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Narrating Sloth in Medieval Literature: the Knowledge of Feelings

Ioana Balgradean

The present paper sets out to explore the specific mechanisms inherent to what I venture to call the courtly affection of sloth and its subcategories of sorrow, grief, anxiety, fear, etc. I will be dealing with an intertextual dialogue, which accounts for, and, in a feedback dynamics, impacts on the conceptual configurations recorded in narrative constructs. The intertext at the core of this study engages the twelfth-century pre-text *Eneas* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. It construes itself around a lexical network which articulates the emotion of sloth, while informing the transmission and reformulation of a narrative web of emotional constructs in later medieval literature. My analysis will endeavour to highlight the emergence of an epistemology building on the intricate narrative relationship between diegetic interpersonal actions and events, the eye and the heart as interactive organs of feeling, and the movement of the passions felt within the body. I will be grappling with an economy of affect that is conceptualised as kinesic and kinaesthetic, suggesting an epistemological alternative to the Augustinian theory of emotion as will, which prevailed in the Christian West for over seven hundred years.

Simo Knuuttila states that when dealing with the history of ideas, instead of isolating “unit ideas and tracing their occurrences in different combinations,” one had better “speak about historical analogies” that take into account the “conceptual context of a conception” (*Emotions* 207). Or, to put it simply, emotion is to be viewed as a historical, cultural construct, configured by specific epistemological systems and beliefs. Following in

The Construction of Textual Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Literature. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 22. Ed. Indira Ghose and Denis Renevey. Tübingen: Narr, 2009. 47-61.

this vein, mine is an essay about the emotion or passion of sloth as narrativised in courtly literature dating from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. I will be looking at the intertextual developments of a narrative tradition which emerges around 1160 in the form of a pre-text, the *Eneas*, in the higher milieus of a warrior feudal society preoccupied with courtly refinement and the crusade. The diffusion of the theme of passion and its related lexical web provides an enduring and creative intertextual dialogue between courtly texts throughout the Middle Ages. Importantly, the texts I discuss in this essay write sloth as a kinaesthetic, kinesic *event* described as a violent perforation of the body by means of arrows and a subsequent, violent modification of the entire psychosomatic apparatus including a problematic annihilation of the faculty of free will, and hence, moral responsibility, thus impacting on ethical behaviour. Let me begin by clarifying two central methodological concepts: I use *kinaesthesia* in the sense of sensation of movement felt within one's own body (Berthoz 31-32), and *kinesis* as communication and perception of body motricity in space.¹ In fact, the emotion is narrated as a lexical network that outlines a continuum, which links an interpersonal clash, unfolding spatially, with a sensory-motor process. A cognitive grasp of the phenomenal mobility of sloth requires the telling of a story via specific syntactic combinations of intricate concepts.

Sloth – or *acedia* in its Latin form – is first theorised by Evagrius Ponticus in the ascetic milieu of the Egyptian desert of the fourth century. It is handed over to the Western canon by Cassian, who notices that *acedia*, defined as “anxietas sive taedium cordis,” is “adfinis” (akin) to *tristitia* (*Institutions* IX, X), while for possibly not remote reasons, Gregory the Great will exclude *acedia* from his heptad of capital sins and will focus on *tristitia* only (*Moralia* XLV 87-9). Throughout the Middle Ages, sloth undergoes what Wenzel identified as “a continuing process of secularisation in the sense that the concept was carried from the monastery to the *saeculum*, the world outside the cloister” (179). My study focuses on the reconfiguration of *acedia* in the emerging cultural context influenced by the aristocratic literature of *fin' amors*. I therefore depart from Wenzel's somewhat generalising observation that “after approximately 1300 the concept remained static. What one finds in the literature of the next two centuries is the popular image of ‘sloth in God's service.’ Longer descriptions of the vice usually define it in terms of a state of mind and then indicate a host of external faults for which it is responsible” (180). For my part, I argue that the concept transgresses the theological boundaries

¹ For a thorough discussion of kinesis and its importance in cognition and literature, see G. Bolens (Introduction). I am most grateful to her for letting me consult the manuscript.

into the erotic imagination of courtly literature, and there we are dealing with a concept endowed with a sprawling genealogy, which needs to be taken into consideration. I will therefore proceed to a philological, etymological analysis of the words used, in the effort of identifying the semantic intertext, context and content of a medieval, to a large extent irrecoverable, feeling. I will be looking at a complex linguistic web which weaves into its syntax some of the above-mentioned derivations – such as sorrow, fear, slackness – that have come to torture and flout the free will of aristocratic lovers, and thus to cause serious anxiety with respect to the central concept of Christian ethics. The brilliant stroke performed by the culture of *fin'amors* is to thoroughly mould its discourse upon the Christian one, and to import its operating structures with the purpose of legitimising its straightforwardly sexual dimension. The result is an uncanny series of revisions of standard theological elements, as well as a homogenous mixture of worldly and religious motifs that end up by permeating the imagination of the later Middle Ages in a general way (Wirth 202-3). Wirth argues that the new conceptualisation of the heart is at the core of this interesting blend and sprawling intertextuality: “L’invention du cœur a donc permis à chacun d’acquérir ce qu’il n’avait pas, une dimension spirituelle de la sexualité dans le cas des laïcs, une érotique imaginaire dans le cas des religieux” (203). The courtly motifs of the love wound (189), the gift of the heart (195-6), and the cultual treatment of the object of desire in general (202) are modelled on prevalent religious exegesis and ritual, while investing the latter with their powerful bodiliness.

However, a discussion of medieval narratives of emotion cannot begin elsewhere but with an acknowledgement of its Augustinian heritage. Augustine famously equated emotion and intellectual *voluntas* despite their belonging to two different levels of the soul, by making of will the all-pervasive, “dynamic centre of personality” (Knuutila, “The Emergence” 209).² He is followed by an entire tradition that makes of the

² Augustine originally views the soul as a tripartite structure, thus inscribing himself in the Platonic philosophical tradition (O’Daly 11). According to the political model that splits the city into three main groups – leaders, guardians, people – Plato’s soul is made up of *nous* (reasonable part), *thumos* (irascible part), *epithumia* (appetitive part) (Boquet 151). Along those lines, Augustine distinguishes between a vegetative soul (that man shares with plants), a sensitive soul (that man shares with animals) and an intellectual soul (that man shares with God) (*De quantitate animae* 70). Yet, Augustine will prefer the rational-irrational bipolar pattern to the Platonic threefold one. The *anima rationalis* is in charge with mind, intelligence and will, while the *anima irrationalis* contains sense-perception, memory and appetite or affect (*De civitate dei* 5.11, 19.13). This bipartite structure doesn’t imply an actual split between the two sectors, well on the contrary: there is continuity and the superior part of *anima* has control over the whole via the will.

junction emotion-will a cultural enterprise in its own right by ever refining and adapting it in response to different contexts (Knuutila, "The Emergence" 211; Boquet 86). A turning point is reached in the twelfth century when the translation and rapidly growing influence of Greek and Arabic theories focus on the physiological and social dimension of the passions. In the new context, the medical treatises describe the human being as a psycho-physiological unity regulated by the flow of the spirits, corporeal, invisible substances residing in various organs and insuring the connection and interaction between world, body and soul (Knuutila, *Emotions* 212-226). Amongst the new philosophical teachings, Thomas Aquinas famously posits that emotions are "acts of the sensitive motive powers caused by external objects through the evaluations of the estimative power and necessarily accompanied by movements of the heart and the spirits" (*Emotions* 239).³ Despite its Aristotelian components, Aquinas' theory respects the orthodox Augustinian moral dimension of emotion, which is ultimately ruled by the intellect (Knuutila, *Emotions* 253-4). Nevertheless, it exactly grounds emotional cognition in the fragile sphere of human physiology, specifically, in the middle part of the head, where resides the cogitative power (Thomas Aquinas I.78.4).

Around the same time, Aquinas' contemporary Roger Bacon is shuttling between Oxford and Paris, while developing an Aristotelian epistemological theory based on *species* – an emanation of corporeal nature emitted by every object in the world, and which is responsible for sensation and cognition (462-5). Biernoff has shown that this scientific theory enables him to locate objects and mental concepts on a continuum described as a "physiological account of perception in which *sensation and cognition are modelled on physical causation*" (Biernoff 83, my italics). To Bacon, "mental concepts and affective states" are nothing but the "necessary effects of extramental objects." The crux is that his Aristotelian sensory-motor theory of cognition openly contradicts the existence of Christian free-will, and his efforts to determine the efficacy of the Augustinian disembodied intellect over the receptive, sensitive soul prove "unsuccessful" (83). Indeed, in the *De Anima*, Aristotle grounds knowledge in sense-perception (III.8.431b20-432a14), which is essentially a form of movement: "Sensation consists in being moved and acted upon, for it is held to be a species of qualitative change [. . .]. Let us then first proceed on the assumption that to be acted upon or moved is identical with active operation. For movement is in fact active operation of some sort" (II.5.416b28-417a20). Aristotle and his medieval follower Roger Bacon create an active continuum between the perceiving soul and the world, ultimately suggesting that cognition be embodied, instead of being the

³ See Thomas Aquinas' theory of emotion developed in *Summa theologiae* 2.I.22-48.

product of an auto-affected, remote, abstract mind. I wish to insist on the remarkable quality of Bacon's epistemology because it proposes the necessary philosophical frame-work to the understanding of the literary texts I will be analysing below.

The combination of pagan and Christian philosophy taught in universities in the thirteenth century provokes immediate reactions on behalf of the Parisian neo-Augustinians, who view the new ideologies as a serious challenge to the fundamental Christian doctrines of responsibility and original sin. The ongoing intellectual conflict culminates on 7 March 1277, when the conservative neo-Augustinian school of thought led by Bishop Etienne Tempier, with support from Pope John XXI, condemns 219 philosophical articles inspired by Aristotle's works (Hissette 7-8). Van Steenberghen calls it the most serious condemnation of the Middle Ages and its importance perfectly reveals the great anxiety provoked by new conceptualisations of the functioning of the categories of the soul, which appear to challenge the Augustinian ground-concepts of moral responsibility and free-will (483). Two of the censured articles are revealing for this study, namely "Quod homo agens ex passione coacte agit" and "Quod voluntas, manente passione et scientia particulari in actu, non potest agere contra eam" (Hissette 261-2). I am not going to discuss in depth the theological debate and the philosophical intricacies that generated it, but simply wish to use this example in order to highlight a specific socio-cultural context where there is tension and anxiety with respect to conceptualisations of emotion moulded by pagan philosophy. Jacquot significantly links this historical episode with the new theories of *amor hereos* or love-passion, which emerge in the courtly milieu, thereby illustrating the vigorous circulation and dialogue between contemporary texts and ideas. More specifically,

Même si elle n'est pas visée directement par la condamnation de ces deux articles, incompatibles avec la conception chrétienne de la responsabilité morale et de la liberté, l'explication psycho-médicale de l'amour, qui suppose une errance de la faculté estimative, s'y trouvait impliquée. L'interprétation de cette erreur de jugement qui exerce son empire sur les autres facultés et qui fait envahir l'être tout entier, spirituel et corporel, par la passion amoureuse, ne peut échapper à une condamnation au nom de l'orthodoxie religieuse qu'au prix d'une explication par la pathologie, c'est-à-dire en plaçant avec fermeté un amour qui n'a pas de mesure dans le domaine de la maladie mentale. (95)

The medical discourse on love reaches the Latin West via the *Viaticum*⁴, translated from the Arabic by Constantine the African at the end of the eleventh century, and Avicenna's *Canon*, translated by Gerard of Cremona in the twelfth century (Jacquart 93-94). For Girardus Bituricensis, the commentator of the *Viaticum*, and for all the medieval tradition that follows, love is an excessive passion of the brain, "morbus cerebro contiguus," opinion shared by his contemporary Andreas Capellanus (93-4) in the manual on noble love *De amore*: "Est igitur illa passio innata ex visione et cogitatione. Non quaelibet cogitatio sufficit ad amoris originem, sed *immoderata* exigitur; nam cogitatio moderata non solet ad mentem redire, et ideo ex ea non potest amor oriri" (I.1.13). This statement coins emotion (*passio*) as originating in sensorial perception (*visione*) and unregulated, excessive judgement (*cogitatio immoderata*), which is another way of saying that the intellectual will is inefficient under the assault of external objects that hit the senses. It also means that the Bishop of Paris was right to worry about the new ideological avenues that revise the orthodox Augustinian equation where affect is rational will and moral responsibility.

In order to offer some insight into the philosophical crisis which shakes the Latin West as of the second half of the thirteenth century, I wish to now turn to two poems, which reveal the epistemic agenda of a literary culture that proposes a turning point in the history of the body in its relation to the mind or soul. I chose to discuss the case of the *Eneas* because it is a pre-text, or one of the texts which mark the beginnings of the literary tradition emerging in the aristocratic milieu of the twelfth century. I will then move on to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a fourteenth-century witness of an ongoing, successful inter-textual dialogue. To reach the *Eneas*, my first literary stop, I will take a step back in time and head towards the 1160s refined Plantagenet court, commonly known as the cradle of courtly literature. The poem is written by an anonymous Norman clerk and represents the ground-stone for later off-shoots of psycho-physiological thematisations of emotion. The text writes sloth into a lexical web articulated by "maus" (harm, pain, sorrow), "poiné" (pain, affliction), "dolor" (pain, suffering), "angoisse" (anguish), "mornes" (afflicted, sad), "pensis" (thoughtful, worried) (8938) (Tobler and Lommatzsch), etc., words which ostensibly blur the line between body and soul, by describing emotion as a formidable psycho-somatic event.

When Lavine first sees Eneas, she is outright hit by an arrow in the heart: "Amors l'a de son dart ferue" (8057), "la saiete li set colee / desi qu'el cuer soz la memelle" (8066-7). More specifically, Love has smitten

⁴ For a recent edition of *Viaticum* I.20, the chapter dealing precisely with *amor eros*, see Wack 186-191.

(“ferue”) her heart by piercing her eye and sliding down only to get stuck under her breast. She goes on, “Il me navra an un esgart, / en l’oil me feri de son dart [. . .] / tot le me fist el cuer coler” (8159-60, 8162). It is remarkable here that visual perception as source of emotion should be diegetically equated with an arrow assault,⁵ thus suggesting that the absolute instance of human interiority (the heart) is perfectly permeable to external objects, in the present case as efficacious as warfare material. This fictional event is a foregoing transcription of Bacon’s optical theory which postulates that the eye is the expansive, flexible threshold where exchanges between the sensible world and the internal spiritual faculties take place. As such, it is responsible for both intra- and extramission, i.e., it receives sensorial data, while as carrier of the soul it reaches beyond the surface of the body into the world (Biernoff 91-2). Biernoff identifies the Baconian gaze as kinaesthetic, i.e., as a “‘feeling’ on or in the body” (95-7), more explicitly, as a motor sensation within the body. Thus, along the lines of a similar script, the lovers of the *Eneas*, like later the Amant of the *Rose* and Troilus, complain of having their heart “feru” (smitten) or “navre” (wounded) by an eye/arrow, in a linguistic figuration of intently violent hand-coordinated, felt gestures: “Or est cheoite es laz d’amors” (8060), “Cupido, qui ert deus d’amor [. . .]/ an sa baillie le tenuit” (8922, 8924). The protagonists describe the ensuing feeling as performing a binding and tightening act carried through either by use of a cord or rope (“laz”), or by means of indefinite holding, retaining in one’s grab (“tenoit”) with persisting motion-obstructing control (“baillie”).

The scope of the gesture of seizing is the psycho-somatic self in its entirety, “corage” and “pansé” included, through annihilation of personal volition, “voille ou non, amer l’estuet” (8061): “vers Eneam a atorné / tot son corage et son pansé” (8063-4). “Corage” builds etymologically on the Latin root “cor” (heart) and indifferently signifies intention, desire, feeling, thought (Tobler and Lommatsch), being used interchangeably with the word “cuer” (heart). “Pansé” refers to (sorrow-blended) thought (Tobler and Lommatsch), thus strengthening the ambiguous dimension of a cognitive category that is objectified and held fast by means of an invading rope of slothful feeling (8063-4), which literally vexes, exhausts by repeated attacks (“argue”) and commoves (“comuet”) its victim (Tobler and Lommatsch): “Amors l’argüe et comuet” (8935). Ultimately, both Lavine and Eneas identify the emotional event as death-entailing “angoisse” (anguish), literally, a “painful sensation of choking” (OED; Tobler and Lommatsch): “N’an quit avoir autre confort, / de ceste angoisse, fors la mort” (8255-6), and “Ele aportot ma

⁵ According to Biernoff the darting gaze of the *Eneas* functions as sexual penetration (48-57), and is therefore described as what I term a kinesic, kinaesthetic phenomenon.

mort o soi, / angoisement me navra" (8968-9). Here again, the etymological inquiry reveals that the term is to be traced back to the Latin verb *ang(u)ere*, meaning "to choke, to distress, to squeeze", thus participating in the larger lexical web woven around the concept of sloth, which explicitly refers to the sensory-motive acts of grabbing, binding and strangling.

Importantly, the *Eneas* writes sloth as a *continuum* originating in the surrounding world, which then forces its way through sensorial perception and spreads all over the psycho-somatic system by taking hold of both "cors" (body) and "cuer"/"corage"/"pansé". The immediate consequence of the external, military aggression is vertiginous variation of skin colour – "a changié cent foiz colors" (8059) and body temperature – "an po d'ore ai et froit et chalt" (8126), combined with an impressive sequence of kinesic and kinaesthetic manifestations, which signal complete internal and external turmoil. In Lavine's case, they are expressed via pointed action verbs such as "tressüer" (sweat), "trambler" (shudder), "pasme" (swoons), "tressalt" (quivers), "sanglot" (sobs), "fremist" (shivers), "degiete" (throws about) "sofle" (breaths heavily), "baaille" (yawns), "crie" (screams), "plore" (weeps), "gemit" (moans), "brait" (brays) (Tobler and Lommatsch):

Ele comance a tressüer,
a refroidir et a trambler,
sovant se pasme et tressalt,
sanglot, fremist, li cuers li falt,
degiete soi, sofle, baaille:
bien l'a Amors mise an sa taille!
Crie et plore et gient et brait. (8073-80)

These verbs link emotion to a broad range of body sensations and motricity, while the eye as sensorial perceptor and the heart as emotional centre are spatialised and mobile, thus highlighting the sensory-motor dimension of the experience and blatantly ignoring its rational, abstract facet. In fact, Lavine's "cuers li falt" (8076), her heart fails (Tobler and Lommatsch), is wanting, as if it had been displaced or estranged from her, to the point that she declares herself "vaine" (8086), emptied. This literal lack or removal ("remue," 8089) of heart or "corage" is synonymous with fear, an established subcategory of sloth.

Having been literally caught in the ropes of an emotion that shakes her through and about, Lavine struggles to make sense of it all and proceeds to interpret the phenomenon: "Lasse,' fait-elle, 'que ai gié? / Qui m'a surprise, que est cié?'" (8083-4). She immediately identifies herself as

being “*lasse*,” weary, exhausted in the body (Tobler and Lommatsch) and wonders about that someone or something that has taken over, or taken hold of (“surprise”) her being. She similarly realises that she feels (“sent”) her body is being tormented (“*destroiz*”, 8124) with mortal pains – “*dont mes cors sent dolors mortaus*” (8091) – and it is this sensory-motor data which enables her to understand what is happening. At first, her monologue linguistically transcribes her feelings and her cognitive failure (“*ne set*”) as to what actually disturbs and overturns her interior space: “*ne set ancor qui ce li fet / qui son corage li comuet*” (8080). Only then does she present her epistemological conclusion, exposing it within a very eloquent syntactical structure, where knowledge subsequently builds on somatic evaluation of pain: “*Ge quit, mien esciant, ge ain*” (8097), “I think, according to my estimation, that I love.” The lovers are clearly described as a space swept by commoved, centrifugal forces whose action culminates with a swoon, which operates as a serious suspension in the functioning of embodied intelligence. Eneas’ example speaks volumes in this sense, by equating the memory of the eye/arrow piercing his heart – “*ier m’egardastes de tel oil / qui tot lo cuer me tresperça*” (9098-9) – with spasmodic fainting and loss of verticality – “*se pasma*,” where “*pasmer*” comes from the Latin *spasmus*, “cramp” – as well as with a broader social disability of performing the gestures expected of a military leader in time of war:

Donc l’an Sovint, si se pasma
et rechei iluec ariere . . .
Unc ne pot monter an cheval,
a sa gent dit que il a mal. (9100-1, 9109-10)

It is a fact, Eneas cannot mount his horse to fight Turnus because La-vine’s eye has smitten through the centre of his being and is rambling about generating dysfunction within the continuum of his perceptive connection with the surrounding world, deactivating his muscles and intelligence, his bodily and social mobility, making of him an iconic instance of sloth.

The narrative of emotion as military assault upon the heart and the ensuing short-circuit of psycho-physiological motricity are witnesses of an expansive intertextuality informed by the much circulated opening to the *Roman de la Rose*; and by the time Chaucer writes *Troilus and Criseyde* there seems to be reason for him to make his longest poem into the formal and thematic exploration of the emotional phenomenon of sloth. *Troilus* combines the familiar lexical material inherited from its textual predecessors to produce an authentic narrative event building on interactive, spatial and gestural knowledge conveyed via kinesic verbs and situa-

tions, which challenge the script of moral responsibility. Sadlek has noted that “with the exception of a brief period at the end of book III, Troilus is continuously sorrowful” (361). This state of affairs blatantly suggests that the lover is caught in the performance of an ever-slackening gesture, which weaves itself into a similarly loose, yet blocked and repetitive linguistic fabric. At the origin of the emotional phenomenon there is an exchange of looks that literally ties Troilus up: his eye moves around the temple only to *smite* and *block* against Criseyde’s body: “His eye percede and so depe it wente, / Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente” (I.272-3). The eye is then engaged in both a kinesic and kinaesthetic action, since it moves around freely, as well as touches and feels other bodies by hitting against them. Similarly, Criseyde’s eyes stream, flow straight into his heart, in a movement that doubles the one performed by the arrow of the God of Love that hits him “atte fulle” (I.209):

Was ful unwar that Love hadde his dwellynge
Withinne the subtile stremes of hire yen;
That sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen,
Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte. (I.3047)

Indeed, Troilus declares himself “thorugh-shoten” and “thorugh-darted” (I.324-25) with Criseyde’s look, which penetrates his innermost space as an arrow would. Once there, it grafts itself onto the bottom of his spatialised heart and begins to stick – “gan to stiken” (I.297) – thereby generating “so gret desir and such affeccioun” (I.296). The verb “to stick” develops from the OE *stician* and means “to pierce, be sharp, to prick,” as well as “to be fastened in position” (*OED*), while its use suggests that Criseyde’s gaze performs a stabbing, steadfast gesture that is sensorially perceived as keen.

It is precisely because his heart is *held* by woe that Troilus *loses hold* of his entire functioning and proceeds to the obstruction and dissimulation of his excessive affective state. The verbs “bowen” and “wynde” both refer to vigorous gestures carried out under the constraining force of love’s hand which performs fast binding (“bynde”). Similarly, the touch of the hand /look that shoots the arrow through the heart and ties it up, decisively counters the guidance of rational will, the Augustinian faculty expected to, yet failing to steer the protagonist:

And wende nothing hadde had swich myght
 Ayeyns his wille that shuld his herte stere,
 Yet with a look his herte wex a-fere. . .
 Wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love. (I.227-29, 231)

Troilus then *strives to seize* (“caught”) his former glad, pleasant appearance (“pleyinge cher,” I.280). This action implies that he is painfully aware of his loss of control over how the people around him will interpret the total, expressively-loaded gesture which overtakes him. In fact, he hardly knows anymore how to direct his eyes in space (“to loke”) or “winke,” verb which suggests performance of the facial gesture of closing the eyes: “Unnethes wiste he how to loke or wynke” (I.301). The operation aimed at concealing, or rather refashioning the emotion that both blocks and slackens his inner and outer being culminates with his physically locking himself away from social interaction into the solitude of his room and the private space of his bed: “But bad his folk to gon wher that them liste. / And whan that he in chamber was alone, / He doun upon his beddes feet hym sette” (I.357-9).

Two books later, in what appears as the temporal and spatial suspension of the narrative moment discussed above, Troilus is again in his bed, having one of his slothful fits. At this point, he is accompanied by Criseyde, and one would sensibly expect that the much yearned-for presence of the beloved should do away with Troilus’ ongoing, blocking state of sorrow. However, no relaxation occurs this time either, well on the contrary. His response to Criseyde’s helpless surrender, which she expresses by shedding a few tears, and he interprets as wrath (III.1082), is immediate spasmodic contraction of the psycho-somatic system: “But wel he felt aboute his herte crepe, / For everi tere which that Criseyde asterte, / The crampe of deth to streyne hym by the herte” (III.1069-71). The sensorial perception of her tears – “To heere or seen Criseyde, his lady, wepe” (III.1068) – directly activates the sensation of something closing in on his heart with circular, creeping movements with a straining effect. The verb “crepe” expresses a specific type of visual, locomotive and kinaesthetic action. Its etymon is the Old English *creópan*, signifying “to move with the body prone and close to the ground [. . .] as a human being on hands and feet, or in a crouching posture” (*OED*). This centripetal movement of the spirits that the contemporary medical books would have identified as the physiological manifestations of sadness or anxiety, is narrated by *Troilus* as the sensation of a clasp, a tight squeezing – suggested by the verb “streyne” – acting onto his heart and subjecting it to a “crampe,” literally, “an involuntary, violent and painful contraction of the muscles, usually the result of a slight strain” (*OED*).

Two stanzas later the emerging phenomenon is straightforwardly identified as sorrow or fear and begins to build into an intricate spatially-coordinated sensory-motor event:

And therewithal he hang adown the heed,
 And fil on knees, and sorwfully he sighte [. . .]
 Therwith the sorwe so his herte shette
 That from his eyen fil there nought a tere,
 And every spirit his vigour in knette,
 So they astoned or oppressed were.
 The felyng of his sorwe or of his fere,
 Or of aught elles, fled was out of towne;
 And down he fel al sodeynly a-swowne. (III. 1079-80, 1086-92)

The kinesic description of Troilus' drooping head ("hang adoun the heed"), slackening knees ("fil on knees") and his emitting of a distressed sound ("sorwfully . . . sighte") does much more than offer standard gestures associated with grief. It rather outlines a situation where the new disposition of limbs, the body's broken verticality, and the renegotiation of the relationship to gravity are inherent parts of a continuum which links Troilus' perception of Criseyde's tears, the violent clasp at his heart, his mental processing of the incident— "he thoughte he nas but lorn" (III.1076) – an act of speech – "than seyde he thus" (III.1083) – the preparation of, and the final swoon. To that purpose, the narrative recounts that sorrow shuts the heart, as one would fasten the door to a house, and associates the obstruction of the innermost part of interiority with a withdrawal of liquid tears from the extreme surface of the body, i.e., the eyes. This state of things logically reflects that the spirits residing in the heart have been immobilised, tied themselves in a knot ("knette"), and have become insensitive ("astonished"), crushed, as under the weight of something pressing onto them ("oppressed"). By describing the heart as an actual rope-roll, the text posits that the entire being is blocked at its centre, deprived of its natural fluidity (such as that of blood and tears), of organ- and limb-mobility (he falls immobile to the ground), and consequently of the sensorial and intelligent faculties. Troilus' psycho-somatic system slackens, loses its vigour. Its being slothful signifies that sensations clasp and strain him all the way to overrunning, overspreading his body which is viewed as a container. I am here proposing an etymological translation of "a-swowne" which derives from the Old English *geswōgen*, past participle of *swōgan*, "to overrun, choke, rush into" (OED, Bosworth and Toller), for the good reason that the text equates becoming faint with the action of the feelings fleeing extra-muros – "fled was out of towne" – outside the surface of the body, in a circular movement

which unifies external world and sensory-motor interiority, whilst tapping the conceptualisation of self as finite, impermeable spatial and spiritual unity.

Finally, I have tried to demonstrate that while these poems write the feeling of sloth as verbal and psycho-somatic expressivity, its most intimate quality is to counter and obstruct this fundamentally mobile quality by affecting the protagonists' vital flexibility of body and soul. The narratives of sloth discussed above escape a typological gridding where a word stands for a concept, which in its turn stands for a pre-defined internal, mental representation. The emotion is rather narrated as a complex phenomenon, linguistically translated as a lexical, syntactical network, instead of a unique signifier which triggers an established signified. Sloth is diegetically articulated by information pertaining to a sensorial and motor order, by a kinesic and kinaesthetic form of cognition, which ignores and/or suspends the fixed operations of disembodied moral judgement as Saint Augustine and his followers have it. By revising the Augustinian pre-texts on emotion, the courtly narratives set out to similarly establish themselves as pre-texts of an emerging tradition and dynamic parts of a rapidly growing intertext that overflows the boundaries of literature into medieval culture as a whole. On this perspective, the very mobile courtly configurations and lexis of affect have endured, while necessarily accommodating transformation, and have something to say about construing past feelings and present ones.

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