10

"Common Profit" and Libidinal Dissemination in Chaucer

In one of his *Epistolae de rebus familiaribus* (III, 12) Petrarch gave a piece of advice to a young man who had decided to go in for politics, abandoning his former aspiration to take orders. [1] The young man, unknown to us except by the name of Marco Genovese, had apparently enjoyed a long acquaintance with Petrarch. [2] As we can infer from the letter, he had long since expressed his firm intention of going into a religious life. But it now turned out that he had changed his mind and confessed, probably with some anxiety, his decision to engage himself in politics. [3] The confession must have been made with the hope of obtaining from Petrarch a reassurance that his volte-face from the venerable *vita contemplativa* to the *vita activa* was not necessarily a shameless deed but something permissible and even legitimate. As might be expected, Petrarch understood well the dilemma and uneasiness the young man was undergoing and offered him an authoritative, if not straightforward, assurance that the active career of the statesman was no less important and praise-worthy than that of clergyman. Although he could not say so without making it a proviso that he (Marco) "would love God in all cir-

1. Epistola XII, Frenciscus Petrarca Marco Suo S.P.D., which is subtitled "Dissuadet amicum a votis monasticis, illumque ad patriae commoda procuranda adhortatur." 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).

2. Cf. "I gladly and eagerly hasten to open the doorway of my friendship. Why do I say 'open'

cumstances, that [he] would adhere to Him, worship Him, and long for Him with [his] entire mind," the thrust of Petrarch's advice is in the direction of reassurance.

> Do not despair, therefore, that… your concern for your citizens, which Requires so much of your time, appears opposed to that divine grace which you seek. Persevere, proceed, do not hesitate, do not abide nor fail in your own salvation. He is present who foresees all your time infallibly and eternally (regardless of how you arrange it).
> (Tu igitur ne desperes,… quasi tuorum cura civium quam gens, divinae, quam petis gratiae, sil adversa. Perge, age; ne titubes, ne subsistas, neu saluti tuae desis. Aderit ille qui tempus tuum, quod, quale disposueras, nondum venit, praevidit infallibiter ab aeterno.)

Petrarch's reassurance consists in the idea that even by virtue of the political life (*vita activa*) the soul can attain the heavenly beatitude which is commonly taken to be reserved for the contemplative life. In proof and support of this proposition Petrarch draws on the authority of not only Cicero (*Somnium Scipionis*), of which later, but also Plotinus. As to the latter Petrarch writes,

> It has been established, according to the opinion of Plotinus, that one becomes blessed and is cleansed not only through the penitential virtues hut also through the political ones.
> (constetque, iuxta Plotini sententiam, non purgatoriis modo prugatique iarm animi (*sic*), sed politicis quoque virtutibus beatum fieri.)

when more than four years ago I offered it to you at your own most welcome request? I recognize my Marco, and I embrace him with delight in these letters of yours as after a long silence he rightfully returns to me… I always hoped that from the young man you were you would become a great man. But I confess that I did not believe that it could happen so soon" (III, 12): Bernardo, *Rerum familiarium*, English trans., p. 145. It bas been plausibly inferred that this Marco is none other than Marco Portonario of Genoa, and that the letter is written about 1340. See E. H. Wilkins, *Petrarch's Eight Years in Milan* (Mass.: Cambridge, 1958), pp. 237–38. For this reference I am indebted to R. J. Lokaj.

3. "I also recall that most glowing proposal of yours which in those early days of your friendship in extended discourse you trustingly revealed to me. I do not regret that now that proposal is either modified or, hopefully, merely postponed… Do not despair, therefore, tha… your concern for your citizens, which requires so much of your time, appears opposed to that divine grace which you seek": Ibid.

By "the penitential virtues" (*purgatoriae virtutes*) Petrarch means, as the context suggests, essentially the contemplative (as against the active) virtues, that is, the virtues through which men of leisure such as priests or philosophers seek to be at one with the divine mind or God. Petrarch's point is that the virtues which help men attain heavenly beatitude are no monopoly of the contemplative ones but are inclusive of the "political virtues" (*politicae virtutes*), and that these active virtues are as much worthy of life-long commitment.

The conception of these two virtues—*virtutes purgatoriae et politicae*— is as interesting as their distinction is illuminating, and one is naturally tempted to ask from where Petrarch actually took these ideas. Despite his explicit mentioning of the authority it is obvious that Petrarch, with no command of Greek, did not obtain this view from Plotinus directly. Rather, as was usual with the medieval writer, his immediate source must be sought in one of the Latin *auctores*, in this instance, Macrobius's *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis*. This is easily confirmed not merely by such characteristic vocabulary as "the penitential virtues" (*purgatoriae virtutes*) and the "political virtues" (*politicae virtutes*), which were actually used by Macrobius himself in his *Commentary* as expressly Plotinian terminology; it is also confirmed by the fact that the very passage in *Somnium Scipionis* that occasioned Macrobius to adduce Plotinus in reference to these specific virtues is also quoted by Petrarch in the letter in question. That is to say, behind Petrarch's advice to the young man, which purports to put the way of *vita activa* on the same footing as that of *vita contemplativa* as conductive to heavenly beatitude, there existed the powertul and useful medium or the Macrobian-Ciceronian tradition.

The passage in *Somnium Scipionis*, on and around which Macrobius constructed an influential tradition, and which Petrarch quoted in his letter in question—saying, "Heavenly is that saying of my Africanus in Cicero's work (Notum est apud Ciceronem coeleste illud Africani mei dictum)"—is veritably l a celebrated one. It is the passage where Africanus, speaking to the young Scipio, reveals the significance of the commonwealth and the reward waiting for those who have devoted themselves to the commonwealth.

> 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 associations and federations of men bound together by principle of justice: which are called commonwealths.
> (omnibus qui patriam conservaverint adiuverint auxerint, certum esse in caelo definitum locum ubi beati aevo sempiterno fruantur. nihil est enim illi principi deo qui omnem mundum regit, quod quidem in terris fiat, acceptius quam conciliacoetusque hominum iure sociati, quaecivitates a~pellantur.) [4]

Macrobius, commenting on this passage, starts with what can be called the philosophers' tradition: "Virtues alone make one blessed and only through them is one able to attain the name. Hence those who maintain that virtues are found only in men who philosophize openly affirm that none are blessed except philosophers (solae faciunt virtutes beatum, nullaque alia quisquam via hoc nomen adipiscitur. unde qui aestimant nullis nisi philosophantibus inesse virtutes, nullos praeter philosophos beatos esse pronuntiant)." While philosophers, Macrobius continues, attribute four functions to these virtues, i.e. prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice, these virtues, being essentially philosophical, are all contemplative virtues and thus attainable, in theory, only through the way of *vita contemplativa*. This simple syllogistic argument—virtues are of philosophers, philosophers are contemplative, therefore virtues are contemplative—would not be particularly illuminating were it not for an interesting qualification about those philosophic-contemplativevirtues. Marcrobius, importantly, hastens to add that those philosophic-contemplative virtues are too stringently defined. For "according to the liminations of so stringent a classification the rulers of the commonwealth would be unable to attain blessedness (ita fit ut secundum hoc tam rigidae definitionis abruptum rerum i publicarum rectores beati esse non possint)." For the man of action like "the rulers of the commonwealth" leading the life of action (*vita activa*) philosophizing or doing philosophy

4. Quotations from *Somnium Scipionis* and Macrobius's *Commentary* are all from *Mocrobius*, vol. II, ed. J. Willis (Teubner, 1970). Quotations in translation are from *Mocrobius' Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W. H. Stahl (New York, 1952; 1966).

is a pure luxury, which can be enjoyed only in scholarly leisure (*otium*), not in activities of any negotiation (*negotium*). But there have been men of action virtuous enough to attain blessedness. How should we deal with and define these non-philosopher's virtues? Macrobius's strategy in answering this question is in line with the typical medieval tradition, offering a conceptual classification and drawing on an authority. What he proposes on the authority of Plotinus is the view based "on the proper and natural classification (vera et naturali divisionis ratione)," according to which each of the above-mentioned four philosophical virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice) is to subsume four different types or *genera*. These four types are "the political virtues (politicae virtutes)." "the cleansing virtues (purgatoriae virtutes)," "the virtues of the purified mind (virtutes animi iam purgati)," and "the exemplary virtues (virtutes exemplares)," and through this analytical subdivision the four cardinal virtues are categorized into sixteen different kinds. For our purposes, these four types are of specific importance and duly require some explanation.

The political virtue is the one by which "the good man is first made lord of himself and then the ruler of the state who is just and prudent in his regard for human welfare (vir bonus primum sui atque inde rei publicae rector efficitur, iuste ac prodive gubernans, humana non deserens)." What is expected of the man of action is self-discipline in private and fair-dealings in public affairs. The second one, the cleansing type of virtue, belongs to the man of leisure leading a contemplative life, and is found in those who have resolved to cleanse themselves from any contamination with the body in order to mingle solely with the divine. Emphasis is placed, one must note here, on the mind's move away from the body on the assumption of the separation of the soul from the body. The third, the type of the purified mind, is the one in which the mind has already been completely cleansed from all taints of this world and has become so attached to the divine Mind that by imitating it the human mind keeps an ever-lasting covenant with it. Attention must be drawn to the complete disembodiment of the mind and its self-reflexive attempts to identify with the divine Mind. The fourth, the exemplary type, is the one discernible in the accomplished spiritual state where the human mind is in perfect accord and unity with the divine Mind. Such is the "proper and natural classification (*vera et naturalis divisionis ratio*)."

Now in this "proper and natural classification" there are two points

particularly to be noted. First, the discrepancy which exists not in degrees but in kind between the first and the remaining three types: while the political type belongs to the this-worldly affairs of *vita activa*, the other three concern the spiritual sphere of *vita contemplativa*. To put it differently, the last three have to do with different degrees of disembodiment whereas the first political type, in contrast, is evolved in the body, be it natural or political. Secondly, it is easy to see that the last three types form a Neoplatonic system, in which the types of the virtues are classified according to the extent to which the mind becomes purified and purged of bodily forces and influences, thereby approaching the divine Mind or *Nous* so as to be identified with it. It is characterized by the ladder structure, in which the end of the mind which, Neoplatonically speaking, comes to the same thing as the end of individual human existence, hence the end of the virtues—is defined as an attempt to regain its proper and true homeland, as it recollects its way back to the divine *Nous*. It is essentially a version of the topos generally known as "*itinerarium mentis*," wherewith the end of individual human existence is taken to be the mind's return to its true *Heimat*, which is to be eternally united with God.

In accordance with his strategy in the *Commentary*, however, Macrobius sets store not so much by the differentiation of the virtues as by the equal efficiency of the virtues in attaining heavenly beatitude. Heavenly beatitude, which the Neoplatonic tradition held as the monopoly of philosophers, is now made equally open to the man of action, and this revolutionary turn was made possible by virtue of "the political virtue."

> 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 me blessed.
> (si ergo hoc est officium et effectus virtutum, beare, constat autem et politicae esse virtutes: igitur et politicis efficiuntur beati.)

Through the introduction of "the proper and natural classification" of virtues Macrobius aims at an egalitarian realignment of virtues, whereby the powerful philosopher-oriented tradition, comprising such value-laden ideas as mind, contemplation/consciousness, identity, recognition and the like, is demoted from sovereignty. On the other hand, the

"political virtues," bound up as they are with practical, mundane affairs, are now valorized as equally efficient toward the attainment of heavenly beatitude. The principle of the body and embodiment, which underlines the "political virtues," stands in sharp contrast to the principle of the mind and disembodiment, which largely characterizes the philosophical tradition of virtues. And this contrast in the two diametrically opposite principles cannot be left as a mere contrast but, for obvious reasons, is theoretically a big contradiction. (Without exaggeration, it is one of the Big Questions of human beings.) Macrobius's strategy consists in glossing over this tremendous theoretical contradiction by the authoritative introduction of the "proper and natural classification." If the "political virtues" are to be made legitimate, it is at the cost of theoretical consistency. The two distinct entities of body and soul, with their opposing orientations, embodiment and disembodiment respectively, can by no means be easily reconciled.

Perhaps one cannot lay too much stress on the latent price Macrobius has to pay for the legitimization of the "political virtues," particularly in the overall Neoplatonic framework. The price includes the theoretical clarity with which the mind-body problematic is to be dealt with. If the philosophical virtues are traditionally in possession of their spiritual and legitimate domain in which to exercise their discipline of disembodiment, the "political virtues," on the other hand, do not enjoy their proper domain. By "their proper domain" I mean the kind of public sphere where the body, whether natural or political, is largely legitimate in its own right, or at least, nor defined essentially in its negative relationships with the philosophical virtues. An old adage that the body should be well under the control of the soul does not solve the problem because it is, in its essentials, based on spiritual reductionism. Due consideration must be given to the motives and initiatives of the body. In short, what is at stake as regards the "political virtues" is the legitimization of the body—the legitimization in particular of the body as it unfolds itself in its public domain.

My proposition is that this problematic field for the "political virtues"—what I would like to call with Jiirgen Habermas "the public sphere" (*Oeffentl-lichkeit*) with its suggestive gestures of creation and opening-up—shares structural and thematic similarities with what is called the "commune profit" in Chaucer. [5] A set of problems arising from

the legitimization of the "political Virtues," it seems to me, stands us in good stead in approaching such a complex issue as the "commune profit."

In his letter to Marco the would-be statesman, Petrarch assured him of the legitimacy of the "political virtues" on the strength of the Plotinian-Macrobian system, which in effect adroitly collapsed the vital distinction of the contemplative and the active. The distinction, if clearly made, would have given birth to a whole set of problems from epistemological to ontological, from metaphysical to physical. In an attempt to open up and demonstrate "the public sphere" as a valid ground for salvation history, however, Petrarch entrusted the "political virtues" with the same power as the other, contemplative virtues possessed. But neither the nature of the "public sphere," which was a precondition for the "political virtues" to be effective, nor their functional relations were taken into account. Consciously or unconsciously, Petrarch bypassed the legitimization problem of both the body and body politic.

The problem of the legitimization of the body politic, to be sure, is one of the major issues of medieval political philosophy or rather political theology, to follow Ernst Kantorowicz's, or for that matter Spinoza's apt designation. However, it is not my intention here to deal with the matter from this angle. [6] Rather, my own concern is broadly with the question of the body nature of the body politic.

The Macrobian system of virtues, as we have seen, with its specific

5. This problematic of opening up the social and political field seems to me the one which the *House of Fame* left Chaucer for further elaboration. See my "From the *House of Fame* to Politico-Cultural Histories," in *Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. T. Takamiya and R. Beadle (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 45–54. It is interesting to note that the same problematic is given another elaboration in the *Knight's Tale*, this time, in terms of "the contemplative Palamon" and "'the active Arcite." For this, see Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Active Arcite, Contemplative Palamon," *JEGP* 26 (1927): 285–93. My thanks are due to Jerome Mandel, one of the co-participants of the J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, who rightly alerted me to the presence of this article.

   It is perhaps not impertinent here to confess that it was J. A. W. Bennett who first brought my attention to the perplexing charm of the *Parlement of Foules* when I was an undergraduate student of Spenser in oneof theJapanese universities. It was in his erudite book on the *Parlement* that I was first introduced to Macrobius and Alanus.

6. For seminal studies on this issue, see Margaret Schlauch's "Chaucer's Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants," *Speculum* 20 (1945): 133–56 and Paul A. Olson's "The *Parlement of Foules*: Aristotle's Politics and the Foundations of Human Society," *SAC* 2 (1989): 53–69.

emphasis on the "political virtues" provided Petrarch with the occasion to open up the public sphere, the field for *vita activa*, which had no legitimacy in its own right but was justified insofar as it functioned as a passage toward spiritual purification. If this is the case, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the same problematic—that is, the problematic centering around the legitimization issue of the public sphere—finds its echo in what Chaucer is concerned with at the beginning of the *Parlement of Foules*. What I am hinting at is, of course, the theme of the "commune profit," the public field for fame and *vita activa*. Such thematic correspondence, it is true, comes as no surprise since they both, implicitly in Petrarch's case and explicitly in Chaucer's, share the same source or *auctor*, Macrobius. But what is really interesting for our purposes, however, is the different response each of them shows toward the same problematic. Facing the legitimization issue of the public sphere, the "commune profit," Chaucer and Petrarch seem to have taken different paths. At the risk of oversimplification, it is Chaucer's way to conduct his poetic deliberations on the principle of body and embodiment as against mind and disembodiment—i.e. taking fully into consideration the natural causes of the body as well as the quasi-natural autonomy of the body politic—whereas Petrarch's is essentially the way of disembodiment, sublimating and spiritualizing the matter of body after the grand model of the *itinerarium mentis*, the mind's journey back to God.

Now the *itinerarium mentis* is a topos characterized by the mind's quest for its ultimate end, which is the divine Mind as well as its true home. The mind's quest is a home-coming journey, recollecting its way backward. The end of the mind is considered to be the recognition and overcoming of limitations imposed on it by the body, time and space, and in so doing to accomplish its home-coming in the eternal, true reality. The destination, the ultimate end, is God, who is variously described as "the divine mind" (*divina mens*) or *nous* (Macrobius) or "*unum, bonum, simplex, esse*" (Boethius). The end, toward which the mind aspires and which it desires to attain, is a beatific vision where it is at one with its true Self, the divine Mind. (You may call it "Logos," if you like.) Desire for God, in this instance, is structured by the principle of identity: the mind takes pleasure in re-cognition, self-identification and reunion. And the setting in which this dramatic scene of anagnorisis is accomplished is in the theatre of the mind, i.e. the contemplative mode.

Now if there is mind's desire for self-identification, wanting to be at one with its true Self, there is in the same vein the body's desire, which as far as desire is concerned is probably more authentic than the mind's. The body's desire, however, when compared with the mind's, possesses neither a self-identifying orientation nor a proper and definite end of its own. Dissemination perhaps is the proper word to describe its movements. It is never structured by the principle of identity, and self-recognition is a word entirely alien to the body. Unlike the mind, the body lacks its own theatre where its desires take their forms and act out the scenes. For the body to be perceived at all the existence of the mind is a pre-requisite, and to the mind's eye the body presents itself always already as difference or, to use another fashionable concept, as Other. Hence the perennial question of how to deal with the Other and Its desire. The typical and simplest answer to this question is to put the Other and Its desire under the control of the mind. The scene is in the theatre of the mind *sub specie contemplativa*, and it is directed under the hegemony of the identity principle.

To come back to Chaucer's "commune profit": It is precisely from under this hegemony of the mind's self-identifying process that the field for the "political virtues," what Chaucer calls the "commune profit," wins its own justification and legitimacy. The opposite formative principles, that of identity and that of difference, are yoked together in the collapse of the epistemological distinction between the contemplative and the active. The "commune profit," the product of identity and difference, therefore, is a composite of incompatible elements, an entity contradictory in nature.

Such a conceptual structure of contradiction may well remind us of the paragon of the genre, namely, "love." It is characteristic of love to be bittersweet as well as being at once earthly and heavenly. And more than anything else, it concerns both body and soul. Seen in this light, it seems no mere coincidence that the Chaucerian reduction of the *Somnium Scipionis,* which emphasizes, by unusual repetition (47; 75), [7] the word and concept of the "commune profit," is immediately preceded by the reference to love, "the dredful joye" (3). The reference to love as a symbol

7. Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987). The number in brackets denotes the line number.

of structured contradiction at the beginning of the *Parlement of Foules* can be read as a precursor of the similar constitutional contradiction that is to appear in the concept of the "commune profit."

However, the attempt at cultivating the field of the "commune profit" in its own right, the attempt, that is to say, at opening up "the public sphere" for the actualization of the "political virtues" on the plane of the body and body politic, the attempt to justify the way of *vita activa* to God, having as little recourse as possible to Neoplatonic spiritual sublation, the attempt which I presume was among the theoretical possibilities Chaucer, after having read the *Somnium Scipionis* with "Macrobye" (111), must have been led to think of, calls for as a preliminary step an investigation into the nature of the body, particularly its main driving force, desire. And this, as I understand it, is precisely what is undertaken in the part that follows the *Somnium Scipionis* section in the *Parle ment of Foules*, i.e. the enclosed garden which contains as its symbolic monument and event respectively the Temple of Venus and Nature's parliament.

Africanus leads the way, as you remember, and fades out, leaving Chaucer the poet of the dream vision alone in front of the garden gate. Africanus's guidance can be interpreted as merely an associational literary hang-over from the *Somnium Scipionis*. Logically speaking, however, he is to carry Chaucer over from unwished-for knowledge ("I hadde thyng which that I nolde" [90]) to what he wants to know ("I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde" [91]). Now it is safe to assume that unwished-for knowledge has to do with the doctrinal vision set forth by Africanus of self-dedication to the "commune profit." That Africanus himself acts as a guide from this vision to another vision, which should unfold, at least in its intention, what Chaucer really wants to know, suggests that the latter vision, too, retains some relationship, if tangential, with Africanus the man and his opinion.

And here again, it is perhaps not irrelevant to recall what Petrarch has to say and write about Africanus in the letter in question and elsewhere. There is no better way to indicate how much Petrarch admired Scipio Africanus than to witness the existence of the epic *Africa* he devoted to him. For Petrarch Africanus as a preserver of the ordered state is, as one authority puts it, "the most perfect exemplar of the cardinal virtues offered byantiquity." [8] But above all, for Petrarch this Africanus is insep-

arably associated with that doctrinal advice he gave to the young Scipio relating to the importance of self-dedication to the "commune profit." To quote the passage in the letter we have discussed above, Petrarch says, "Heavenly is the saying of my Africanus." And there is a scholarly consensus that this Africanus of epic stature, Africanus the noble ideologue of the "commune profit" ideal, was a common currency in the fourteenth century.

Thus we must assume that the figure of Africanus is commonly imaged as a champion of the doctrine of the "commune profit." Now if his function is—as our logic dictates it indeed is—to take Chaucer from one vision to another, from the unwished-for knowledge to what he really wants to know, from the visionary explication of the doctrine of the "commune profit" to something new, then the following should be said about the latter new vision. Insofar as it is introduced by Africanus its thematic outlines are largely concerned with the doctrine of the "commune profit"; but since the core of the doctrine of the "commune profit" is merely an unwished-for knowledge, not what he really wants to know (which should be the second new vision), it follows that the new vision is something which retains the thematic framework but negates the components of the doctrinal explication. To make a long and abstract story short and visible, it is the body and the bodily nature of the body politic that are at stake in the Garden of Venus and Nature. It is precisely what is lacking in the exposition of the doctrine of the "commune profit" in the first vision of the *Somnium Scipionis*. The question of the body, both natural and political, is one which is unmistakably related to the theme of the "commune profit" but which receives no positive explication from Africanus. It is beyond his knowledge, or perhaps more appropriately, it is below his knowledge. This explains his subsequent disappearance as Chaucer is entering the garden. [9]

That Venus in the Temple of Priapus, one of the landmarks of the pleasure garden, represents earthly kind of desire is obvious and needs

8. Aldo Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio and the "Africa"* (Baltimore, 1962), p. 54.

9. It is worth keeping in mind what Russell A. Peck (in his excellent article. "Love, Politics, and Plot in the *Parlement of Foules*," *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 290–305) says about the general critical attitude to the *Parliament of Fowls* in recent years: "what follows, the section between Geoffrey's reading and his encounter with Dame Nature, is the most ignored portion of the poem" (p. 298).

no proof.

> And in a prive corner in disport
> Fond I Venus and hire porter Richesse,
> That was ful noble and hautayne of hyre port—
> Derk was that place, but afterward lightnesse
> I saw a lyte, unnethe it myghte be lesse—
> And on a bed of gold she lay to reste,
> Til that the hote sonne gan to weste.
>
> Hyre gilte heres with a golden thred
> Ibounden were, untressed as she lay,
> And naked from the brest unto the hed,
> Men myghte hire sen; and, sothly for to say,
> The remenaunt was we1 kevered to my pay.
> Ryght with a subtyl coverchef of Valence—
> There was no thikkere cloth of no defense. (260–73)

The allegorical description conferred on her, to be sure, suggests some refinement on earthiness but nonetheless it remains essentially this-worldly, tied down to the earth and the body. The desire represented is carnal and shows little sign of aspiration toward the clarity of self-recognition. The principle of identity and the pleasure of self-identification, by which Mind's desire is distinguished, are here totally out of place. Interestingly enough and quite appropriately, it is not in the nature of Venus to be self-identical after all. Neither in the capacity of the so-called two Venuses, heavenly and earthly, nor in her liaison amoureuse with the male deities, Vulcan and Mars, nor in her representational relation to Diana, does she maintain her solid identity but is always dual, ambidextrous, and ambiguous. Venus in short is the prime instance of the principle of difference. Venus in the Temple, laying herself coyly in the bed, an undeniable image of earthly sexual desire, cannot but remind us, by association, of her heavenly counterpart. It is hard to contain the Venereal love in one fixed conception and image; it disseminates itself in its duality and multifarious associations. Some of the exemplary results, both mythological and legendary, are ostensibly shown in and around the Temple (246–94).

Nature' parliament, which follows the Temple of Venus, by contrast, shows a certain tendency toward some kind of unity, even if it is not without discordant argumentation. Nature, of course, is responsible for this turn of events, from the differing/deferring desire of Venus to a general orientation toward unity. As might be expected, this perceivable orientation is ultimately based on the universal belief in the theory of correspondence between macro-and microcosm, the identity principle writ large, as it were. This is all well-known, and as if to corroborate this correspondence theory, Chaucer makes an explicit reference to Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae* — his "the Pleynte of Kynde" of "Aleyne" (316)—and designates his Nature as Alan's. Alan's vision, as it is presented in his *De planctu Naturae*, is unfolded in the mode of mytho-allegory, which is distinguished by the characteristic outlook of the so-called twelfth-century Renaissance, particularly that of Chartrian philosophy. At the basis of the outlook is "the special awareness of a '*continuité ontologique*' [10] [M.-D. Chenu] between creation and redemption (Winthrop Wetherbee)." What is meant by "redemption" here is a visionary and imaginative act by which man is restored to his proper place in the natural order ordained by God. What matters is the propriety of position in the cosmic order, not the recognition of providential disposition. The redemption here is not a matter of linear salvation history, which is historically marked by the Incantation of Christ and the consequent Redemption accomplished through it. In Alan's *De planctu Naturae* it is appropriately the figure Genius, Nature's priest, not Christ, that brings about redemption. He pronounces the decree of excommunication on those who commit unnatural atrocities defying the propriety of Nature's order. If Genius's act of excommunication is done on the authority of and at the instigation of Natura, Natura's deeds, in turn, are authorized in the last analysis by God. She is, as Chaucer rightly calls her, "the vicaire of the almyghty Lord" (379)—*vicaria Dei*. Thus at the heart of Alan's mytho-allegory is the order of God—order in the senses of both harmonious structure (cosmos) and the command to maintain it. In this scheme of things, redemption is no other than the observance of the primary divine order, the spiritual and psychological re-creation and enactment of the harmonious order between man/microcosm and the grand design of God/macrocosm. With a special imprint of Neoplatonism, it is a vision ostensively optimistic, and because of this it is not entirely free from the problems endemic to the Neoplatonic vision, viz., the negative side-effects of spiritual sublation and sublimation.

10. Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (N.J.: Princeton, 1972), p. 125. For Chaucer's attitudes toward Neoplatonism, see my "Chaucer's use of Neoplatonic Traditions," in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 45–51.

It is true that the question of the body and bodily desire is not altogether brushed aside in Alan's vision as insignificant but rather taken into serious consideration. What were regarded as abuses of bodily desire, like homosexuality and adultery, for example, form the centre of Nature's complaints. In fact, the theme of adultery functions as the structural backbone of the whole vision: at the mytho-allegorical level "redemption," the end of the vision, is envisaged as the restoration of a broken marital relationship, i.e. flirting Venus's return to her husband. The mythological prototype is, of course, that of the Vulcan-Venus-Mars triangle. [11] What is noteworthy about the effects of the transformative use of this mythological triangle is the spiritual valorization of Venus as well as the general delimitation of her nature. In the original divine triangle, as the Middle Ages read it in Virgil (who in turn had taken it from Homer), Venus is truly ambidextrous, taking pleasure in her liaison with Mars while at the same time taking advantage of her marital relation with Vulcan. Venus in Alan's poetic vision, on the other hand, is functionally divided into two role figures, "lawless pleasure" in her extra-marital relation with "Jocus," and "rightful chaste love" in her marital relation with "Hymenaeus." The home-coming of Venus, if it is successfully accomplished, enacts the proper and natural use of the bodily desire, which would otherwise disseminate itself without end. [11]

Alan's Venus indeed represents bodily desire, but she is specifically charged in accordance with Nature's law to control herself. Seen from a different angle, the ontological dimension of the body is here legitimated insofar as it is placed under Nature's control. From the standpoint of the legitimization of the body this seems a great advance. And yet, it must be recognized that essentially, the structure of legitimization is the same as in the case of the *Itinerarium mentis*. The dimension of the body,

11. For the medieval transformation of the Vulcan-Venus-Mars triangle, see my "The *Brooch of Thebes* and the *Girdle of Venus*: Courtly Love in an Oppositional Perspective," *Poetica* 29/30 (1989): 17–38.

the dimension of difference, is justified and recognized so long as it is subordinated to the identity principle of mind, which alone guarantees the all-important correspondence of macrocosm to microcosm. The natural body is envisaged as forming part of the divine cosmos, the authentic extension of identity, and in so doing, the mind or subject of such recognition finds its true self, being at one with the grand design of God—a perfect correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. In such visionary recognition, the extension of the body as such can find no real and ontological habitation of its own. The ostensibly carnal Venus we have seen in "the Temple of Priapus" has no meaningful place in Alan's poetic vision except for a negative employment. The problem is that before this Venus Alan's pales, and not only ontologically.

This impression of the collapse of the ontological dimension in Alan's visionary redemption reminds us of the similar one we thought detectable in the vision of the *Somnium Scipionis,* particularly in reference to the doctrine of the "commune profit." There is, as I have argued, a collapse in the final analysis of the "political" dimension in the structure of legitimization. In the way the body is dealt with, Alan's attempt is naturally more ambitious and comprehensive. But as far as the structure of legitimization is concerned there is little to choose between them. Now Chaucer confesses, as we have noted, that he is not satisfied with the vision of the *Somnium Scipionis*, and in our understanding this dissatisfaction stems from an insufficiency in the legitimization process of the "political" sphere or the field of the body politic. If this is the case there is then little ground to suppose that Chaucer finds Alan's vision convincing and satisfactory. The chances are very slight that he would write, "I hadde thyng which that I wolde." As a matter of fact, despite his explicit reference in Nature's parliament to Alan's *De planctu Naturae*, which in ordinary circumstances would suggest Chaucer's due respect to him, the session of the parliament shows little sympathy with Alan's vision. Rather, the session can be better read as a Chaucerian critique of Alan. With its emphasis both on the natural distinction of social standing and on the individual predilection, which is obviously beyond the pale of Alan's concern, the avian parliament could be a telling criticism leveled at Alan's sweeping idea of natural propriety. Furthermore, another instance of criticism, this time more crucial, can be found in Chaucer's treatment of Nature. The conclusion having been reached that the decision of whether or not to choose the "tercel" is to be left to the royal "formel," Nature gives a supplementary comment:

> But as for couseyl for to chese a make,
> If I were Resoun, thanne wolde I
> Conseyle yow the royal tercel take,
> As seyde the tercelet ful skylfully… (631–34)

Here Nature confesses in effect she is not reason. But such confession, in the case of Alan's vision, would he hardly conceivable. Nature is the vital link that makes possible and guarantees the enactment of the "ontological continuity" between creation and redemption. She is the agent of divine re-creation, and to function in such capacity Nature should be an irreplaceable representative of divine Logos or Reason. If there is a sense in which she can be designated as "the vicaire of the alimyghty lord" (379), Chaucer's rendering of "*vicaria Dei*," the meaning and role of "reason," we presume, should be among its primary implications. The Chaucerian Nature's confession of her being different from reason, if not unreasonable or irrational, suggests that she is not fully invested with the divine power to enact the realization of the "ontological continuity" between creation and redemption. But her loss on the side of divine authority and power is her gain on the part of her bodily dimension. Nature's parliament, an avian body politic, approaches anything but a harmonious order. The mirror with which to look up to nature (natural law or divine order) is darkly visible, but it is not powerful enough to enlighten everybody. It must grope its way to a solution of its problems. But things in general never look pessimistic at all in Nature's parliament. Reason for this optimistic mood can be sought in the primitive and festive assurance of time and body. Even if we are in the dark about the solution of social and individual problems we have at least time and body to enjoy for a year until another St. Valentine's Day. In a sense time legitimates the body politic.

If such a body politic deserves the name of the "political sphere," we must say that we have come a long way from the one implied by Africanus's doctrine of the "commune profit." There, as we have seen, the "political sphere" is ultimately legitimated as a passage to spiritual sublation and sublimation, with the result that sufficient attention is paid

neither to the body politic as such nor to the bodily nature of life on earth. Here, in contrast, the body politic is not a means to something else, at least, not a means to something spiritual, but an end in itself. If its "political sphere" wants a definitive spiritual direction, it is full of vigor and vitality. Whereas the "political sphere" in the case of the *Somnium Scipionis* is virtually disembodied, here it is almost despiritualized.

In retrospect, it is not so difficult to see that what is conspicuously lacking in the first vision of the *Somnium Scipionis* is the consideration of the existential energies which Venus and Nature in the subsequent vision are to represent. Any doctrine expounded on the matter of the "commune profit" or body politic will not carry much conviction if it does not give sufficient attention to the problems of the body. To be sure, life on earth for humanity, *vita activa*, must be justified and legitimated in some form or other, and it is one way to legitimate it, as Africanus does, as a halfway but crucial house on the way to heavenly beatitude. But Chaucer finds this unsatisfactory and unconvincing. Even if we suppose that human life on earth is a mere halfway house, Chaucer may have thought, some investigation is in order on its natural aspects, including sexual desire and other bodily impulses. The question is how far can one go toward the legitimization of the body, natural and political, in its own right. And Chaucer explored this in his own way through his reading of literature dealing with these issues, stories of Venus and allegories of Nature.

The vista Chaucer has thus opened up toward the end of the *Parlement of Foules* is a kind of "political sphere," over which Nature presides as the seasonal driving force. [12] This resultant horizon, as it turns out, is not a far cry from the familiar world of *The Canterbury Tales*, whose initiating force, the *primum movile* of the narrative kind, is designated as none other than the pricking by Nature. As you remember, in April when spring comes all living things are alive with vigour.

> And smale foweles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye

12. Cf Bruce K. Cowgill's excellent "The *Parlement of Foules* and the Body Politic," *JEGP* 74 (1975): 315–35, especially his conclusion that "it is here, in the accentuation of the active life as the foundation of the entire social order, that the thematic indebtedness of the *Parlement of Foules* to *the Roman de la Rose* is most fundamental" (p. 335).

> (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
>
> (*General Prologue*, 9–12)

The "corages," pricked by Nature, are not only the place of feelings but also one of the vital bodily organs (*cor*), and in Middle English the word still retained the connotations of physicality. The "corages," so animated, as the context suggests, do belong to both birds and pilgrims. In the beginning, it can be said of *The Canterbury Tales*, is Nature—Nature not as a representative of divine Logos but taken as certain forces immanent in the body. The dimension of the body is now on the point of gaining its legitimate autonomy, but of course, not quite.