.

Chaucer writes (3):

And of hyre look in him ther gan to quyken  
So gret desir and such affeccioun,  
That in his herte botme gan to stiken  
Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun. (bk. I,  
vv. 278; 295-298)

(And such desire and affection of her look awaked within him, that his fixed and deep impression of her began to stick to the bottom of his heart)

The sensorial image constructed by Troilus' perception has instant affective impetus and as such impresses itself potently in his heart. Criseyde's image is said to be sinking into Troilus' cardiac organ, transfixing it like an aggressive graft, phenomenon which is sensorially perceived and intellectually interpreted as death or the extinction of the vital spirit: "That sodeynly hym thoghte he felte dyen, /Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte" (bk. I, vv. 306-307) (That suddenly it appeared to him that he felt the spirit in his heart dying because of her look). The emerging affect springs from the matrix of his innermost being (the heart) where, originally, it almost dissolves life into non-sentience, before configuring itself into a new form, which, as yet, eludes conceptualisation and withstands denomination. The language of the poem suggests that the emphasis lies on the *action*, on the *corporeal event*. It thus points to a foundational crisis, taking place in the zone where the self has been fractured by a phenomenal interaction, and is about to experience bodily and cognitive transfiguration.

This insight into emotions as singular, context-bound experiences, involving complex and continuous evaluation and change through

the organism's subsystems has been recently reaffirmed by the appraisal theory of *emergentism*, formulated by the affective sciences. Emergentism assumes that:

The combination of appraisal elements in a recursive process is unfolding over time and that the ensuing reactions will form emergent emotions that are more than the sum of their constituents and more than instantiations of rigid categories, namely unique emotional experiences in the form of qualia. In fact ... the process of categorisation and labelling of the non-verbal representation of an emotion episode, including somatosensory proprioceptive feedback, allows for an active search for a construction of individual, cultural or situational meaning (8).

This theoretical perspective is to be understood in the light of what specialists term *componential appraisal models*, which view emotion "as a dynamic episode in the life of an organism that involves a process of continuous change in all of its subsystems (e.g. cognition, motivation, psychological reactions, motor expressions, and feeling – the components of emotion) to adapt flexibly to events of high relevance and potentially important consequences" (9).

Facing the gaping unknown of his singular emotional experience, Troilus bursts into song (3):

If no love is, O God, what fele I so?  
And if love is, what thing and which is he?  
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?...  
If harm agree me, whereto pleyne I thenne?  
I noot, ne whi unwery that I feynte.  
O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte.  
(bk. I, vv. 400-402; 409-411)

(If this isn't love, Oh God, what do I feel? And if love it is, what and which thing is he? If love be good, wherefrom comes my woe? ... If harm agrees with me, why am I then complaining? I don't know either why I faint with vigour. Oh lively death, Oh sweet harm so quaint.)

This writing of an unstable, unsettling emotion evokes evanescent conceptual avenues, alongside the impossibility of nailing an oxymoronic sensorimotor, cognitive experience down to a fixed sign. Such poetic language expresses corporeal and epistemological instability, and

the state of being suspended in-between, in the interval separating two equally valid yet contrary arguments, caught within the tense force field of a logical fallacy underpinned by fluctuating, contradictory, emotional data. In this sense, literature operates as a powerful juncture, bridging the gap of unknown and unpredictability opened by the human's encounter with the phenomenal world. Its mission is to name the unnamable, to point to an unutterable and ungraspable point of origin, where the perceiving body experiences emotion as a necessity to create language and meaning, so as to arrest something that is always slipping away.

At this stage, says the poet, Troilus' "horns are shrinking in" – *his hornes in to shrinke* (bk. I, v. 300). Crucially, it is by means of a metaphor, or the actualisation of formal possibility, that one pretends an emotional phenomenon that defies referentiality and categorical knowledge. The image thus created expresses withdrawal, a reversal of the centrifugal, exploratory, corporeal, and social attitude that had characterised the former Troilus. To *shrink* – from Old English *scrican* – is to "wither" or "shrivel" (10). The former expressive style has been turned on its head, and therefore, the once extraverted, supermobile body is contracting and folding inwards, with a creasing, autumnal movement.

The rigid and dry, vigourless quality of this image is crucial to an understanding of Troilus' specific epistemology of emotion. In one of his final narrative appearances, the prince's verticality and motricity have been irreversibly damaged and he is limping about the streets of Troy, supported by a crutch (3):

Therewith the wikked spirit, God us blesse,  
Which that men clepeth woode jalousie,  
Gan in hym crepe, in al this hevynesse;  
For which, by cause he wolde soone dye,  
He ne et ne drank, for his malencolye,  
And ek from every companye he fledde;  
This was the lif that al the tyme he ledde.

He so defet was, that no maner man,  
Unneth hym myghte knowen ther he wente;

So was he lene, and therto pale and wan,  
And feble, that he walketh by potente;  
And with his ire he thus hymselfe shente.  
But whoso asked hym wherof hym smerte,  
He seyde his harm was al aboute his herte.  
(bk. V, vv. 1212-1225)

(Therewith the wicked spirit, God bless us, which men call mad jealousy, began to creep within him in all this heaviness; for which, because he would soon die, he neither ate nor drank because of his melancholy. He also fled all company. This was the life that he led all the time. He was so disfigured that people would barely know him wherever he went. He was so lean and so pale, wan and feeble, that he walked with a cane. And with his wrath he thus destroyed himself. But whenever one asked what ailed him, he would say his harm was all about the heart.)

The passage actualises Troilus' affective experience as a series of corporeal acts. While the city of Troy is about to fall in the hands of the Greeks, Troilus, whose name signifies "little Troy", literally succumbs to emotion. Thus, Chaucer transfigures the martial confrontation of the battle field into self-directed affective violence. In his poem, the legendary destruction of the great ancient civilisation is embodied by Troilus, who concomitantly feeds and grapples with a self-destructive experience, which blends sorrow, wrath, jealousy, and melancholy. The language of the passage reveals a vicious emotional circle, a self-reflexive affective scenario, unfolding as a series of vigorous mutilating actions, whose aim is overtly, knowingly suicidal: Troilus stops eating, drinking, and seeking human contact, his body is shrinking away, while he shapes up, as it were, for death. Both acted by and actor of this singular emotional event, Troilus' body is disfigured, crippled, to the point where he becomes unrecognisable. The emotional movement manifests itself as an impotence, or the impossibility to break the rigid, unbending circle of self-destruction, to be understood in a fundamentally sensorimotor sense: Troilus' biped station has been fractured, he is now in need of a *potente*, a cane, or the active, potent double of a leg and of a sensorial capacity turned atonic, inflexible. The metaphor of the shrinking horns discussed above has materialised into a body, shrunk, fallow, and ankylotic, supported into erectness by a wooden excrescence.

Taken altogether these symptoms point to the diagnosis of melancholy pathology according to the definition given by ancient Greek medicine, which the Middle Ages rediscover through the Arabic medical texts and practice. The poem itself explicitly refers to melancholy,

while subtly insisting that the disease is emotionally generated and cardiac – instead of cerebral, or triggered by an excess of black bile, as the prevailing medical tradition specified. In their major contribution on the history of melancholy, Klibanski, Panofsky and Saxl note that halfway through the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we witness the emergence of a new iconography of Saturn (the god and tutelary planet of melancholics), presented as an old man with a wooden leg, sometimes with a crutch (11). In the current state of research it is possible to suggest that in the 1380s Chaucer creates an original image of the crippled melancholic, figure which will prove fecund in Renaissance art and culture. All the while, Chaucer's poem suggests that emotion may originate as the most commonplace ocular interaction, to evolve as an intricate cognitive phenomenon, and, finally, as a severe pathology.

The aim of this paper has been to show that by configuring emotions as dynamic, embod-

ied events, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* plays out the possibility of the human as variable, corporeal intelligence, engaged in the slippery and precarious medium of life. By rewriting scripts borrowed from medical and philosophical discourse, fiction grapples with the potentialities of the emotional body. There is a sense where the power of poetry is to activate the formal plasticity of language and thought in order to allow one to grasp the fundamentally mobile modes of one's humanity.

An early version of this paper was presented at the The Society for the Social History of Medicine Conference 2012: *Emotions, Health and Wellbeing*, which took place at Queen Mary, University of London on 10-12 September 2012. □

*Conflict of interest: none declared.*

*Financial support: none declared.*

## REFERENCES

1. **Thomas Aquinas** – In: De Libera A, trans. L'Unité de l'Intellect Contre les Averroïstes. De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas. Paris: Flammarion, 1994
2. **Bolens G** – Le Style des Gestes. Corporéité et Kinésie dans le Récit Littéraire. Lausanne: BHMS, 2008
3. **Chaucer G** – In: Benson LD, ed. The Riverside Chaucer. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Translations are mine.
4. **Stanbury S** – The Lover's Gaze in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In: Shoaf RA, ed. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. "Subgit to alle Poesie". Essays in Criticism. Binghamton, New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992:224-38
5. **Bacon R** – In: Burke RB, trans. The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon. vol. 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press / London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1928:419-500
6. **Biernoff S** – Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages. Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002
7. **Jacquart D** – Cœur ou Cerveau? Les Hésitations Médiévales sur l'Origine de la Sensation et le Choix de Turisanus. In: Paravicini Bagliani A, ed. Le Cœur. Micrologus 11. Firenze: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2003:73-90
8. **Scherer KR** – Emotions are Emergent Processes: They Require a Dynamic Computational Architecture. Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society 2009; 364:3459-3474
9. **Grandjean D, Sander D, Scherer K** – Conscious Emotional Experience Emerges as a Function of Multilevel, Appraisal-Driven Response Synchronization. Consciousness and Cognition 2008; 17:484-495
10. Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2010. <http://www.oed.com/>
11. **Klibanski R, Panofsky E, Saxl F** – Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art. London: Nelson, 1964.