9

From the House of Fame *to Politico-Cultural Histories*

At the unfinished end of the *House of Fame* we are left with a group of people in the moving house of rumour. In the variety of the walks of the life they occupy and in their tell-tale characteristics they inevitably remind us of, and seemingly anticipate, the world of the *Canterbury Tales*. Mundane scenes approximating in many respects to those of modem realism emerge out of the dream vision toward what appears to be its close. One might reasonably ask what is the significance of this move, particularly when these scenes at the end of the *House of Fame* are ostensibly lacking in any ontological foundation, and at the same time when the dream vision out of which they present themselves keeps referring, if obliquely, to such transcendental visions as Boethius's and Dante's? One way to put my tentative answer is that this Chaucerian move is a revolutionary attempt at opening up a political sphere called "commune profit." If it is characterized by ontological uncertainty, this uncertainty is a measure of the epistemological certainty with which tradition vests the transcendental visions.

I

Toward the end of Book II of the *House of Fame*, where the Eagle and Chaucer were in their cosmic ascent going through the last element, Chaucer the dreamer-poet was reminded of, or in his own word "thoughte" of, three *auctores* he had read. "And thoo thoughte y upon Boece" (972); "And than thoughte y on Mercian. /And eke on Ante-

claudian" (985–86). [1] Boethius, Martianus Capella and Alan of Lille, all belong to and form the tradition of the cosmic flight vision, where an allegorical subject-figure ventures an imaginative and symbolic ascent to heaven for the attainment of a transcendental ideal. In Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* Prudenita/Fronesis is in quest of the grand redemptive ideal for *homo novus*; [2] in Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*, Philologia for the acquisition of total, encyclopaedic knowledge; and in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, "Mens" (Mind) for the recorety and repossession of its true, eternal dwelling place. [3] A contrast between these grand flights and Chaucer's is immediately obvious: instead of allegorical personifications such as Mens, Philologia or Prudentia, Chaucer the individual dreamer-poet is carried off for the ascent, and the ascent itself is made not for some transcendental ideal but merely for a gift of a "tyding," which he is fortunate enough to be given an opportunity of acquiring. Chaucer's cosmic flight is to all intents and purposes an ironic and bathetic vision. But there is more than that.

When Chaucer the dreamer-poet "thoughte" on Boethius, Martianus Capella, and Alan of Lille there took place, I would argue, what can be called "a perspectival inversion of the transcendental." By this I mean the inversion of perspective from a theo- and cosmocentric transcendentalism to something like geocentric empiricism. Needless to say, for Alan, Martianus Capella and Boethius, the entire universe or cosmos with its proper harmony and authoritative design is assumed to supply a substantial basis for philosophico-allegorical fabulation and is anything but the object of experiential proof. In Chaucer's vision, however, this basic underlying principle is overturned and replaced with, as it were, an empiricist one of "seeing is believing":

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1. All quotations from Chaucer in this paper are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. L. D. Benson (Boston, 1987).
2. Cf. especially Richard H. Green, "Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*: Ascensus Mentis in Deum," *Annuale Medievale* 8 (1967): 3–16.
3. It may be controversial to take the protagonist of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* not as Boethius but as *mens*, but since Lady Philosophy's teaching consists in the recognition that the end of man is mind's self-recollection of its home and its self-identification with the transcendental god, there is reason to argue that the essential structure of the *De Consolatione* is to be construed in line with the Neo-Platonic tradition of the *ascensus mentis in deum or itinerarium mentis*. For this background, see Edmund Reiss, *Boethius* (Boston, 1982), pp. 147–53.

And than thoughte yon Marcian,
And eke on Anteclaudian,
That sooth was her description
Of alle hevenes region,
As fer as that y sey the preue;
Therefore y kan hem now beleve. (985–90; emphasis mine)

Personal experience rather than the bookish authority of knowledge, observable proof rather than invisible apriority, provide the basis for true recognition. As such the idea looks so seductively modem that it makes us almost unmindful of the power and authority of the *auctores*, which must be duly assumed if the intended humour is not to be lost on us. Chaucer's *recognition* of what he is actually seeing is, in the first place, predicated on his reading of the *auctores*: "thoughte y on Alan…" But, as it turns out, the validity of this vision is immediately relegated, by Chaucerian inversion, to the empiricist proof: the small world of subjectivity ("thoughte y") swallows up, in the last analysis, the transcendental macrocosm.

It is important to note here that this perspectival inversion is subtly accomplished and ingeniously implied in the functioning of the word "thoughte" (as both noun and verb). What is first recognized, i.e., taken cognizance of, through the traditional and authoritative representation (established by the *auctores*) of the universe, is in another moment put to subjective proof and authorization. The authority of traditional representation pales before the authorizing subject. The importance of this epistemological inversion, this replacement of suprapersonal authority with the personal, can be more fully appreciated if we go back some ten lines or so and think about the two occurences of the word "thought(e)." One is a verb and the other an English rendering of the Latin noun mens, one of the Boethian keywords:

And thoo *thoughte* y opon Boece.
That writ. "A *thought* may flee so hye
Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
To passen everych element.
And whan he hath so fer ywent,
Than may be seen behynde hys bak

Cloude"—and a1 thay y of spak. (972–78; emphasis mine.)

The juxtaposition, I believe, is deliberate and significantly related to the problem of "the inversion of the perspective." The second "thought" (973) here, ostensibly quoted and translated from Boethius, is in the original Latin *mens*. It is arguably an interesting question to ask why Chaucer did choose the English word "thought" rather than "minde" for translation. It could be that Chaucer's rendering as "thought" simply derives from the French *la pensée* as found in Jean de Meung's version of *De Consolatione Philosophiae*; [4] but one must not overlook the difference between Chaucer's "a thought" and rhe French "*la pensée*"—whether countable or not is in this particular instance is crucial. Besides, what matters is not the question of the provenance of the form of the rendering as such but its function and significance in comparison and reference to the original context. This brings us to the first *metrum* of Book IV of the *De Consolatione*, whose initial lines, as we have noted, are quoted by Chaucer himself upon seeing what this well-known metre makes him reminiscent of. The *metrum*, interestingly enough for our purposes, is in fact the *locus classicus* of "the inversion of perspective."

To put it briefly, the metre describes the ascent of the *mens* (mind) toward the furthest end of the universe and even beyond it onto the other side—the mind "leaves the furthest pole, /And stands on the outside of the swift upper air" (lines 16–17) [5] —where God reigns in his eternal, blissful kingdom. As typical of the *ascensus mentis in deum*, the ascent is specifically envisaged in the mode of reminiscence and characterized as a home-coming. The *mens*, once illuminated by the light of philosophy, will remember if darkly its rightful home in God and willingly seek to go back. The home-coming occasions or brings with it the inversion of perspective from geocentric to theocentric, from Fortune-dominant view to providential vision, or, alternatively, from mutable beings to eternal Being: the cosmos turned inside out, its centre replaced with its periphery. By virtue of the "mind" reminiscent—*mens memor*—of its true origin and home, eternity and totality and truth are to be identified in the tran-

scendental vision.

The Boethian *mens*, then, must reasonably be considered an attribute of God, whose extension in principle should be intelligible but is in practice only darkly graspable in the individual mind. According to the medieval system of epistemology, which consists of the three major types of perception and knowledge (*imagination, ratio/ratiocination, and intellegentia/intellectus*), the remembrance of things divine has nothing whatsoever to do with *imaginatio* and is even beyond the reach of *ratio*. It is only at the level of *intellengentia*—the mode of knowledge arguably farthest from what could be called empiricist objectivism—that the identification of Godly *mens* with one's own mind, hence true recognition /reminiscence has a chance to take place. [6]

The Boethian *mens*, in this way, is inseparably wedded to the Neo-Platonic doctrine of reminiscence and its concomitant vision of the perspectival inversion of the universe. Chaucer, I believe, was fully aware of these implications when he translated the word *mens* into "thought" and juxtaposed therewith "thoughte y." For when, in the passage following the above-mentioned quotation from Boethius, Chaucer expresses, perhaps in an humorous vein, his sense of confusion resulting from the excess of spirituality he unexpectedly feels in himself it must be assumed that the whole problematic of the Boethian *mens* is on his mind:

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4. References to Jean's *Li Livres de Confort* are to the edition by V. L. Dedeck-Héry in *Medieval Studie*s 14 (1952): 165–275.

5. References to Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* are to H. F. Stewart's edition and translation in the Loeb Classical Library (Mass: Cambridge, 1918).

6. Cf. Lady Philosophy's discussion (in Book IV, pr. vi.) on the distinction between Providence and Fate. Explanation is made on the analogy of "a number of spheres turning about the same centre," whose "innermost one approaches the simplicity of middleness and is a sort of pivot for the rest." And "in a similar manner, that which is furthest separated from the principal mind [*prima mens*] is entangled in the tighter meshes of fate, and a thing is more free from fate the more closely it moves towards the centre of all things." This set of concentric spheres naturally reminds us of its archetype, the structure of the grand cosmic design, but through the divine vision set forth by Philosophy its centre has already been replaced by the true one, the *prima mens*. This spherical inversion is a matter of epistemology and according to Philosophy, can only be accomplished through the exercise of *intellectus*: "Therefore as reasoning [*ratiocination*] is to understanding [*intellectus*], as that which becomes is to that which is, as time is to eternity, as the circle is to that which its centre, so is the moving course of fate to the unmoving simplicity of providence."

The striking metaphor of the concentric spheres, used by Lady Philosophy to explain the central importance of the *prima mens* and providence and of its recognition through *intellectus*, seems to me to find its ironical echo in the doctrine of airy transmission propounded by Chaucer's Eagle (782–821).

"Y wot we1 y am here,
But wher in body or in gost
I not, ywys, but God, thou wost."
For more clere entendement
Nar me never yit ysent. (980–84; emphasis mine)

"Clere entendement," which is then sent him, i.e., to his mind or "thought," is naturally suprapersonal it is even not difficult to construe it as some perception gained through *intellegentia*, at whose level the true theocentric vision is considered to be intelligible. Put differently, his own "thought," delimited as it is by the body and its sense perception, is disturbed and attracted by the Boethian *mens*, another if totally different "thought," and to a degree infused with its spirituality. But not so far as to subvert his own personal integrity. As we have seen, in the immediately following passage (985–90) his kind of empiricist principle exerts itself subtly to engulf the transcendental vision.

This is a case of Chaucerian irony *par excellence*. The Boethian inversion of the universe is reinverted. with the result that the ultimate theocentric vision, which is to be accomplished through the *men's* recollection of and return to its true. eternal home, collapses into merely a personal view of empiricist proof. The word "thought" actually is indicative of this inversion of inversion, and it is precisely by the ironical and clever manipulation of the word "thought" that this inversion raised to the second power is worked out.

II

It thus turns out that. far from being merely a matter of translation, the Chaucerian rendering of *mens* as "thought" is concerned with the whole question of *Weltanschauung*. It has a metaphysical dimension and significance. This will be given further confirmation when we reflect on yet another version of "thought," i.e., the Chaucerian rendering of Dante's *mente*. This significant Italian word, usually interpreted and translated as "memory," stems of course from the Latin *mens*. The passage that contains another instance of "thought" appears in the proem to Book II of the *House of Fame*:

O Thought, that wrot a1 that I mette,
And in the tresorye hyt shette
Of my brayn, now shal men se
Yf any vertu in the be
To tellen al my drem aright. (523–26)

This in turn, as is well known, is ostensibly based on Dante's invocation to the Muses, Genius, and Memory at the beginning of Canto II of the *Inferno*:

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
O mente, che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate. (7–9)

(O Muses, O high Genius, now help me;
Memory, that has inscribed what I saw,
Here be shewn thy nobleness.) [7]

The second line of the tercet, as is shown above in Chaucer's version, reads, "O Thought, that wrot al that I mette" (523). *Mente* becomes "thought" and *vidi* is replaced by "I mette" (dreamt). Nothing to my mind is more eloquent than these two changes in showing Chaucer's attitude to Dante. For, be it *mente/vidi* or "thought"/"mette", these pairs of words are indicative of the different visionary framework in which each poem unfolds itself. These sets of words are a symbolic expression of their respective epistemological positions. [8]

This holds true especially for the work of Dante. Pertinently drawing our attention to the importance of the function of "memory" in Dante, Peter Dronke says "For Dante the unswerving truth of his memory [i.e., *mente*] is vital, since, however much literary elaboration we may have to

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7. Quotations from Dante are from *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. C. S. Singleton (N. J: Princeton, 1973.

8. For the similar semantic analysis between *The Divine Comedy* and *Troilus and Crisseyde* in reference to "festa" and "feste," see my "'Hevene' in Criseyde: Dante's 'Festa' and Chaucer's 'Feste,'" in *Philologia Anglica: Festschrift for Professor Yoshio Terasawa* (Tokyo, 1988), pp. 299–305.

reckon with, this begins from the visionary perception [i.e., *vidi*] which had ignited his mind and which it mattered to him intensely to record aright." [9] The emphasis on "the visionary perceptions" and "his memory"—*mente* and *vidi*—has much to do with the nature and structure of his vision, what Erich Auerbach calls "figural realism." It is in this specific mode of figural realism that Dante, a concrete historically unique individual, encounters another concrete, historically unique individual and such instances of encounter are taken to fulfil the *figurae* of the world history. "For Dante," Auerbach says, "the literal meaning or historical reality of a figure stands in no contradiction to its profounder meaning," but precisely "figures' it; the historical reality is not annulled, but confirmed and fulfilled by the deeper meaning." [10] What Dante saw in person (*vidi*), however daunting, was a certain unique historical reality— a vision comparable only to those of Aeneas and St. Paul (cf. Inf., II, 31–32)—and at the same time was, without losing its unique status, in itself the fulfillment of the *figura* of divine history. That is why the *mente* and its true recording are so vital.

As we might expect, this is by no means the case with Chaucer. If he makes an invocation to "Thought," that is, "Memory," it is merely to record what he *dreamt* of ("mette"). Recording one's own dream aright may indeed have had its proper use and significance in the Middle Ages just as it may certainly have in the post-Freudian era; but a dream is one thing, and the unique grand vision is another. An inevitable comparison with Dante will suggest that Chaucer was making here an oblique but telling critique of Dante's grand vision of figural realism. What Dante saw in person from *Inferno* through *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso* culminated in "the shadow of the blessed realm (*l'ombra del beato regno*).":

> O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
> tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
> segnata nel mio capo io manifesti, …
>
> (O divine Virtue. if thou dost so far lend thyself
> to me, that I make manifest the shadow of

9. *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 3.
10. "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Mass: Gloucester, 1973), p. 73.

the blessed realm imprinted on my brain, …)

(*Paradiso*, Canto I, 22–24)

It is in order to express or record "the shadow of the blessed realm" which is "imprinted on [his] brain," that he makes an invocation to the *divina virtù*. The solemn invocation is a measure of the transcendental rarity of his vision. Again. Chaucer does not fail to take advantage of this passage as a subtext. When he alludes to it at the beginning of the Book III Chaucer makes full use of it for his own purposes.

> And yif, devyne vertu, thow
> Wilt helpe me to shewe now
> That in myn hed ymarked ys—
> Loo, that is for to menen this,
> The Hous of Fame for to descryve…   (1101–5)

The Dantesque august invocation to the *divina virtù* gears our horizon of expectation into a higher key, and we are on tiptoe to see what is *segnata nel suo capo*, what could be tantamount to "the blessed realm." There is a pause, and the pause is an eloquent indication of the bathos we are going to be given. In place of the transcendental "blessed realm" we are given "the House of Fame." The House of Fame, as we remember, situated "Betwixen hevene and erthe and see" (715), must confine itself by its nature within the boundary of the airy region; Fama's feathers are different in kind from those of Philosophy. The "blessed realm" is the total figural vision Dante actually saw in person; the *House of Fame* is essentially a mutable image Chaucer dreamt of in his dream. The difference, indicative in itself of the critical distance Chaucer seems to have taken toward Dante's vision, can hardly be overemphasized, and this critical distance. I believe, is of a piece with the mental attitude which brings him to translate *mente* into "thought."

Chaucer translated both the Dantean *mente* and Boethian *mens* equally into "thought," and put this "thought" in juxtaposition with the all-subsuming "thought" of the empiricist "I." To put both *mente* and *mens* as one and the same "thought" can be justified with reference to the former's verbal and doctrinal kinship: they share, if differently in degree, the Neo-Platonic doctrine of reminiscence as well as the same

verbal root. In both instances, *mens* and *mente*, it is not the case chat the subject remembers but rather that memory reminds the subject. In both the Boethian *Itinerarium mentis* and the Dantesque *Itinerario della mente* the subject is to be formed subject to the transcendental discourse of memory. Chaucer seems to have implied that both journeys were too metaphysical and high-flown for him, and should and could be rendered more down-to-earth and made subject to his own subjective proof. The Chaucerian rendering of "thought" is thus a strategy to deprive the *mens* and *mente* of their transcendental property, i.e., "memory." The strategy necessitates a whole perspectival revolution. By reversing the Boethian inversion and by replacing the Dantean "blessed realm" with the House of Fame and the House of Rumour, Chaucer sets out on a journey that entails the reversal of the transcendental. One might be tempted to say that the Chaucerian pseudo-ultimate vision, represented by the revolving house of rumour, situates itself *au-delà* de eternity. The whole upshot, eventually, is a peculiarly modern outlook, the groundless and frivolous world of Fame/Fortune/Rumour—the outlook essentially in need of foundation and authorization. [11]

III

What does such an epistemological outlook have to say about matters political and cultural! In broad outline this much perhaps can be said: it is a move away from authoritarian totality and trans-cultural unity, going out toward arbitrary marginalities, uncertain particularities. What is notably lacking in this politico-cultural outlook is, in short, an authorizing apparatus which enables the "common profit" to effectuate itself,

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11. J.A.W.. Bennett deals with the "thought" passages in his informative *Chaucer's Book of Fame: An exposition of "The House of Fame"* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 53–55; 90–92. He discusses, however, neither the doctrine of reminiscence nor the significance of the translated English word as such. But his overall critical assessment is in keeping with mine: referring to the Boethian *metrum* (Book IV. m.i) Chaucer spontaneously quoted while flying high, Bennett says, "Ultimately he [Chaucer] will come in thought to the soul's true country; and at this height he will see that the triumph of earthly tyrants is fleeting for they are exiled from this fair abode. This will nor be Chaucer's inference or emphasis—if he would not ape Dante, still less would he mimic the reverend Boethiu—and the realm of Fame lies far below that of Boethius's 'lord of kinges' (*regum…dominus*)" (p. 91).

while at the same time steering clear of facile authoritarianism, be it papal or monarchic. Such an authorizing apparatus seems to have been thinkable in theory and even available in part. I am thinking here of such instances of the republican form of elective government as Marsilio of Padua's or of the monarchical form of parliamentary representation in the English constitution. But Chaucer's concern seems to have been more foundational. And this problem, how to open up the social and political field, the "common profit," which is left by the *House of Fame* for further consideration, is precisely. I believe, what the *Parliament of Fowls* goes on to pick up for more elaboration and deliberation. [12]

Although the idea of the "common profit," as the context of the *Parliament of Fowls* clearly indicates, comes from the *Somnium Scipionis*, yet it seems worthwhile and suggestive to see the term through a Boethian filter. That it could be possible is because the *De Consolatione* virtually quotes from the *Somnium Scipionis* the very passage that deals with the thematic complex of "common profit"/"fame." Furthermore, we are fortunate enough to be able to read the passage in question, thanks to Chaucer and Jean de Meung's translations, in both medieval English and Old French.

In his amply abridged English version of the *Somnium Scipionis* at the beginning of the *Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer writes that Africanus urges Scipio to look to the "common profit" because only he who has devoted

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In presenting Chaucer the revolutionary—in the sense that implies the perspectival inversion—or political Chaucer—in the sense in which he tries to cultivate the political sphere as against the comtemplative domain—I have little in common with B. G. Koonce's *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in "The House of Fame'* (N.J: Princeton, 1966). Koonce contends that "ultimately, it is in the light of the allegorical meanings and techniques common to both the *Comedy* and the *House of Fame* that we must assess the nature and significance of Chaucer's use of Dante. Once we have done so, it should become apparent that the importance of his imagination lies not in the outward rhetorical features of the *Comedy* but in those inward patterns of structure and meaning which point to the Christian content of his own vision" (p. 10). I believe, however, that Chaucer's vision differs not in degree but in kind from Dante's, which is, as we have argued, uniquely distinguished by "figural realism." It is a reductionism, if respectable, to produce meaning in reference to "the Christian content," and, I believe, it is precisely against such way of seeing things that Chaucer makes imaginative endeavours in the *House of Fame*.

12. My paper "Libidinous Dissemination in Chaucer," which I read at the Seventh International Congress of the New Chaucer Society (8 August 1990, Canterbury) deals with these and related issues in the *Parliament of Fowls*.

himself to the "common profit" is to attain the blissful place. What is translated as the "common profit" reads in the original Latin either *res publica*, *partria* or *civitas*, and collation with the original does not seem of much help in identifying the immediate provenance of the term, "common profit." However, if one looks at the section in the *De Consolatione* which deals with "fame/glory" (Book II. p. vii)—the section where Boethius himself alludes to the Macrobian passage in question—together with both Jean de Meung and Chaucer's translations, one can gain some insight as to the provenance and significance of the term "common profit."

The following, in brief, is what we read about Lady Philosophy's lesson on fame: "that [fame] is the only thing that could attract minds which are naturally outstanding, but not yet brought to the perfecting of their virtues to their finished conditions: namely the desire for glory and the reputation of having deserved well of the state [*res publica*]." This *res publica* in Boethius, as a matter of fact, reads "profyt of the comune" in Chaucer and *commun profit* in Jean de Meung. Chances are not slight that an intertexual association and fusion took place in Chaucer's imagination between *Somnium Scipionis* and *De Consolatione* by reason of their close proximity in themes, i.e., those of fame and "common profit."

But no less noteworthy is the difference in the contextual implications between the two: while the *Somnium* is largely, if not totally, positive about the devotion to the *res publica* and its reward, the *De Consolatione* is through and through negative, relegating them in the last analysis *sub specie aeternitatis*. The meritocratic world of fame or the civic state structured by the system of *cursus honorum*, on whose foundation rests the republican outlook of the *Somnium Scipionis*, hence also the ideal of "commune profit," will eventually lose its positive value in the Boethian transcendental vision. At the level of *imagination* a desire for fame contingent on good services to the country (or "commune profit") can indeed be regarded as, to use Milton's famous phrase, "the last infirmity of the noble mind," but at the level of *intellengentia*, it is nothing but a false desire for non entity. The result is that the typical ideal of republican nobility unfolded in the *Somnium* comes to be deprived through the Boethian philosophical filter of its metaphysical authorization.

The Chaucerian world view, characteristically visible in the *House of Fame*, is in its essential structure an inversion of the Boethian transcendental vision, a vision which in itself contains the *locus classicus* of perspectival inversion. Through his attempt at inversion raised to the second power, Chaucer opens up the field for his politico-cultural history/story. The field, the "commune profit," is thus in want and need of authorization and organization, politically as well as ontologically. And it is reasonable to expect that Chaucer's way of doing this will be by narration, by means of story-telling. Behind such efforts, it must be remembered, there always lurks the haunting *problematique* of the Boethian transcendental vision.