

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETRY IN THE
MIDDLE AGES:
THE CASE OF THOMAS HOCCLEVE

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THOMAS HOCCLEVE earned his living as a clerk in the office of the Privy Seal, but he also employed his pen in the copying of poetry, his own included. Three autograph copies of his work survive, in fact; and one of these (now Huntington MS HM 744) formerly belonged to Sir Israel Gollancz, the scholar commemorated in this series of lectures. Gollancz edited poems from this manuscript as part of the edition of Hoccleve's works published by the Early English Text Society.¹ I therefore imagine that he would have sympathised with one purpose of the present lecture, which is to contribute to a revaluation of Hoccleve's poetry. The poet's own confession that he was 'dull' and learned 'little or nothing' from his master Chaucer is still commonly accepted as a fair summary of his achievement; but such self-depreciation is itself eminently Chaucerian, and I want to suggest that the disciple's poetry in fact displays, at its best, a lively intelligence and a command of English verse which give the lie to his talk of incompetence and stupidity. At the same time I shall take up some of the problems presented by those autobiographical passages which are so characteristic (and unChaucerian) in Hoccleve. Gollancz's fellow editor, F. J. Furnivall, made much of these passages, freely deriving from them conclusions about the poet's life and character; but modern critics are uneasy with such naïvely literalistic interpretation. They stress

¹ All quotations are from this three-volume edition: *The Minor Poems in the Phillipp's MS. 8151 (Cheltenham)* [now Huntington MS HM 111] and the *Durham MS. III. 9*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, ES 61 (1892); *The Regement of Princes*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, ES 72 (1897); *Minor Poems from the Ashburnham MS. Addit. 133* [now Huntington MS HM 744], ed. Sir I. Gollancz, ES 73 (1925). In 1970 the two volumes of minor poems were reissued in one volume revised by J. Mitchell and A. I. Doyle, from which I cite. Selections are edited by E. P. Hammond, *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey* (Durham, NC, 1927) and by M. C. Seymour, *Selections from Hoccleve* (Oxford, 1981). There is an admirable edition of the *Series* by M. R. Pryor (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1968).

rather, as we shall see, the conventional and non-factual elements in Hoccleve's self-revelations. But in this as in some other areas of medieval literary studies, the reaction against autobiographical readings has begun to overreach itself, so that it now seems necessary to argue that not *all* autobiographical passages in medieval writings are simply 'conventional', and also that there are some cases, Hoccleve's included, where interest in the poetry is actually inseparable from interest in the man.

Gollancz and Furnivall would simply have taken this for granted; but modern scholars and critics have generally reacted to such declarations of biographical interest with increasing disapproval. Three distinct schools of thought, otherwise often at variance, have converged to make this anti-biographical position overpoweringly strong in recent times. Historical criticism has stressed the conventional character of authorial self-reference in medieval times (the use of traditional topics, the influence of St. Augustine, and so on); the New Criticism has discouraged biographical interest as a distraction from the words on the page; and formalist or structuralist criticism treats first-person discourse as part of the fictive world of 'le texte'. All these developments, in their different ways, have helped to make the frank man-to-man response of Furnivall to his author seem very old-fashioned indeed. Writing, as he tells us, in the British Museum on Monday, 29 February 1892, at 7.30 p.m. 'under the electric light', the Victorian editor characterised Hoccleve as a 'weak, sensitive, look-on-the-worst kind of man': 'But he has the merit of recognizing his weakness, his folly, and his cowardice. He makes up for these by his sentimental love of the Virgin Mary, his genuine admiration for Chaucer, his denunciation of the extravagant fashions in dress, the neglect of old soldiers, &c. We wish he had been a better poet and a manlier fellow; but all of those who've made fools of themselves, more or less, in their youth, will feel for the poor old versifier'.¹

The directness of Furnivall's response to his 'poor old versifier' is delightful, but it is no longer possible today after studies such as those by Curtius on the topos of affected modesty, Spitzer and Zumthor on the 'non-empirical I', Donaldson on the Chaucerian narrator, and Kane on the autobiographical fallacy.²

¹ *Minor Poems*, p. xxxviii.

² E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London, 1953), pp. 83-5; L. Spitzer, 'Note on the Poetic and the Empirical "I" in Medieval Authors', *Traditio* iv (1946), 414-22; P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, 1972), and 'Autobiography in the Middle Ages?'

If autobiographical interpretation is to become respectable again, and if the term 'autobiographical' itself is ever to escape from that guard of inverted commas which regularly now accompanies it, the whole matter needs to be thought out afresh, so that there may be some new understanding of the proper criteria for valid and useful work in this area. Full recognition of the part played by literary tradition and free-ranging invention in first-person utterances need not deprive criticism, as it tends to do at present, of the capacity to recognize equally fully those cases where such utterances are *not* fictional or conventional.

Literary critics commonly apply the epithet 'autobiographical' quite generally to all passages where an author says things about himself which are judged to be true, at least in part. This terminology involves some awkwardness, to which I shall return later; but first let me offer a few observations on the judgement of truth. It will be clearly understood, to begin with, that in some first-person discourse the question of autobiographical truth simply does not arise, because the writer is not referring to himself at all. Thus no competent reader, knowing the relevant facts, could fail to see that the following little poem, despite its direct first-person form, is to be understood dramatically as spoken *in persona alterius*:

I have labored sore and suffered deth,
And now I rest and draw my breth;
But I shall come and call right sone
Heven and erth and hell to dome;
And then shall know both devil and man
What I was and what I am.¹

The same prior question, that of reference, can be settled equally decisively in the opposite direction—in favour, that is, of formally *non-dramatic* utterance—where the first-person speaker bears the author's own proper name. This happens once in Chaucer's poetry, when the eagle calls the dreamer in the *House of Fame* 'Geoffrey', and much more frequently in Hoccleve, where the first person is many times identified as either 'Thomas' or

Genre 6 (1973), 29–48; E. T. Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), pp. 1–12; G. Kane, 'The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies' (Chambers Memorial Lecture, London, 1965).

¹ From *English Verse 1300–1500*, ed. J. A. Burrow (London, 1977), p. 309. This anthology also contains an edition of Hoccleve's *Complaint*, ll. 1–308.

'Hoccleve'.¹ Such naming is important because it establishes clearly that the first-person pronoun does at least refer to the author, not to some other person, real or imaginary. Hence it will always be in order to raise the question of autobiographical truth in such cases. But the substantial question of truth is nearly always more difficult than the formal question of reference, because there are so many things besides the truth that one can speak about oneself (not all of which one would want to call lies).

The question can be easily and decisively settled only in those cases where an author's statement about himself can be checked in a reliable independent source. Such cases do not occur very often in medieval literature, but Hoccleve's poetry provides some instances. Like his master Chaucer, Hoccleve was a civil servant, and his career can therefore be documented, like Chaucer's, from the official archives. In Chaucer's poetry there is nothing for such documents to confirm except a passing and dismissive reference, again in the *House of Fame* (653), to his 'rekenynges' in the Customs House; but Hoccleve's writings refer quite freely to his life at the Privy Seal. He mentions, for instance, the name of the Privy Seal hostel at which he lodged (Chester's Inn, on the south side of the modern Aldwych), the amount of his annuity (£10 in 1406), and the names of fellow clerks (Baillay, Hethe, Offorde).² The researches in the Public Record Office of Furnivall's collaborator, R. E. G. Kirk, and of the administrative historians T. F. Tout and A. L. Brown have provided documentary confirmation of these details. Tout and Brown, both good, hard-headed historians, find nothing, it should be noted, in Hoccleve's poetry to deter them from using it as a trustworthy source of information on the workings of the Privy Seal.³

¹ 'Thomas': throughout the *Series*, especially in the *Dialogue* (10, 20, 25, 199, 203, etc.). 'Hoccleve': *Dialogue* 3, *Roundel II* (*Minor Poems*, p. 310) 1 etc., *Male Regle* 351, *Regement of Princes* 1864-5, 4360, *Balade to Maister Somer* (*Minor Poems*, p. 59) 25. Philippe Lejeune stresses the importance of identity of proper name between author and narrator in establishing the autobiographical character of a work: *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975). This valuable book provides an up-to-date bibliography of modern studies.

² Chester's Inn, *Regement of Princes* 5; annuity, *Male Regle* 421; Baillay etc., *Balade to Maister Somer* 25-6.

³ R. E. G. Kirk, Appendix of Hoccleve Documents, *Minor Poems*, pp. li-lxx; T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England*, vol. v (Manchester, 1930), ch. xvi; A. L. Brown, 'The Privy Seal in the Early Fifteenth Century' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1954), and 'The Privy Seal Clerks of the Early Fifteenth Century', *The Study of Medieval Records*, ed. D. A. Bullough and R. L. Storey (Oxford, 1971), pp. 260-81. Brown writes in his essay (p. 271): 'What he [Hoccleve] wrote was apparently in essence true. His service in the

The fact that in these matters, where it is possible to check, Hoccleve's poetry nowhere departs from the actual circumstances of his life must be borne in mind when approaching those other more contentious matters where documentary checks are not available. In his lecture entitled 'The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies', Professor George Kane has rightly insisted on the dangers and difficulties of making 'inferences from texts about . . . undocumented matters respecting the life and personality of an author'.¹ One may therefore be tempted to set the whole insoluble problem aside; but in practice this proves difficult to do. Many modern critics who profess complete agnosticism in the matter go on to talk like unblushing atheists. They slip easily, for instance, from declaring that we cannot tell whether Chaucer's poetry does or does not represent his ordinary personality into taking it for granted that it does not. This is because the reaction against the speculative excesses of older criticism has left a distinct, though unacknowledged, bias against any recognition of autobiographical reference at all in medieval literature. This bias appears in a number of ways, and most notably in the handling of the tricky and vital question of conventionality.

I want in particular to question the belief, to be traced in much recent polemic, that convention and autobiographical truth are in general to be taken as incompatible alternatives. Here again one needs to distinguish, as I did earlier, between the question of reference and the question of truth. The former tends to be a straight either/or problem: either the first-person pronoun refers to the writer or it does not. So here recognition of conventionality can indeed exclude autobiographical interpretation altogether, simply by establishing that the 'I' of the poem is not the author at all. In the *pastourelle*, for instance, one of the rules of the genre makes writers speak of themselves, in the first person, as walking out one May morning. For a competent reader the question of truth will not arise in this case. Here the conventional and the autobiographical can indeed be treated as mutually exclusive. But in those other cases where the writer does refer to himself and where the question of truth consequently arises, matters are more complex. Questions of truth rarely allow of a single either/or answer; and where they are concerned, the customary modern Privy Seal, his annuity, his hostel, even to some extent his breakdown, can be substantiated from the records.' (I am grateful to my colleague John Guy for help with Privy Seal matters.)

¹ Kane, p. 5.

opposition between the conventional and the autobiographical, insofar as it claims to distinguish fact from fiction, often simplifies and distorts the issues. Let me give an example, taken from the excellent lecture by Kane already referred to. Kane remarks that Chaucer 'repeatedly professes inexperience, or lack of aptitude, or lack of success as a lover'; and he goes on to ask the following question: 'Do we accept this as autobiography, or call it a conventional pose, or take the position that we cannot possibly know?'¹ This is indeed a difficult case, but I am concerned here only with Kane's statement of the alternatives: 'autobiography' or 'conventional pose'. The main objection to this formulation is simply that people strike 'poses' (conventional or otherwise) in life as well as in literature. Furthermore, we do not always find it easy to distinguish such attitudes, especially where they come to be assumed as a matter of habit, from the truth or reality of a person's life and opinions. How could such a distinction be made, for instance, in the well-documented case of William Butler Yeats? In such a case, the 'poses' will be of no less interest to the biographer than to the critic.

Kane warns of an 'autobiographical fallacy', and he is right to do so. But there is also an opposite error, which must be called the 'conventional fallacy'. Victims of the latter combine a learned and sophisticated awareness of literary convention with an apparently naïve and reductive notion of what real life is like—naïve and reductive, because they talk as if non-literary experience were not itself shaped by conventions. Of course, everyone knows that it *is*; but the knowledge seems to desert medievalists when they argue that the conventional character of a text *proves* that it has no autobiographical content. In reply to this objection, it might be argued that, insofar as life and literature do indeed share the same conventional character, the distinction between them ceases to be of any interest to criticism and can be ignored. From this point of view it would be a matter of indifference whether Chaucer did or did not in real life adopt that 'pose' of the unsuccessful lover which he strikes in his poems. Even if he could be shown to have done so, it might be said, the passages in question would still not count as significantly autobiographical—not, that is, unless one could prove that Chaucer actually *was* an unsuccessful lover. But when modern critics deny the autobiographical character of a medieval poem, they are not concerned only with the hard facts which might be deduced from it. Their stress on the conventional

¹ Kane, p. 5.

character of authorial self-reference usually leads them to state, or suggest, that such reference has no bearing whatsoever on the life and experience of the author. We are offered instead, in and out of season, the purely literary, dramatic, or fictive utterances of the authorial persona, the 'I of the poem', the narrator, and so on.

Instances of the 'conventional fallacy' are not hard to find in modern discussions of Hoccleve. Let me give three examples. These concern Hoccleve's three most interesting and memorable poems: *La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve*, written in 1405 or 1406 when the poet was in his later thirties; *The Regement of Princes*, written for Prince Hal in the last years of Henry IV (1411-12); and the so-called *Series*, Hoccleve's last datable work, put together a few years before his death in 1426.¹

La Male Regle is a highly characteristic, indeed an inimitable, literary creation. In it Hoccleve laments the present sad state both of his health and of his finances. He is suffering, he says, from a double sickness in purse and in body (337-8, 409), caused by the excesses of his riotous and unbridled youth. This is the *male regle* or misrule of the title, which Hoccleve describes with a good deal of lively detail concerning his irregular life as a young man in London and Westminster taverns and eating-houses. Furnivall treated these descriptions as direct transcripts of reality, unmediated by any literary convention; but in 1967 Eva Thornley pointed out the influence of the Middle English penitential lyrics

¹ The date of Hoccleve's death was established by A. L. Brown: see *The Study of Medieval Records*, p. 270. On the date of the *Male Regle*, see J. H. Kern, 'Een en ander over Thomas Hoccleve en zijne werken', *Verlagen en Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen*, 5th series, i (1915), 344-47 (I am grateful to Hanneke Wirtjes for excerpting this article from the Dutch). Kern's dating, late 1405 or early 1406, is followed by Seymour, *Selections*, pp. 109-10. On the date of the *Regement*, see Kern, art. cit., 351-58. On the date of the *Series*, see Kern, art. cit., 362-71, and 'Die Datierung von Hoccleve's Dialog', *Anglia* xl (1916), 370-3. Kern dates the *Dialogue* (the second part of the *Series*, and the only part that can be dated) in 1422; but he fails to notice that the wording of the reference to a coinage statute of the Parliament of May 1421 (*Dialogue* 134-40) clearly shows that it is a later insertion in a passage written before the statute was passed. The *Dialogue* was therefore presumably first composed during Humphrey of Gloucester's first, not his second, spell as 'lieutenant' (*Dialogue* 533): between 30 December 1419 and 1 February 1421. The allusion in *Dialogue* 542-3 to Humphrey's *secundo reditu* from France must refer to his return late in 1419 from his second campaign in France, not to his return in 1422 from his third, as Seymour supposes (*Selections*, p. 136). Since Hoccleve says that he was 53 years old at the time of writing the *Dialogue* (l. 246), he was most likely born in 1366 or 1367.

on Hoccleve's poem.¹ Hoccleve's account of his wild youth, she observed, owes something to the traditional scheme of the seven deadly sins, commonly employed in the penitential lyrics. Thornley herself did not draw any anti-autobiographical conclusions from her evidence, but later scholars have not hesitated to do so. Thus Penelope Doob, in an important discussion of Hoccleve to which I shall have occasion to return, notes approvingly that Thornley 'finds the poem more conventional than autobiographical'. Elsewhere she writes as follows: 'Hoccleve's *Male Regle* is, as Thornley demonstrates, an exceptionally good example of the conventional informal penitential lyric; and its colourfulness and realism may relate it more closely to such works of fiction as the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* or the lively confessions of the seven deadly sins and of Haukyn in *Piers Plowman* . . . than to a true confession from the heart.'² The weakness of this argument lies in its tacit identification of conventionality with fictionality. This is particularly shaky where a scheme such as that of the seven deadly sins is concerned. That conventional scheme did indeed figure in literary fictions such as *Piers Plowman*; but it also provided the moral grid-system most commonly used by men of the period whenever they attempted to map their inner lives. That was how people thought about themselves. Hence if Hoccleve had wanted, for whatever reason, to describe his own experiences as a wild young man, he would most naturally have sorted them out into sin-categories. Even if this sorting were more systematic than it in fact is in the *Male Regle*, there would still be no reason to conclude that the poet's confession must be a 'work of fiction'. We would still be left free to make what we could of its 'colourfulness and realism':

Wher was a gretter maister eek than y,
Or bet aqweyntid at Westmynstre yate,
Among the tauernerres namely,
And Cookes / whan I cam / eerly or late?
I pynchid nat at hem in myn acate,
But paied hem / as þat they axe wolde;
Wherfore I was the welcomere algate,
And for 'a verray gentil man' y-holde. (177-84)

¹ E. A. Thornley, 'The Middle English Penitential Lyric and Hoccleve's Autobiographical Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 68 (1967), 295-321. Thornley refers especially to the lyric beginning 'In my youth full wild I was', No. 6 in F. A. Patterson, *The Middle English Penitential Lyric* (New York, 1911).

² P. B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1974), pp. 213, 226.

One must agree with Doob that such a passage does not read like a 'true confession from the heart'. The self-depreciation has a humorous, slightly weary note. We all know, it implies, what motives might prompt a cook or an innkeeper to welcome such a big spender, flattering him with titles such as 'master' and 'a real gentleman'. But the 'true confession from the heart' is only one form—and that the most vulgarly romantic—which autobiographical writing can take. When Hoccleve chooses to write about himself, as I believe he does in the *Male Regle* and elsewhere, he does so for reasons quite different from those suggested by Dr Doob's teasingly inappropriate phrase.

I shall return to this point later. For the present let us turn to a second instance of the conventional fallacy. In his most widely read work, *The Regement of Princes*, Hoccleve refers on four occasions to Geoffrey Chaucer, who had died some twelve years earlier. Hoccleve himself is sometimes referred to as an English Chaucerian, and there can be no doubt that he learned much from his predecessor's work. He imitated it quite closely on occasion, as when, at the request of a London stationer, he wrote a *Miracle of the Virgin*, in rhyme royal and with a Marian prologue, which derives so directly from Chaucer's *Prioress's Prologue and Tale* that it found a place in one copy of the *Canterbury Tales*.¹ Although direct echoes of Chaucer occur less frequently than one might expect in Hoccleve's verse, his metrical art and especially his mastery of the syntax of the rhyme royal stanza would have been almost impossible without Chaucer's example. Such dependence upon Chaucer is, of course, common in fifteenth-century poetry; but two of the passages in *The Regement of Princes* have been generally accepted, until quite recently, as evidence that Hoccleve actually knew Chaucer and was personally instructed by him in the art of English poetry. In the long and interesting encounter with the poor almsman which forms the prologue to the *Regement*, the old man responds to Hoccleve's disclosure of his name with these words:

'Sone, I haue herd, or this, men speke of þe;
þou were aqueynted with Caucher, pardee' (1866-7)

¹ *Minor Poems*, pp. 289-93. For the identity of Thomas Marleburgh, Hoccleve's patron, see *Minor Poems*, p. 272. The poem appears as the 'Ploughman's Tale' in the copy of the *Canterbury Tales* in Christ Church, Oxford. On the relation of Hoccleve's poetry to Chaucer's, see generally the remarks of M. R. Pryor in her edition of the *Series* (p. 389 n. 1 above), pp. 30-54.

Later, in dedicating his poem to the future Henry V, the poet apologizes for his lack of learning and skill:

Mi dere maistir—god his soule quyte!—
 And fadir, Chaucer, fayn wolde han me taght;
 But I was dul, and lerned lite or naght. (2077–9)

The meaning of this passage seems plain enough; but Jerome Mitchell, in a discussion entitled 'Hoccleve's Supposed Friendship with Chaucer', has suggested that 'this so-called autobiographical allusion is nothing more than a conventional expression of self-deprecation'.¹ Here again, the proposed alternative between autobiography and convention proves misleading. Certainly there does exist a convention of self-depreciation in polite letters, as in polite society; and no doubt Hoccleve's modest protestations, like those of Chaucer himself, owe something to the literary topic of affected modesty, studied by Curtius. Also, when Hoccleve goes on to his threnody for Chaucer, lamenting the loss of one who was a Cicero in rhetoric, an Aristotle in philosophy, and a Virgil in poetry, he is following a literary tradition already established in the vernaculars: the lament for a dead master.² Such considerations should certainly make one hesitate to derive from Hoccleve's words either a just estimate of his own merits or a discriminating account of his master's; but they do nothing to explain why he claimed Chaucer as an acquaintance. When John Lydgate in his *Troy Book* describes how Chaucer treated the verses of other poets, he does so from hearsay ('I have herde telle'); but Hoccleve claims direct personal knowledge.³ Mitchell remarks that there is no indication of any friendship in the life-records of either man; but one has only to recall the character of those documents to see the absurdity of this argument. The Public Record Office is not rich in records of literary friendships.

The question of Hoccleve's friendship with Chaucer is not in itself very important; but Mitchell's discussion of the matter may be taken as representative of a general approach which can be seriously disabling. Many readers today are only too ready to accept the historical critic's pronouncement that such and such an 'autobiographical' passage is no more than conventional or

¹ J. Mitchell, *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century Poetic* (Urbana, Ill., 1968), p. 117.

² *Regement* 2080–107, cf. 1958–74. The French poet Deschamps wrote in similar terms about his master Machaut: ballades nos. 123 and 124 in Deschamps, *Œuvres*, ed. le marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire and G. Raynaud (Paris, 1878–1903).

³ *Troy Book*, ed. H. Bergen, EETS, ES 97, 103, 106, 126 (1906–20), v 3519–26.

fictional. Whether they belong to the older school of the New Criticism or to the newer schools of formalism, these readers will be glad enough to be relieved of biographical considerations which both schools regard as in any case *hors de discours*. But even in medieval literature there are occasions when exclusive concentration on 'le texte' or 'the words on the page' leads to an impoverished and dehumanized reading of works whose true force and character can only be appreciated if their particular extra-textual reference is duly recognized and acknowledged. Hoccleve's *Complaint* and his *Dialogue with a Friend* are cases in point.

The *Complaint* and *Dialogue* are the first two items in Hoccleve's last and most original major work: what Hammond, for want of a better title, called the 'Series'. This consists of a sequence of linked writings, dedicated to Humphrey duke of Gloucester in the last years of Henry V. In the opening *Complaint*, Hoccleve represents himself at the age of 53 musing on the uncertainty of worldly fortunes. In particular, he recalls a 'wild infirmity' which changed his own fortunes some years before, causing him to lose his wits. He recovered from this breakdown—five years ago, he says, on All Hallows' Day—but ever since his friends and acquaintances have persisted in doubting his mental stability; and it is of this that he chiefly complains. People cannot believe that he is really better. They watch for signs of his former brain-sickness in his present ways of walking and standing and looking:

Chaungid had I my pas / some seiden eke,
For here and there / forthe stirte I as a Roo,
None abode / none arrest, but all brain-seke.
Another spake / and of me seide also,
My feete weren aye / wavynge to and fro
Whane that I stonde shulde / and withe men talke,
And that myne eyne / sowghten every halke. (127–33)

In her study of 'conventions of madness in Middle English literature' entitled *Nebuchadnezzar's Children*, Penelope Doob cites a medieval parallel to show that these are among the 'standard symptoms of the madman'.¹ She also stresses the conventional character of Hoccleve's view of the aetiology of madness: like most medieval men, he sees it as a visitation of God. These are valuable observations; but they do not, as Doob appears to believe, show that Hoccleve's account is to be understood as a conventional fiction. It is precisely those 'standard symptoms of the madman' that nervous friends would look for; and there is no reason to think

¹ Doob, p. 221.

that Hoccleve himself, musing on his traumatic experience, would have attempted to understand it otherwise than in the religious terms of his age, just as we today would use psychoanalytic terms.¹ Doob herself is aware of this complication, and at one point opines that 'it does not matter very much' whether one takes the account as autobiographical or not; but she reveals herself as an atheist rather than an agnostic in this matter when, for instance, she observes that the 'fairly extensive records' of Hoccleve's life contain no reference to his madness.² I have already objected to this kind of argument *a silentio*.

Doob offers her own interpretation of the *Complaint* and *Dialogue*, as an alternative to autobiographical readings. Hoccleve's subject, she writes, is 'the sinful madness of mankind'.³ But is it? The poet does indeed speak of his madness as a visitation from God, and in one place he interprets it as divine punishment for his 'sinful governance' in times of prosperity (*Complaint* 393-406); but there is nothing in the text, so far as I can see, to justify Doob's conclusion that the wild infirmity is simply a 'traditional metaphor for the crippling state of sin which is the subject of the poem'.⁴ On the contrary, Hoccleve clearly treats it as an actual illness, from which he recovered at a specified time, five years ago on All Hallows' Day. But if this is indeed the true subject of Hoccleve's poem, what were his reasons for writing it? Medievalists will appreciate that this is a more difficult question than it seems. It is only too easy to see why a medieval poet might write about 'the sinful madness of mankind'; but why should he choose to write about his own mental breakdown and its aftermath? Here as elsewhere the autobiographical interpretation will be in danger of seeming merely anachronistic unless it can be supported by some historically plausible account of the poet's reasons for writing about himself. Indeed, this question of the purpose or function of autobiographical writing is, as I shall try to suggest, crucial for a proper understanding of poems such as the *Complaint* or the *Male Regle*.

This is a question which the term 'autobiographical' itself most

¹ In his illuminating discussion of Hoccleve, S. Medcalf cites a modern psychoanalyst's judgement on the case: *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Medcalf (London, 1981), pp. 129-30.

² Op. cit., p. 226. Note, however, Brown's opinion: 'In his "Complaint" . . . written about 1420-1, perhaps during Lent 1421, Hoccleve states that he regained his sanity on 1 Nov., five years previously. This may be one reason why he did not come to the Exchequer personally between May 1414 and Mar. 1417 to collect payments due to him,' *The Study of Medieval Records*, p. 271.

³ Op. cit., p. 230.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 228.

unfortunately begs. As was remarked earlier, critics commonly treat this epithet as if it were appropriate to any occasion when an author says things about himself which the reader has reason to believe are true; but in fact the word carries further implications, unwanted in most medieval contexts and generally unacknowledged there. These concern the presumed purpose of the self-referring utterance. In modern usage the term 'autobiography' denotes a genre of non-fictional narrative—a species of biography and (theoretically at least) a sub-species of history. There are, of course, many possible reasons for writing such a book; but those most commonly avowed—the official reasons, as it were—are rather grand and disinterested: to record the events of one's life for posterity, to explain how one came to be how one is, and the like.¹ Autobiographical discourse, in fact, has come to be distinguished as a literary and formal kind of talk about oneself; and as such it is not directly or primarily concerned with the ordinary practical businesses of such talk—excusing, confessing, complaining, and all those other everyday speech-acts which involve reference to one's own actions or experiences.

Did any medieval author write such an autobiography? Some scholars, notably Georg Misch, have found it possible to devote many hundreds of pages to medieval examples of the genre; but others, notably Philippe Lejeune, have argued that these so-called medieval 'autobiographies' are better called something else.² I think that Lejeune's judgement is correct, although the reasons which he gives are suspect. Following Zumthor, he speaks of 'absence de la notion d'auteur' and of 'absence d'emploi littéraire autoréférentiel de la première personne'; but the Middle Ages, at least from the thirteenth century onwards, had a very clear 'notion d'auteur', and their writers were perfectly capable on occasion of using the first-person pronoun 'autoreferentially'. The true difference is to be looked for rather in the realm of authorial purpose. Unlike the modern autobiography, the corresponding medieval texts will present themselves as written versions, albeit elaborated and formalized, of an everyday self-referring speech-act. They are addressed to particular recipients, and they serve

¹ Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as follows: 'Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité', *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 14.

² *Pacte autobiographique*, p. 315, citing Georg Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, 8 vols (Frankfurt, 1949–69) and Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, pp. 68–9, 172–4.

explicitly stated practical ends. The greatest of them, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, addresses itself to God with a persistence which many modern readers find disappointing; and the saint's account of his life is shaped throughout by the confessional purpose of this address. Another text frequently cited in this connection, the *Monodiae* of Gilbert of Nogent (1115), also addresses itself as a confession to God. Peter Abelard's so-called *Historia Calamitatum* takes the form of a letter to a friend offering consolation and encouragement 'based upon the experience of my misfortunes'. These works contain many facts about their authors' lives; but even they—medieval autobiographies, if ever there was such a thing—cannot be so described on any functional definition of the genre. Functionally considered, the *Confessions* and the *Monodiae* are confessions, and the *Historia Calamitatum* is a consolation.¹

The same questions of address and function arise in the consideration of Hoccleve's autobiographical passages. To whom is he speaking? And for what purpose? Most of his works are occasional pieces, and of himself he certainly never speaks without occasion. These occasions often fall outside the province of literature as we now understand it; but they hold the key to the understanding of Hoccleve's own particular brand of autobiographical writing.

Hoccleve entirely lacked his master Chaucer's ability to speak in voices other than his own. In his *Dialogue*, the exchanges between himself and his friend display a real skill in rendering general conversational effects; but the friend never establishes himself with a distinct individual idiom, as Chaucer's Pandarus does in his talks with Troilus. The same must be said of Cupid, the speaker in *The Letter of Cupid*, of the Virgin Mary in *The Complaynte of the Virgin before the Cross*, and of the eminently forgettable characters in Hoccleve's two most ambitious verse narratives, the *Gesta Romanorum* stories in the *Series*. Even the old almsman in the prologue to the *Regement of Princes*, Hoccleve's equivalent to Wordsworth's leech-gatherer and perhaps his least insubstantial dramatic creation, is no more than a pale shadow by comparison with the old man in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. This poet's skills lay elsewhere, in the articulation of his own voice. Hoccleve speaks best when he speaks *in propria persona*, either in soliloquy, as in the *Complaint*, or when he speaks to another person, as he most often

¹ For a discussion of autobiography laying emphasis on functional considerations and employing the Austin/Searle concept of speech-acts, see E. W. Bruss, 'L'autobiographie considérée comme acte littéraire', *Poétique* xvii (1974), 14–26.

does. His is above all a poetry of address; and the list of persons to whom he addresses himself at one time or another is long and varied. It includes: the members of the Trinity, Health (personified), Lady Money (personified), the Virgin Mary, King Henry V and his two brothers Humphrey of Gloucester and Edward of York, John duke of Bedford, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Henry Somer, Treasurer Fourneval, the Town Clerk of London John Carpenter, and the Lollard knight John Oldcastle. Such varying occasions and purposes call for varying roles (by which I do *not* mean fictional roles); and as Hoccleve presents his self differently, to the King or to the heretic, so the character of his autobiographical writing changes accordingly. I distinguish here three main roles: the good citizen, the friend or colleague, and (most important) the dependant or petitioner.

From the present point of view (and from most others) Hoccleve the good citizen is the least interesting of the three. This is the Hoccleve who, like John Gower in the previous generation, took upon himself the role of upholding standards by giving moral counsel to the great and deploring the abuses of modern times. Examples of this kind of writing are: the poem to Oldcastle attacking the Lollard heresy, the passage on the evils of flattery in the *Male Regle* (209–88), the passage in the *Dialogue* (99–196) deploring the clipping, washing, and adulterating of coins, the story of Jonathas and Fellicula told in the *Series* as a warning to young men against the wiles of women, and above all the *Regement of Princes*. Apart from its lengthy prologue, the *Regement* devotes itself entirely to instructing Prince Hal in the proper virtues of a ruler. Such treatises ‘de regimine principum’ were very popular in the fifteenth century, and the *Regement* was by far and away the most successful of Hoccleve’s works. It survives in more than forty manuscripts.¹ Although here as elsewhere he can command a sinewy, plain, and expressive English, it must be confessed that Hoccleve is not at his best in the role of the good citizen, loyal to country and crown, orthodox in religion, and honest in all his personal dealings. However, even Hoccleve the good citizen has his complexities, for in the *Series* especially, in the *Male Regle*, and

¹ The editors of the proposed new critical edition of the *Regement* count 43 MSS. The Robbins–Cutler *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* counts 45 (including two MSS with short extracts), putting the poem ninth in their list of Middle English works preserved in the most MSS. On the popularity of such works in the fifteenth century, see R. F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980), ch. 5.

to a much lesser degree in the *Regement*, Hoccleve's various confessions of personal inadequacy cast fitful shadows across the adjacent passages of moral and prudential counsel. For how, after all, could a writer whose own standing was so avowedly insecure, financially, morally, and medically, take it upon himself to speak on behalf of his society, as a solid citizen, to the coiners and heretics at its margins and to the kings and lords at its centre? Readers who credit Hoccleve with no awareness of this contradiction commonly react to his orthodoxies with something of that mixture of embarrassment and derision which society reserves for those of its members who try too hard to be one of the boys; but the poet who described how he practised sane faces in front of the mirror in his room was self-aware as well as self-conscious; and that self-awareness certainly embraced some knowledge of his own weakness in seeking to be accepted as a 'verray gentil man'. I have argued elsewhere that this awareness is particularly strong in the *Series*.¹ This sequence of poems enacts, I believe, the progress of that rehabilitation in society which Hoccleve, after his wild infirmity and its unhappy aftermath, so longs for. It begins in solitude and alienation, with the *Complaint*; progresses with the ministrations of the friend; and ends with the poet comfortably ensconced in the orthodox role of *père de famille*, responding to the friend's anxious request for help with his own wild and uncontrollable son. Here at least a touch of moralizing complacency may be forgiven in a good citizen who has himself so recently suffered the miseries of alienation.

Hoccleve's 'rehabilitation' in the *Series* comes about largely through the agency of that unnamed friend who visits him, comforts and advises him, lends him books, and finally sets the seal on his recovery by asking for his help. The familiar exchanges between the two men are well rendered. Indeed, in the role of friend and companion Hoccleve generally commands a voice of notable ease and conviction, anticipating later English literary voices even more, perhaps, than Chaucer does in the *Envoy to Scogan*. He is a poet of *urban* companionship, evoking already something of that distinctive, almost cosy, sense of familiarity which unites those living in the busy 'press' of a great town who actually happen to know each other, either socially or at the office. Hoccleve's London was not big by modern standards; but, as he portrays it in such poems as the *Male Regle* or the *Series*, it is already

¹ 'Hoccleve's *Series*: Experience and Books', forthcoming in a volume of essays on fifteenth-century literature edited by R. F. Yeager. Hoccleve describes his antics in front of the mirror in *Complaint* 155-68.

recognisably the tense, gossipy London of the satires of Donne and Pope.¹ Indeed, as Stephen Medcalf has well observed, Hoccleve can even put one in mind of a later metropolitan writer, Charles Lamb—another ‘impecunious but clubbable London clerk of literary leanings’.² There were already clubs in Hoccleve’s London. The poet belonged to one, called the ‘Court de bone compaignie’, which met periodically for convivial dinners at the Temple. On behalf of this club he wrote a double ballade to one of its distinguished members, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Henry Somer.

But the most important club in Hoccleve’s London life was the office of the Privy Seal, in which he served as clerk for nearly forty years. The clerks of the Privy Seal were more than simply colleagues at the office.³ They lived communally at the *hospicium privati sigilli*, or Privy Seal hostel; and in the *Male Regle* Hoccleve uses an expressive phrase when he speaks of going ‘hoom to the priuee seel’ (l. 188). All the poet’s ‘fellawes of the priue seale’, as he calls them (*Complaint* 296), shared his chronic difficulty in getting paid, and sometimes in his petitionary poems he pleads for them as well as for himself:

We, your seruantes, Hoccleue & Baillay,
 Hethe & Offorde, yow beseeche & preye,
 ‘Haastith our heruest / as soone as yee may!’⁴

He also complains feelingly of their other troubles. In a well-known passage in the *Regement of Princes*, he compares their demanding work at the writing-desk with the simpler and more companionable tasks of common craftsmen:

This artificers se I day be day,
 In þe hotteste of al hir bysynesse
 Talken and syng, and make game and play,
 And forth hir labour passith with gladnesse;
 But we labour in trauaillous stilnesse;
 We stowpe and stare vpon þe shepes skyn,
 And keepe muste our song and wordes in. (1009–15)

This stanza shows how especially well Hoccleve can write when he

¹ See for example *Complaint* 70–98 and 183 ff., describing the poet’s nervous reactions to the ‘press’ in Westminster Hall and on the London pavements. Unlike Donne and Pope, Hoccleve does not appear to have known the satires of Horace or Juvenal.

² *The Later Middle Ages*, p. 127.

³ On the life of the Privy Seal clerks, see the studies by Tout and Brown cited at p. 392 n. 3 above, especially ch. 7 of Brown’s thesis.

⁴ *Balade to Maister Somer* (*Minor Poems*, p. 59) 25–7; also *Balade to Henry V* (*Minor Poems*, p. 62).

is dealing with the particulars of his own experience. The contrast between the talking, singing, and joking in a craftsman's shop and the 'trauailous stilnesse' of the Privy Seal office is drawn with great precision and economy of language. Notice, for instance, how in the line, 'We stowpe and stare vpon þe shepes skyn', the word *stare*, neat enough already in its alliterative coupling with *stowpe*, gathers extra force from the ensuing 'shepes skyn'—a phrase which defamiliarizes the parchment and so converts the writer's fixed gaze into a real weary, hypnotized 'stare'. A tanner would at least have whistled.

A little later in the *Regement*, Hoccleve has another less well-known passage where he speaks with similar force and precision on behalf of the 'fellows of the Privy Seal', describing one of the tricks by which they were deprived of the legitimate rewards of their labours. A stranger comes to Westminster to get some necessary document issued from the office of the Privy Seal. He encounters one of those unscrupulous hangers-on so familiar from later satirical writings—in this case, a 'lord's man' who promises to use his influence to get the document without delay. Pocketing the stranger's fee, he persuades the Privy Seal clerks to expedite the business by promising them that his own influential master, who has (he claims) the interests of the stranger at heart, will do them a favour in return at some later date. But the lord, of course, does not know the petitioner from Adam, and the hanger-on will later claim to have given the clerks their fee. The clerks know what is going on; but what can they do? 'His tale schal be leeued, but nat ourys.' Let me quote the first part of this striking passage, which takes the law-abiding modern reader deep into an unfamiliar world of chicanery and influence:

But if a wyght haue any cause to sue
 To vs, som lordes man schal vndertake
 To sue it out; & þat þat is vs due
 For oure labour, hym deyneþ vs nat take;
 He seiþ, his lord to þanke vs wole he make;
 It touchiþ hym, it is a man of his;
 Where þe reuers of þat, god wot, sooþ is.

His letter he takiþ, and forþ goþ his way,
 And byddeþ vs to dowten vs no thyng,
 His lord schal þanken vs an oþer day;
 And if we han to sue to þe kyng,
 His lord may þere haue al his askyng;
 We schal be sped, as fer as þat oure bille
 Wole specifie þe effecte of oure wylle.

What schol we do? we dar non argument
 Make ageyn him, but fayre & wel him trete,
 Leste he roporte amys, & make vs schent . . .
 (*Regement* 1499–515)

And so on. These stanzas end less well than they begin; but the specious assurances of the lord's man are very well caught in lines such as 'It touchiþ hym, it is a man of his' and 'His lord schal þanken vs an oþer day'; and the complex workings of power and influence about the king's court are displayed with authority. This is a world where documents are 'sued out' in return for a promise that some future 'bill' will itself be favourably received higher up, and where petitioners depend for their success upon the sponsorship of some great lord or else upon the good offices of some lesser intermediary who may, for his own reasons, agree to undertake their cause. Even established civil servants such as Hoccleve and his colleagues could easily come to grief on what Thomas Wyatt a century later called 'the slipper top of court's estates'. The payment of their supposedly regular annuities was far from being a matter of course; and the extra fees 'due for their labour', upon which they depended to make ends meet, could finish up in other hands, as we have seen. They had to look after themselves as best they could, in accordance with the harsh dictum of Arcite in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*:

And therfore, at the kynges court, my brother,
 Ech man for hymself, ther is noon oother.
 (*Canterbury Tales* I 1181–82)

It is within this social context that the modern reader should try to understand and sympathize with Hoccleve in his third and most significant role: that of petitioner. For the image of himself which he projects in his poetry is determined most of all by the harsh requirements of survival in the treacherous world of the court. Furnivall wished he had been a manlier fellow and not complained so much; but the conduct of an independent nineteenth-century gentleman would have soon led to destitution in any medieval man dependent upon the favours of the great. When Hoccleve speaks of himself, as he often does, 'conpleynyngly', he does so for a purpose, and with the technique of an expert. Most of the business with which his office dealt concerned petitions submitted to the King or his Council and handed on, if they were granted, to the Privy Seal clerks for the drafting of the appropriate

warrant.¹ In the formulary which he compiled in the last years of his life for the benefit of his colleagues, Hoccleve included five model 'supplications' or 'petitions ensellez du prive seel'.² He himself was well acquainted with the uncertainty of reward and the misery of hope deferred. One of the *sententiae* recorded in his formulary is *Expectantes excruciat dilatio promissorum* ('the putting-off of promised benefits torments those that await them').³ It is therefore easy to understand why so much of his poetic output should take the form of a complaint about hardships or wrongs suffered, coupled with a petition for the remedy addressed either to the potential benefactor himself or else to some other person who could act as mediator on his behalf.⁴ Thus Huntington MS 1111 contains a group of petitionary balades addressed to the Lord Chancellor, the Subtreasurer, the King, and the Town Clerk of London; the *Male Regle* culminates in an appeal to the Treasurer for payment of his annuity; and the *Regement of Princes* makes a similar appeal for relief to Prince Hal himself.⁵ Hoccleve's religious poems, too, often take the form of complaints and petitions, appealing to Christ or the Virgin Mary as mediators who can use their influence to win him favour with God the

¹ Brown's thesis describes the function of the Privy Seal clerks in dealing with many of the several thousand petitions presented to the King each year (ch. 2) and discusses the general importance of petitions as 'the key to all administrative action' (pp. 340-5). See also Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 42-3, and J. A. Tuck, 'Richard II's System of Patronage', in *The Reign of Richard II*, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and C. M. Barron (London, 1971), pp. 1-20. Tuck writes: 'The importance of the petition in medieval government can hardly be over-emphasized: patronage as much as justice was founded upon it' (p. 4). For a collection of petitions from Hoccleve's time, see *Anglo-Norman Letters and Petitions from All Souls MS. 182*, ed. M. D. Legge, Anglo-Norman Text Society 3 (Oxford, 1941), pp. 1-41. See also J. A. Burrow, 'The Poet as Petitioner', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981), 61-75.

² The formulary is BL MS Add. 24062. See 'The Formulary of Thomas Hoccleve', ed. E.-J. Y. Bentley (Ph.D. thesis, Emory University, 1965), item 175, p. 166. Brown discusses the formulary in his thesis, Appendix B.

³ Ed. Bentley, item 892, p. 1030.

⁴ The importance for a petitioner of having a sponsor willing to use influence on his behalf at court is stressed by Brown (thesis, pp. 30 and 345), Green (*Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 49-52), and Tuck (*Reign of Richard II*, pp. 15-17). Hoccleve's petitionary poetry, both secular and religious, frequently refers to such intermediaries or 'menes': e.g. *Regement* 302, 3187; *Minor Poems* p. 46 l. 89, p. 53 l. 44, p. 54 l. 83, p. 63 l. 23, p. 71 l. 125, p. 135 l. 709, p. 277 l. 64.

⁵ *Minor Poems*, pp. 58-64; *Male Regle* 417-48; *Regement* 4360-403. The *Regement* appeal is neatly worked into a discussion of Prodigality (to which Hoccleve confesses, as in *Male Regle*) and Largesse (for which he hopes).

Father. The pattern of complaint and supplication, as these examples show, was deeply impressed upon Hoccleve's consciousness.

He evidently gave the matter of petitioning a good deal of thought. Seneca's *De Beneficiis* taught him what he no doubt already knew, that even successful begging exacts its own high price:

Senek seith, he haþ nat þat þing for noght
That byeth it by speche and by prayere.
There is no thyng þat is in eerthe wroght,
As þat he seith, þat is y-bought so deere.¹

But what is the alternative? As he says in the *Male Regle*, the 'shameless craver' gets what he wants by sheer importunity, while the 'poor shamefast man' stays poor. So he must learn to crave. But nagging repetition is, in fact, not the best way. Variety and inventiveness help:

Whoso him shapith mercy for to craue,
His lesson moot recorde in sundry wyse.
(*Male Regle* 397-8)

There are more 'sundry wises' of petitionary approach in Hoccleve's writings than can be illustrated in this lecture; but, in view of the poet's reputation as a monotonous whiner, one should emphasize that there *is* variety, and that this variety includes a good deal of wit and comic byplay. Playing the fool, if stylishly done, can save a little face; and it also serves to keep potential benefactors entertained. Hoccleve describes one of his poems as an 'owter of my nycetee', displaying his folly to amuse, in this case, the Duke of York.² The phrase draws attention to an aspect of his autobiographical writing which neither Doob nor Furnivall recognizes.

An extreme example of the light petitionary touch is the group of three roundels in which the poet complains to Lady Money and receives her unfavourable reply, a *jeu d'esprit* worthy to be compared with Chaucer's *Complaint to his Purse*. But let me end by returning briefly to that more substantial piece of 'shameless craving', the *Male Regle*. In this poem the complaint, as I remarked earlier, concerns two kinds of sickness, physical and financial, both caused by the poet's excesses in his riotous youth. Thornley and

¹ *Regement* 4705-8. Cf. Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, ed. J. W. Basore (Loeb, 1935), II. i. 4: 'Non tulit gratis, qui, cum rogasset, accepit, quoniam quidem, ut maioribus nostris gravissimis viris visum est, nulla res carius constat, quam quae precibus empta est.'

² *Balade to My Gracious Lord of York* (*Minor Poems*, p. 49) 17-18.

Doob interpreted the piece as a penitential lyric; and certainly Hoccleve does express regret for the past, as well as a resolution to live a better-regulated life in the future. But these confessional sentiments serve an overriding petitionary purpose, from which the poem derives its form and its tone. Corresponding to the two sicknesses of purse and body we find here two subtly intertwined requests for relief, one addressed to the personified god of health, the other to Fourneval, the King's Treasurer. The practical point of the poem emerges clearly enough in its last four stanzas, where Hoccleve appeals to Fourneval for payment of his annuity, which is overdue; but this unavoidable act of importunity is approached in the most amusingly roundabout fashion. The poem opens with a lofty and fanciful appeal to Health, addressing that personification as if he were the great lord who could bring Hoccleve the 'socour and releef' that he needs. It then goes on to speak of the poet's youthful misrule, referring first to the excessive and irregular eating and drinking which have helped to ruin his constitution:

twenti wyntir past continually
Excesse at borde hath leyd his knyf with me. (111-12)

It is in this context that Hoccleve first mentions money, when he refers at l. 130 to the 'penylees maladie' which sometimes kept him out of his favourite taverns. From this point on, references to his youthful extravagance and its financial consequences occur with more than accidental frequency. Thus immediately after the account, quoted earlier, of his reputation with cooks and inn-keepers as a big spender, he describes how instead of walking 'hoom to the priuee seel' he took a boat (evidently an extravagance, like a taxi in modern London). His explanations of this self-indulgence bear all the hallmarks of his best manner: fullness of detail specified in precise, unlaboured English. How economically, for instance, the muted personifications of the line 'Heete & vnlust and superfluitee' express his three reasons for taking a boat in summer: he was hot, he had had too much to eat and drink, and he didn't feel like walking.

And if it happid on the Someres day
þat I thus at the tauerne hadde be,
Whan I departe sholde / & go my way
Hoom to the priuee seel / so wowed me
Heete & vnlust and superfluitee
To walke vnto the brigge / & take a boot /
þat nat durste I contrarie hem all three,
But dide as þat they stired me / god woot.

And in the wyntir / for the way was deep,
 Vnto the brigge I dressid me also,
 And ther the bootmen took vpon me keep,
 For they my riot kneewen fern ago:
 With hem I was I-tugged to and fro,
 So wel was him / þat I with wolde fare;
 For riot paieth largely / eueremo;
 He styntith neuere / til his purs be bare. (185-200)

It may seem strange to claim of a passage such as this that it is shaped by a petitionary intention. Fourneval, one might suppose, would hardly be inclined to help replenish a purse which had been made bare by such extravagances. But the Privy Seal clerk knew what he was at:

Whoso him shapith mercy for to craue,
 His lesson moot recorde in sundry wyse.

Hoccleve would have every reason to know that the Lord Treasurer received quite enough straight hard-luck stories in the ordinary way of business; so he could be trusted to appreciate the amusing alternative which the poet offered him—something very different from the customary ‘wife and three children to support’. There is, it must be admitted, something slavish in the readiness with which Hoccleve makes a fool of himself to amuse the great man, as when he shamingly confesses that he was too shy and sheepish to do more than kiss the girls who attracted him to the Paul’s Head Tavern; but he makes sure to recover his dignity in the closing pages of the poem. Here his mastery of the ‘sundry wises’ of petitionary address can be most clearly seen. First he addresses himself, with the warning that his modest annuity and uncertain fees make it essential for him to live a life of reason and moderation in future: ‘Be waar, Hoccleue’ (351). Then, in a loftier style, he addresses Health, confessing his past irregularities and renewing his pleas for relief. And finally he names Fourneval, and plainly asks him for the money that can heal all his sicknesses. It comes down to coin in the end:

By coyn, I gete may swich medecyne
 As may myn hurtes alle, þat me greeue,
 Exyle cleene / & voide me of pyne. (446-8)

It will be evident from this discussion that one should not look in Hoccleve’s poetry for the simple truth about him, whatever that may have been. Traditional moral psychology helped to shape the account he gives in the *Male Regle* of his youthful behaviour, just as traditional morbid psychology helped to shape the account of his

breakdown in the *Complaint*. Both these accounts, furthermore, owe much of their distinctive tone and emphasis to their original occasion and purpose; and the unhappy Hoccleve of these bills of complaint is not the same as the orthodox Hoccleve who reproaches Oldcastle or the gregarious Hoccleve who invites Somer to dinner at the Temple. But to put the matter in this way implies, not only that Hoccleve really does talk about himself in his poetry, but also that his departures from the imaginary norm of simple autobiographical truth are themselves best understood by reflecting upon his particular circumstances. Here, for once, we are not reduced to generalization or speculation in considering the life and the social context of a medieval poet. The details are available, in the poems themselves and in the work of historians; and it is readers least embarrassed by these details who are most likely, I think, to appreciate the character of this remarkable, though uneven, writer.