If the Old Man’s tree, an “iren hoot,” and a crow’s “Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!” are the symbolic meeting places for the diverse themes and antinomies of the previous poems, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is the trial by fire for the entire vision. It’s here we witness the resurrection of every major philosophical dispute, every first-rate nightmare and crummy joke in the Chaucerian performance, all huddling together in one psychotic utopia and overcrowded Panglossian murder mystery. The goal is to understand the epistemological architectures that make Chaucer’s style possible. And his style, generally speaking, is to split his poems in half between a dada-esque community dinner-theater short run of Don Giovanni, with visible wires, cookie sheet thunder, coconut shell cavalry—all the pennywise spiritual ambitions and Pygmalionic death threat of “O, statua gentilis-sima” played on a donated pump organ—and then somehow ‘stick the landing’ on the slippery surface of what Takada called, a “simple and straightforward and even austere . . . ambition to affiliate himself with the great continental tradition of Neoplatonism.”

If we’re willing to entertain the idea that he splits his poems in half (and the measurement isn’t exact) then we’ll probably derive more enjoyment from the fact that he plays both ‘halves’ at once—and almost never at equal speeds or volumes. Donaldson writes, “One is apt to come away from this feast feeling that one has been abundantly fed, but one is not sure on what kind of food.” Sure enough, the Nun’s Priest Tale is an inter-denominational pileup of literary gestures and classical name-dropping. It also happens to be the definitive nursery rhyme of medieval Platonism. Every reasonable person could accuse the Nun’s Priest’s Tale of doing too many things at once. What’s more exciting is that every reasonable person seems to have accused it of doing too many things at once and doing all of them well.

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Nevertheless, through its stream of consciousness and airborne lunacy the poem conceals a beguilingly simple structure. This might sound like disappointing news, in the way the lazy trope of an alarm clock is in the final scene of a good fantasy. But here the alarm clock works in reverse. So it’s only as disappointing as an alarm clock that rings everyone back to sleep. The entire experiment is to make sure that it’s set like a deranged snooze. Every time we want to make the poem answer to waking life it keeps howling things like, “meanwhile, in the land where the fireflies have eradicated polio, monster truck racing is making a huge comeback.” The “beguilingly simple structure” upon which it takes place is the fundamental aporia of the Platonic and Neoplatonic literary traditions: the conflict between Human Art and Human History, whether they are part of the same struggle for meaning or whether they’re just destined to struggle against each other. The tale is decisive in any pursuit of a Chaucerian Poetic, even if the unforgiving and elemental broadness of the aporia makes it easy for every other topic to ‘stick’ to the poem.

The philosophical problem of Art and History in the tale belongs to another problem whose context is as much mythic as linguistic: postlapsarian referentiality, the poetic status of fallen language. It’s a dizzy tangle of metapoetry in which, and bear with me: ‘a poem about poems’ tells ‘a story about the story of language’ in order to speculate upon the recovery of a ‘language before language’. Emmet T. Flood describes Augustine’s theological inroad to an unresolved classical division.

But when a man turns toward God to address Him, he cannot speak to Him directly through the device of physical language, because God is immaterial. At this juncture, the gap between the physical status of language and the transcendent and immaterial nature of the divine is unbridgeable.

…He seems to be caught in a post-creation material world which is radically and irreconcilably disconnected from the sphere of the divine. But he has noted the key to his escape from this dilemma in his mention of the similarities between the writings of the Platonists and the Gospel of St John.  

Therefore, by ‘Art’ we imagine, in the medieval Neoplatonic context, an uncreated order of knowledge negotiated through symbol and metaphor. The metapoetic appeal to infinity ‘in Art’ inherited from classical models. By ‘History’ we understand the external world of mimetic propulsion that introduces the occasion and content of poetry. And by content we understand everything ‘in Art’ that belongs to the represented phenomenology of experience. In Emmett Flood’s Augustinian terms, “a physical