Charles Muscatine and the Style of *Piers Plowman*

Charles Muscatine is best known among students of English literature as a critic who in Derek Pearsall’s words, “wrote the best book on Chaucer that has ever been written.” Among students of French, he is perhaps known as a person whose use of stylistics opened new understandings of the French fabliaux and romances. But his work was also ground-breaking for non-Chaucerian fourteenth-century English literature, especially the writings of the Pearl Poet and the enigmatic masterpiece *Piers Plowman*. Today I would like to look at the methodology he designed for literary analysis, how he applied it to *Piers Plowman* in particular, and what difference that has made.

(Rather than my saying “quote” and “end quote” interminably, the handout gives all the Muscatine quotations in the order in which I use them. You will see that the body of this paper is made up largely of his words.)

In *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, he announced his aim as “giving form and style their due attention as essential, inseparable concomitants of meaning” (1). Later, in the preface to *Medieval Literature*, Muscatine said that his work had had two main foci, one, “literary style and
its relation to meaning‖ and the other “literature as a source for evidence in cultural history” ii; he explained these foci in *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* as an attempt to answer the question: “How can we make literary research and literary understanding contribute to the full, rich, complicated whole that is the history of our culture?” (5) Later he wrote, “Modern literary stylistics [he referred here specifically to the stylistics of Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer] . . . incorporates the New Criticism. . . . stylistic analysis can describe a text, from its syntax and imagery through its narrative form and total structure (not to speak of many other possible stylistic categories) with a new precision and concreteness” (*Poetry* 8). Yet, he said, “the new critical position despite all it has taught us, can no longer be defended as an end in itself. . . . Turning us away from a bad kind of history, it has tended to turn us away from history itself” (*Poetry* 4). It was necessary to go beyond the use of New Criticism and stylistics to “find,” as he said, “plausible bridges between literary style and meanings that have resonance as history” (*Poetry* 10). The question “what is the style saying and what does it mean?” (*Poetry* 11), is to be answered in relation to the historical character of the epoch and/or author being studied: “in what ways are they to be understood as poets of that time and that place? How do their
works fit into a full and complex sense of their time? (Poetry 25) . This does not mean reinforcing platitudes about periods, for, as he wrote, “Stylistics is attuned as well to the variant and dissident as to the conventional note” (Poetry 8). His approach seeks, then, a particular “connection between literary study and cultural history” (Poetry 14). For example, when introducing stylistic analysis of fourteenth-century poetry, he begins with cultural history, summarizing characteristics of the period: “I propose then to offer a brief characterization of the age—which I shall call an age of ‘crisis’—and then to investigate how each poet’s style is related to it” (Poetry 14). He surveys political, religious, chivalric, artistic, and literary aspects of the age, and relationships of three poets and their works to these aspects. Speaking of Piers Plowman, he says, “We shall . . . turn from Langland the reformer to Langland the artist, and ask how they agree—to ask what (if anything) the poem as artifact has to add obliquely or stylistically to what the poem as moral tract directly says” (Poetry 34).

Published reactions to his essays and books give some idea of the influence of Muscatine’s method. Alfred David wrote in a review of Medieval Literature, “The key words ‘style’ and ‘culture’ mark the direction charted by Muscatine’s criticism, which interprets styles as indicators of
culture, seen not as a set of received ideas or constant characteristics but as a matrix of conflict and change.” iii Derek Pearsall wrote, “He devised a method for writing about medieval literary texts—and not just Chaucer, but Langland, Dante, the French Roman de la rose and fabliaux—that is compellingly ‘literary,’ a form of close reading, but that is also vividly conscious of their place in their literary traditions, in the history and social circumstances of their making, and in relation to contemporary developments in the pictorial arts. His work has inspired two generations of readers and critics. Every word he wrote is to be treasured.” iv V. A. Kolve wrote, “In the lectures of Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer . . . Muscatine opened the door to another kind of criticism . . . socially aware, ideologically alert, culturally situated. His is one of the indispensable voices in medieval studies of our time . . . .” v

Influenced by his teacher Helge Kokeritz and by Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, C. S. Lewis, Nevill Coghill, and William K. Wimsatt, among others, Muscatine constantly and generously related his own analysis to the work of his contemporaries as well as those who preceded him. vi We can see this in his analysis of Piers Plowman, for example. In the chapter, “Piers Plowman, the Poetry of Crisis,” he began by summarizing some of
this contemporary criticism, in his text and notes referring to works by George Kane, A. C. Spearing, Morton Bloomfield, John Lawlor, Elizabeth Salter, Derek Pearsall, Robert Frank, S. S. Hussey, Rosemary Woolf, Priscilla Jenkins, Elizabeth Suddaby, R. E. Kaske, B. F. Huppé, E. Talbot Donaldson, T. P. Dunning and others, showing how some of these critics reveal aspects of the style of the work. Yet, as David Benson said at his memorial service, “Charles Muscatine’s critical gift, and it was a great and rare gift, was the ability to see in a poem that which others had missed, but which once he had defined it, would be obvious to all.”

Muscatine characterized the style of Piers Plowman by what he called “its extraordinary inconclusiveness” (Poetry 72), the fact that it is “finally controlled and explained by none of . . . the large formal resources” available to the poet (74), neither Gothic structures (73-4), theology (74-5), nor genre (75-87), that features of the poem are “abrupt . . . [and] enigmatic” (89), and that its “sense of locus or space” is peculiar (87). In “The Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative,” he further described Langland’s use of space, his “shifting locus of action.”

There is, I believe, no fuller or more exact stylistic analysis of Piers Plowman than this one of Charles Muscatine’s. It has been indispensable to
later scholars. He analyzed in detail the poem’s “poetic texture,” what he described as its “enormous range of tone” (Poetry 93), the poet’s “capacity to express the most elevated of religious feelings in the simplest terms” (94), “his gift for the arresting image” (97), “the line or half-line that suddenly turns the mood or thought around, often with a satiric snap” (102), the interruptions of its rhythms (103), with “sharp transitions” (104). He sums up the style of the poem this way:

The obscurity of the larger plan, the seemingly capricious interplay of debate, pilgrimage, and quest, and of mimetics and didacticism; the periodic establishment and collapse of the dream-frame; the shiftiness of space; the paradox of graphic power and pictorial diffuseness; the alternations within a great range of tone and temper; the shiftiness of rhythm—all these produce a curiously homogeneous artistic effect that for lack of a better term I have called surrealistic (106). viii

Muscatine followed this tour de force on the unique style of the work with a move to his second focus:

The art of Piers Plowman is assuredly the creation of a quite remarkable personality, but it is also a response to a cultural situation.
Viewed in this way, the form and style of the poem seem to be saying something more than do its overt arguments (106).

He compared the poem briefly to pictorial art of the period and contrasted it with the work of the *Pearl* poet. His conclusion was that *Piers Plowman*, in his words, “carries the instability of the epoch in its very structure and style as well as in its argument . . . the poem with the poet, having together been submitted to the crisis itself, seem to have become in part its victims” (107, 109).

Thus, he moved from the history of the age to a detailed stylistic analysis of the work, not only for its own sake, but especially in an attempt to see the relationship between style and cultural history. He asked of the three poems he was considering in *Poetry and Crisis*, “how has what we otherwise know of the culture left evidence of its condition in their art, and particularly in their style? And how does their art, reciprocally, modify and enrich our notion of their culture?” (25-6). In this process, he considered multiple aspects of *Piers* or whatever work he was concerned with.

Personally I have found throughout a long life that every time I begin to study what is for me a new aspect of *Piers Plowman*, I find that he has been there before me and that his work has set problems, perspectives, and
definitions essential to the insights I was seeking, for example in the study of style itself and its meaning, and the examination of Langland’s use of locus or space. Although Chaucer was his favorite poet, he kept up on new studies of *Piers Plowman* and considered claims different from his own with an interested, open mind. As Derek Brewer wrote, he was “deeply perceptive, free from doctrinaire parti pris.” When, for example, I suggested that perhaps the style of the poem might be explained not entirely by insecurity in a time of crisis but also by Langland’s attempt to write about the ineffable God, instead of rejecting the idea he responded with characteristic generosity and openness, “I’ll be pondering for a long time your finding that the ‘difficulty and density of the poem is partly a function of its sense of the mystery of God.’” ix

Ralph Hanna recently referred to “the postmodern turn from concerns either aesthetic or philological” x, and A. V. C. Schmidt wrote, “over the 1990’s the growing body of specialized studies has concentrated on the text, context, background, and theological and political ideas rather than the poem’s qualities as a great work of medieval literature . . .” xi Some scholars, however, are continuing to probe poetic style; xii as William Rogers writes, they are “paying closer attention than usual to the features of the poem that
seem most resistant to paraphrase: tone, style, flavor, quality, nuance, attitude. . . .” I think, for example, of the work of A. V. C. Schmidt himself, David Benson, J. A. Burrow, Andrew Galloway, Derek Pearsall, Elizabeth Robertson, William Rogers and my own efforts. Such scholars and those who come after them will find Charles Muscatine to be a Virgil on their journey. As we continue to learn from his work, we can only be boundlessly grateful.

1 Book jacket, Medieval Literature.

ii Medieval Literature


iv Book cover, Medieval Literature.

v Book cover, Medieval Literature.

vi A. V. C. Schmidt lists some of the works of Muscatine’s immediate predecessors: “the pioneering appreciations of Piers Plowman as poetry by Coghill, Lawlor and Salter (all published in 1962) and by Spearing (1963 and 1964) . . .” These may, of course, have been influenced by Muscatine’s Chaucer and the French Tradition which was published in 1957.

vii Romance Philology 17 (1963): 115-122, at 121.

viii The term “surrealistic” has caused debate, and is remembered, for example in a recent essay by Derek Pearsall asserting that the C-text “has fewer of those abrupt transitions and juxtapositions and dark meanderings that led Muscatine to call it ‘surrealistic’ (“The Poetic Character of the C-Text of Piers


x “The Tree of charity—again” in Burrow and Duggan, eds. Medieval Alliterative Poetry: (125-139) at 125.