4

A Pocockian Moment

My encounter with John G. A. Pocock, not in person but in bookish mode, took place more than two decades ago in rather unexpected circumstances. It was in the course of my struggle with a couple of medieval English poems that I came across *The Machiavellian Moment*. [1] Reading it was for me a revealing experience and helpful in making out those otherwise intractable pieces of work. The poems in question were by Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, both belonging to the medieval poetic genre called the "dream vision," in which the poet/narrator describes in the first person singular the contents of a dream. Briefly put, the visionary experience comprising *The House of Fame* is made up largely of three sections through which the poet/narrator goes through: (1) in the first section (called the Temple of Venus) we are given an abridged version of the story of the *Aeneid* as the poet/narrator sees it portrayed on the walls of the temple. It should be noted for our present purposes that the Virgilian story is an exemplary instance of the topos "*translatio imperii* "; (2) in the second section, the poet/narrator undergoes a version of the cosmic flight vision, in which the visionary/narrator describes his/her flight from the earth to some higher place. Its celebrated examples include the *Somnium Scipionis*, Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (esp. Book IV, metrum I), and Dante's *Paradiso*. In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, however, as we shall see later, what is supposed to be a transcendental cosmic flight was parodied so that the destination of the flight was neither the other side of the universe ("on the outside of the swift air") as in the case of Boethius, nor the

1. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton UP., 1975).

Dantesque transcendental beatific vision of "Light Eternal (luce etterna)" (or "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars (l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele)," but "the house of fame" located somewhere in the sublunary sphere, which is characteristically under the control of Natura and Fortuna, the principles of life and death, rise and fall. Goddess Fame, the queen of the house, appropriately approaches Fortuna in her characteristics; (3) in the third section is described a fabulous construction called "the house of rumour," a kind of flying house full of openings through which for variour rumours can enter. Once inside, however, what we find with the poet/narrator are just ordinary people apparently in every walk of life. They are busily engaged in communication which, however, never leads to anything: there dominates rumour, a symbol of fortune and contingency, and the whole vision abruptly closes.

The nucleus of this vision, it is not so difficult to see, lies in subversion of the visionary orientation the traditional genre of cosmic-flight. While the traditional vision enable us to grasp the distinction between appearance and reality, between this-worldly vicissitudes and other-worldly eternity, between fortune and providence, and prefer the latter, the author of *The House of Fame* holds a skeptical attitude toward the use and validity of any such transcendental orientation. Among several textual hints he leaves for his readers, the following is one of the most telling instance that reveals his subversive intention:

> And thoo, thoughte y upon Boece.
> That writ, 'A thoughte may flee so hye
> Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
> To passen everych element, …'[2]

Here the poet suggests that the reader take a look at the corresponding passage in Boethius's *De consolatione Philosophiae* (IV, metrum I), the prime instance of the Neoplatonist topos "*itinerarium mentis*" (the Mind's Homeward Journey), where the mind, having left the prison-house of body, reminding itself of its true homeland, makes a cosmic flight toward the limits of the universe and finally passes over to the other side to find

2. *The House of Fame*, II, pp. 973-75. All quotations from Chaucer in this paper are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. L. D. Benson (Boston, 1987).

its true home, the kingdom of God. In the place of the Kingdom of God over and beyond the limits of the universe, as I have described, Chaucer set as his vision's destination his "House of Fame"-cum-"House of Rumour," epitomes of fortune and contingency. Instead of the "mind (*mens*)" that enacts the homeward journey in Boethius, the poet of *The House of Fame* adopts the word "a thought," despite the fact that the English word "mind" would come more readily to mind as a translation of "mens." The inference is easily made that the English word "a thought," along with its countable hence divisible attribute, is better suited to Chaucer's strategy to emasculate various Neoplatonic associations the word "mind" might provoke If the word "mind" reminds us of the platonic recollection of transcendental idea, the word "thought" with its countable individuality makes us aware of a more nominalistic kind of world-picture. [3]

As we have briefly seen, the function of traditional visionary literature is to enable us to see the distinction between appearance and reality, between this-worldly vicissitudes and other-worldly necessity, between fortune and providence, always, in favour of the latter. Pocock, you may remember, describes this state of affairs in a succinct formula: "fortune + faith = providence." [4] Following this formula, we may render the Chaucerian strategy of subversion as "providence – faith = fortune," which in fact is given in a series of formulae Pocock gives in reference to "the models so far established of an intellectual equipment which lacked means of explicating the succession of particulars in social and political time." Not only that, but his formulae actually possess almost miraculous hermeneutical power. Let us consider the formulae in full:

> Experience, prudence, and the *arcana imperii*; fortune + faith = providence; providence – faith = fortune; providence + prophecy = revealed eschatology; virtue and grace. The formulae constitute the model so far established of an intellectual equipment which lacked means of explicating the succession of particulars in social and political time, so that all responses to such particular occurrences must be found somewhere

3. For a further extended discussion of this theme, see Chapter 9 of the present volume: "From *The House of Fame* to Politico-Cultural Histories."
4. *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 48.

between the poles of experience and grace. [5]

Chaucer's strategy in *The House of Fame* can be described in these formulae as the parodistic subversion of "fortune + faith = providence" to entail "providence – faith = fortune." But we have only dealt with the last two sections of the poem and there remains the first, the Temple of Venus with an abridged version of the *Aeneid* as above described on its walls. So far as I know there has been no convincing interpretation of the poem as a unified work of art that properly incorporates the significance of this first section. But Pocock's formulae seem to me very suggestive. (Of course, this interpretive business has nothing to do with Pocock's scholarly intention; it is merely fortuitous; "by hap," as the Elizabethan English put it.) What is suggestive is the reference to "*arcana imperii*"; the word "*arcanum imperii*" coming from Tacitus has now become more prominent for readers of *Barbarism and Religion*, [6] especially volume 3. Quoting Tacitus's dictum, "There was revealed that arcanum of state, the discovery that emperors might be made elsewhere than Rome," Pocock writes, "This arcanum, though cited nowhere in Gibbon's early chapters, was of central concern to Gibbon, as one key to the process by which the city was ruined and abandoned by its own empire; the historical process he had resolved to write" (pp. 25–26). Whether or not "this *arcanum imperii*" is the same as the "*arcana imperii*" of the formulae, we won't ask at this moment; nor will we query the precise semantic composition of the word. The word still remains to suggest, however, some unknown mechanism of the rise and fall of empire as well as its transition, "*translatio imperii*." As I understand it, it suggests the power of fate or destiny, by which for instance Aeneas is destined to establish the second Troy. If the construction of Rome is a task Fate assigned to Aeneas, it is a destiny of the same kind that Aeneas must abandon Dido. In this world-picture there is no possibly that the visionary transformation or translocation that allows the formulae "fortune + faith = providence" will be realized. It is interesting to note that Chaucer

5. Loc. cit.

6. J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge UP., 1999); vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (1999); vol. 3, *The First Decline and Fall* (2003).

describes Aeneas's betrayal of Dido as "singular profit" [7] in contradistinction to the "common profit," [8] the word commonly used for the Latin "*res publica*."

To sum up: In *The House of Fame* Chaucer seems to aim at a critique of some of the traditional models of, to use again Pocock's laconic and illuminating words, "an intellectual equipment which lacked means of explicating the succession of particulars in social and political time."

Whether *The Parliament of Fowls*, came after or before *The House of Fame* is a question about which scholars' opinions divide, but it is clear that they are closely related in term of structure as well as themes. Like *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls* is made up of three more or less distinct sections: beginning with (1) an abridged version of the *Somnium Scipionis*, which forms the first section and is followed by description of an imaginary garden. Within the garden there are two foci of significance: (2) one is the Temple of Venus where various types of tragic love stories are depicted, and (3) the other is the parliament of fowls, in which an avian debate is conducted on the issue of the marriage between male and female birds of different kinds (or avian social classes). [9] After an interesting and sometimes querulous discussion, the decision is entrusted to Nature, who, having intervened halfway, gives a singularly unhelpful decree that the couple in question must wait till next year. With that the poem closes in the communal singing of the avian chorus.

In the first section, an abridged version of the *Somnium Scipionis*, an emphasis is placed, as might be expected, on the passage that deals with the "*res pubulica*."

> All those who have saved, aided, or enlarged the commonwealth have a definite place marked off in the heavens where they may enjoy a blessed existence forever. Nothing that occurs on earth, indeed, is more gratifying to that supreme God who rules the whole universe than the establishment of the association and federation of men bound together

7. *The House of Fame*, p. 310.

8. For a fuller discussion of the idea, see Chapter 10 of the present volume: "Commune Profit" and Libidinal Dissemination in Chaucer.

9. The argument here and hereafter is based on what I set out in Chapter 10.

by principles of justice; which are called commonwealths.

Because it is an abridgement, Chaucer does not cite the passage itself but repeats instead the keyword "common profit." If we read this message using the formulae Pocock has provided us with, the structure of meaning can in the final analysis be categorized under the heading of "fortune + faith = providence," and thus it is judged to be incapable of "explicating the succession of particulars in social and political time." The justification of the *vita activa* (activities contributing to the common good) may look persuasive but it is easy to see that it is not an autonomous business of mundane affairs but ultimately predicated on divine supremacy. It may be interesting to note, however, that Petrarch (1307–74), approximately 40 years older than Chaucer, seems to have found in the same passage of the *Somnium Scipionis* something positive and productive. Drawing on Macrobius's *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis*, in which form it was usually read in the Middle Ages, Petrarch tries to legitimize the life of action on the same footing as the life of contemplation. Petrarch's is a forced logic that takes advantage of the Plotinian concept "political virtue" which he finds in Macrobius's *Commentary*.

> Now if the function and office of the virtues is to bless, and moreover, if it is agreed that political virtues do exist, then political virtues do make them [men of action] blessed. (*Epistolae de rebus familiaribus,* III, 12) [10]

Petrarch's reading in favour of the *vita activa* can serve as a good indication of the historical milieu of the age, which longs for some means of "explicating the succession of particulars in social and political time." "*Res publica*" or "the common profit" is a concept in want of social and political explication.

Returning to *The Parliament of Fowls* with this in mind, we are encountering something unexpected. The avian parliament may seem to promise a political explication, but the parliament is set in the amatory garden. The deities that preside over the scene are Venus and Nature. And this Nature confesses she has nothing to do with Reason. The fundamental principle, if any, seems to be that erotic drive in bodily nature that has no end but presentation of the species. As an attempt at a social and political explication, nothing could seem more retrograde. But this Chaucerian concern with nature and the bodily eros can suggest a different and possibly a creative critique on the formulae Pocock has given. In short, what if the term Nature was added in the present formulae? It is nothing new to pair Fortuna and Natura in medieval discourse, after all. What would become of the relationship, if any, between nature and virtue, nature and the common good, and so on.

In any event, I cannot say too much about the ineffable fortune that I had in encountering Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* over twenty years ago. By that seminal and superb work I found myself referred to the word "*arcanum imperii*" as I was reading Pocock reading Gibbon.

10. Quotations are from Joseph Fracassetti's edition (Florence, 1862); quotations in English translation are from Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri, I–VIII*, trans. A. S. Bemardo (New York, 1975).