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Transforming Experience into Tradition: Two Theories of Proverb Use and Chaucer's Practice

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Let us lay, at the foundation, the image of the women who carry full,
heavy vessels on their heads without the aid of their hands.

The rhythm with which they do this is what the proverb teaches.

From the proverb speaks a *noli me tangere* of experience.

With this, it proclaims its ability to transform experience into tradition.

Benjamin 1999:582

Toward a Transdisciplinary Theory of Proverb Performance

Beginning in 1994, the interdisciplinary journal *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* hosted a lively, even heated, debate over two rival theories of proverb use. One theory was jointly authored by a linguist, George Lakoff, and a literary critic, Mark Turner; it treats the proverb as a species of metaphor. A group of experimental psycholinguists, Richard P. Honeck and collaborators, developed the other, an analogy-based problem-solving model.¹ Honeck and Jon Temple initiated the discussion by comparing the two theories and finding Honeck's own theory superior from the standpoint of empirical support. Three psychologists led by Raymond Gibbs then took up the banner for the metaphor theory, arguing that disciplinary differences led Honeck and Temple to misunderstand key terms in the theory and to subject it to an inappropriate standard of proof (Gibbs et al. 1996a:207-8). Honeck and Temple retorted that "evaluation of the theories via an artificial, unproductive, and misleading disciplinary distinction fails to do justice to either theory" (1996:230). The seemingly troublesome disciplinary differences argued out in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* shrink to tiny proportions, however—a mere family quarrel—when measured against the gap between cognitive theories on the one hand and, on the other, the

¹ The theory forwarded by Honeck and collaborators appeared first (Honeck et al. 1980), but it has since been elaborated and modified to take account of work by Lakoff and Turner (1989) and others (see Honeck and Temple 1994 and 1996, Honeck 1997). Hence I take up Honeck's theory second.

anthropological, folkloric, and performance-based studies carried out by those whom, for brevity's sake, I will call ethnographers of the proverb.²

I attempt here to draw up some preliminary plans for a bridge spanning the gulf between cognitive and ethnographic proverb study. My argument rests on two basic assumptions: that proverb use is both mental *and* social and that the most holistic and integrative approach will be the most useful.³ This essay appraises the two theories, both of considerable interest for what they include and what they omit, and then measures the fruits of this theorizing against Chaucer's richly elaborated and far-reaching conception of proverb use in Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's great narrative poem has much to tell us about the power of performed genres embedded in written texts, and the reader will hardly be surprised that I find Chaucer's poetic practice more complete, subtle, and searching than even the most explanatory of theories. Extending from The General Prologue through the Knight's, Miller's, Reeve's, and truncated Cook's Tales, Fragment I best suits my present purposes because in this opening segment Chaucer teaches his audience how to read his highly experimental new work, a program of instruction that includes tacit lessons in his subtle art of proverb use.⁴

² The bibliography of ethnographic approaches to the proverb is enormous; for a good sampling of classic articles, see the reprinted ethnographic pieces in Mieder and Dundes 1981 and Mieder 1994. Arewa and Dundes 1964 is another foundational study. Mieder 2001 supplies recent bibliography on ethnographic and other approaches as do the periodically updated bibliographies in the journal *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*.

³ The value of inquiry conducted outside disciplinary boundaries is still contested on methodological and philosophical grounds. See, for example, Stanley Fish's argument (1989) that disciplinary boundaries are insurmountable because our disciplines constitute our knowledge, and thus there is no vantage point from outside traditional disciplines from which interdisciplinary inquiry can be conducted. Bauman avoids the term "interdisciplinary" for almost the opposite reason: "to seek an 'interdisciplinary' solution is to concede the legitimacy of disciplinary differentiation to begin with, whereas I have preferred to align myself with the integrative vision of language, literature and culture in which folklore was itself first conceived" (1986:114; cf. Bauman 1996). A considerably bolder, but compatible, attempt at the discipline bridging I attempt here is Bowden 1996.

⁴ The use of literary texts for ethnographic study remains controversial, but it is hard to deny that written sources have enriched our knowledge of proverb practice. Influential precedents include Peter Seitel's study of Ibo proverbs (1981), which combines fieldwork with evidence from the novels of Chinua Achebe; the work of Fontaine (1994) and Perry (1993) with the Hebrew Bible; and a stimulating essay by Daniel Boyarin (1993) that makes ethnographic use of ancient Hebrew and medieval

The Importance of “Cultural Specifics”

Richard Honeck's *A Proverb in Mind* affirms that cultural contexts enrich the study of proverbs, but argues nevertheless that for theoretical purposes proverbs can be “abstracted away from their cultural specifics” because “the mental structures and processes of *Homo sapiens* are explainable on the basis of the same theoretical principles” (1997:37). Thus Honeck summarizes ethnographic work but does not substantially alter his theory in light of it. Yet even insofar as proverb use involves mental (as opposed to social) performance, one can hardly discount such culturally determined factors as the size and familiarity of the proverbial repertoire, the amount of proverb practice provided, and the value placed on skillful use. A holistic theory must accommodate both universalizing cognitive factors and highly specific cultural determinants.

Proverb use arises from a context of “cultural specifics” from which it cannot be “abstracted” without serious distortion. In Western Europe intense interest in proverbs prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and peaked in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁵ The literature of late medieval and early modern England abounds in proverbial wisdom, as the indices drawn from the works of this period testify.⁶ We can judge the pervasiveness of proverb use in Chaucer's period by the wealth of proverbs embedded in his and other literary texts, the contemporary practice of compiling large proverb collections, and the custom of drawing attention to proverbs in written texts by means of pointing hands and other devices. Perhaps even more telling is the exuberant spillover of proverbs into visual art such as wall painting, painted glass, tapestries, and misericord carvings, as well as into what Obelkevich calls “improbable media”—tables, plates, pots, knife blades, and sundials.⁷ Many of these visual representations depend on the viewer's ability to match them with familiar proverbs held in memory.

Christian literary sources. Precedents from Anglo-Saxon studies include Niles 1999; from Chaucer studies, Lindahl 1987 and Winick 1994.

⁵ Davis 1975 and Obelkevich 1994 provide concise overviews.

⁶ See Whiting 1968 to the year 1500, and Tilley 1950 for 1500-1700.

⁷ For medieval proverb collections see B. Taylor 1992. For proverbs in medieval and early modern visual arts, see Obelkevich 1994:229, Jones 1989a and 1989b, and Block 1991.

Unlike most proverb users in our society, Chaucer and his audiences were “strong tradition-bearers.”⁸ Pupils in medieval England routinely memorized proverbs, and they honed their linguistic skills by translating them in and out of Latin. By the mid-fourteenth century, translation of proverbs and other sayings in and out of the vernacular was standard educational practice (Orme 1989:76). A number of pedagogically oriented proverb collections survive, including one compiled by John Cornwall, a schoolmaster at Oxford in the 1340s who sets out *sententiae* in Latin to be translated into English.⁹ Until the early fifteenth century, students usually wrote their translations on waxed tablets and few survive. But from the 1420s on, translation workbooks give intriguing glimpses into the centrality of proverbs in the late medieval classroom. The Latin sentences set for translation were called *latinities*, or “latins”; the English sentences were *vulgaria* or “englishes.” Among the set sentences in one workbook is the lament: “a hard latin to make, my face waxeth black” (Orme 1989:76-77). Schoolmasters varied the austere moral *sententiae* of their basic text, the *Distichs of Cato*, with racier vernacular proverbs that resemble the lively expressions preserved in Chaucer’s verse: “Bornt hand fyr dreydis”; “Far fro the ee, far fro the hart”; “Betwyx two stolys [stools] fals the ars down.”¹⁰

As Chaucer takes pains to demonstrate in *The Canterbury Tales*, one need not have been to school to value proverbs. A fourteenth-century

⁸ John Niles uses this term to refer to those exceptional storytelling practitioners who “stand out for their large repertory and authoritative style” (1999:174). I assume that strong bearers of proverb tradition will be much more common than strong bearers of story because the proverb is so much shorter and simpler. In emphasizing the very prominent role played by proverbs in medieval and early modern culture, I do not mean to discount their visibility in contemporary American and European life. The modern proverbial materials collected in Whiting 1989 extend to over 5000 entries; Mieder 1993 offers a book-length demonstration of the proverb’s continued relevance.

⁹ Orme 1989:76-85. B. J. Whiting tried to distinguish between Chaucer’s *proverbs*, “sayings which are, or appear to be, popular in origin, or which have become thoroughly popular in use” and his *sententiae* or *sententious remarks*, which “show clearly their learned origin” (1934:viii). Over thirty years later, in his monumental compilation of proverbs before 1500, Whiting added a distinction easier to sustain: “a sentence is a piece of wisdom which has not crystallized into specific current form and which anyone feels free to rephrase to suit himself.” He adds that sentences tend to be more abstract than proverbs and are less likely to have figurative meanings (1968:xiv).

¹⁰ From the “Lincoln Sentences of c. 1425-50 in Beinecke Library MS 3 (34),” nos. 7, 11, 12 (Orme 1989:83).

German legal document recommends to pleaders before juries, "Wherever you can attach a proverb, do so, for the peasants like to judge according to proverbs."¹¹ Sermons reached most members of medieval society, and preaching was an important agent for the wide dissemination of proverbial wisdom (Wenzel 1986:205-7). From the thirteenth century onward, manuals for preaching are bound up with collections of quotations from learned authors such as Seneca, Augustine, and Bernard, as well as with lists of the same kind of homely vernacular proverbs found in the school texts (B. Taylor 1992:33-35). With these skeletally outlined "cultural specifics" in mind, I first examine the two universalizing theories of proverb use introduced earlier, and then relate them to Chaucer's proverb practice, with the aim of using theory to illuminate practice and practice to reveal gaps in theory.

Two Cognitive Theories of Proverb Use

The rival theories that caused a stir in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* seek to explain what a human mind does when confronted by a proverb. Both treat only metaphorical proverbs ("As the twig is bent, so grows the tree"); neither deals with non-imagistic expressions such as "practice makes perfect" or "haste makes waste." For those of us accustomed to thinking of proverbs as linguistic rather than cognitive phenomena, it may be helpful to reflect briefly upon the kind of thought they require. Proverbs posit miniature theories, under which seemingly unrelated experiences illuminate one another and are therefore transformed. A famous psychology experiment dating from 1945 demonstrates the potential power of the analogical reasoning required in proverb use. Called the "radiation problem," the experiment requires that subjects think of a way to destroy a tumor inside a patient, when rays of the strength required to kill the tumor would also destroy healthy tissue and kill the patient. Few of those tested arrive at a solution without further prompting. In a version of the experiment from the 1980s (Holyoak and Thagard 1989), psychologists first presented subjects with a problem in which a general must find a way for his army to capture a fortress when it cannot make a full frontal attack. A solution is to split the army and attack from many different directions, converging on the fortress. Only about ten percent of the student subjects came up with a solution to the radiation problem without prompting. Yet

¹¹ A. Taylor 1931:87; see Davis 1975:340-41, n. 31 and n. 40, on lists of proverbs compiled or owned by early modern lawyers.

given the fortress analogy and a hint that it might be relevant, 75 percent were able to propose that the tumor be attacked from different directions by rays of low intensity that would pass harmlessly through the healthy tissue and converge to destroy the tumor.

Significantly, the hint about the relevance of the fortress problem to the radiation problem turns out to be almost as important as the analogy itself. In the absence of the hint, only 20 percent of the subjects saw that in the fortress problem lay a potential solution to the radiation problem. As the researchers point out, “This finding emphasizes the difficulty of the initial retrieval step for analogies when there is little surface similarity between the source and target domains” (Holyoak and Thagard 1989:252). The source domain is the given, in this case the fortress problem; the target domain is the desired application, the radiation problem. Although one uses the model of metaphor and the other of analogy, both of the cognitive theories to which we will turn shortly assume that proverb comprehension rests upon mapping the similarities between two widely divergent domains of knowledge, one familiar and experiential, the other more remote and abstract. Thus it follows that immersion in proverb use hones the particular intellectual skill called for in this experiment, “the initial retrieval step,” or the perception of the relevance of the two domains. Given the words, “Charcoal / writes everybody’s name black” and a situation involving a habitual slanderer, what many listeners or readers need is a hint that one can be fruitfully related to the other, even though the correspondence is metaphorical, not literal. The “hint” in the experiment is a regular feature of proverb performance, a set of cues alerting users that proverbs differ from ordinary speech and hence require a special kind of reception.¹²

Extending Lakoff’s influential earlier work, *Metaphors We Live By* (with Mark Johnson, 1980), Lakoff and Turner posit that our thinking is conditioned at a very deep level by a series of extended metaphors, such as “argument is war” or “life is a journey.”¹³ More than simply figures of

¹² Ethnographic theories generally regard the proverb as a performed genre; this “hint” that a special type of reception is required corresponds to the “perception of proverbiality” in Arora 1994 and to “keying performance” in Bauman 1977 and 1986, Hymes 1981, and Foley 1995. Foley 1995 provides full bibliography and synthesizes earlier work in this vein. The “charcoal” expression derives from Merwin 1973, discussed later in this article.

¹³ Its authors wrote *More than Cool Reason* “to analyze the role of metaphor in poetry” in language accessible to students (Lakoff and Turner 1989:xii); one chapter is devoted to investigating “basic mechanisms of poetry which appear in high relief in proverbs but which suffuse all our poetry” (*ibid.*:160). Thus it is unlikely that they set

speech, which are linguistic phenomena, these metaphors are concepts, part of our minds. So deeply ingrained are they in our language and thought that we do not necessarily notice, for example, the underlying metaphor that leads us to refer to a baby's "arrival" or to refer to someone who has died as "departed." The core idea informing the Lakoff-Turner proverb theory is that, like other metaphors, proverbs require that their recipients apprehend a "source domain" schema, provided by the proverb. Recipients then map the source domain onto a "target domain," which may be specified by the context or it may be unspecified. For the proverb "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," the source domain is the trainability of saplings and a possible target domain is the adult criminality of a child raised by thieves. Proverb users frequently possess detailed experiential knowledge of the source domain, relative to the abstract nature of the target domain, which might treat of life, death, time, ironies of fate, or the vanity of human wishes. Thus the cognitive work performed by these basic metaphors can be very powerful. Proverbs reveal the relationship between seemingly disparate situations and offer strategies for action or coping (see Burke 1967).

According to the Lakoff-Turner theory, four cognitive tools or principles help the recipient to map certain aspects of the proverb's source domain over to the corresponding aspects of the target domain. First, at a higher level of abstraction than metaphors such as "life is a journey," Lakoff and Turner posit a set of "generic-level metaphors." One of these, "the generic is specific," plays a role in proverb comprehension. To use an example to which we will return, at the more concrete level, the proverb "One bad apple spoils the whole barrel" makes use of the metaphor "a group of people in close proximity is a barrel of apples." At a higher level of abstraction, the same proverb makes use of the metaphor "the generic [the group] is [a] specific [the barrel of apples]." Thus the proverb uses a concrete and observable effect involving a particular fruit, in a particular container, under prescribed conditions (the specific) to enable the user to understand a wide variety of group interactions (the generic). Once the two domains are analogically related, confident knowledge of the specific enables more creative and nuanced reasoning about the generic. Lakoff and Turner number "the generic is specific" among the metaphors that we "live by" (or think by) and thus need not consciously evoke.

out to formulate a theory of the proverb *per se*, though their hypothesis is stimulating and has clearly contributed to the refinement of the theory developed by Honeck and collaborators. Lakoff and Turner did not themselves take part in the discussion of their theory in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*.

Aiding and abetting the proverb interpreter's grasp of the "generic is specific" metaphor, according to Lakoff and Turner, are three other cognitive tools. One is the set of beliefs we inherit from the old notion of a Great Chain of Being. These ideas survive "as a contemporary unconscious cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language" (Lakoff and Turner 1989:167). When we interpret proverbs, ideas inherited from the Great Chain combine with a second piece of cognitive equipment, a body of practical knowledge about "the nature of things," which we use to form a common sense theory of how the world works. The Great Chain metaphor ranks entities hierarchically, on the principle that each entity on the chain possesses all the salient characteristics of those below it, plus some higher order properties that justify its superior spot on the chain. Placed at the top of the hierarchy of earthly entities, human beings possess the highest-order attributes shared by minerals, plants, and animals. In addition, humans possess their own distinguishing properties, such as reason and speech. As a final piece of cognitive apparatus, Lakoff and Turner stipulate a principle of verbal economy. Their version of the linguistic "Maxim of Quantity" holds that when a speaker refers to an entity on the Great Chain, in the absence of contrary information we assume that he or she is referring to the highest-order properties that characterize the entity, the same properties that determine its hierarchical position on the Chain. These four conceptual tools—the "generic is specific" metaphor, the Great Chain metaphor, the "nature of things" principle, and the Maxim of Quantity—allow the proverb interpreter to match up elements of the source domain (specified by the proverb and familiar to the interpreter) with their counterparts in the less easily apprehended target domain. Thus the reader or hearer grasps the proverb's meaning.

To relate in compressed form just one of their examples (1989:205), Lakoff and Turner interpret the text "Ants on a millstone / whichever way they walk / they go around with it."¹⁴ The source domain is the concrete image of the ants crawling on the millstone; the target domain is unspecified and the recipient must determine it. In this case, the lingering assumptions left by the Great Chain metaphor indicate that we are interested in these ants for what they can tell us about human beings. The Maxim of Quantity helps us to single out the salient properties and to screen out irrelevant particulars about ants or millstones. Practical knowledge of "the nature of things" prompts us to recognize that the ants are tiny relative to the millstone and that their relatively minute movement is insignificant compared to the

¹⁴ I discuss the source of this expression in Merwin 1973 shortly.

millstone's rotation, which the ants cannot control or even comprehend. Lakoff and Turner give a much more detailed analysis of this example with many more theoretical intricacies, but once again, the essential conceptual activity is the mapping of the relevant parallels between the source domain, ants and millstones, and the target domain, human life. In their reading, the metaphor of ants on a millstone reminds us that as human beings we lack a perspective from which to evaluate the magnitude of our purposeful efforts as weighed against cosmic forces.

Richard Honeck's rival theory proceeds from the idea that proverbs are problems that require solutions, rather than poems that require interpretations. He refers to it as the "conceptual base" theory after the abstract mental medium in which this problem solving takes place.¹⁵ Unlike Lakoff and Turner, who treat proverbs as literary texts, Honeck tends to posit speakers in face-to-face situations. His theory stipulates two different cognitive environments for proverb use, which he terms "irrelevant" and "relevant context" situations. In the first, one encounters proverbs "out of the blue." A stranger steps into an elevator and says, "A net with a hole in it won't catch any fish" (Honeck and Temple 1996:86) or a stranger walks up to someone on the street and says, "Not every oyster contains a pearl" (Honeck 1997:128). According to Honeck, the listener first tries unsuccessfully to interpret the phrase literally.¹⁶ Even if the listener has never heard the saying "Not every oyster contains a pearl," she recognizes that the statement has "no immediate referent" (no oysters in sight or under discussion). She further notes that the stranger's observation is stated "in a gnomic, nonpast tense way" (Honeck 1997:129), and must therefore be treated as a special kind of utterance.

Next, the addressee proceeds in accordance with a pragmatic linguistic principle: a listener assumes that something is meant by what is said and seeks a workable meaning. When the statement fails to make sense as a literal observation about oysters, the recipient moves to the "figurative meaning phase." She uses what she knows about oysters and pearls to construe a meaning that can be applied to a vast number of new situations: "not everything that makes valuable things does it all of the time"

¹⁵ Except where noted, my account of Honeck's theory derives from his single-authored book-length work, addressed to a non-specialist audience (1997:ix).

¹⁶ In the belief that it has caused great confusion, Lakoff and Turner avoid the word "literal." They argue at length against the "literal meaning theory" both in linguistics and as a common-sense view of language (1989:110-39, 217-18). They suggest that "literal" is best used as "a handy, nontechnical term" for the source domain of a metaphor (1989:119), which is how I use it here.

(*ibid.*:130). A special quality of the proverb is its potential for self-instantiation; that is, the same utterance can have a referent or it can simply be a piece of freestanding philosophy about the way of the world. In the absence of any discernible immediate referent, the addressee might recognize the statement as proverbial and answer, “You got that right,” if she too has had bitter experience of too many pearl-less oysters. As we will see, nearly all of Lakoff and Turner’s examples are of “irrelevant context” situations. Like Honeck’s innocent bystanders accosted by total strangers who utter proverbs “out of the blue,” Lakoff and Turner are free either to propose their own referents for the cryptic utterances they use as examples or to interpret them as freestanding bits of practical philosophy.

In Honeck’s “irrelevant context” model, then, the hearer is given only the source domain of the metaphor and must discover or invent the target domain. That oysters are sometimes pearl-less is the given, and she must discover what the speaker means by it.¹⁷ If the speaker has in mind a particular application for his utterance (a particular target domain), he will have to provide further clues. In the “relevant context” instance, both domains are indicated and the intellectual task is to relate them meaningfully. For example, the speaker of the proverb “Not every oyster contains a pearl” might shrug and brandish a scratched and worthless lottery ticket. The addressee must think at the highest level of abstraction that will produce a satisfying conceptual match between utterance and visual prompt. Honeck holds that this matching takes place in “a totally abstract medium,” non-imagistic and non-linguistic, which he terms the “conceptual base” (*ibid.*:131-32). In either case, context-irrelevant or context-relevant, the proverb functions as a miniature theory: it is generative, it can be applied to an infinite number of new situations, and, once applied, it transforms the situation (Honeck et al. 1980:156-57).

Lakoff and Turner do not define *proverb* except to say that proverbs can be treated as poems (1989:160). Honeck gives a formal definition that follows from his theory (1997:18): “A proverb can be regarded as a discourse deviant, relatively concrete, present (nonpast) tense statement that uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals that serve to categorize topics in order to make a pragmatic point about them.” The proverb is “discourse deviant” because it does not follow the usual rules (it

¹⁷ For ease in exposition, I continue to use Lakoff and Turner’s terms, “source domain” (specified in the proverb) and “target domain” (often to be supplied by the listener) to describe the two domains of knowledge related by a proverb. Honeck’s preferred terms, “vehicle” (explicit in the proverb) and “topic” (the proverb’s usually unstated referent), seem to me harder to remember because in ordinary language either the source domain or the target domain could logically be termed the proverb’s “topic.”

can talk about oysters when it means lottery tickets). The “topics” are the proverb’s referents (*ibid.*:131) or, in the terminology favored by Lakoff and Turner, its “target domain.” “Cognitive ideals” are a later refinement added to Honeck’s theory to explain the apparent binary or “black and white” nature of so many proverbs. Ideally, all oysters would contain pearls; like many others, the sample proverb highlights the contrast between the ideal and the imperfect reality.

The formalism of both theories shows up immediately in their relative lack of concern about the origins of the utterances they refer to as proverbs. From their disciplinary perspective at the intersection of linguistics and literary criticism, Lakoff and Turner treat proverbs not as the products of tradition but as individual literary texts. Given their declaration that proverbs may be thought of as poems, it follows that they refer to their interpretations as “readings,”¹⁸ which is what they are—skillful close readings. The examples with which they expound their theory are particularly easy to treat as poems: they are drawn from what could easily be called a book of poetry, W. S. Merwin’s *Asian Figures*. Merwin prefaces his volume of aphoristic expressions with the explanation that a Mrs. Crown of the Asia Society in New York gave him some lists of Asian proverbs both in the original East Asian languages and in English translation. He writes that he does not know the original languages and that his “adaptations” of the translations provided “were not undertaken with a view to being—necessarily—literal” (1973:iii). Writing as a poet rather than as a philologist or ethnographer, he does not report how or when his raw materials were collected or who translated them with what degree of fidelity. The “Asian figures” in Merwin’s volume flow in intriguing thematic drifts with no context to provide clues to their intended referents. “Most beautiful / just before,” is followed by “Autumn rides down / on one leaf,” then “Autumn / the deer’s / own color,” followed by “Ice comes from water / but can teach it / about cold” (1973:35).

Merwin’s translated figures are wise and beautiful, and Lakoff and Turner’s close readings quite brilliant, but are these “Asian figures” proverbs? Ethnographers almost invariably use the word “traditional” in their definitions of this tiny but hard to define genre, or they stipulate some

¹⁸ Lakoff and Turner speak of “possible readings” of proverbs (1989:186) and acknowledge that “proverbs can have an enormous range of readings, depending on the framings one brings to them” (189). Their treatment of the expression “jelly / in a vise” (186-89) suggests that conflicting readings arise from the slipperiness of language combined with the subjectivity involved in applying each of their conceptual principles.

kind of “currency” or “circulation.”¹⁹ Many of the cryptic little poems in Merwin’s volume—“Blind / blames the ditch”; “Can’t crawl / and tries to jump”—very likely do derive ultimately from a living or once-living tradition of proverb use,²⁰ but obviously do not circulate in the verbal form Merwin gives them. The Lakoff-Turner theory will also rouse the resistance of ethnographic researchers who believe that proverbs must be studied in the context of the cultural practices of the group that uses them. We do not know whether the Asian figures Lakoff and Turner cite come from an ancient written source or whether they were collected from active bearers shortly before Mrs. Crown passed them along to Merwin. The authors almost never attempt to relate these expressions to “Asian” culture. In a rare exception, Lakoff and Turner’s interpretation of “Any weather / chicken’s / pants are rolled up” entails the explanation that “In Asia, it is common for barefoot peasants working in the fields to roll up their pants when it rains so that they don’t get their pants wet when they step into puddles” (1989:201). How the putative “Asian” users of these proverbs have internalized the Great Chain of Being metaphor (usually understood as a piece of Western intellectual history) detains Lakoff and Turner for the length of only one sentence: “It is extremely widespread and occurs not only in Western culture but throughout a wide range of the world’s cultures” (*ibid.*:167).

The thinness of the cultural analysis in the Lakoff-Turner theory indicates that the authors’ interests lie elsewhere. Yet, surprisingly enough from the ethnographer’s perspective, Honeck’s survey of approaches to proverb study places the Lakoff-Turner theory in the category of “cultural views” of the proverb (1997:31-36). Among the “serious and fundamental differences” Honeck enumerates between his theory and that of Lakoff and Turner, “the most important” is that Lakoff and Turner’s theory “derives from the cultural view” (*ibid.*:152). This category also includes, for example,

¹⁹ Dundes defines the proverb as “a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element, a descriptive element consisting of a topic and a comment” (1981:60). Seitel provisionally defines proverbs in English as “short, traditional, ‘out-of-context’ statements used to further some social end” and observes: “That proverbs are short and traditional is a generally accepted feature of definition” (1981:124). Arora makes a similar point: “Probably the most consistently accepted generalization concerning proverbs, in virtually any language, is that they are ‘traditional’” (1994:4). Mieder calls traditionality “the central ingredient that must be part of any proverb definition” and holds that “any text to qualify as a proverb must have (or have had) some currency for a period of time” (1993:6, 41).

²⁰ Many of Merwin’s figures have recognizable counterparts in European vernaculars: “The crying baby / is the one that gets fed,” “The rats decide / the cat ought to be belled,” “Listen / even to a baby” (1973:5, 9, 10).

the work of anthropologist Charles L. Briggs, who conducted field research on proverb use in a community of 700 inhabitants in the mountains of northern New Mexico between 1972 and 1984. Briggs's culturally specific fieldwork makes a strange bedfellow for Lakoff and Turner's formalism.²¹ Yet, in the course of the debate in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, Honeck rejects what he sees as Lakoff and Turner's unnecessary emphasis on the cultural origin of proverbs (Honeck and Temple 1996:218): "Although culture- and context-specific phenomena occur, the fact remains that cultures do not do cognitive work, individual minds do, and there is good reason to assume that minds operate by universal principles." Thus, for Honeck (*idem*), "Rather than viewing proverbs as irredeemably culturally situated and incapable of being extricated from situations, the cognitive view requires that proverbs be seen as *abstract entities* that can only be understood by a set of very general theoretical principles." So biological and empirical is Honeck's orientation that what ethnographers would consider insufficient attention to cultural context is from his disciplinary perspective an unnecessary emphasis on it. The defenders of the Lakoff-Turner theory in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, Gibbs and his fellow psychologists, also regard Lakoff and Turner's theory as culturally based. For ethnographers, it is startling to read that Gibbs and company judge the Lakoff-Turner theory "the most comprehensive view" to date of how people make sense of proverbs (1996a:215).

Just as Lakoff and Turner do not inquire into the context that produced their "Asian figures," Honeck shows little concern about the sources of his examples. Some of them he and his collaborators have simply made up.²² Honeck and Temple write, "the fact that proverbs can be created anew is important theoretically because it makes it clear that individual proverbs do not have to be part of the linguistic heritage of a culture" (1994:99). In criticism of the Lakoff-Turner theory, they emphasize that "any theory of proverbs must be consistent with and draw on empirically derived data and principles of processing as these have developed in cognitive science" (*ibid.*:111). Yet bibliographies of proverb research abound with ethnographic studies that do not draw upon empirical data from

²¹ Like virtually all scholars with backgrounds in anthropology, folklore, or oral-traditional studies, Briggs concludes that proverb performance stands with one foot in a living tradition and the other "in the minute details of everyday life in a given community" (1994:344).

²² Honeck and Temple list six proverbs they have made up (1994:99). One, "A net with a hole in it won't catch any fish," is used prominently in the explication of Honeck's theory.

cognitive science and thus do not meet the criteria Honeck and Temple set down for “any theory of proverbs.” Conversely, some of the more blunt among the ethnographically oriented investigators might respond tartly that “any theory of proverbs” must be about proverbs, that is, from their perspective, about a class of traditional utterances recognized as such by a particular culture and in circulation among its members. Many ethnographers would resist the idea that Honeck and collaborators can discover anything useful to them as long as they treat proverbs as lists of verbal items randomly gathered or made up by the researchers themselves, and as long as their theories seem to treat proverb users as processing units.

Both cognitive theories limit their investigation to the point at which a reader or hearer encounters a proverb; they diverge in their description of the particular mental activities that take the proverb interpreter from the source domain to the target domain, be it specified or open. Wide as the gap between his own work and that of Lakoff and Turner seems to Honeck, I have suggested that the real gulf lies between the two cognitive theories on the one side, and the work of proverb scholars committed to ethnographic, performance-based, and oral-traditional approaches on the other. For those who work with orally transmitted proverbs, Honeck’s theory has the advantage of treating proverb use as a kind of face-to-face encounter rather than an instance of close reading. But both theories treat “proverb use” as virtually synonymous with proverb comprehension, a view that is much too limited, as we will see. Neither theory gives more than brief attention to whether the recipient has heard the proverb in question applied in a consistent way all his life or whether he is encountering it for the first time. Both theories posit weak tradition-bearers, people to whom proverbs usually come “out of the blue” and require either the kind of close reading given to difficult literary texts (Lakoff and Turner) or elaborate strategies of paraphrase and analogy-building (Honeck). When we turn to evidence from the Middle Ages (or if we were to examine an existing society where proverb use is culturally central), we meet strong tradition-bearers, those who hold a repertoire of proverbs in memory and use them in ways not accounted for by either theory.

A bridge from cognitive to ethnographic approaches may at this point seem like an attempt to span the Pacific. At issue is the very identity of the phenomenon under study—the proverb—and what standards of proof apply. Current research on interdisciplinary inquiry provides many examples of the same definitional and evidentiary gap: analysts consistently cite terminological slippage and the lack of a common truth standard as leading obstacles to successful work across disciplinary boundaries (see Kaplan and Levine 1997; Moran 2002). To scholars working at the farthest edges of

established disciplines, these boundaries resemble other kinds of frontiers: lonely, windswept, and full of uncharted risks.²³ If all significant aspects of “proverb use” took place in the mind, in what Honeck describes as a non-imagistic, non-linguistic, wholly abstract mental medium, then centuries of ethnographic research would have little to contribute. Those committed to an integrative approach will, I hope, agree that an ethnographer benefits by asking what the human mind does with proverbs, just as a cognitive scientist builds a better theory by asking what cultural work proverbs do. As a starting point toward an integrated theory, researchers on each side of the disciplinary gap can offer an account of what the other side has left out. Lakoff-Turner and Honeck give stimulating accounts of what ethnographic theories will leave out if they ignore research into proverb cognition. The cognitive theories, in turn, need from ethnographers a livelier sense of the proverb as a performed genre situated in human social life.

Chaucer's Practice

Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales* takes the modern Western reader into a culture where proverb use is active and ubiquitous. Chaucer's practice immediately reveals that in confining itself to proverb comprehension, cognitive theory addresses only half the mental work involved in proverb use. Both Lakoff-Turner and Honeck understand proverb use as a process of reception; they ask what happens when someone encounters a “proverb” without asking where the utterance came from and how it got there. Chaucer too is keenly interested in reception. But *The Canterbury Tales* also presents us with a fictional world of active, purposeful, even scheming proverb speakers who produce apposite utterances and apply them skillfully. For Chaucer as for other practiced wielders of rich stores of traditional materials, proverb use involves production as well as reception. Both cognitive theories focus their attention almost exclusively on the intellectual gymnastics of innocent bystanders accosted by proverbs. But familiarity with the living traditions studied by ethnographers or the once-living tradition depicted in Chaucer's fiction compels us to ask also about the mental activity involved in proverb production. Who are these people in Honeck's theory who pop into elevators and utter proverbs? How do they come up with their proverbs? Why do they use them? How do they signal

²³ See Klein 1996 on the relative security of working within established academic departments, where the traditional reward structure operates most strongly (espec. 29-30), and on the challenges facing disciplinary “migrants” and “pioneers” (espec. 42-46).

that they have uttered a special kind of statement that their addressees will have to process in a particular way?

Although ethnographers are justified in asking for more attention to what constitutes a proverb than cognitive theory yet affords, in fact Chaucer's understanding of the proverb is as open and eclectic as that of Lakoff and Turner, who draw upon Merwin's translations, and that of Honeck, who invents proverbs. Chaucer draws proverbs from a wealth of written and oral sources, and, though it cannot be proved, it seems very likely that when the need arose, he too made them up. A possible example from Fragment I occurs in a speech Chaucer gives to the student John in *The Reeve's Tale* (in a caricatured Northern dialect): "Hym boes serve hymself that has na swayn, /Or elles he is a fool, as clerkes sayn" ("He must serve himself who has no servant, or else he is a fool, as learned men say," *CT* I.4027-28).²⁴ "As clerkes sayn" is one of Chaucer's formulas for marking proverbial utterances, but in the absence of other evidence, we cannot know whether the saying was in circulation or invented by Chaucer, who is consistently playful about the origins of his raw materials.²⁵ Chaucer marks some proverbs as orally circulating speech: "Men seyn thus" (*CT* I.3598), "I have herd seyde" (I.4129). But he also has his Wife of Bath cite as a "proverbe" a quotation from Ptolemy's "*Almageste*" (III.325-27), a work whose textual status she has just taken pains to emphasize: "The same wordes writeth Ptholomee; / Rede in his *Almageste*, and take it there" (III.182-83). The word *proverb* applies equally to quotations from learned texts and anonymously circulating traditional expressions.²⁶ In the pilgrim narrator's *Tale of Melibee*, indications of learned origin such as "Seneca seith" (VII.1147 etc.), "Caton seith," (VII.1181 etc.), "Salomon seith" (VII.1003 etc.), and "the book seith" (VII.1144, 1164, etc.) alternate freely with "the proverbe seith" (VII.1054, 1215, 1264) and "men seyn" (VII.1153, 1466).

²⁴ The works of Chaucer are cited from *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson et al. 1987). I cite *The Canterbury Tales* (*CT*) by fragment (a Roman numeral) and line number.

²⁵ Whiting 1968 cites only this one instance of the saying, but one of Whiting's collection principles held that "if Chaucer takes pains to emphasize the fact that he is quoting an old proverb, we may, perhaps, choose to believe him" (1931:50). Thus he indexes this unique expression as one of Chaucer's proverbs (1934:87, 1968:S919).

²⁶ Louis 1997 offers a more extensive survey of the meanings of *proverb*, drawing upon other Middle English sources as well as Chaucer.

For Chaucer, a proverb seems to have been a saying, of any origin, worth repeating because it serves as a guide to action, deliberation, or understanding. In his usage, *proverbe* does not specify the origins of the utterance, its social positioning, or the means by which it was habitually transmitted. Chaucer's practice of marking proverbs as quoted sayings corresponds to Richard Honeck's observation that a proverb uses "characteristic linguistic markers" to arouse a certain response in its hearers or readers (1997:18). Earlier, I suggested that these verbal signals correspond to the "hint" that affected so strongly the cognitive ability of experimental subjects to apply the solution of the "fortress problem" to that of the "radiation problem." From the ethnographic side, Shirley L. Arora argues on the basis of her fieldwork with Spanish-speaking residents of Los Angeles that the "perception of proverbiality" is far more important in practice than the history of the expression, if its history can even be known. Arora writes, "The utterance in question—'truly proverbial,' i.e., traditional, or not—will function as a proverb, with all the accompanying weight of authority or community acceptance that the concept implies, as the direct result of the listener's perception, right or wrong, of its 'proverbiality'" (1994:6). To illustrate Chaucer's practice, I have chosen expressions whose "proverbiality" would have been apparent to his audiences, either because he marks them explicitly or because evidence exists that the expression was in circulation and thus recognizable as originating outside Chaucer's work. My selection principle thus conforms to the widely accepted ethnographic practice of employing generic categories recognizable to the tradition-bearers themselves. At the same time, it conforms closely enough to Honeck's definition of the proverb (quoted earlier) to allow me to measure the explanatory power of cognitive theory against Chaucer's practice.

I begin with an instance of proverb use well described by the theories with which we began: the "figure" that the Parson is said to live by. Its form, a rhetorical question, suggests the learned end of the proverb spectrum, and indeed its traceable background is in biblical and patristic sources.²⁷ The Parson's portrait states that he has taken certain advice from the gospels (I.499-504; my emphasis):

²⁷ Scattergood 1987 notes that Chaucer associates the term "figure" with "proverb" in his short poem "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton" when he describes the poem as "this lytel writ, proverbes, or figure." The poem can apparently be thought of as a piece of writing, a miniature proverb collection, and a metaphorical statement ("figure"). Whiting 1968:G304 indexes this passage from the General Prologue but supplies no supporting examples; Benson et al. 1987 cites possible precedent in the biblical passage Lamentations 4:1-2 and in Latin scriptural commentary.

And this *figure* he added eek therto,
 That *if gold ruste, what shal iren do?*
 For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
 No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
 And shame it is, if a prest take keep,
 A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.
 Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,
 By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde lyve.

Chaucer devotes the first quoted line to alerting the reader that the second contains a verbal form in need of special interpretive treatment. At this early point in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer demonstrates for his audience how to map the qualities of the familiar source domain onto those of the less familiar target domain. The observable contrast in the durability of gold and iron provides a way to reason about what can be expected of a cleric relative to his parishioners. Chaucer intertwines the “parson as gold versus people as iron” metaphor with a second image familiar enough to medieval audiences to qualify as a “metaphor they lived by”: the pastor as shepherd and the people as his flock. Gold and iron are hierarchically ordered, with more expected of the former than the latter; the same is true of shepherd and sheep—each metaphor reinforces the other. In an ideal world, both shepherd and sheep would be clean and both metals would remain without tarnish, but the two analogies point to the same *a fortiori* argument: if the gold / shepherd / priest is corrupted, how much more corrupt will the iron / sheep / parishioner be?

Even if the reader of the General Prologue has not encountered the gold and iron “figure” before, Chaucer’s labeling alerts us that the Parson *quotes* it, rather than just speaking it, and that the quoted utterance will mean more than it says. As both cognitive theories posit, the idealized metaphorical relation between clerical gold and lay iron functions as a miniature theory under which many instances may be subsumed. The gold that glints from the Prioress’s shining brooch (*CT* I.160) and the Monk’s intricately wrought “love-knotte” (I.179) subtly underscores the argument. If the clergy live by worldly values (if their gold is literal and ornamental rather than figurative and moral), what values will guide the “lewed man”? Whether one finds more useful the particular set of mental tools hypothesized by Lakoff and Turner or by Honeck, this example is one of the few in Fragment I for which either theory offers a reasonably complete model.

The Parson’s gold and iron figure may have been new to many members of Chaucer’s audience, and it seems to call for the kind of detailed decoding familiar from literary analysis. As an example of the problems that

familiar utterances pose for the two cognitive theories, let us look at what appears to be a traditional proverb in the Knight's Tale. Palamon breaks out of prison and finds himself in the same grove of trees as his cousin and rival, Arcite, who is loudly singing a courtly love song. Palamon has no idea who the singer is, while Arcite has no idea that he is being overheard (*CT* I.1521-27):

But sooth is seyde, go sithen many yeres,	
That 'feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres.'	
It is ful fair a man to <i>bere hym evene</i> ,	<i>keep his composure</i>
For al day meeteth men at <i>unset stevene</i> .	<i>appointments they have not made</i>
<i>Ful litel woot Arcite of his felawe</i> ,	<i>little does Arcite know</i>
That was so <i>ny</i> to herken al his <i>sawe</i> ,	<i>near, speech</i>
For in the bussh he sitteth now ful stille.	

Chaucer creates "the perception of proverbiality" by marking the saying "The field has eyes and the wood has ears" as true and old. It appears in almost identical wording in a collection of proverbial materials made around 1300, preserved in MS Trinity College Cambridge 1149 (0.2.45), from Cerne Abbey in Dorset.²⁸ As the modern editor's punctuation indicates, Chaucer is quoting, not in this instance from a written source such as Boethius or the Bible, but from the oral and written *mélange* that constitutes medieval English proverb tradition.

According to the theories reviewed here, a commonsense knowledge of fields and woods should prompt the reader or hearer to recognize that, without one's knowledge, one can easily be spied upon from a distance when in a field and overheard by a concealed listener when in the woods. Whether one calls it "isolating the generic-level schema contained in the specific-level schema evoked" (Lakoff and Turner 1989:166) or "reconfigur[ing] the literal meaning model and the proverb topic so that they are conceptual matches" (Honeck 1997:132), in theory a listener must take the statement to a level abstract enough to subsume all applications of the proverb. Lakoff and Turner would make explicit the concealed metaphors, "spies are eyes" and "eavesdroppers are ears." Honeck would offer a paraphrase, such as, "One must stay constantly alert to the possibility of

²⁸ The collection in which it appears consists of a list of Latin expressions, with spaces left for translations, which, where filled in, are in English or French, written in red ink (Louis 1993:2964-65). Under the Latin expression *Campus habet lumen et habet nemus auris acumen* is an English version almost identical to Chaucer's: "veld havend hege, and wude havend heare." For the English proverb, see Whiting 1968:F127; the Latin proverb is no. 2272 in Walther's collection (1963-69) of medieval Latin proverbs.

surveillance or eavesdropping.” Taken in isolation, as it appears, for example, in the proverb collection in MS Trinity College 1149, the proverb’s target domain could be an unfriendly world in which spies and eavesdroppers are everywhere. In its narrative context in *The Knight’s Tale*, the warning about surveillance and eavesdropping applies best to Arcite, whose incautious song threatens to reveal his concealed identity to his listening rival, Palamon, hidden in the same bush.

Encountered for the first time, “The field has eyes and the wood has ears” is a strange assertion. In working through the passage in question many times with students, I have observed that those who recognize Chaucer’s proverb as an outdoor version of the modern expression, “The walls have ears,” understand its meaning instantly. Those who have never heard the modern equivalent often have great difficulty grasping the import of Chaucer’s proverb, even after it is paraphrased for them. Their attempts at making literal sense of the statement—“Do the eyes belong to mice and squirrels? Do the ears belong to woodland creatures?”—bear out Honeck’s experimentally based conclusion that hearers of unfamiliar proverbs try first to make sense of the utterance with reference to the source domain alone. Although systematic research is needed, this bit of anecdotal evidence suggests that even among relatively weak tradition-bearers such as many American college students, processing a proverb encountered for the first time differs in important ways from processing a familiar one.

Instead of starting from scratch in connecting the source to the target domain, an addressee faced with a familiar proverb seems to activate a set of associations based on past applications of the same proverb.²⁹ The initial step, the cueing of proverb performance or “perception of proverbiality,” functions in the same way whether the proverb is highly familiar or made up on the spot. The hearer grasps that she has read or heard a proverb and looks for a target domain. But to understand the reception of widely circulating proverbs, especially by strong bearers, we might invoke what John Miles Foley has called the “enabling referent of tradition” (Foley 1995:5; cf. Foley 1994 and 2002). That is, we need to recognize that with familiar proverbs, recipients may rely not only upon the familiarity of the expression itself, but also on their experience with prior *applications*. Some familiar proverbs mean in nearly the same way each time. For example, “One bad apple spoils

²⁹ Honeck 1997 acknowledges that familiar proverbs are comprehended more quickly and reliably, but does not incorporate the implications of this difference into his single theory of proverb comprehension meant to encompass familiar and unfamiliar expressions alike.

the whole barrel” is applied so consistently to a troublemaker who demoralizes a peer group that it might seem harsh and confusing if applied to an earnest young ballerina whose lack of technique detracts from a group performance. An expression with which a hearer has had ample and consistent experience may call for cognitive processing that is not just faster, but different, from the processing of fresh expressions. Lakoff and Turner give more attention than Honeck to the accessing of pre-existing mental pathways. However, both theories seem best suited to first time encounters with conundrums such as, “Any weather / chicken’s / pants are rolled up” or “Cows run with the wind / horses against it” (Lakoff and Turner 1989:161) and less prepared to address meanings that accumulate over the course of many applications.

Theories that undervalue the “supply end” of proverb practice and the presence of proverbs in individual memory will lack the power to explain another fascinating aspect of proverb use by strong tradition-bearers: dueling proverbs. Countering proverbs with proverbs is an ancient activity, perhaps as old as the form itself, and well documented in those oral cultures that have survived into the modern world.³⁰ In the first eight chapters of the biblical Book of Proverbs, an authoritative voice pronounces solemn precepts that urge self-restraint and right action upon a listener addressed as “my son.” In chapter nine, the contrasting voice of a foreign woman counters with a single proverb drawn from an entirely different value system: “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (9:17). In the *Dialogue of Salomon and Marcolphus*, an *agôn* in proverbs that circulated widely from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, Solomon speaks in the same righteous voice of aphoristic authority found in Biblical wisdom literature. Marcolphus (or Marcolf), a “short,” “thykke” peasant figure suggestive of Chaucer’s Miller, answers with proverbs as “chorlysh and rude” as his clothing (Beecher 1995:151):

Solomon: Woe to that man that hath a double heart and in both ways will wander.

Marcolphus: He that will two ways go must either his arse or his breeches tear.

These “dueling proverbs” operate upon the same dynamic principle of *quiting* (matching, rivaling, repaying in kind) that animates *The Canterbury Tales* (Cooper 1997:202-3). They also underscore the ethnographer’s belief that “it is not the meaning of the proverb per se that need be our central

³⁰ See, for example, Arewa and Dundes 1964 and Seitel 1981.

concern but the meaning of proverb performances” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1981:119).

Usually Chaucer’s *quiting* juxtaposes whole tales, such as those of Knight and Miller or Miller and Reeve, but in the prologue to The Cook’s Tale, Chaucer depicts a brief example of dueling proverbs. The Host casts aspersions on the food sold in the Cook’s shop, then urges him to tell his tale, without being angered by jesting (“be nat wroth for game,” I.4354). The Host further defends his remarks about the Cook’s shop with the proverb, “A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley” (I.4355). On one narrative plane, the proverb seeks to justify the Host’s insults to the Cook; on another, it adds to the playful but extensive justification with which Chaucer surrounds his own choice to narrate two *fabliaux*. Like the woman in Proverbs and like Marcolphus, the Cook responds with an equal and opposite proverb, “‘Sooth pley, quaad pley,’ as the Flemynge seith”—a true jest is a poor jest.³¹ The fictional “proverb use” in this verbal duel between Host and Cook amounts to considerably more than mapping the source domain of a received proverb to a target domain. The respondent must grasp the import of the first proverb, then pull from memory another that will match, rival, or pay back the one he has just heard, just as the storytellers of Fragment I use their larger verbal units to *quite* one another. To supplement the cognitive activities hypothesized by Lakoff-Turner and Honeck, it would be intriguing to have a theoretical account of the mentation involved in this highly social and deeply traditional use of the proverb.

To conclude this sampling of proverb activity in Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*, I turn to The Cook’s Tale, which most but not all Chaucerians consider incomplete.³² The tale’s central figure, Perkyn Revelour, is a victualer’s apprentice with no particular interest in learning his trade but great relish for singing, dancing, flirting, gambling, raiding his master’s cash box, and viewing London’s passing street parade. His master is slow to take action, but eventually reaches a point of decision (I.4403-13):

³¹ See Wallace 1997:167 on possible implications of the Cook’s use of a Flemish proverb. Lindahl relates *The Canterbury Tales* to a number of contemporary activities involving oral performance (1987:44-61) and notes that a large portion of its proverbs relate either to social standing or occupational status (104).

³² Scholars have argued that Chaucer intentionally left The Cook’s Tale incomplete, that the ending is lost, and even that the tale is in fact complete as it stands. See Benson et al. 1987:853 for a brief account of the controversy prior to 1987. Partridge 2000 supplies current bibliography and a fresh look at the manuscript evidence.

But atte laste his maister hym bithoughte,
 Upon a day, whan he his papir soghte,
 Of a proverbe that seith this same word:
 "Wel bet is roten appul out of hoord
 Than that it rotie al the remenaunt."
 So fareth it by a riotous servaunt;
 It is ful lasse harm to lete hym pace,
 Than he *shende* alle the servantz in the place. *ruin*
 Therefore his maister *yaf* hym *acquittance*, *released him*
 And bad hym go, with sorwe and with meschance!
 And thus this joly prentys hadde his leve.

The mental work of the master victualer that Chaucer fictionalizes in this passage may represent the most common form of "proverb use" in a society of strong bearers, and we receive little guidance from cognitive theory until we reach Chaucer's explicit application, "So fareth it by a riotous servaunt." Only at this point do we find ourselves on familiar turf, as Chaucer demonstrates how to map relevant features from source domain to target domain, bad apples to bad apprentices. But the most interesting part is the cogitation that led the master "atte laste" to his proverb. Chaucer represents the master as stalled, until he finds in his mental reservoir a proverbial formula for his action. Once the proverb is found, the action follows easily and swiftly. In such a case, would Lakoff-Turner and Honeck offer mirror images of their respective theories, in which the proverb speaker has the target domain (a bad influence among the apprentices) and looks for a matching source domain (a bad apple in a barrel of otherwise sound fruit)?³³ While the subtle factors that affect human interaction never cease to surprise, the threat of spoiling food was part of pre-modern daily life. If we were to reverse the cognitive theories with which we began, the proverb user would reason about the less knowable situation by contemplating the all too familiar one.

Where would the fictional master have found his proverb? A master victualer in late fourteenth-century London could be expected to have some elementary schooling (Barron 1996) and thus have memorized many proverbs in the course of learning to read and write (Orme 1989, Bowden 1996). To this acquired stock, more would have been added by ear.

³³ Whether proverb comprehension should be thought of as unidirectional (source to target domain only) or bidirectional is one of the issues at stake in the exchanges in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* (Gibbs et al. 1996b:234). Gibbs and company also suggest that Honeck has overlooked the potential significance of "permanent memory structures" in proverb comprehension (*idem*). Honeck 1997 acknowledges these issues as relevant but has not yet incorporated them into his cognitive base theory.

Chaucer lays considerable emphasis on the “proverbiality” of the saying the master recalls, and it seems safe to assume that this expression was in oral circulation by Chaucer’s day. A version had already appeared in the written record by about 1340: “A roted eppel among the holen: maketh rotie the yzounde yef he is longe ther among” (Whiting 1968:A167). It appears in two fifteenth-century collections, and of course it still circulates in varying versions among English-speakers today. Chaucer’s formulation, “bet is . . . than,” is an ancient proverb structure, an example of the binary or quadripartite form that many theorists consider basic to proverbial wisdom (Dundes 1981, Perry 1993). Why does the master act so confidently once he finds the right proverb? Walter Benjamin stresses the proverb’s uncanny power to “transform experience into tradition” (1999:582): “It is scarcely within the powers of the individual to purify the lessons of his life completely by purging them of his particular experience. But the proverb can do this by taking possession of them.” From our earliest records of proverb use, these expressions have existed to be retrieved from memory, applied, and acted upon, in just the way that Chaucer has his master victualer apply one. Traditional sayings codify strategies “for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions” (Burke 1967:304).

As I observed at the beginning of this exploratory foray, it is no surprise that proverb practice in a society of strong bearers far outstrips even the most promising and productive of theories. On the basis of some aspects of Chaucer’s practice, I have attempted to identify some ways in which the available theories illuminate proverb practice and some places where practice shows up the limitations of theory. I began with the metaphor of building a bridge between the work of ethnographers and that of cognitive scientists. It may be easier to outline work for others to do than to do it, but a bridge begins with the recognition that a gap needs to be spanned. Perhaps, when there is a bridge for them to come to, ethnographers and cognitive scientists will begin to cross it.

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