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An Ecocritical Approach to Chaucer.
Representations of the Natural World
in the English Literature of the Middle Ages

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To my parents

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An Eco-critical Approach to Chaucer. Representations of the Natural World in the English Literature of the Middle Ages

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I have endeavored in the slippery task of viewing English medieval ideas and representations of the natural world and of the relationship between humanity and nature from an ecologically-oriented perspective, and along this uncertain path I have been supported by a series of persons that I would like to thank for believing in my project and encouraging me in its completion.

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CHAPTER 1

Ecocriticism: What It Is and Why Apply It to Middle English Literature

*Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the "harmony"
which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into
an anomaly, into the freak of universe. He is part of nature, subject to her
physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of
nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the
home he shares with all creatures.*
Erich Fromm

The choice to write and present a study of nature in medieval English literature from an ecological perspective has been originated by a personal interest in the urgency of the deep environmental crisis we are faced with and by the drive to expand the eco-oriented study of representations of nature in literature to chronological and spatial areas well beyond those originally typical of ecological criticism. The choice of the Middle Ages besides being motivated by a smaller amount of such kind of critical literature in the area, finds its motivation also in the cultural variety and richness of that historical period.

When I first came to know about ecocriticism in the Anglo-American literature class during my final year at university in 2000, this then still new (to Italians) interpretative approach to literature seemed to offer me an ideal solution to join and balance my passion for language and literature with the likewise strong passion for the natural world and the environment. In particular, I have always been fascinated by the ways in which human beings interpret and represent nature, the environment, and their relation to it as portrayed in literature.

Although it appears to be rather obvious when brought to attention, it seems at the same time to be often forgotten that the relationship humankind entertains with the environment is not and can not be a marginal issue, because it is instead a fundamental,

undeniable and unavoidable matter of fact and reality. There have of course been studies on nature in literature and in Middle English literature, they however mainly looked at and considered nature as a setting or a source or repository of material for figurative representation, metaphors and exempla; scholars did not seem to be particularly interested in investigating the relationship between humankind and the environment, certainly not in ecological terms.

As a result of the global environmental crisis, issues concerning the relationship between humankind and the environment have become of paramount importance in order to build a new attitude on the part of human beings based on sustainability and respect. Ideas concerning the relationship between humankind and the environment and the role of humanity in this dynamics, as well as ideas about environmentalism are often based on misconceptions and misunderstandings, and those issues are also often marginalized as statements of radical movements. Environmentalists are in fact often considered as fanatics who want to prevent progress.

In order to understand how the relationship between humankind and the environment (and as a reflex, between culture and nature) is not a topic that can be marginalized and ignored, it would be sufficient to do something that has already been done several times before me, and that while we all have it in the back of our mind, we also obviously do not refer to very often. We should remind ourselves of the etymological meaning of the Greek root *oikos*, Latinized as *eco-*, and which we can find in eco-nomics as well as in eco-logy. Pokorny (1959) lists the Indo-European root *weiḱ- from which Greek *oikos* derives, as meaning "village; house" (Skr. विश् (*viś*), Av. *vīs*, Gk. οἶκος (*oikos*), Lat. *vīcus*, Germ. *weihs*, OCS *vĭsĭ*). The word eco- is thus shared by eco-logy and eco-nomics, so

that, etymologically, the first would be the study of the "house" and the second the management and account of the "house". These two disciplines also share other aspects than the mere etymology though, as Teri Wynn underlines: "Ecologists research natural systems and economists research human systems" (Wynn 2010); the balance and well-being of the general system, of the whole constituted by the natural world and by the human world, depends on the relationship between ecology and economics, that is on the ways in which nature and humans interact. In recent years a growing awareness of the relation of economics and ecology has been observed and has given rise to new approaches toward this interconnection; these days we hear talk about "green economy" a lot, and in general of an economical policy that is sustainable for the natural environment. On this wave, Arthur L. Dahl has articulated this discourse in a book (1996) that starting from biological analyses draws a parallel between ecology and economics and their dynamics, establishing the "eco-principle" that gives the title to his book. In this work, Dahl emphasizes the underlying unity of purpose and the similarity that exist between and should continue to link ecology and economics in theory as well as in practice; any deep (and deepening) and wide (and widening) chasm between the two is a symptom of a malfunction in the way their relationship is managed by the human component. He theorizes the concept of "eco" as a superstructure founded on the two ideas of economics and ecology and that is an attempt to unify these ideas and their function. The "eco" is thus a system which can be relating either to natural or to human-made realities, and its idea can apply to natural environments and their functioning as well as to human social systems and their internal dynamics. Whether or not Dahl's theories will find concrete application and are truly feasible is not at question here: what I would like to underline in

taking his work as an example, is that this unifying function of the "eco" as Dahl expounds it should constitute a direction indicator aiming at bringing us to reconsider and redefine the present relationship with the natural world, and the terms of our coexistence with it. Economics, the management of the "eco", should be inspired and guided by the notions of ecology, the study of the "eco"; this would allow a balanced and organic functioning of the global "eco", our planet.

The very meaning and semantic implications of the root *eco-* should thus be enough to make clear and manifest that everything in the world is connected and related. Yet, as I said, we fail to keep this idea at work and present in our thinking and acting. What is most striking, in my view, is the fact that many seem to forget that this concept of interconnectedness which we keep ignoring but which in fact informs every aspect of our life, is also European (intended mostly in a cultural sense); it has not been borrowed or mutuated from the East or from some other culture. It is instead at the basis of our European (and hence Western) way of life, of our daily activities and of the organization of these activities, which basically constitute a chain of not only interconnected but also interdependent spheres. They work similarly to an ecosystem, where what happens to one of the elements of the ecosystem will affect the others with varying degrees of directness. This idea is not new to medieval studies either, as it calls to mind the famous image of the Great Chain of Being that we still find very productive up to the Renaissance and later (Lovejoy 1964).

The program of ecocriticism to study literature in an effort (among others) to recover in our culture and tradition elements and attitudes identifiable as balanced, sustainable, respectful and ecological towards the environment, can be therefore with full

right extended to the literature of a historical period – the Middle Ages – whose culture was based on the acceptance of previous traditions, including the Greco-Roman, and which elaborated a long-lasting and successful metaphoric image of the interconnectedness of things.

On these bases, I intend to study the idea of nature during the Middle Ages, its sources and characteristics, and the ways in which it has been treated and represented in literature (which often draws on philosophical writings as well), focusing on the varied and stimulating work of one of England's greatest poets, Geoffrey Chaucer.

I will start with a brief introduction on ecocriticism, ecology and its relation to culture, literature, and then move on to analyze the main and various cultural traditions that were accepted, re-elaborated and merged during the Middle Ages, focusing on the Classical Greco-Roman, the Germanic and the Christian, and which would (or could) have an influence on Middle English literature. I will then dedicate the third chapter to the ideas, conceptions, and representations of nature produced and circulating in the Middle Ages, and especially those that would deeply influence both the cultural milieu in which Chaucer grows and operates, and Chaucer himself as a person and as an intellectual alike.

The final chapter will be devoted to Chaucer: after surveying the sources and models for his representations of nature, I will review his own representations of the natural world in its various aspects throughout a selection of his works. In so doing, I will investigate and underline the underlying conception of nature, as portrayed by him, and of the relationship between humankind and the environment (and thus between culture and nature) that he describes, depicts or implies.

All these considerations, investigations and analyses will have as their informing principle and conclusive interpretative meter that of establishing whether any of Chaucer's ideas and representations of nature taken into consideration and examined are, or might be viewed as, bearing some ecological significance or foundation. From the results obtained I will also try to establish Chaucer's position towards nature and towards the relationship between humankind and nature and towards humankind's attitude towards the non-human.

1.1. Ecological Awareness Is Not a Modern Phenomenon

Environmental issues have always been a part of human history: air and water pollution and deforestation were already problems in very ancient times. The exploitation of timber and other resources certainly favored the rise and development of many civilizations, who would also set up timber commerce (s. the Phoenicians) or would trade some other raw materials, but deforestation also put an end to some of those civilizations, bringing them to collapse. Deforestation is also in part a consequence of dendrolatry, that is veneration of trees. Trees and forests were seen to embody or house divinity, and people either adored them or, in an effort to defeat their own mortality, hated them and destroyed them. Such a scenario is well represented in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh: the hero of this ancient work decides to destroy the cedar forests of his kingdom in order to gain everlasting and immortal fame. Those forests were so dear to the gods that they had put a guardian to protect them, and after the king's misdeeds, they curse the Sumerian region with fire, drought and desolation, which will in fact later occur in that geographical area. Only after the revenge of the gods led to dear friend Enkidu being

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taken away, will Gilgamesh realize how futile his attempt to win immortality had been, and the way he chose to carry it out was even more a wrong choice on his part: he destroyed a forest guarded by a demigod and loved by those same gods he worshipped and wanted to equal and emulate, but in so doing he caused the decline of his own country and kingdom.

Far from being solely the product of imagination and artistic, fictional creativity, the epic of Gilgamesh is a metaphorical and mythological representation of the history and fate of a civilization. As Marco Paci writes in his book *L'uomo e la foresta*: "La leggenda di Gilgamesh, come tante altre, ha pescato nella realtà storica e non solo nell'immaginario" (2002: 17)[1].

Cedar forests were in fact a typical natural scenery in the Middle East and in the Mesopotamian region, and besides providing abundant and fundamental raw material for fueling and building, they also held a strong spiritual significance. This symbolic function survives today in the image of the Lebanon cedar that we can see on the Lebanon flag, and in the fact that "ancora oggi per i popoli mediorientali e nordafricani la foresta di cedro appartiene di diritto a un panorama che non è solo cornice di vita, ma anche paesaggio interiore" (Paci 2002: 18)[2].

The destruction of the expanses of cedar forests that centuries ago used to cover the Sumerian region, in what is today southern Iraq, is thus represented in the most ancient epos that has come down to us by a reckless and ill-considered act of a man who wants to challenge the divinity and the creating and regenerating force of nature, symbolized by

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[1] "The legend of Gilgamesh, like many others, has drawn upon historical reality and not only on imagination", (my translation).
[2] "Even today, for Middle Eastern and North African peoples, cedar forests belong by rights to a panorama that is not only a background for human life, but also an interior landscape", (my translation).

the cedar forests of the kingdom of Uruk. The high-rate exploitation of those forests is historically testified by some laws decreed in Ur with the purpose of protecting what was left of them (Grove 1995).

Ancient Greece also witnessed a great deal of environmental damage such as soil erosion, which was a result of deforestation. In his *Critias*, Plato gives an alarming description of his country's landscape:

[…] ἀρετῇ δὲ πᾶσαν γῆν ὑπὸ τῆς ἐνθάδε ὑπερβάλλεσθαι, διὸ καὶ δυνατὴν εἶναι τότε τρέφειν τὴν χώραν στρατόπεδον πολὺ τῶν περὶ γῆν ἀργὸν ἔργων. μέγα δὲ τεκμήριον ἀρετῆς: τὸ γὰρ νῦν αὐτῆς λείψανον ἐνάμιλλόν ἐστι πρὸς ἡντινοῦν τῷ πάμφορον εὔκαρπόν

[111a] τε εἶναι καὶ τοῖς ζῴοις πᾶσιν εὔβοτον. τότε δὲ πρὸς τῷ κάλλει καὶ παμπλήθη ταῦτα ἔφερεν. πῶς οὖν δὴ τοῦτο πιστόν, καὶ κατὰ τί λείψανον τῆς τότε γῆς ὀρθῶς ἂν λέγοιτο; πᾶσα ἀπὸ τῆς ἄλλης ἠπείρου μακρὰ προτείνουσα εἰς τὸ πέλαγος οἷον ἄκρα κεῖται: τὸ δὴ τῆς θαλάττης ἀγγεῖον περὶ αὐτὴν τυγχάνει πᾶν ἀγχιβαθὲς ὄν. πολλῶν οὖν γεγονότων καὶ μεγάλων κατακλυσμῶν ἐν τοῖς ἐνακισχιλίοις ἔτεσι--τοσαῦτα γὰρ πρὸς τὸν νῦν ἀπ' ἐκείνου τοῦ χρόνου

[111b] γέγονεν ἔτη--τὸ τῆς γῆς ἐν τούτοις τοῖς χρόνοις καὶ πάθεσιν ἐκ τῶν ὑψηλῶν ἀπορρέον οὔτε χῶμα, ὡς ἐν ἄλλοις τόποις, προχοῖ λόγου ἄξιον ἀεί τε κύκλῳ περιρρέον εἰς βάθος ἀφανίζεται: λέλειπται δή, καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς σμικραῖς νήσοις, πρὸς τὰ τότε τὰ νῦν οἷον νοσήσαντος σώματος ὀστᾶ, περιερρυηκυίας τῆς γῆς ὅση πίειρα καὶ μαλακή, τοῦ λεπτοῦ σώματος τῆς χώρας μόνου λειφθέντος. τότε δὲ ἀκέραιος

[111c] οὖσα τά τε ὄρη γηλόφους ὑψηλοὺς εἶχε, καὶ τὰ φελλέως νῦν *ὀνομασθέντα*⁺ *πεδία*⁺ πλήρη γῆς πιείρας ἐκέκτητο, καὶ πολλὴν ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ὕλην εἶχεν, ἧς καὶ νῦν ἔτι φανερὰ τεκμήρια: τῶν γὰρ ὀρῶν ἔστιν ἃ νῦν μὲν ἔχει μελίτταις μόναις τροφήν, χρόνος δ' οὐ πάμπολυς ὅτε δένδρων †αὐτόθεν εἰς οἰκοδομήσεις τὰς μεγίστας ἐρεψίμων τμηθέντων στεγάσματ' ἐστιν ἔτι σᾶ. πολλὰ δ' ἦν ἄλλ' ἥμερα ὑψηλὰ δένδρα, νομὴν δὲ βοσκήμασιν ἀμήχανον ἔφερεν. καὶ δὴ καὶ

[111d] τὸ κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ὕδωρ ἐκαρποῦτ' ἐκ Διός, οὐχ ὡς νῦν ἀπολλύσα ῥέον ἀπὸ ψιλῆς τῆς γῆς εἰς θάλατταν, ἀλλὰ πολλὴν ἔχουσα καὶ εἰς αὐτὴν καταδεχομένη, τῇ κεραμίδι στεγούσῃ γῇ διαταμιευομένη, τὸ καταποθὲν ἐκ τῶν ὑψηλῶν ὕδωρ εἰς τὰ κοῖλα ἀφιεῖσα κατὰ πάντας τοὺς τόπους παρείχετο ἄφθονα κρηνῶν καὶ ποταμῶν νάματα, ὧν καὶ νῦν ἔτι ἐπὶ ταῖς

πηγαῖς πρότερον οὐσαις ἱερὰ λελειμμένα ἐστὶν σημεῖα ὅτι περὶ αὑτῆς
ἀληθῆ λέγεται τὰ νῦν (*Κριτίας*).[3]

Rome, the greatest and biggest metropolis of antiquity, suffered from a number of problems: noise pollution, air pollution due to smoke and biological waste, water pollution. The situation was so urgent that to solve the problem of dealing with these health hazards, the Romans set up a sewage and aqueduct system that would remain unsurpassed for centuries to come.

In most ancient religions and philosophical movements we can observe an awareness of man's improper behavior towards the environment. In particular, trees and forests, as mentioned before, had a sacred function and symbolical meaning: it is so for Hinduism: one of the sections of the Vedas is called Āraṇyaka, which means "in the wilderness, or in the forest": most early Hindu deities were nature gods, and the forest

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[3] "The land was the best in the world, and was therefore able in those days to support a vast army, raised from the surrounding people. Even the remnant of Attica which now exists may compare with any region in the world for the variety and excellence of its fruits and the suitableness of its pastures to every sort of animal, which proves what I am saying; but in those days the country was fair as now and yielded far more abundant produce. How shall I establish my words? and what part of it can be truly called a remnant of the land that then was? The whole country is only a long promontory extending far into the sea away from the rest of the continent, while the surrounding basin of the sea is everywhere deep in the neighbourhood of the shore. Many great deluges have taken place during the nine thousand years, for that is the number of years which have elapsed since the time of which I am speaking; and during all this time and through so many changes, there has never been any considerable accumulation of the soil coming down from the mountains, as in other places, but the earth has fallen away all round and sunk out of sight. The consequence is, that in comparison of what then was, there are remaining only the bones of the wasted body, as they may be called, as in the case of small islands, all the richer and softer parts of the soil having fallen away, and the mere skeleton of the land being left. But in the primitive state of the country, its mountains were high hills covered with soil, and the plains, as they are termed by us, of Phelleus were full of rich earth, and there was abundance of wood in the mountains. Of this last the traces still remain, for although some of the mountains now only afford sustenance to bees, not so very long ago there were still to be seen roofs of timber cut from trees growing there, which were of a size sufficient to cover the largest houses; and there were many other high trees, cultivated by man and bearing abundance of food for cattle. Moreover, the land reaped the benefit of the annual rainfall, not as now losing the water which flows off the bare earth into the sea, but, having an abundant supply in all places, and receiving it into herself and treasuring it up in the close clay soil, it let off into the hollows the streams which it absorbed from the heights, providing everywhere abundant fountains and rivers, of which there may still be observed sacred memorials in places where fountains once existed; and this proves the truth of what I am saying. (*Critias*, English translation available online at: http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html).

was seen as a privileged place for learning the practice of Hinduism (Dhawan 1998), and as a sacred place highly revered by Hinduists. But the forest has a strong symbolical meaning also for other Oriental religions such as Buddhism: in the early texts of the Mahāyāna (especially in the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra*) we can see a celebration of the ascetic and monastic life to be conducted in the forest (Williams 2009 (1989): 36-38; Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism 2004: 494). Middle Eastern cults also revered forests, as exemplified by the epic of Gilgamesh, and within ancient Greek and Roman religions sacred forests and groves, often nearby temples, were a common element. In other pagan religions as well, such as the Germanic, we can see the same phenomenon of dendrolatry; the very backbone of ancient Norse cosmology is a sacred cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasill.

Forests and groves as well as harboring or embodying divinity, the gods, represented a place for worshipping and gathering, a sort of temple of nature. This strong religious meaning and function was very important for the preservation of the woodland that had not been cut down for building and fueling material or burned down to gain land for grazing and agriculture: "Gli antichi greci sono il punto di partenza per comprendere come si possa controllare un patrimonio forestale con la religione e il mito a supporto della legge" (Paci 2002: 20)[4]. Paci further emphasizes a similitude between the forest and the Greek temples, according to which the columns would represent tree trunks, and the temples erected in honor of the local divinity were moreover surrounded by forests (Paci 2002: 20). The temple would thus be a sacred grove carved out of stone and surrounded by those woods it symbolizes, and later bringing the sacred aura of the forests within the city walls when they began to be built in urban areas.

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[4] "Ancient Greeks represent a starting point to understand how it is possible to manage and control forests through myth and religion as support for the law", (my translation).

As well as being revered, forests were dreaded by people: they were populated by wild animals, some potentially dangerous for man, and they gave shelter to vagabonds, outcasts from society, and bandits. Forests, and wilderness in general, of which the woods became the epitomizing symbol, inspired awe, admiration and religious and spiritual communion in people, but also represented the manifestation of nature's power and through it the power of divinity. This had a twofold connotation: forests also represented powers unknown to the precarious existence of human beings, like the power of continuous regeneration and the longevity of the vegetation, which in those remote times must have been perceived as immortality. Moreover, forests represented the unknown, the unpredictable turns of life, and a place of many dangers. In short, as well as infusing people with a deep and positive sense of communion with the divine force present in nature, the forest also shows the limits of human existence.

These considerations are intended to illustrate how environmental problems and ecological awareness have always been a part of human life, and found expression in philosophical as well as literary works. The urgency which surrounds these issues today is a consequence of the realization that we might have reached the point of no return in our abuse of the environment, and that it is time we reconsidered our behaviors and beliefs.

1.2. Ecocriticism: Genesis and Theoretical Definition

1.2.1. Short Genesis Survey and Purpose of Ecocriticism

Eco-criticism has developed as a necessary by-product of the raise in ecological awareness occurred during the 1960's especially in the United States. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962) is considered to be a milestone in the birth of modern

environmentalism. It was neither the only nor the first book on the matter, that had been debated for years before the American biologist and writer caught the attention of the public with her work on the harmful and indiscriminate use of pesticides, which was causing serious damage to the environment and to the life of people and animals. Whereas the book might have been given more responsibility than it actually has, its tremendous impact on public opinion, which raised a fierce front of criticism and opposition as well as enthusiastic support, was caused on the one hand by the economic interests of the chemical industry and of large-scale intensive agriculture, and on the other hand by the growing realization among Americans, and not only Americans, that something was wrong with the health of the earth.

The wave of ecological awareness, to which the publication of *Silent Spring* undoubtedly contributed, invested all fields of scientific and cultural studies and research (Buell 1995: 10, Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xxi); historians, anthropologists, philosophers, theologians and even psychologists started to look at the environment and at the relationship between humankind and the environment differently, and to include this new perspective in their studies. Literature was the only field of the cultural spectrum that had not addressed this fundamental and now urgent issue systematically.

We had to wait until the 1990's to see an official and direct response from the literary academic community to the environmental debate. It came in a double form. In 1995 established Harvard scholar and Professor Lawrence Buell, with his long experience of study on Thoreau and the Transcendentalist movement, published a book – *The Environmental Imagination* – that places the theretofore marginal genre of nature writing within the scope of mainstream and canonical American literature. His work provides a

thorough and in-depth definition of nature writing, identified as an essentially American genre, but it also offers a critical reflection on the way in which the environment has been and still is represented and constructed in literature. What he essentially does is to define virtually the object and subject of ecocriticism.

The following year Professor Cheryll Glotfelty and Associate Harold Fromm published *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996): this book outlines the genesis of the literary response to environmentalism, which, unlike it might seem, did exist, only it never constituted a unified and identifiable front, but consisted of isolated articles and essays, as Glotfelty explains in her "Introduction" (1996: xvi-xvii). But this milestone work also wants to offer a definition of literary environmental studies as well as an answer or a path to an answer to the question that Glotfelty herself had posed some years before: "How can we, as literary critics, respond to the environmental crisis?" (Todd 1998: 15). She became the first Professor of a class called "Literature and the Environment" at the University of Reno, Nevada, a class that gradually appeared more often in American universities.

Whereas all the essays included in the book look at the American tradition, it is precisely in the "Introduction" that the wide scope of this critical approach is set. As Glotfelty reports, American historian, writer and environmentalist Wallace Stegner suggested that the subject of ecocriticism "remain large and loose and suggestive and open, simply literature and the environment and all the ways in which they interact and have interacted" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xxii).

While Buell strictly limits the boundaries of nature writing to nonfictional texts such as science papers, philosophical writings, travel guides, with the essentially and proto-typically American nature essay at the center, ecocriticism widens its scope to genres other

than nature writing, as long as the works examined "manifest […] ecological awareness" (xxiii). What critics intend for manifestation of ecological awareness is the key point here, as is the meaning of 'environment'. With regard to the latter, the ecocriticism manifesto presented in the "Introduction" to the *Ecocriticism Reader* clearly identifies the environment as the world humanity lives in in the broadest sense: it is not only 'nature' in its meaning of areas where man does not live steadily, has not settled, and is therefore still 'wild' and only inhabited by animals, plants and rocks. The notion of environment implied in this interpretative approach is far more comprehensive and inclusive: "But nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xxiii). All that is part of this world, whether 'natural' (that is not human or originated and made by humans) or due to have a relationship with or an impact on the environment is interesting for an ecocritic and pertinent to ecocriticism. Glotfelty herself notes how "the horizon of possibilities remains suggestively open" (Ibid.: xiii). This broad and open definition is in my opinion necessary if we want to overcome the much criticized cultural dualism dominating in the Western tradition and thought, and at the basis of the human reckless exploitation and devastation of the environment. On these same grounds, it would be useful and appropriate to extend the broadness and openness advocated by Stegner to the kind of texts and genres to be interpreted with an ecocritical perspective. If, as literary critics and scholars, we want to contribute to solve the environmental crisis, as Glotfelty suggested we should, then studying and analyzing different representations of the environment and of humanity's relationship to it should be at the top of the ecocriticism

agenda. The marginality of an issue such as "Literature and the Environment", which was brought to public and academic attention by the two books mentioned above, has but only begun to be overcome: the European academic world is still highly tentative and timid in granting a prominent or emphasizing position to this branch of cultural and literary studies. This means there is still a lot of work to be done, and one way of achieving it is through the extension of the ecocritical approach to mainstream and classical literature which shows to grant nature a relevant role.

If the environment is defined so inclusively and comprehensively, suggesting an openness of interpretation, then the object of literary environmental studies or ecocriticism should be kept likewise open and inclusive if a new ecocritical conscience has to have an effect and impact on human behavior towards the environment.

The majority of ecocritical studies have so fare focused on theoretical issues and on nature writing and eco-oriented works, particularly within the American literary tradition: outstanding examples, besides the aforementioned works of Buell and Glotfelty and Fromm, are Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995)[5], Kate Soper's *What is Nature?* (1998)[6], Dana Phillips' Dana Phillips' *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America* (2003)[7], John Parham's miscellaneous *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (2002)[8], just to name a few.

Nevertheless, a number of studies about other historical periods and other geographical areas have lately started to appear. ASLE branches have been established in Britain and in Japan, with prospects of future expansion in other Eastern countries. There

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[5] Schama Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
[6] See Bibliographical References.
[7] Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
[8] Parham, John. *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2002.

are studies about the English Romanticism of the 19th century: for example, Jonathan Bates's study of 1991[9], or James McKusick's study (2000)[10]; and studies about Shakespeare: for example, Simon C. Estok's article on Shakespeare[11] (2005). Some works have been trying to expand the scope of ecocriticism from nature writing to other genres and cultures, such as Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's miscellaneous collection (2001)[12]. Ecocritical studies have been also produced in other European countries: noteworthy among them is an anthology edited by Anna Re, one the few Italian ecocritics, on Italian "green" literature, in collaboration with Patrick Barron[13], and a book by the same author (with an Introduction by Fernanda Pivano) called *Americana Verde*[14], which introduces American environmental literature to the Italian public.

As far as the Middle Ages and Chaucer are concerned, some articles and essays have been produced, among them: Lisa J. Kiser's "Chaucer and the Politics of Nature" (2001), Sarah Stanbury's "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature" (2004); Rebecca M. Douglass also suggests some targeted interpretations of a few of Chaucer's works in her "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature" (1998)[15].

1.2.2. Definition, Methodology and Theoretical Tools

So far we have briefly seen the origin, purpose and subject of ecocriticism, which are deeply interconnected, and had to be illustrated jointly. But what is ecocriticism? How

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[9] Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991.

[10] McKusick, James C. *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

[11] Estok, Simon C. "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of 'Home' and 'Power' in King Lear." *AUMLA* 103 (May 2005): 15-41.

[12] See Bibliographical References.

[13] Re, Anna, and Barron, Patrick. *Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology*. New York: Italica Press, 2004.

[14] Re, Anna. *Americana Verde. Letteratura e ambiente negli Stati Uniti*. Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, 2009.

[15] For all three articles see Bibliographical References.

do we define it? Glotfelty defines it as such: "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii), which "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Ibid.: xviii). This is a rather simplified definition, but it is indeed the core of ecocriticism, which is primarily focused on the relations and "interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xix).

As Rebecca M. Douglass has noted in her "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature": "For the moment ecocriticism is (perhaps fortunately) more a methodology than a coherent critical theory" (1998: 138). It is indeed fortunate, because it allows to maintain the interpretative strings looser than a systematized literary critical theory would. This does not of course mean that ecocriticism does not have or implement interpretative categories and guidelines, nor that they are not informed by a theoretical principle. But as far as possible, ecocriticism tries to escape a rigid ideological mindset, so that it is more interested in the actual reality and diversity of the relations between humanity and the environment, culture and nature, rather than in interpreting and bending or manipulating them through some existing or new ideology. Indeed it aims at surpassing ideologies which are more often than not at the root of human misbehaviors towards nature.

In studying how nature is represented in literature, ecocriticism tries to answer the following questions: How is nature represented in a given text (be it a novel, a short-story, a poem, a nonfictional text, and so on)? "What role does the physical setting play in the plot of" a given text? "Are the values expressed in this [text] consistent with ecological wisdom?" "How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?" "In what

ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?" "How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?" "What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies?" "How is science itself open to literary analysis?" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii-xix). But this is just a specimen of issues and questions: others concern the absence or presence of dualistic or monistic ideology in a given text; the presence of anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism or, on the contrary, of the attribution of "natural" characteristics to humans; the gendering of nature; the presence of a metaphysical if not spiritual or religious dimension attached to nature; what idea(s) and conception(s) of nature are expressed in a given work; what sort of humankind/nature relationship is portrayed; the presence of ecological awareness or ecological ideas (even *ante litteram*); the character of the representation of nature offered by the text (is it mimetic or figurative?).

The text remains the first and most important source for finding answers to these questions, but ecocriticism proves its openness also in referring to other non-literary disciplines such as ecology itself, but also anthropology, natural sciences, psychology, philosophy, history, etc., in order to gain and offer a more faithful, precise, deep and grounded interpretation and explanation of the way in which literary texts, a human cultural and linguistic artifact, represent the reality of the relationship between humankind and the world it inhabits and shares with other beings.

What is relevant in the ecocritical methodology is the fact that nature (whether a metaphorical character, the setting of the plot, or another element in the text) becomes a subject, "an actor in the drama" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xxi), and not just the stage on which the facts, events or relationships represented take place. Nature becomes, or better

comes back to being, an active subject with its own specific identity and with likewise weight and importance.

1.3. Why Approach Medieval Literature and Chaucer Ecocritically

Although I have been trying to argue the necessity for ecocriticism to be and remain open as a methodology for approaching literary representations of the environment and of humankind's relation to it, one might still contend how and why ecocriticism could and should be applied to medieval texts, and in this case to Middle English literature.

While this question is now certainly legitimate and proper especially in Europe (and Italy, where ecocriticism is still relatively a novelty), ecocritics have posed it to themselves already over a decade ago. More in general, ecocritics have been questioning themselves about future perspectives of ecocriticism and about its boundaries as early as the mid-90's. The collection of essays published in 2001 by two American scholars and ecocritics, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, bears a most significant title with this respect: *Beyond Nature Writing. Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. The book's agenda is clear from its cover: in order to gain more recognition and acceptance from the academic community, ecocriticism must prove to be a useful, efficient and productive methodology to be used with any kind of text. For this reason, many scholars have experimented working with genres other than nature writing, such as African-American works (Armbruster 2001: 2-3). But this book goes one step forward presenting examples of literature that certainly cannot be included within the boundaries of nature writing or environmental literature proper.

Nevertheless, as the two editors explicitly say (with a certain right and fit insistence) in their "Introduction", and as I have also written above, if ecocriticism wants not only to gain full academic recognition, but also make a difference in culture to spur a change in the public's attitude towards the environment, it needs to explore texts which are less explicitly environmental or ecological in both setting and intent, motifs and significance, but which are instead closer to mainstream literature and to representations of an environment that is more familiar to the one in which most people live.

Indeed, while I definitely agree with such an intent, I also think that the basis for such a step are already stated in Glotfelty's presentation of ecocriticism, as I have previously noted. This does not mean that the debate over this matter is unnecessary: it has in fact favored the first endeavors to implement ecocriticism in the interpretation and reading of canonical texts. And the same question also came from other scholars, who ask what can ecocriticism do, how can it contribute to the understanding and interpretation of literature. In order to give them a persuasive answer, they should be presented with examples of literary texts they are familiar with and that would seem not to fall within the scope of ecocriticism.

Medieval literature certainly is a literary area that would seem to be unfit for an ecocritical, ecological approach, especially when we consider that ecology and environmentalism are mainly modern cultural phenomena. But if their systematization and definition have come in modern and recent times, this does not mean that their key concepts and core ideas are also chronologically modern. Indeed, they are a part of human history as much as nature is, because humankind has always had a relation to the environment and reflected upon it, and also represented it in cultural and literary

constructs. The literature of the Middle Ages is no exception. The environment plays in fact a fundamental role in much medieval literature, and the ways in which it is represented show a variety of underlying ideas and conceptions of nature that would baffle common ideas and images about the Middle Ages and medieval culture, too often and for too long seen as a culturally and intellectually monolithic period, and as an age with no room for reason, logic, objective and 'scientific' method in the interpretation and explanation of the world.

American scholar Rebecca M. Douglass has tried (and in my opinion succeeded) to offer a first answer to the question whether ecocriticism can be or is a useful tool in the study of medieval literature in general, and of Middle English literature in particular. In her essay "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature" she presents a series of questions a reader should ask him-/herself when reading a text, which besides being questions perfectly pertinent to an ecocritical approach of any literary text, are also questions that would normally be raised when approaching a medieval text. Here are a few examples: "How is nature represented in this [text]?" (this question Douglass quotes and borrows from Glotfelty, s. above), […] "What does 'nature' mean for the fourteenth century?" (1998: 150), "How does setting matter? Is the setting specific, an identifiable space? Is it generic? Metaphorical? […] Does setting influence character? Do certain locations bear specific meanings? […] How has the author used his or her genre? What do modifications there reflect of his or her understanding of the complex relationships within nature? What […] do particular genres seem to reflect about nature, wildness, and interconnections? […] Is time or space more emphasized in the text under study?" (Ibid.: 151).

Her opening lines and paragraph are, in my opinion, the real key to answer any question not only about the utility of ecocriticism, but about any discipline or movement or initiative linked to ecology and to a discourse concerning the relations and connections between all elements of the environment, meant as the space in which humankind and animals and plants and landscapes alike live and exist:

> What, you ask, has literature, literacy, or especially Middle English to do with ecology? Consider for a moment the meaning of the word 'ecology': the science or study of interconnectedness. What is an ecocritique, then, but a consideration of the ways in which we perceive the inteconnectedness of things? As literary critics, we can extract from the general sense of ecology, as the stud of living things in relationship to their environments, an understanding of the interconnectedness of the literary text to human and other organisms (Douglass 1998: 136).

This is not of course an answer to the question "Can, and if so how, ecocriticism contribute to medieval studies?", but it is the justification to (if any be needed), the motivation behind the implementation of ecocriticism in the study of literature and therefore also of Middle English literature.

This is the premise from which the present work also started, and to it I would only like to add a few considerations on the issue of the "interconnectedness of the literary text to human and other organisms". Keeping in mind the broad definition of environment suggested in the previous paragraph, and that of ecology as "the study of interconnectedness," I would like to pose a question that while rhetoric for me, it is obviously not so for many others: What is literature but the either mimetic or figurative representation that human beings create and construct for themselves of their own nature and existence? Such a representation cannot possibly exclude the space in which human

beings live and which unavoidably shapes and informs them and their perception and interpretations of the nature of things, of the existence they want to portray. Moreover, or in support to this statement, the first products of the human creative, figurative and literary imagination are representations of the self and its relationship to the surrounding environments and its constituents. In other words, humanity defined and represented itself in relation to and by way of the place in which it lives and acts.

On such grounds, the use of an ecocritical perspective (as so far described and defined) in the study of literature is not only justified, but somehow necessary, since it can enable a better understanding of ourselves and the ways in which we relate to the space where we live and the ways in which we interpret and represent it. As Loretta Johnson wrote in her bibliographical essay, "The environmental crisis requires global change. Ecocriticism, once the literary arm of environmentalism, has evolved into a multidisciplinary approach to all environmental literature, which, if ecocriticism does its work, will be all literature. Period" (Johnson 2009: 6).

Still, one might wonder where is the place of medieval and Middle English literature in this discourse. Of what concern can an ecocritical study of this literature be for us, human beings of the 21st century? One of the major endeavors of ecocriticism is that of investigating the ways in which we related and have related to the environment through time, and this holds in particular for the Western world. We can find traces of an ecological conscience and awareness in ancient civilizations and in the literature they have produced (s. par. 1.1), as well as of a conception of the environment as a comprehensive and more unified and uniform system of interconnections than we would conceive of today. But this conception did not vanish overnight: the Middle Ages, far from being the

monolithic and intellectually dark and dull historical period many still consider it to be, were characterized by an astounding variety of conceptions about the world, the environment, and the place of human beings in it. The now so much criticized cultural dualism between man and culture has ancient roots, it is not a product of Christianity or of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century. Being invested by Christianity in every field, the Middle Ages could be deemed to be based on this dualism: but this idea is as fallacious as the premise it is based upon. Ecocritics are re-reading and studying even the Scriptures to see what idea of nature and of the relation human beings are expected to have to it is really expressed in the sacred texts of Christianity (Bunge 1994; Kay 1998). Indeed, during the Middle Ages it is in the religious sphere that we see a variety of conceptions and positions: the Franciscan movement born from the preachings of St. Francis advocates an idea of the world that could not be farther from the man/nature split.

Moreover, the deeply religious Middle Ages are the real cradle for the scientific revolution to come (Grant 1996): much of the scientific method to be used by Galilei or Copernicus is set during the Middle Ages by the Scholastic interpretation of the Aristotelian theories.

Chaucer is a typical example of the variety and richness and openness of the medieval cultural milieu: a man of many experiences and many interests, he ventured to write about all the major themes debated and represented in the tradition received and developed by his age, and he experimented in genres as well as in themes. His works offer a most interesting portrait of the social and intellectual world of his time, a time that like no other bridges antiquity with modernity, and that is therefore of paramount importance to understand the ways in which various and often contrasting conceptions of nature and

of humanity's relation to it have developed through time, to let us get to a point where, as Al Gore ardently stated, "we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization" (Buell 1995: 3).

Various scholars (Douglass 1998; Stansbury 2004; Kiser 2001) have already offered initial examples of how to approach Chaucer ecocritically. I will take these examples in consideration later in this work, but they prove encouraging, precisely because based on the premises that an understanding of the past and of the ways taken by the different ideas about nature is fundamental for an understanding of where we are now and what direction we should take to change the present situation.

CHAPTER 2

The Idea of Nature in the Middle Ages: Cultural and Philosophical Background

You must love the crust of the earth on which you dwell more than the sweet crust of any bread or cake. You must be able to extract nutriment out of a sand-heap. You must have so good an appetite as this, else you will live in vain.
Henry David Thoreau

So far I have been discussing a critical methodology whose object is the study of nature and environment in literature, as if we all agreed on the meaning and sense of the words 'nature' and 'environment'. For clarity's sake, it is probably best to explain and specify what is intended with these two terms nowadays and in the present study.

One thing that immediately strikes us when we think of the meaning of the word 'nature,' or about the idea of nature encompassed by the word, is that it is not easy to define it. The word has, in the various languages, stratified a variety of meanings through time; in his famous book *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980), Raymond Williams very aptly writes that "the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history" (Williams 1980: 67). 'Nature' conveys a most complex and wide range of significations, and yet, as Kate Soper suggests, "its complexity is concealed by the ease and regularity with which we put it to use in a wide variety of contexts" (Soper 1995: 1).

Nowadays, the meaning of the term 'nature,' in the use we make of it in our common parlance, is as varied and imprecise as ever. We could mean with it "spaces of the earth uninhabited by humans," or even simply "the outdoors," usually a non-urban outdoors. The concept we mean by the word 'nature' often overlaps with that of wilderness and/or that of environment. On other occasions, nature is for us what we watch and admire in the documentaries displaying lions chasing springbox, or elephants

quietly grazing in the Savannah, or whales placidly swimming in the oceans; but nature is also the robin or the titmouse that builds its nest in our garden and picks the bread crumbs from our gardens or window-sills; nature is thus a sphere apart from ours, but also a sphere close to ours and that interacts with us.

In general, it usually denotes something outside of the human sphere, of the physical and abstract space in which humans live and act. But, if unconsciously and unintentionally, we also often use 'nature' to describe ourselves: some of our behaviors or emotions, feelings. We use the term 'natural' with reference to our physiological needs and behaviors, or to our emotional reactions to certain events.

If we check the meaning of 'nature' and of 'environment' in the most authoritative dictionary of the English language, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we can read these entries[16]:

Environment (ɛnˈvaɪrənmənt)
[f. environ v. + -ment. Cf. OF. environnement.]

1.1 The action of environing; the state of being environed. (With quot. cf. environ v. 4.)
1603 Holland Plutarch's Mor. 1009, I wot not what circumplexions and environments [orig. περιελεύσεις].

2.2 concr. a.2.a That which environs; the objects or the region surrounding anything.
1830 Carlyle in For. Rev. & Cont. Miscell. v. 34 Baireuth, with its kind picturesque environment.

b.2.b esp. The conditions under which any person or thing lives or is developed; the sum-total of influences which modify and determine the development of life or character.
1827 Carlyle Misc., Goethe (1869) 192 In such an element with such an environment of circumstances.

3.3 attrib., as environment area, environment control, environment minister.

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[16] I have limited the number of entries and the occurrences and quotations related to each entry; the criteria for the exclusion are based on semantic similarity and redundancy of the significations of the word, which are often only elaboration of one signification that has originated idiomatic and figurative expressions which have crystallized in language.

1963 Daily Tel. 28 Nov. 16/2 The future pattern of cities should be conceived as a patchwork of 'environment areas' of residence, commerce or industry from which traffic other than that concerned with the area would be excluded.

Nature, n. (ˈneɪtjʊə(r), ˈneɪtʃə(r))
Also 4– 5, 6 Sc. natur, 5, 6–7 Sc. natour, 6 Sc. nateur, natuir.
[a. F. nature (12th c.), ad. L. nātūra birth, constitution, character, course of things, etc., f. nāt-, ppl. stem of nascī to be born. The native English word is kind n.]

I. 1.I.1 a.I.1.a The essential qualities or properties of a thing; the inherent and inseparable combination of properties essentially pertaining to anything and giving it its fundamental character.
  a 1300 Cursor M. 22147 O thinges sere þair naturs [he shall cause] turnd to be in sere figurs.   1390 Gower Conf. III. 19 If I schal more seie Upon the nature of the vice.

2. a.I.2.a The inherent and innate disposition or character of a person (or animal). Also, (one's) better nature.
  See also good nature, ill nature, and second.
  a 1300 Cursor M. 21888 Ilk creatur Efter þe state of his natur, Better his maker knaus þan man.
  1390 Gower Conf. III. 205 A wolf he was.., The whos nature prively He hadde in his condicion.

b.I.2.b The general inherent character or disposition of mankind. Also in phr. human nature.
  1526 Pilgr. Perf. (W. de W. 1531) 140 b, Though ye fall neuer so ofte by impacyency, through ye fraylte of nature.

c.I.2.c With adjectives, in reference to the different elements of human character.
  a 1676 Hale Prim. Orig. Man. iv. v. (1677) 332 So much of that in Man that concerns his Animal Nature.

 3. a.I.3.a With a and pl. An individual character, disposition, etc., considered as a kind of entity in itself; hence, a thing or person of a particular quality or character.
  c 1374 Chaucer Boeth. v. pr. ii. (1868) 152 Ne þer ne was neuer no nature of resoun þat it ne hadde liberte of fre wille.   1390 Gower Conf. III. 88 The god commandeth the natures That thei to him obeien alle.

4.I.4 In various phrases: a.I.4.a of (a certain) nature.
  In first quot. perhaps in sense of 'origin'.

f.I.4.f nature and nurture, nature-nurture, heredity and environment as influences on, or the determinants of, personality (see quot. 1874). Also attrib.

5.I.5 by (earlier †of, †on) nature, in virtue of the very character or essence of the thing or person.
  In some cases with suggestion of senses 9 and 11.

II. 6.II.6 a.II.6.a The vital or physical powers of man; (a person's) physical strength or constitution (obs.); the strength or substance of a thing.

III. 9.III.9 a.III.9.a The inherent dominating power or impulse (in men or animals) by which action or character is determined, directed, or controlled. (Sometimes personified.)

10. a.III.10.a The inherent power or force by which the physical and mental activities of man are sustained. (Sometimes personified.)

IV. 11.IV.11 a.IV.11.a The creative and regulative physical power which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena. balance of nature: see balance n. 13 d.

b.IV.11.b More or less definitely personified as a female being. (Usu. with capital.)

d.IV.11.d Contrasted with art: (see art n. 2). Also, fidelity or close adherence to nature; naturalness. from nature: see from prep. (adv., conj.) 13.

12.IV.12 In various phrases: a.IV.12.a against nature, or contrary to, nature.

f.IV.12.f (one of) nature's gentlemen: a natural gentleman, a person who is a gentleman by nature. Hence in similar phrases, and in extended use: by temperament.
  1841 Thackeray Second Funeral Napoleon iii. 67 In the matter of gentleman democrats, cry pshaw! Give us one of nature's gentlemen, and hang your aristocrats!

13. a.IV.13.a The material world, or its collective objects and phenomena, esp. those with which man is most directly in contact; freq. the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of human civilization.
  1662 Stillingfl. Orig. Sacræ iii. ii. §17 According to the Atomicall principles, no rationall account can be given of those effects which are seen in nature.

  14. a.IV.14.a the or a state of nature: (a) the moral state natural to man, as opposed to a state of grace; (b) the condition of man before the foundation of organized society; (c) an uncultivated or undomesticated condition; (d) physical nakedness.
        a 1667 South Serm. (1697) I. 9 The Difference between a state of Nature, and a state of Grace.

(OED 2nd edition on CD-ROM v.4.0, 2009)

So much for dictionary definition. But when we use 'nature' in our discourses and conversations in non idiomatic (example for idiomatic: 'the course of nature') or attributive (example for attributive: 'a person of kind nature') sense, we usually use the word with the meaning of 'natural world,' that is, those areas of the earth that are not inhabited by humans, where the landscape has not (at least apparently) been modified by humans, and where animals, plants and other natural elements can live and exist virtually undisturbed by human activity. We usually mean a world apart from ours that fascinates and intrigues us exactly because of its apparent diversity and distance from us, but also for the similarities with us we seek and see in it.

Thus, even if we normally use nature to signify something apart, distant and different from us, in the end we cannot escape the link that does exist between the human and the non-human, since we are part of the same system, or world. The fallacy of an assumption on nature as a world apart from us is proved precisely by the definitions of the term 'nature' provided by dictionaries.

It is rather striking how, in most *OED* definitions, nature has to do with humanity, it is strictly and directly related to human beings. Only from around the XVII century do we see a gap between humanity and nature (s. entry 13. a, its first occurrence dates to 1662), which will deepen as time goes on. But nature in the sense of human character, temperament, disposition is still a semantically productive field as late as the XIX century (s. entry 12. f: the first occurrence is from 1841 in Thackeray). If we pay attention to the chronological aspect of the *OED* data, we can see that the semantic shift has occurred around the time of the scientific revolution. When nature, or the environment not inhabited by humans, and all its beings and elements became the object of a systematic and systematized study and observation regulated by 'scientific' criteria and method, its otherness, its alterity with respect to humanity was definitively affirmed. As we will see in the next paragraph, this phenomenon had already occurred in ancient Greece. The difference, this time, is that the nature which is the object of the XVI and XVII century 'neo-scientists' has been devoided of any spiritual essence and character.

Once we have agreed on the fact that humanity and nature are not two totally different and separate worlds, but that instead, the world of nature intended as one great ecosystem also comprehends human beings, we cannot ignore the semantic development

of the word 'nature,' which has come to signify all that is not part of the human sphere[17].

What is important to understand, though, is that this modern signification does not imply

a radical distinction or gap between nature and humans; thus, we could define 'nature' or

the 'natural world' as that both animate and non-animate part of the system earth, which

has developed and evolved apart from human culture, but is of course affected by it and

affects it.

This is the meaning and sense of 'nature' and of 'natural world' considered and

used here; I will alternate the use of 'nature' and 'natural world', preferring the latter

when possible because it conveys a less comprehensive and less abstract meaning than

'nature.' As for 'environment,' I will follow the *OED* definitions 2.2 a. concr. and 2 b. esp.,

leaving aside the other, more specific connotation taken on by the word in current speech,

whereby, when we talk about the environment, we often refer to the damaged, over-

exploited and endangered areas and systems of the natural world.

2.1. The Composite Heritage of the Past

The Middle Ages inherited a variety of different cultures and traditions and

therefore of different visions and ideas of nature and of humanity's relationship with

nature. This cultural heritage consisted of a long and rich Greek and Latin tradition of

philosophical systems and literary works of various genres. Another element which

constituted a large part of the European tradition at the dawn of the medieval period was

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[17] Such a distinction between what is human and what is natural was strengthened in the Romantic period as C. S. Lewis (2002) suggests through a quote from Coleridge's *Prelude*: "he had 'long desired to serve in Nature's temple' (II, 452-263). *Nature*, in fact, or anyway her 'temple', excludes towns" (Lewis 2002: 72); and further down in the same paragraph he clarifies: "Nature in them [the Romantics] means the country as opposed to the town" (Lewis 2002: 73).

represented by the local traditions and lore, defined as 'pagan' in opposition to the Christian tradition, which constituted yet another fundamental aspect of the culture of the Middle Ages, but whose role and influence will progressively grow to be decisive and dominant in the development of medieval culture.

A distinguishing feature of the medieval tradition is the synthesis it manages to produce among these various and varied cultural systems, so that pagan legends and ideas can coexist with the relatively new Christian tradition. This process of assimilation resulted in a complex and composite culture and therefore in a complex attitude of medieval people towards the natural world.

Greek philosophy, starting with the Pre-Socratics and especially from the 5th century BC, with Socrates, Plato and then Aristotle, marks the beginning of European civilization, but it also changes the Western view of nature forever.

Until that moment, within that same culture, the natural world in which human beings lived immersed and by which they were surrounded, was conceived of and interpreted as a combination of incontrollable forces governed by whimsical and fickle deities. However, these gods, masters of the natural forces and elements, were highly anthropomorphized: they resembled humans in their vices, feelings, and were represented in human form in both literature and visual arts.

But this process of anthropomorphization of the gods which govern the natural forces is not the first stadium of the human interpretation of the natural world, of the cosmos. The attribution of human characteristics to both animate and inanimate natural elements is the result of an ancient state of the human mind, caught as it tried to understand the surrounding world; this cognitive and interpretative attitude towards

nature is called by scholars 'magic' (Lenoble 1974[18]; Leroi-Gourhan 1993[19]). Within this context, the word 'magic' does not convey the meaning we are more familiar with, that is, the use of superstitious, occult rites invoking presumed occult powers to intervene in the course of things and change it according to our wishes, powers which are considered as illusory, dangerous and fundamentally a product of ignorance. Nevertheless, in this connotation there are the remains of the original meaning of 'magic', which consisted of "una specie di animismo contemporaneamente propiziatorio e operativo"[20] (Lenoble 1974: 271), and which essentially signified a human intervention in the course of life through belief and rites and through the power and the aid of spiritual entities; but unlike the modern definition of magic, as given by the *OED*[21], it did not carry also a negative meaning, but performed the function of empowering humans on a moral level with regard to a both hostile and at the same time generous environment.

Pre-historic and proto-historic people observed natural elements such as mountains, rivers, trees and forests and sought in them for "le risposte alle domande più antiche" [22] (Paci 2002: 11). Ancient humans also perceived in them and in natural phenomena the presence of entities or spirits which regulated the phenomena themselves, but above all they perceived the vital and (re-)generating power of nature. These "spiritual entities" were probably perceived as immortal, as capable of surviving the death of the

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[18] Lenoble, Robert. *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'idée de Nature.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1969. All quotations are from the Italian transl. *Storia di un'idea di natura*. Napoli: Guida, 1974, hereafter cited in the text.

[19] Leroi-Gourham, André. *Les religions de la préhistoire Paléolithique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964. All quotations are from the Italian transl. *Le religioni della preistoria*. Milano: Adelphi, 1993, hereafter cited in the text.

[20] "A sort of animism propitiatory and operative at the same time," (my translation).

[21] "The pretended art of influencing the course of events, and of producing marvellous physical phenomena, by processes supposed to owe their efficacy to their power of compelling the intervention of spiritual beings, or of bringing into operation some occult controlling principle of nature; sorcery, witchcraft. Also, the practice of this art" (*OED* 2nd edition on CD-ROM v .4.0, 2009).

[22] "The answers to the most ancient questions," (my translation).

tree or animal they inhabited, for example, thus implying the existence of a potentially infinite vital cycle. This attribution of a spiritual power to the physical nature, this animistic interpretation of the cosmos, and the moral perception of the cyclicity of life and death, besides being "capace di esorcizzare nel primitivo la paura della fine dell'esistenza"[23] (Paci 2002: 12) and thus satisfy the need for reassurance and for a sense of safety, also represent the answer to the intellectual need, the atavic curiosity among humans to know and understand the world and the universe, trying to explain and comprehend the relationships between the natural phenomena.

The most ancient cosmologies are the way through which primitive and ancient humans tried to "accedere alla comprensione di un ordine universale" [24] (Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 94). At first, these deities were identified with the objects and phenomena they were believed to inhabit, but were later conceived of in human terms. Humans transferred onto these spiritual beings the ideas they held about themselves: they imagined things as bearing a resemblance with themselves, as a result of what Lenoble defines "la propensione del soggetto ad immaginare le cose modellandole sulla propria esistenza" [25] (Lenoble 1974: 51), because their own existence is the only parameter they have on which to draw conclusions and judgments about the rest of the world. They also transferred onto the natural gods human traits both on a moral and on a physical level.

The following step was to place the gods within the cosmos: they were turned from invisible beings residing inside nature to human-like entities (though still not visible to humans) living in the part of the world that humans had no access to or direct experience

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[23] "Capable of exorcizing the fear of the end of life in primitives," (my translation).
[24] "To access the under standing of a universal order," (my translation).
[25] "The subject's disposition to imagine things modeling them according to his or her existence," (my translation).

of, the sky. In ancient and polytheistic Greek religion the gods were placed above a sacred mountain, Mount Olympus, as we are told by the works of Hesiod and by the epic poems of Homer, the major direct sources for ancient Greek religion and mythology. The nature represented in Homer's poetry is a chaotic combination of incontrollable natural forces; the only hint of an organizing principle is represented by the Greek pantheon symbolized by the Olympus, the residence of the gods who embody the various natural forces and phenomena. People found comfort in this partly ordered cosmos, but the order they discovered and built was uncertain and aleatory, since it was subject to the will of the gods, and humans did not play any active part within it. The human being conceives of him-/herself as a creature at the mercy of the elemental forces, and, like all other creatures, is but a vehicle through which the divine action passes: "l'anima non è altro se non un luogo di passaggio per le forze magiche" [26] (Lenoble 1974: 69).

2.1.1. Classical ideas and representations of nature

Pre-Socratic philosophers tried to find and define a principle which would assign an order and an origin to the world, and each philosopher identified it either in a natural element (e.g. Thales in water) or in undefined substances, or powers or principles (e.g. Anaximander in the *apeiron*), whereas others, such as Empedocles found the origin and organization of the world to reside in the balanced mix of four elements (fire, air, water, earth), believed to be the main constituents of the material world. The ancient gods thus slowly lost their unquestionableness, and their existence was put in doubt by thinkers who

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[26] "The soul is but a place through which magical forces pass," (my translation).

relied on sensible perception and observation rather than on supernatural explanations based on moral grounds.

It is in this situation that Greek philosophy operates a revolution which will have a tremendous impact on the development of European civilization and culture, and on its attitude towards the physical world. The spark that set off this change is represented by Socrates's philosophy: he turned the intellectual gaze inwards, and the human being became the philosopher's own object of interest. Humans acquired a new self-consciousness and found themselves able to give up the gods they had believed in; the human being could sense his/her own deep essence and individual identity as opposed to the chaotic world governed by the will of the gods. It is with Plato that the human intellectual interest is moved from the human being to the whole cosmos, conceptualized by the philosopher as a giant being provided with a rational soul:

"[30b] λογισάμενος οὖν ηὗρισκεν ἐκ τῶν κατὰ φύσιν ὁρατῶν οὐδὲν ἀνόητον τοῦ νοῦν ἔχοντος ὅλον ὅλου κάλλιον ἔσεσθαί ποτε ἔργον, νοῦν δ' αὖ χωρὶς ψυχῆς ἀδύνατον παραγενέσθαι τῳ. διὰ δὴ τὸν λογισμὸν τόνδε νοῦν μὲν ἐν ψυχῇ, ψυχὴν δ' ἐν σώματι συνιστὰς τὸ πᾶν συνετεκταίνετο, ὅπως ὅτι κάλλιστον εἴη κατὰ φύσιν ἄριστόν τε ἔργον ἀπειργασμένος. οὕτως οὖν δὴ κατὰ λόγον τὸν εἰκότα δεῖ λέγειν τόνδε τὸν κόσμον ζῷον ἔμψυχον ἔννουν τε τῇ ἀληθείᾳ διὰ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ " (*Τίμαιος*).[27]

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[27] "And the creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole was fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole; and that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best. Wherefore, using the language of probability, we may say that the world became a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God" (*Timaeus*, English translation available online at: http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html).

But Plato keeps his interest on a rather abstract level, and he subordinates the physical world to the sphere of the ideas and of the soul. Ideas are considered by Plato to be the 'real reality' of which the physical objects are only a sensible reflection.

It is Aristotle, however, who is responsible for creating a connection between this new philosophical perspective based on existentialistic principles and an epistemological approach based on rationality and on direct observation of the physical world and its manifestations. His thought marks a turning point: he does not refute what had been achieved before him, instead he takes the pre-Socratics as a starting point: "Aristotle tried to restore to dignity the ancient, pre-Socratic quest for some rational explanation of the way things are in the world we live in" (Weisheipl 1982: 139). He then suggests a comprehensive interpretation of the cosmos, trying to give reason of the new and old questions raised by the previous philosophers, questions which keep being raised in the course of history.

His first step is to limit his observations to what he defines as the sublunary world, that is what lies beneath the skies: this is the only cosmic sphere of which humans can have direct sensible experience, since it is the world they live in, the Earth. As he extends to the physical world, to nature, to what he calls φύσις (physis), the "ordine 'scoperto' da Socrate nella coscienza"[28] (Lenoble 1974: 83), transferred by Plato on a cosmic and transcendental level, Aristotle recognizes the individual and separate existence of all that is not human. Things are now in front of humans as "esseri dotati di un'alterità radicale"[29] (Lenoble 1974: 85), they exist by nature. With Aristotle things acquire their own identity as something 'other' than human beings, but they also gain the interest of humanity; they

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[28] "The order 'discovered' by Socrates in the human conscience", (my translation).
[29] "Entities provided with a radical otherness," (my translation).

certainly gain Aristotle's interest, as he sets out to observe, understand and classify all the objects, phenomena and forces of the natural world. He conceptualizes nature and makes an inventory of it, classifies it by means of logic and a need for systematization, dividing and organizing everything in categories, species, types, and genera: "Questa natura costituisce un ordine […] oggettivo […]. L'aristotelico scopre in essa quell'immagine di cui un'anima attenta, osservatrice e disinteressata sente il bisogno, e non sarà più tormentato né dai sortilegi né dai demoni cosmici"[30] (Lenoble 1974: 92).

The new attitude towards the world which resulted from these philosophical systems and speculations brought about an epoch-making change: humans liberated themselves from the psychological burden of atavic fears related to their condition of beings subject to external and internal forces, needs, urges. When they saw themselves as capable of understanding, describing and defining these forces, need, urges, and everything that surrounded them, humans felt free and empowered. This awareness and (self-)confidence could (and in fact did) have at least two consequences: either the desire to dominate the world they then knew and understood or a sense of respect and appreciation of the natural world.

When humanity acquires self-awareness and recognizes the existential autonomy of all that surrounds it, it also develops a sense of respect towards the cosmos: "il regno della legge presuppone il mutuo rispetto dando a ciascuno, nei giusti limiti, il diritto di rimanere se stesso"[31] (Lenoble 1974: 71). Greek philosophers essentially wanted to apply an order regulated by logic and rules to the chaotic anarchy they believed to see in nature.

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[30] "This nature constitutes an objective order. The Aristotelian finds in it that image that an attentive, scrupulous, observing, and disinterested soul needs, and will no more be tormented neither by sorceries nor by cosmic demons", (my translation).

[31] "The realm of the law implies mutual respect giving to each and everyone, within just and fair limits, the right to be and remain oneself", (my translation).

In reality, the chaos they saw in the cosmos was a result of humans' ignorance with regard to the dynamics of natural life, and of the fear and preoccupation with the concrete problems of their own life and existence. Putting order in that phenomenal reality ultimately meant to put order within themselves. In the end, both the cosmic chaos and the imposed 'logical order' are human constructions reflecting humankind's ideas about itself and its place in the world.

But Aristotle with his remarkable effort put in observing, describing, and organizing knowledge about nature, offers an idea and interpretation of nature which manages to balance the need for order and understanding of the natural world with the need for order in the moral and spiritual side of human life, as well as that for social order and organization. His sincere and deep interest for the physical reality he describes and classifies gives tremendous value to his work: it has the unquestionable advantage of founding itself on a sensible and perceptible reality of which everyone can have direct experience; and the merit of establishing a methodology of observation, description, organization and classification of the world, which will serve as a model for future philosophers and scientists.

Aristotle was one of the most, perhaps the most influential philosopher in the Middle Ages: "per gli studiosi medievali fu il Filosofo per eccellenza"[32] (Grant 2001: 105). Plato was also very influential, but his authority was mainly restricted to the religious sphere. He very soon found his way into Christianity: his thought was easily made to fit the Christian theological and doctrinal system. With his emphasis on the transcendental as origin of the material world, Plato's idea of the cosmos and of its creation had much in

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[32] "For medieval scholars he was the Philosopher *par excellence*," (my translation).

common with the Christian idea of God as maker of the world and invisible entity living in the celestial spheres. All proceeded from Him, or, in Plato's system, from its Platonic equivalent, the Soul; according to the Greek philosopher, everything exists because it was conceived in the maker's mind: the idea of things is the real thing, of which the material objects are but a sensible manifestation: "Plato did not develop a doctrine of 'nature' […]. His concern was to show that all material reality proceeds from divine intelligence, which necessarily must be anterior to the world" (Weisheipl 1982: 143). If Plato's philosophy was so fitting for the Christian theological doctrine, what then made Aristotle so appealing to medieval thinkers and theologians?

Weisheipl continues: "Aristotle tried to maintain *both* the priority of Soul and the reality of 'nature' as a primary, spontaneous source of characteristic movement and rest" (1982: 143). He tries to reconcile both spirit and matter: this is what makes his ideas so appealing. If Aristotle's intent is to "respect the evidence of the senses" (Ibid.: 140), and then basically everything can be explained through some presence of nature, then those phenomena for which we cannot rely on the senses, and which are not art (τέχνη) or accidents (τύχη) can only be explained by nature: "Once we have excluded anything that can be explained by art or by chance, we are still left with phenomena that can be explained in no other way than by 'nature,' some source which is ultimately *given* in human experience" (Weisheipl 1982: 144). As a result, nature is more than the physical; it is both the primary and the secondary cause, matter and form, and the resulting combination of the two. But nature also accounts for the spiritual, hence the divine, God. Nature is pervaded and permeated by God (Plato's Soul).

In this sense, nature is both creation of the divine, manifestation of it, and agency for divine manifestation and human comprehension. Nature is the physical (material and spiritual) reality through which humans perceive, acknowledge, and understand the divine, the supernatural which created nature in the first place and influences it from its fixed remote site in the celestial spheres. Nature is both a vehicle for human understanding of the supernatural, the divine, and for a contact between them, and a place for the manifestation of the supernatural powers as well as of the natural forces and elements, which have in themselves the origin of movement and rest, but which were originally given this innate power by the Primary Cause, the *Primus Motor Immobilis*.

Aristotle's was not the only philosophical system and physics, or natural philosophy, of Antiquity, of course, but it was that which mostly contributed to and influenced the natural philosophy of the Middle Ages. Other Classical philosophers received attention from medieval thinkers and some of their ideas and images found their way in medieval philosophy, theology, and literature. Two notable figures of the Roman tradition in particular, exerted a remarkable impact on the medieval mind: Lucretius, the somehow controversial Latin atomist, and Pliny the Elder, author of the monumental *Historia Naturalis*. One common element between these two Romans is constituted by the cult of the Goddess Nature, a figure which will have a tremendous influence and resonance in both medieval philosophy and medieval literature. To the idea of a personified Nature, bestower of life, will dedicate much of their work philosophers of the School of Chartres and poets such as Bernardus Silvestris in his *De universitate mundi* and Alain de Lille in his *De planctu naturae*, who will codify and stereotype the image of the Goddess Natura created by the French philosophical school. This rhetorical tradition will

be received and used by many (and also later) poets, such as Jean de Meun, and over a century later, by Chaucer.

According to Epicurus, knowledge resides only in our sensible perception of things (Lenoble 1974: 113), and his thought is therefore not concerned with divinity. Lucretius, a Latin atomist of the first century B.C. and follower of the Epicurean doctrine, despite his admiration for and adherence to Epicurus's thought, cannot help assigning a somewhat divine character to Nature, which he envisions as a goddess responsible for the order of natural things and for the boundless fecundity, which particularly strikes the poet-philosopher. It is in view of this idea of nature that his invocation to Venus in the beginning of the *De Rerum Natura* should be considered. Although embracing a philosophical tradition which seeks to liberate humanity from the self-generated fears of a worldview based on finalistic grounds, the fears arising from ancient religion, Lucretius cannot completely let go of the torment of the human soul which, in fact, characterizes his life as much as his work. It is interesting how he begins his philosophical poem with an invocation to Venus, which is followed by a celebration of Epicurus:

> Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas,
> alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa
> quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis
> concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum
> concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis:
> te, dea, te fugiunt venti, te nubila caeli
> adventumque tuum, tibi suavis daedala tellus
> summittit flores, tibi rident aequora ponti
> placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum.
> nam simul ac species patefactast verna diei
> et reserata viget genitabilis aura favoni,
> aeriae primum volucris te, diva, tuumque
> significant initum perculsae corda tua vi.
> inde ferae pecudes persultant pabula laeta
> et rapidos tranant amnis: ita capta lepore
> te sequitur cupide quo quamque inducere pergis.

denique per maria ac montis fluviosque rapacis
frondiferasque domos avium camposque virentis
omnibus incutiens blandum per pectora amorem
efficis ut cupide generatim saecla propagent.
quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas
nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras
exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam,
te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse,
quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor
Memmiadae nostro, quem tu, dea, tempore in omni
omnibus ornatum voluisti excellere rebus.
quo magis aeternum da dictis, diva, leporem.
effice ut interea fera moenera militiai
per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant;
nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare
mortalis, quoniam belli fera moenera Mavors
armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se
reiicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris,
atque ita suspiciens tereti cervice reposta
pascit amore avidos inhians in te, dea, visus
eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.
hunc tu, diva, tuo recubantem corpore sancto
circum fusa super, suavis ex ore loquellas
funde petens placidam Romanis, incluta, pacem;
nam neque nos agere hoc patriai tempore iniquo
possumus aequo animo nec Memmi clara propago
talibus in rebus communi desse saluti.
(*De rerum natura*, I, 1-43)

Venus here clearly stands for a personification of Nature intended mainly as creative and generative force, but it is peculiar that Lucretius chooses a goddess and not simply Mother Earth, Goddess Earth. She is not only a life-giver, but also a governing entity, which regulates the birth and death of all the creatures, and the course of events. And the invocation is followed by a section dedicated to the philosopher who had delivered humans from the cosmic and religious fears, who is however not explicitly mentioned in the passage, Epicurus:

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,

> primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra
> est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra;
> quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti
> murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem
> inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta
> naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.
> ergo vivida vis animi pervicit et extra
> processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
> atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque,
> unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri,
> quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique
> qua nam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.
> quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim
> opteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.
> (*De rerum natura*, I, 62-79)

Here Lucretius expresses his adherence to Epicureanism and to the idea that the ancient religion had only blinded humans to the reality of things, by way of infusing them with a fear of impending punishments coming from the gods on which human destiny would depend. The atomistic physics of Epicurus had the purpose of liberating humanity from finalistic preoccupations, seen as useless and vain by atomists, since in nature there is no end to which all things tend, as there was no origin, but only perpetual transformation and regeneration of nature, as Lucretius himself beautifully puts it : "Haud igitur penitus pereunt quaecumque videntur, | quando alit ex alio reficit natura nec ullam | rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena" (*De rerum natura*, I, 262-264). But natural philosophy, science cannot ultimately answer humankind's dilemma, since it is unlikely that humans will accept to see themselves as mere machines (Lenoble 1974: 164) and matter. Lucretius does not solve this problem: he cannot reduce humanity to just a part of the world, not more important than the other elements of the cosmos. Still, "per lui, la Natura è sempre la Madre 'Venus'"[33] (Lenoble 1974: 154): Nature is here rhetorically identified with Venus, because Lucretius retains some connection with that cultural construction – religion and

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[33] "For him, Nature is always the Mother 'Venus'", (my translation).

its finalism – that atomism sought to dismantle, and this can be seen in the invocation, when after describing all the powers and qualities of Venus which in those verses really coincides with Nature, the poet invokes the goddess Venus/Nature's intervention to bring peace among mortals by appeasing the god of war, Mars. These motifs are certainly motivated by mere rhetorical reasons, but the double image of Venus as traditional goddess of the Greek-Roman pantheon and as Nature, maker and governor of the cosmos does also express Lucretius's own internal conflict on a moral and intellectual level, a conflict which cannot reconcile the mechanistic view of nature offered by atomism and an undeniable human need for a spiritual dimension.

One doubtless advantage of atomism, from an ecocritical perspective, is the fact that it aimed at eliminating anthropocentrism: humankind was not the center of the cosmos, but one of its particular elements, events, cases. Rather than finding a meaning and an end in nature, human beings should learn to accept the reality of things as it is, and thus live in peace with them: "*Possiamo dunque andar d'accordo con la Natura accettando le cose come sono e come ci si presentano giorno per giorno*"[34] (Lenoble 1974: 128). The absence of a finality in nature and in life, and therefore the lack of a pre-determined course and order of events inevitably leads to an acceptance of the way things are and happen. But this fatalistic view did not necessarily have only positive consequences; while for the atomists the depersonalization of nature signified abandoning anthropocentrism, it also led to devoid nature of any spiritual and mystical aspect and significance which, more often than not, had the effect of inspiring awe and respect of nature in human beings. An idea which originally bore positive implications ended up having opposite effects, since a natural

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[34] "We can then coexist with Nature accepting things as they are and how they present themselves to us day after day", (my translation). In italics in the original.

world deprived of any spiritual dimension was more easily seen in materialistic and utilitarian terms, and thus exploited without ethical and moral preoccupations. But in Lucretius and his predecessors it still expressed an egalitarian view of the cosmos, where humans, plants, animals, rivers, stones had the same value, function, and the same right to existence.

Pliny's achievement and therefore his contribution to medieval ideas of nature was of a different kind. His monumental work in 36 books marked a new attitude towards humanity's relationship with the natural work. Pliny did not mean his work to offer yet another philosophical system and interpretation; he did not speculate about philosophy. He starts his writing in Book II, after devoting the whole first book to the enumeration of the books, chapters, topics of the work and of the sources he used and from which he gathered all the information and data presented in his *Historia*, and he begins with a definition of world which he identifies with nature itself and with divinity:

> Mundum et hoc quodcumque nomine alio caelum appellare libuit, cuius circumflexu degunt cuncta, numen esse credi par est, aeternum, inmensum, neque genitum neque interiturum umquam. Huius extera indagare nec interest hominum nec capit humanae coniectura mentis.
> Sacer est, aeternus, immensus, totus in toto, immo vero ipse totum ac finito similis, omnium rerum certus et similis incerto, extra intra cuncta conplexus in se, idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura.
> (*Naturalis Historia*, II, 1)

Pliny's work was produced in a time where most theories about the cosmos and the natural world proceeded from Plato's and Aristotle's thought, and a time when Stoicism was an influential philosophical system in the interpretation of the world, but atomism, although rather marginal, was also exerting a certain degree of intellectual stimulus. It has

been remarked how in the *Historia Naturalis*, we can perceive a hint of "watered-down

Stoicism" (Doody 2010: 23), and in fact, as Mary Beagon fitly points out, "Stoicism, in

particular, with its emphasis on duty in public as well as private life, was especially

appealing to Romans" (1992: 27). In his work Pliny presents a list and enumeration of all

the objects of the natural world; in addition to this, however, as already noted above, the

Historia Naturalis is not engaged in any philosophical debate, and does not follow the

precepts of any particular philosophical school, Pliny does not live remote and detached

from the practical, social and political reality of his era. Time and again, in his work he

overtly and harshly criticizes human behavior towards the environment, pointing out in

particular to the pursue of a luxurious life on the part of his fellow citizens, and on the

exploitation and violence proper perpetrated against nature:

> Lapidum natura restat, hoc est praecipua morum insania, etiam ut
> gemmae cum sucinis atque crystallinis murrinisque sileantur. omnia
> namque, quae usque ad hoc volumen tractavimus, hominum genita
> causa videri possunt: montes natura sibi fecerat ut quasdam compages
> telluris visceribus densandis, simul ad fluminum impetus domandos
> fluctusque frangendos ac minime quietas partes coercendas durissima sui
> materia, caedimus hos trahimusque nulla alia quam deliciarum causa,
> quos transcendisse quoque mirum fuit.
> In portento prope maiores habuere Alpis ab Hannibale exsuperatas et
> postea a Cimbris: nunc ipsae caeduntur in mille genera marmorum.
> promunturia aperiuntur mari, et rerum natura agitur in planum;
> evehimus ea, quae separandis gentibus pro terminis constituta erant,
> navesque marmorum causa fiunt, ac per fluctus, saevissimam rerum
> naturae partem, huc illuc portantur iuga, maiore etiamnum venia quam
> cum ad frigidos potus vas petitur in nubila caeloque proximae rupes
> cavantur, ut bibatur glacie
> (*Historia Naturalis*, XXXVI, 1, 1-2).

Here we can see how Pliny criticizes the destruction of the landscape, of mountains;

he attacks the excavation of mines in the earth and mountains, and he defines it as a

"morum insania", a foolish, inconsiderate custom motivated only by "nulla alia quam deliciarum causa", only a desire for luxury, for mere pleasure. He criticizes luxury, but in general every human intervention and exploitation of the natural world which will have consequences on the ecological balance and order created by nature; he preaches moderation and "condanna […] qualsiasi tecnica che vada al di là della soddisfazione dei bisogni essenziali"[35] (Lenoble 1974: 218). He condemns the disruption of the cosmic order set by nature, which he envisions as a Mother Earth:

> equitur terra, cui uni rerum naturae partium eximia propter merita cognomen indidimus maternae venerationis. sic hominum illa, ut caelum dei, quae nos nascentes excipit, natos alit semelque editos et sustinet semper, novissime conplexa gremio iam a reliqua natura abdicatos, tum maxime ut mater operiens, nullo magis sacra merito quam quo nos quoque sacros facit, etiam monimenta ac titulos gerens nomenque prorogans nostrum et memoriam extendens contra brevitatem aevi, cuius numen ultimum iam nullis precamur irati grave, tamquam nesciamus hanc esse solam quae numquam irascatur homini.
> (Historia Naturalis, II, 64)

Mother Earth is a life-giver, a nourisher, and a protector: this deified and personified image of the earth, and, by extension, of nature, will have a deep and lasting impact on the imaginary of the poets, and, especially in the Middle Ages, there will be a flourishing of works dedicated to or having as character this poetic figure.

But for Pliny, Mother Earth, or Mother Nature, is not (or not only) a product of rhetorical invention: he clearly states from the beginning that his idea of the world, and thus of nature, is that of a unified, single composite being made up of many particular elements. In his work, Pliny painstakingly lists and describes all the elements, all the

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[35] "Condemns any technical intervention which exceeds the satisfaction of primary needs", (my translation).

details, so that by observing and appreciating the single units, seen as microcosm, we can have a better glimpse of the larger picture, the great system earth, the macrocosm.

If Pliny brings nothing new with his *Historia Naturalis*, from a philosophical and scientific point of view, he does on the other hand offer a new idea, a new attitude: "This vision of nature that can be broken and catalogued, fact by fact, name by name, item by item, represents a new idea about what it is to know about the nature of things. In the *Naturalis Historia*, nature becomes exactly the sum of its parts" (Doody 2010: 23). And Pliny frequently emphasizes the relationship of the single, individual fact with the whole, and the importance of the interconnectedness.

Pliny presents thus a novelty in epistemological methods, in ways of knowing the natural world: he catalogs, he describes, only through words, all known facts and objects, collecting the information from other written works, and not by personal observation. This methodology of his has been ungenerously criticized, because it has been regarded, rightly to our modern view, as non scientific; but as Aude Doody suggests, the scholars who have been comparing Pliny's work with that of Aristotle or Theophrastus, being then disappointed by Pliny's "lack of investigative research or scientific theory" (2010: 23), while right on the one hand, have on the other hand missed a very important point: it is true that Pliny did not collect his data from personal investigation and observation, but only relying on the authority of great thinkers and scholars before him, but he did go to see for example the plants he describes, by visiting the botanical garden of Antonius Castor, and he tells us about this in II, 9, as Doody reminds us (2010: 28).

In this way, Pliny suggests a reverse behavior in observing and contemplating nature, and one which is not intended (or not only) for the scientist or for the philosopher,

but for the common citizen: after reading, or hearing, about a plant, an animal, a landscape, we should be spurred into curiosity to go and see it for ourselves, after Pliny's personal example, and by observing the elected object, we should realize how that single entity is part of a system of entities which works much like the single small individual fact.

And Pliny also suggests an ethical behavior: by criticizing the mindless and selfish exploitation and disfigurement of nature, he exhorts his fellow humans to live in sobriety, taking from nature only what is necessary for essential living. He certainly displays a remarkable degree of ecological awareness, to the extent that we can see in his words a sort of proto-environmentalist attitude.

His encyclopedic method will enjoy great fortune in the Middle Ages, and scholars such as Isidore of Seville, with his *Etymologiae*, will follow his model and example; to modern people used to and surrounded by an ever-growing specialization of cultural and scientific fields, the effort of gathering together all the knowable facts into one single work certainly seems odd and useless. But Pliny's intent in presenting all the different facts, and naming them all, is that of creating an image of unity while he celebrates individual diversity. The web of interconnections among all the individual elements and facts which result in forming an ecosystem, where both individual and collective qualities are of fundamental value for the general balance, is a basic principle of modern ecology, that, as we have seen, finds its roots in ancient thought and behavior.

Another contribution to medieval culture and literature came from the poetic and literary Classical tradition. The most influential figure was probably that of Virgil, whose work was taken as the standard for epic and poetic style, and the model for a rhetorical representation of nature, particularly through his *Eclogues* and his *Georgics*. The *Eclogues*

re-elaborate the bucolic tradition invented by Theocritus, but the description of nature in

Virgil's poems is characterized by the *locus amoenus*, a rural scenery consisting of fixed

landscape elements, and ideally located in the Arcadia of the remote Golden Age. It is

usually the scenario for erotic and amorous encounters, and, especially in the IV Eclogue,

it symbolizes a certain temporariness and impermanence: there is a manifest expectation

for the return of the Golden Age, where the atmosphere of the tranquil scenery will be

extended to the rest of the world and people, and not be confined to the idyllic corner

where shepherds and maidens meet. The poet evokes a change in scope in the first verses,

passing from the "humiles myricae" to the "maiora," the "silvas," from small plants to

entire forests, and important ones, worthy of consuls:

> Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus.
> non omnis arbusta iuvant humilesque myricae;
> si canimus silvas, silvae sint consule dignae.
> (*Bucolica*, IV, 1-3)

But it is not so much a reconciliation of nature and humans that the poet evokes and

invokes; the poem expresses and reflects the political situation of the time, which finally

seemed to see the end of the civil wars between Octavian and Marcus Antonius, giving

hope for a peaceful future.

It is the *Georgics*, however, that are more interesting for our study. Far less idealized

than the *Bucolics*, the *Georgics* are four poems (or a poem divided into four books)

dedicated to the activities of farming: agriculture, cattle-raising, silviculture, and

apiculture. Its purpose is then apparently didactic and rather practical. They are much

more realistic in tone and style, as well as in content, than the *Bucolics*; but Virgil is

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probably not so particularly concerned with providing instructions about farming, and of course, as Segal suggests, "the agricultural instructions are only the framework for the poet's deep exploration of larger matters" (1966: 307). But these larger matters are also connected to nature, in fact they concern the relation between humans and nature. Monica Gale advances a very strong connection between Lucretius's thought as expressed in the *De Rerum Natura* and the *Georgics*, particularly in Book III of the Virgilian poem, suggesting how Book IV is instead the least Lucretian part of the work; yet she grasps a parallel between the bees and the atoms as tiny parts constituting a whole (2000: 49).

It is indeed one of the poetically highest sections, and perhaps the less realistic (at least in part) that contains the most poignant and meaningful message of the poem, a message which is very important for the understanding of the relationship between humankind and nature. The issue is symbolized in the apiculture section of Book IV. This section contains an epyllion of the tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice that Proteus tells to Aristeus, a shepherd and bee-keeper, protagonist of this final book.

The tragic figure of Orpheus symbolizes the tragedy of humankind: death, loss, the brutal force of nature against which humans are helpless: "Unlike the bees, man cannot reconcile himself to the conditions of life and nature" (Segal 1966: 311). We can then see a first opposition between humans (represented by Orpheus) and nature (represented by the bees). The poets sets another opposition: that between Aristaeus and Orpheus, whereby the first is guilty of having committed something serious against the latter:

> Non te nullius exercent numinis irae;
> magna luis commissa: tibi has miserabilis Orpheus
> haudquaquam ob meritum poenas, ni fata resistant,
> (*Georgicon*, IV, 453-455)

The contrast between the two is also reinforced by their characterization: Orpheus is the symbol of art, music and poetry, and of love and passion, an individual and typically human kind of love focused on Eurydice; he represents human love and passion, and human torment and sorrow at the irreparable loss of the loved one, taken away by a brutal nature, and who cannot ultimately come back to life if not by divine intervention, a miracle thwarted by the same human passion, defined by Virgil as *dementia* (488) and *furor* (495), which Orpheus had put in his desperate will to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living. Aristaeus, on the other hand, is somehow closer and not opposed to nature: he is a shepherd, he lives in the countryside among plants and animals; he works with nature in a way.

This portrait is basically reversed when Proteus, the sea-god who can change form, enters the scene. Aristaeus rushes upon him, chaining his wrists and demanding from him an explanation for the death of his bees. Orpheus does not display this kind of impulsive and brutal behavior towards the gods or nature, instead all of nature cries with him when he loses Eurydice and wanders playing his lyre and singing his sorrow.

The figure of Proteus, moreover, can be interpreted as a sort of reconciliation, of fusion of Aristaeus and Orpheus, since he shares fundamental characteristics with both of the: he is a god presiding over natural forces and natural wonders (*miracula rerum*, 441), and at the same time he is a prophet, a *vates* (387), akin to a poet.

Furthermore, Virgil compares the desperate and grieving Orpheus to a grieving bird (*maerens philomela*, 511), but it is not a mere rhetorical comparison he makes, it is instead rather significant as Segal observes: "the bird is seen as a victim of man's vigilant

and unfeeling work upon nature, a victim of the *durum arator*. Hence Orpheus, through the bird-simile, reveals a perspective on the world different from that of Aristaeus. He shows us the relation between man and nature from the point of view of *nature*, not man. Through him animate nature, given a voice, renders back the nature-centered, not the man-centered, view of things" (1967: 317). In other words, through the identification of a grieving Orpheus with a grieving nightingale, the most human of the two human characters expresses the position of nature who complains against the human intrusion and lack of respect towards its creatures. And Segal brilliantly suggests yet another situation: Orpheus is first depicted as typically human and not close to nature, then as gentle with the natural world as opposed to Aristaeus, but then again, Orpheus's wish, request, to bring back to life Eurydice is against nature, against natural laws; whereas Aristaeus's request for the regeneration of the hive after the death of his bees is not against nature, but in accordance with nature: "the alternation of death and regeneration, barrenness and fruitfulness" (Segal 1967: 318).

The poem seems to build more oppositions and contradictions than it is able to solve: "the epyllion as a whole transposes the themes of death, rebirth and immortality, individualism and social responsibility, poetry and public life, violence and creativity onto the level of myth, and offers a kind of synthesis of the concerns which have dominated the poem as a whole without necessarily resolving the tensions and conflicts" (Gale 2000: 56). Indeed, as Gale suggested, in treating the themes of life, birth and death, Virgil does touch upon issues and problems which are central to Lucretius's thought and poem: but he seems to offer a different perspective, though similarly stating the necessity of both life and death and their relatedness in the continuity of life. His emphasis in the end of Book

IV is in the regeneration not of the dead bees, but of their whole, the hive, with newborn bees. None of the individual characters – Aristaeus and Orpheus – represents an ideal solution to the issue of the relationship between humankind and nature. And there is probably no solution to this human dilemma, since the rebirth of the hive does originate from the death of the cows, an image that is far from ideal (or idealized) for the tormented human mind. The matter of the fact is that the human perspective on natural facts is obviously, and of course, human-centered, and we tend to see and interpret certain natural facts as brutal, violent, cruel, when they are not from the perspective of nature, where natural events all concur to the course of things and the eternal cycle of regeneration, of life and death. Virgil does not suggest that humans should change their perspective: instead, in his construction of unsolvable contrasts, which are nevertheless at least partially reconciled in the figure of Proteus and in the shared features of two seemingly opposite characters (Aristaeus and Orpheus), Virgil portrays the reality of the human condition: "as a creature of the natural world and as a being endowed with an inner life, both a creature who furthers nature's ends, […] and a being who negates those ends" (Segal 1967: 323). In giving such pre-eminence to the motif of the bees and the regeneration of the hive, to the extent of placing it at the end of the poem, Virgil emphasizes a matter of fact, that is, how the contrasts, and the conflicts are all within humankind, within our inner life, and cannot find a solution outside of it.

2.1.2. Anglo-Saxon Ideas and Representations of Nature: The Case of *Bēowulf*

There are very few certainties about the most celebrated Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, conventionally titled *Bēowulf*, after the name of its protagonist and hero. The author is

unknown, and so are the date and place of composition, although it is generally believed to have been composed either in Mercia or in Northumbria (based on linguistic and dialectal evidence) in a time span ranging from the 8th to the 11th centuries.

The lack and fragmentariness of these data are even more difficult to cope with, because *Bēowulf* is a rather complex and stratified poem, showing a deep level of intermingling of traditions. First and foremost the Germanic, since the work was written in a Germanic country and in a Germanic language, and Germanic is the subject matter: the heroic exploits of a Scandinavian hero. Then the Christian tradition which reached Britain through the conversion missions sent by Pope Gregory the Great during the 6th century, and which was spread throughout the isle through both vernacular and Latin preaching and writing. With the diffusion of Christian monasteries, where Latin was the language of the learned clergymen, secular Latin philosophical and literary works must also have reached the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. But these three traditions – Germanic, Christian, and Roman – are strictly interrelated, since, for example, the oldest Anglo-Saxon texts which have come down to us are religious compositions, and Latin was not only the language of the Scriptures and of exegetical texts, but also the language of secular works of Classical times and of the first centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire. And Latin are our sources for investigating part of the ancient and original folkloristic substratum which constitutes the Germanic tradition.

The oldest information about these peoples and their culture has in fact reached us through the works of Romans, in particular Caesar's *De bello gallico*, and Tacitus's *De origine et situ Germanorum*, also known as *Germania*. There is a general consensus on the purposefulness of the portrait of these 'barbarian' tribes that Tacitus offers: the imperial

writer wanted to highlight the moral values of measure and sobriety which also belonged to the pristine Latin culture of the Republican era, and which seemed to be completely lost and forgotten in the new imperial age of the Roman civilization of his time. Nevertheless, the details of the descriptions and the information he gives us in the *Germania* were rather accurate: "Tacitus's portrait generally corresponds with what archaeologists have discovered of the culture of Germania in the Iron Age" (Grigsby 2005: 22). What he writes about the religious cults and rituals of the Germanic tribes is particularly interesting; he talks about the cult of the goddess Nerthus, which is related to the ancient fertility worship of the Mother Goddess: "*Reudigni deinde et Aviones et Anglii et Varini et Eudoses et Suardones et Nuithones fluminibus aut silvis muniuntur. Nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehi populis arbitrantur.*" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 1.40). The deification of the land, of the earth has a widespread and long history, dating back to pre-historic and proto-historic times, but it survived even after the constitution of polytheistic religious systems (s. Pliny, Lucretius in the previous paragraph). Tacitus relates of the worship of sacred groves and forests, which also survived among the most isolated Germanic tribes for some centuries after the Christianization of the other tribes. This information, which, as said above, has been confirmed by archaeological evidence as well as comparative studies, tells us how the oldest attested forms of religion and of a cosmological interpretation of the world among Germanic tribes were animistic nature cults.

Due to the lack of direct written testimonies of the Germanic populations in the early stages of their history, none or little is known about the moment and mode of transition from this animistic religion to the polytheistic cult of the Aesir gods. Some

scholars assumed that the Roman religion influenced the organization of this anthropomorphized Nordic pantheon, as the naming of the weekdays would testify, since it seems to be modeled on the Roman system (Grigsby 2005: 43). Latin influence on Anglo-Saxon peoples is not a surprising event in itself, given the traces left by the Romans and the return of Latin in the Christianization missions of the 7th century. The naming of the days of the week according to the names of the gods is clearly influenced by the Latin custom as testified by the only non Germanic name, that is Saturday, with a clear reference to the Latin *Dies Saturnis*, dedicated to the god Saturn; for the other days, the Germanics adopted an *interpretatio germanica* substituting the Latin deities with the Germanic gods which had a corresponding or similar function. Those Germanic tribes that had migrated to Britain from the Continent in the early 5th century had thus brought with the remnants of the fertility cults described by Tacitus and their Germanic polytheistic paganism, a religious system of deities led by the supreme god Odin/Wodan. On this variegated background, later enriched by the introduction of Christianity in the 7th and 8th centuries, the Viking invasions of the 9th century grafted some other heroic material such as, probably, the tradition to which *Bēowulf*, the greatest Anglo-Saxon literary work clearly belongs, that is, the tradition of the heroic deeds of the warriors at the court of the legendary Scylding dynasty. Danish and thus Scandinavian, in fact, is the setting of this complex alliterative poem beautifully stratified with regard to the cultural traditions that contributed to its composition.

The complexity of *Bēowulf* has given origin to a great number of interpretations in time. While some critics focused on its Germanic and 'pagan' background, others favored a reading of the poem within a Christian framework; some scholars analyzed it in search

of mythical patterns and connections, whereas others approached it as a source for historical data[36]. There can be a similar scholarly diversity with regard to themes, motifs, sources; but there is now general consensus about the fact that *Bēowulf* offers an extremely complex and variegated stratification of traditions, and therefore lends itself to all these different interpretations, as Edward B. Irving Jr. rightly points out: "Apparently a consensus is now forming, or has formed, on the subject: namely, that *Bēowulf* is at all points a smooth *blend* of pagan/secular elements with Christian ones, with its chief purpose to celebrate the heroic ethic" (1997: 191). In my opinion, what is important is precisely that we never lose sight of the work's complexity and of the deep level of intermingling reached by the traditions, themes, and motifs, that have converged in the poem's composition.

Andy Orchard claims that Germanic pagan beliefs and Christianity "co-existed uneasily" (2003: 100), but in fact Karen Jolly (1993) has showed in an essay that not only did they co-exist easily, they also merged almost naturally to form a synergic religious synthesis where the pagan and the Christian views were harmonized. *Bēowulf*, though maybe a bit underestimated in this sense, is a beautiful example of this synthesis, because the poet is always very careful not to let either the old pagan rites or the new Christian faith play too large a role in the poem. Explicit indications of pagan Germanic beliefs and practices are rather scanty: one is found on ll. 175-179 ("*hwîlum híe gehéton | æt hærgtrafum, wígweorþunga | wordum baédon, þæt him gástbona | géoce gefremede, wið þéodþréaum | swylc wæs þéaw hyra, haéþenra hyht*", "At times at holy shrines they would offer vows to idols,

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[36] For a survey of the critical analyses related to the Germanic, pagan and to the Christian interpretive frameworks, see Irving Jr. 1997: 177-192; for a survey of critical analyses related to the mythic and to the historical interpretive approach, see Niles 1997: 216-232.

swore oaths, that the monster-slayer would come in aid to save the people, such was their custom, the hope of the heathens"). References to the Christian God and religious system are more frequent, but they are also quite vague: we only know that God has created the world (ll. 90b-100a) and lives in heaven (l. 182a); there are no precise mentions of the Christian world, save for the references to Cain, the Flood and the Final Judgment. The presence and weight of the Christian religion and of God is certainly and clearly perceivable, but it is never overpowering; as Irving Jr. suggests, "the kind of Christianity that *Beowulf* displays is distinctly limited: not so much primitive […], as either deliberately or unconsciously tailored to the dimensions of heroic poetry" (1997: 186). Tolkien also minimizes the presence and role of religion in his today still influential "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics": "If the specifically Christian was suppressed, so also were the old gods" (Tolkien 1971: 22). But this does not mean that religion, or a religious sense and dimension is not present in the poem. Humankind's inner and outer quest for an understanding of the universe, of the world, and of humans' place in it, and humankind's perception of a spiritual presence, and of a moral end, in the physical world, influences greatly the thematic texture and structure of the poem. Nature and this search for humankind's place and role in the world as well as in society are closely and deeply connected in *Bēowulf*. Even too obvious examples of this connection are represented by the three monstrous adversaries faced by Bēowulf, and the general representation of natural landscapes offered by the poet.

The natural element in *Bēowulf* is invested by the poem's stratification just like all other elements in the text. The natural world portrayed in this heroic poem does more or

less unconsciously reflect remnants of old cosmologies and religions, influences from the new religion and a mixture of both.

At a first reading of *Bēowulf* we are left with the impression that the poem allows a great deal of its room for nature. In fact, as Huppé remarked in his "Nature in *Beowulf* and in *Roland*", it is not much more than an impression, much of which "results from single epithets and phrases, which are left undeveloped" (1982: 5). And indeed most of the expressions related to nature are but epithets qualifying a certain character or situation or constitute *kennings*, as in the case of "*ofer hronráde*" (10a), which literally means "beyond the whale road", or of "*ofer swanráde*" (200a), literally "beyond the road of the swan", that is, in both cases, the ocean. Other examples are expressions such as "*fugle gelícost*" ("similar to a bird, bird-like") (218b) in reference to the ship ("*flota fámíheals*" 218a, "the foam-necked floater"), or "*æppelfealuwe*" ("apple-yellow", 2165a) in reference to the color of the treasure brought to Heorot from the abode of Grendel's mother after Bēowulf had killed her.

Nevertheless, this diffuse and insistent use of naturalistic metaphors, similes and images is more than just figurative decoration; it does indeed play a function in the poem, where nature has a greater and deeper thematic role than some would concede. It is true, as George Economou has remarked, that there is no coherent representation of an idea of nature: " I find it difficult to understand *nature* in *Beowulf* […] as a coherent and systematically worked-out representation of an idea of nature" (1982: 44). Offering a representation of an idea of nature, in fact, is not what the poem is about; *Bēowulf* is "an epically elaborated account of how a certain warrior named Beowulf, nephew of the king of the Geats, ventures to Denmark to free that kingdom from the depredations of two

cannibalistic giants, then meets his death in combat against a dragon after having ruled in his homeland for fifty years. That, plus a great deal of lore and legend about the Germanic past is what the poem is about" (Niles 1998: 232). And yet, nature is constantly present in the work, although often only in what Economou calls "isolated instances" (1982: 44), and in the description of the surroundings and the abodes of Bēowulf's non-human adversaries.

One incontrovertible fact about *Bēowulf* is that its natural world is represented as overtly hostile to humans. Nowhere in the poem do we find such soothing and idyllic (and idealized) descriptions of nature as we will find in later Middle English literature (as in Chaucer or in *Sir Orfeo*, for example). The poet depicts nature as an antagonist, almost an enemy for humans. The weather is usually stormy, windy, and the landscape is dark, gloomy, made of wastelands, fens, moors, and a stormy sea; especially in the episodes of the 'monsters', the environment is harsh, hostile, uninhabitable for humans. It is a marshy landscape, humid, cold, with cloudy and turbid waters, which are the habitat for 'monsters', 'water monsters' similar to those Bēowulf encountered and slew in the Breca episode (the *nicera* of line 422). It is an unwelcoming world that hides unknown and mysterious dangers and possible enemies, and it is the realm of the creatures that attack Heorot at night. A fundamental thematic element on which much of *Bēowulf* is built is the opposition between internal and external places: in particular, the enclosed hall of Heorot versus the wild outdoors of the fens and moors.

But nature is not only in the world outside Heorot; it is present also in the human element of the work, in its protagonists and heroes. Epithets and kennings referring to the warriors, their activities, and their artifacts are often related to nature: "*gárholt bere*",

"forest of spears" (l. 1834b) to signify the army of warriors armed with spears, or "stræla *storm*" "storm of arrows" (l. 3117a), a shower of incoming arrows to signify an ongoing battle. The choice of these expressions is of course the author's doing, but it appears even more natural in the mouth of his characters, since especially the kenning is a typical rhetorical device of Norse poetry, and Norse are the protagonists of the story. But the real question for the aim of our study is this: is the author, through such images, only trying to represent and reflect the view of the world of his sixth-century Scandinavian characters, so as to render a historical portrait of the past? Or, through this representation, is he also reflecting his own view and that of his time and place?

The little description of nature in the poem is associated with the episodes concerning the three non-human adversaries: Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. This connection between nature and these three characters reinforces the hostility and negativity of nature in the portrait offered in the poem. The three monstrous creatures have been attributed symbolic values and functions according to the various interpretations of the poem; and it is probably true that various traditions concurred in their creation, but they also have their originality in the text. The poet has shaped the 'monsters' for various functions and purposes, including that of representing humanity's ideas about itself. The so-called monsters symbolize the danger of the natural world considered in juxtaposition with the human, social and enclosed world of the court, but they also represent the dark side, the evil side not only or not so much on a religious (especially Christian) level, as on an existential one. They symbolize humankind's inner evil, fears, and the dangers that come from within one's inner life and from within human society.

It is worthy to note, as Signe Carlson also remarked in his essay "The Monsters of Beowulf: Creations of Literary Scholars"(1967), that the poet never really calls Grendel, his mother, or the dragon 'monsters;' the word does not appear in the text, but only in later translations which render as 'monsters' the various terms used by the poet, such as *guma*, *gast/gæst*, when referring specifically to Grendel for example. The word *áglǽcan* (l. 2592) has also been translated as 'monsters' by Richard North (2006: 204), when in fact, according to the *Dictionary of Old English*[37], it means "awesome opponent, ferocious fighter" from *āglǣca* "torment, distress, trouble, misery, sorrow." For mere convenience, though, I will also occasionally use the term monsters to refer to the three non-human opponents.

In the above mentioned structural opposition between inside and outside spaces, between the warm and safe human world enclosed in the hall and the harsh, cold and dark outside world of moors and fens, Grendel and his mother with their lair become the symbols of this dangerous environment. Their abode has been associated by scholars with the Christian hell, with the Vergilian Avernus and hell (North 2006), or with the Germanic underworld; for all we know about *Bēowulf*'s sources (that is very little), there might be influences from all these traditions. But before being an otherworld, a realm of the dead or of supernatural beings, Grendel's mere is a place of solitude and loneliness, of separation and separateness from the social world. Among the living creatures of this world, Grendel and his mother are exiles, outcasts. And as much as it is possible to attribute symbolic significances to them, they are physical creatures of the physical world: "they remain […]

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[37] *Dictionary of Old English. A to G*. On CD-ROM. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008.

mortal denizens of the material world, *in* it and *of* it" (Tolkien 1971: 20)[38]. They are not

alien from nature and from the world where humans live; they belong to it as much as the

landscape they inhabit. The poet tells us that Grendel is the progeny of Cain (l. 107), which

in *Bēowulf*, as Frye observed, was not swept away from the world by the Deluge (1982: 74).

John Grigsby, on the other hand, identifies Grendel and his mother as originating from

ancient fertility deities: "it was not the winter alone that turned the hideous pair that

threatened Heorot from fertility gods to dark, negative creatures" (2005: 181); according to

him, they would be the remnants of ancient earth cults, and they would thus represent the

passage of Germanic populations from religious cults more closely related to the physical

world, such as the fertility cults, to a different religious and social system, which has man

and his social structure as its focus, a passage that would have occurred around the 6th

century, in his opinion: "around the time of the Beowulf story, a great religious change

was taking place in Denmark which formed a background to the dynastic feuds and

struggles recorded in the sagas" (2005: 183). It would be the passage from fertility cults

related to Nerthus to the polytheistic system of Odin and the Aesir. In this way, Grendel

and his mother are closely connected to the earth, to the material world: and their abode

also acquires the same physical reality, being just another corner of the variegated

landscape, albeit an inhospitable and gloomy one. Their belonging to the earth is

strengthened by the "in it" of the quote from Tolkien cited above, that is, the fact that it is

on the earth that they live, and not in some other spatial world or dimension.

Grendel seems thus to have a double significance: he represents the natural world,

a hostile natural world, its dangers and threats, and at the same time he partakes of

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[38] Emphasis added.

human traits and nature, since he is described by the poet as capable of thinking ("*mid his heteþancum*", 'with his thoughts of hate", l. 475b), and also defined as *wer*, that is 'man; person' ("*wonsaélí wer*", l. 105a), but most of all the portrait of Heorot's enemy gives the idea of a human-like creature, although also beast-like, both on a physical level ("*on weres wæstmum*" 'in the shape of a man', l. 1352a) and on a psychological level. Beowulf talks of Grendel's deeds (l. 195b), and Grendel is essentially described as an exile, one that cannot participate in the social life of the Danish community: "Of all the monsters, it is Grendel who is most consistently depicted in human terms, particularly in the constant evocation of exile imagery to describe his plight" (Orchard 1995: 30); Grendel attacks the Heorot hall, the real and symbolic center of social life, but is not interested in finding and killing the ruler, Hrōðgār, as Halverson suggests (1969: 600); it is the hall that annoys him, and probably what it stands for: "Heorot itself is the target of his attacks" (Halverson 1969: 600), since Heorot embodies the communal and social life of the Danes, a life from which he and his mother are excluded and cannot be part of, because they are not human, but belong to the "fearsome world outside" (Halverson 1969: 600). The solitary character of Grendel is expressed in the poet by the fact that he and his mother are virtually the only inhabitants of the moor mentioned by the poet; save for the serpents, dragons and nicors swimming in the lake of Grendel's lair (ll. 1425-1430), they seem to be the only denizens of that marshy landscape the Danes have any contact with. Grendel is defined as a lone traveller of the moors ("*ángengea*", l. 165a), he is alone, solitary, isolated; he always attacks Heorot alone, never together with his mother. She resolves to attack Heorot (and always alone) only after Beowulf has mortally wounded her son: she attacks out of rage for the loss of her child. She is also described physically as resembling a woman ("*idese onlícnæs*"

'of the likeness of a woman', l. 1352a), and her sorrow, her desperate rage at the death of

her son certainly seems human, and evokes our piety and sympathy. Orchard underlines

this human nature of the two fearsome creatures: "Despite the clear antagonism between

the worlds of monsters and men, there is […] something deeply human about the

'monsters.' All are given human attributes as some stage" (1995: 29).

Grendel and his mother are thus both opposed to and similar to humanity;

viceversa, the poet brings humans closer to these monstrous creatures, when for example

he calls both Bēowulf and the dragon with the same attribute, *aglæcan* (l. 2592). Besides, as

Orchard underlines, the only figures described as 'furious' in the poem are Bēowulf,

Grendel, his mother, Heremod, and the dragon (1995: 32). Thus, some humans and some

monsters share common characteristics. In the portrait of the monsters as representatives

of the natural world and their relation with humans, we can detect the inspiration and

authority of certain works written in the early medieval period, which were very

influential through most of the Middle Ages. Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiarum Libri* (also

known simply as *Etymologiae*) and the anonymous *Liber Monstrorum* clearly exerted an

impact on the *Bēowulf*'s poet. The influence of the *Liber Monstrorum* is underlined and

synthetized by Jennifer Neville (1999: 24-28) in the element of ferocity: according to her,

the anonymous work focuses in its descriptions of exotic monsters on their ferocity, their

fierceness. She draws a parallel between this dominant aspect of the *Liber Monstrorum* and

the similar insistence on fierceness in *Bēowulf*. But I think the kind of influence exerted by

Isidore's *Etymologiae* on Old English poetry that Neville points out is even more fitting for

Bēowulf: "His view of the world derives not from objects but from the etymology of their

names […]. In this sense, Isidore contributes not so much a belief in the interest and value

of the natural world but rather a strategy for understanding and controlling it – a strategy that was apparently attractive to Old English poets" (Neville 1999: 28 n. 35). Similarly, Yoshiko Asaka suggests that "Beowulf's fight with monsters Grendel and the dragon shows people's desire for man's victory over uncontrollable and malevolent natural forces" (2008: 2). The connection between this idea and Isidore's influence is crucial to the work, and is in my opinion all the more underscored in the poem through the way in which Hrōðgār and his men react to Grendel's continuous attacks: they appear to be weak and helpless. Whereas the thought of fighting against other kingdoms does not really scare them, but rather inflames their warlike nature, the monstrous enemy that comes from the swamps leaves them helpless, he dazzles and confuses them, in fact paralyzes their actions, as they seem incapable of opposing any valuable resistance or reaction. It will be a foreign man who will unexpectedly come in their help, man well-known for his strength, power and skill in combat. He is a great warrior, but still a man, like them, not a supernatural being. Yet his real force is inscribed in his name. He is the hero of the poem and carries a name that signifies animal. Whatever etymological interpretation of the name Bēowulf given by scholars we might choose to follow,[39] the reference to the root of 'wolf', and therefore the reference to an animal, to the natural world, remains a constant. Bēowulf thus carries in himself the strength and spirit of an animal, possibly of the wolf, a wild beast traditionally viewed as hostile to man. In some ways, while on the one side humankind imposes itself over nature through its artifacts, on the other it also declares its impotence against the powerful forces of nature, as humans try to oppose it with a warrior

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[39] Skeat 1884 suggests a splitting of the word into bee and wolf, being a kenning for bear; Orchard 2003 confronts Beowulf with a Norse person name (Thorolfr), and associates beow- to the pagan Germanic/Anglo-Saxon god, Beow, a view also supported by Grigsby 2005.

that uses man-made weapons but who is also infused with an almost non-human but wild strength. It would thus appear that the Danes entrusted the task of opposing and defeating Grendel to a person who derives his strength from his own name. The belief in the magical power of words and names is firmly rooted in the Germanic tradition, like in most archaic cultures, and its common practice therefore finds Isidore's idea most appealing, as Neville suggested (s. above). Moreover, the importance of Bēowulf's name and of its role in the narrative is reinforced by the scholarly effort put in finding its etymological root and meaning.

In other words, while humans carefully set the physical boundaries which divide their world from the chaotic outside world of marshy fens, and thus emphasize their otherness with respect to that world and its inhabitants, they also define themselves in relation to it: "The division between the human and the non-human defines humanity; it characterizes human nature through negation" (Neville 1999: 36). But while they define what is human and what is not, they also characterize the non-human (Grendel and his mother, and even the dragon) with typically human features, and humans (Bēowulf in particular) are also characterized, and even named, with non-human traits.

Humans oppose their social world based on trust, the Germanic *treow*, loyalty, and rules, order, organization, and definition, delimitation (also on a physical level, through walls) to the natural world characterized by chaos, unruly forces, lawless creatures, and they want to impose their order and law to the chaotic world outside: "The world enclosed by the walls of Heorot […] represents the imposition of order and organization on chaotic surroundings" (Halverson 1969: 601). Bēowulf's killing of Grendel and his mother is not only motivated by the prevention of more deaths among the Danes, but it is also and

foremost aimed at preventing that the chaos of the outside penetrates the social and rational order of the inside.

Despite these attempts of differentiation, of definition through negation, human and non-human are, as we have seen, deeply interconnected.

Although the natural world and its representation are not the object of the poem and most probably not the poet's objective, the Anglo-Saxon view of nature does filter through the heroic texture of the poem. It certainly is a partial representation of the Anglo-Saxon view, focused on the negative, dangerous, frightening aspect of the Anglo-Saxon people's relationship with their natural environment. In fact, as Halverson noted, "the pleasures of the outdoors are not unknown (cf. 864 ff.), but they have no significant part in the poem" (1969: 599). This representation which focuses on negative, antagonizing and almost apocalyptic elements of the relationship between nature and humanity is highly rhetorical and masterly built on ideas and influences received from the past. Christianity and Germanic mythology are the main traditions which concur in this construction. On the Germanic side, the anthropomorphized gods are also at war with creatures which embody cosmic and elemental forces of nature; Þórr's fight with the Miðgarðsormr, the serpent of Miðgarð, the world inhabited by humans, is most probably the model for the fight between Bēowulf and the dragon, also because both human(ized) heroes die at the end of the fight, an element absent from other literary and mythological fights between a human or human-like hero and a dragon or serpent (North 2006: 202).

On the side of the Latin Christian tradition, the influence of Augustine's doctrine embraced, among others, by the Anglo-Saxon monk, the Venerable Bede, provided the Anglo-Saxons with a spiritual motivation and inspiration to depict the natural world in

such grim terms: "the puzzle of how harmful creatures like wild beasts suit humanity's best interest reduces intellectual pride. Such an approach to the natural world, like the exhortation in *De doctrina Cristiana* to wring spiritual edification out of every representation of the natural world in divine texts, allows for a flexible and positive curiosity about the natural world and moral justification for its representation and interpretation" (Neville 1999: 28-29).

These conscious and deliberate choices on the poet's part spring from his intent to represent not so much the natural world and its dangers and negative aspects, as humankind's reflection on its own place and role in the universe.

And in order to understand their place in the universe, humans look at and try to understand the surrounding world, and they give their meaning to it: they call gods the physical and spiritual forces of life and (re)generation they perceive in the world, and then move these gods to the unknown part of the world (the sky) when they come to learn more about the mechanics of nature, in the world that is the immediate and direct environment in which they live and act. All the religious and philosophical stages and traditions of this development we can find in *Bēowulf*.

The Germanic cosmology is rather complex, because the testimonies we have from various direct sources are often different from one another, and mainly Norse; the Germanic universe revolves around the cosmic ash tree Yggdrasill to which nine worlds are attached. These nine worlds can be roughly said to express three dimensions: Ásgarðr, the home of the Aesir, the gods; an intermediate world with Miðgarðr (middle world, middle earth) and Jotunheimr (world of the giants); and then Helfheimr and Niflhel, the realm and world of the dead; other worlds on this level include Álfheimr (world of the

elves) and Svartálfheimr (world of the dark elves or dwarves). Although the situation is complex and not always clear-cut, we can observe how the world of the gods, the middle world of the earth (Miðgarðr) inhabited by human beings, and the world of the dead are distinctly separated. Similarly, the ancient Greek cosmos was divided in Uranos, Gaia, and Hades, that is, respectively, the skies, the earth, and the underworld, home of the dead and realm of the chthonic deities. In this view, humans, who inhabit the 'middle world' , are subject to the actions and interferences from both the world of the gods and the underworld: "Humanity is first of all situated both morally and spatially between heaven and hell and is thus subject to forces from both" (Neville 1999: 23).

But *Bēowulf* seems to focus on this 'middle world': as Yoshiko Asaka (2008: 7) has noted, the very word *middangeard* occurs often in the text (on lines 75, 504, 751, 1771). This frequency does not only underline the middle position of humanity, its existence in the world, one that can be sensed and known firsthand: "humanity is situated in the natural world" (Neville 1999: 23), and is thus subject to the natural powers, which have an immediate impact on human life. The natural, physical reality of the British landscape must have affected Anglo-Saxon life, and the harshness with which it is described in *Bēowulf*: "it reflects a state of mind and conditions of life behind the poetry" (Halverson 1969: 605). But this portrait is also deliberately constructed by the poet, because despite the real harshness of the British land and climate, it "does not display an accurate or consistent relationship with what is known of actual physical conditions" (Neville 1999: 23). This representation is thus a narrative means to convey humanity's considerations about itself: Anglo-Saxons probably saw themselves as subject to harsh natural conditions, dangers coming from the natural world and also from supernatural forces, but even more

directly they perceived the threats and dangers originating from within human society and the human inner world.

The feuds and wars among the Scandinavian peoples represented in *Bēowulf* are an equivalent of the poet's contemporary feuds and wars among the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. And they are also clearly related to nature in the poem: "The account of the dragon fight is preceded and surrounded by accounts of Geatish troubles among themselves, of Swedish troubles among themselves, of Danish troubles among themselves, and of Geatish alliances and wars with Swedes, Danes, and Frisians" (DuBois 1957: 822). Fights between the human protagonists of *Bēowulf* and their monstrous opponents – Grendel, his mother, and the dragon – do not only symbolize humanity's struggle against supernatural and elemental forces, or the Anglo-Saxons' struggle with the harsh British environment, but they also signify the political and social reality of Anglo-Saxon Britain, characterized by foreign invasions, mainly coming from Scandinavia, by struggles among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and by intestine feuds within the single kingdoms. Furthermore, on an existential level, Anglo-Saxons saw humanity's struggle within itself between good and evil: "just as the Anglo-Saxon writers apparently observed that people were a mixture of good and evil, and so constructed an image of them as being torn between heaven and hell, so they represented the natural world, their immediate context, in response to observations about themselves" (Neville 1999: 23).

In other words, Anglo-Saxon poets and writers used the natural world as a rhetorical means to express ideas and reflections about themselves as individuals and as social groups, attributing human features and characteristics to it and 'natural', non-human characteristics and qualities to human beings. But if this technique apparently

gives pre-eminence to the human, it also unveils and shows their attitude to the natural world. Nature is not only a rhetorical and metaphorical repository of images and expressions, but it also plays an active role: it is a world composed of landscapes inhabited by animate creatures and it interacts through its elemental and phenomenological forces, its landscape and its creatures with the life of humans, who only in vain try to establish a division between themselves and this 'other' world. In fact, they recur to this world to express themselves and to find supernatural and spiritual strength in it. As they define themselves in oppositional and negatival terms with respect to the natural world, they do not diminish or negate its power and existence: "in the clerically and heroically dominated poems that survive […] the focus remains on the power of the natural world, not the power of humanity to resist or overcome it" (Neville 1999: 38). It is the power of nature and the potentiality of its qualities that concerns and fascinates the Anglo-Saxon mind, a fascination which results in awe, and not in destructive attitudes. What emerges clearly from the reciprocal attribution of characteristic between the human and the non-human worlds operated by the *Bēowulf*'s poet is that Anglo-Saxons not only admired (and feared also) the natural world and its powers, but also saw a connection, an interconnectedness between it and themselves: they all share the same or similar qualities, and the conflict between good and evil humans observe in their inner world is but a reflection of the conflicts going on in the natural world outside humans and outside the hall. The human microcosm and the natural microcosm are deeply interconnected: *Bēowulf* shows this interconnectedness through its representation of similarities and correspondences between the natural world and the human dimension of social and inner individual conflicts.

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By postulating the double nature of things, constituted by form and matter, Aristotle somehow 'revealed' the individual identity of all objects and living things: his theory was based not only on teleological grounds (which he never dismissed), but also on rational explanations and theories resulting from direct experience, objective data, and human reasoning. The rationality 'discovered' in nature mainly consists of the order of things and of natural laws, which cause admiration (and peace) in the human mind.

Lucretius, Virgil, and Pliny create through their work some cultural and literary images – such as the Goddess or Mother Natura and the *locus amoenus* – which find great resonance in the following historical eras. Their different views all agree in seeing the world as a whole made of individual parts. Whereas for Lucretius all elements of nature have the purpose of dying and regenerating life with no teleological end or reason, Pliny and Virgil both seem to stress the importance of the individual parts in the whole, and that of their interconnections. In particular, Pliny emphasizes the importance of balance and of natural order.

In general, there seems to be an agreement on the fact that nature has its laws to which all natural elements bend, except for humans, who are preoccupied with other issues (such as finding the meaning and end of their existence, and their role and function in the world, as well as that of the other elements, objects and beings). Some of these questions and the solutions found for them result in a brutal, ruthless attitude towards nature, in its destruction and exploitation, with no regard for its balance, also ignoring that what we do to nature we do to ourselves, as Pliny explained in his *Naturalis Historia*.

Through the example of *Bēowulf*, the Old English masterpiece, we have seen how nature was a term of comparison by which Anglo-Saxons interpreted and defined

themselves. As a consequence, its literary portrait is biased by and functional to the idea they held about themselves. Nevertheless, it emerges clearly that the relation between humankind and nature in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is very strong and close, both because nature, through climate and landscape, influences human existence (as indeed it does today as well!), and because of the proximity in which human communities and the natural world lived, given the very low degree of urbanization of England at the time. Furthermore, nature was still a place, both physical and religious, metaphorical, where humans looked for and found answers to their moral and spiritual needs, both from the perspective of the traditional Germanic 'pagan' religion, and from that of the new Christian faith which clearly influenced the formation of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Many of these philosophical and cultural traditions find their *raison d'être* in humanity's need to find its own place and role in the world, and are therefore human constructions. Nevertheless, they also reflect the role of nature and the *real* relationship between humankind and the natural world, which is already marked by the imposition of the human mind and of human behaviors. Nature is however still seen also as a the big system of which all beings and things are part, and which functions according to laws and dynamics that hold its order and balance. Acting against those laws will inevitably disrupt that order and balance with consequences for all of the world's constituent parts.

There are thus ecological and proto-environmentalist ideas and attitudes in all these ancient traditions so important and characteristic of the following medieval era. We should see how they are interpreted and received, and how (if) they are put into practice by their later recipients.

CHAPTER 3

Ideas and Representations of Nature in the Middle Ages

Aliquid amplius invenies in silvis,
quam in libris.
Ligna et lapides docebunt te,
quod a magistris audire non possis.
St. Bernard de Clairvaux

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,
and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.
Henry David Thoreau

Classical and local cultures (albeit often mediated by Christianity) constituted the basis on which the Middle Ages built their own tradition. In medieval culture there is thus a solid and established basis, but there is also a whole set of new ideas, topoi, themes, and motifs: these are sometimes re-elaborations of traditional ideas, themes, motifs, and at times they reflect instead new influxes and also original, new, and typical ideas. Among the new influences are of course the Oriental traditions brought to Europe by the Arabs, and through their preservation and translation work, the discovery of many Classical works, especially from Aristotle, of which Europe had no knowledge until the 12th century.

The religious Judaeo-Christian tradition was however the most influential during the Middle Ages, since Christianity invested all aspects of life. Religion was a leading principle according to which everyone behaved and to which everything was bent and tended. It is not possible to identify a most popular or influential aspect within Christianity: both the Old and the New Testament were fundamental points of reference, but for our study, the biblical account of the Creation certainly plays a paramount role. It

was not just the basis for any cosmological discourse and interpretation, but also the meter against which any other naturalistic, cosmogonic, cosmological, and philosophical theory or work had to come to terms with and by which it had to be judged and interpreted.

3.1. The Natural World from the Christian Perspective

Medieval Christianity is characterized by a sometimes overlooked variety of positions. Not only the richness and partial ambiguity of direct sources, which besides the Bible and the New Testament also consisted of number of apocrypha and of other texts such as Saint Paul's Letters), but also the various exegetical interpretations that had followed one upon the other in the course of the centuries originated different ways of interpreting and of putting into practice the Christian doctrine.

This differentiation, in turn, gave rise to various religious, philosophical, and theological schools and movements which offered at times radically different interpretations not only of the Scriptures but of the general idea of Christianity. In the midst of such religious and theological heat, heresies also emerged, harshly opposed by the established Church, as well as apparently radical movements which were instead accepted and received by the Church, such as the Franciscan movement. The most distinguishing feature of the medieval Christian clergy, though, was without any doubt the monastic institution, which played a fundamental role in the preservation of Classical and medieval texts, in the receiving and developing of knowledge and of both liberal and scientific studies, and also in the development of environmentally sustainable practices and in the preservation of forests and natural environments.

3.1.1. Nature in the Twelfth Century Renaissance:
the Poets of the School of Chartres

The twelfth century was marked by a wave of intellectual and cultural transformation which has been labeled as the twelfth-century Renaissance; this wave of renewal invested all spheres of human life, from the religious to the literary, the philosophical, and the scientific. Some of the new ideas and currents sowed the seeds for later developments, and in this century we can see the birth of Scholasticism through the work of such scholars as Abelard. The diffusion of Latin translations of Arabic and Greek texts introduced into Europe by the Arabs spurred a fervent activity of study and of thirst for new knowledge. Another prominent figure of the period is Albertus Magnus, the famous Doctor of the Church, who promoted a harmonic relationship between religion and the advancing scientific studies, as his numerous works on naturalistic and scientific matters testify. In particular, within this important phenomenon "there emerged what might be called a more scientific attitude to the natural world" (White 2000: 74). And this is certainly true, as Albertus Magnus' work proves as well as much of the writings related to and resulting from the so-called School of Chartres, to which we are indebted for the invention and codification of the literary figure of the Goddess Natura, investigated by George Economou in his highly valuable monograph[40]. The resonance of such figure was wide and strong: "It has often been suggested that not since the late Antiquity had personified Nature been so strongly recognized as a vital world force of almost supreme magnitude as it was in the twelfth century" (Benson et al. 1982: 10). The philosophical

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[40] Economou, George. *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard UP, 1972, of which a new edition was published in 2002 by the Notre Dame University Press (Notre Dame, Indiana).

basis for such a personification of nature as an identifiable "vital world power" was found by medieval scholars in Plato's *Timaeus*, in the image of the *anima mundi*.

The philosophical system which dominated the intellectual, theological, and literary spheres during the Middle Ages until the thirteenth century, when most of Aristotle's works were introduced into Europe, was Platonism, or, better, a sort of 'Neo-platonism' (to be distinguished from Plotinus' Neoplatonism, of course), a re-interpretation of Platonic thought, which was however enriched with some Aristotelian principles, especially those of the four causes[41] and of his Logic. Indeed, as Chenu's influential writing suggests (Chenu 1957), we should even say Neo-platonisms, since the thought of the Greek philosopher gave rise to different interpretations and schools. A most notable and widely influential Neo-platonic school is the famous School of Chartres (from the town at whose cathedral the School was located), active in the twelfth-century, and whose main philosophical figures were Thierry of Chartres and William of Conches, and also the English John of Salisbury, but around which other intellectual figures also gravitated. Among them, two individuals contributed decisively to the literary representation of the natural world: Bernardus Silvestris, author of the *Cosmographia* or *De mundi universitate. Sive de megacosmus et microcosmus*, and Alain de Lille, author of the *De planctu naturae* and the *Anticlaudianus*, among other writings.

The School's main area of interest was represented by grammar, seen as the foundation of all studies, and from it the Chartrians extended their study to all liberal arts

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[41] In *Physics* II 3 and *Metaphysics* V 2 Aristotle introduces the doctrine of the four causes as a necessary instrument for proper knowledge; the four causes are so identified: a material cause, which indicates the material with which something is made; the formal cause, which indicates its form, the way in which the matter is arranged; the efficient cause, which is the primary cause of rest and motion, thus being the agency of a certain event or state (it could be the person who creates an object for example); and finally, the final cause, which indicates the purpose and aim for which something exists or is done, and this include actions and behaviors.

of the trivium and quadrivium, and then the study of the origin of the universe, cosmogony and cosmology based on the account of the Genesis and the Platonic cosmic myth exposed in the *Timaeus*. Bernardus and Alain, although certainly well trained and knowledgeable of grammar and rhetoric, seemed to be more interested in theological and philosophical matters, as shown by the content of their works, and in particular in the exploration of humankind's relation with the cosmos and with God Himself. It is sometimes hard to distinguish theology and philosophy in their writings, since they apply the logical method based on the four causes inherited from Aristotle to their speculations about God and the creation of the universe; as Economou has aptly suggested, the choice of giving an explicitly literary fashion to their thinking allows them to avoid an in-depth philosophical elaboration which would raise delicate and thorny questions (Economou 2002: 61). But the greatness and the importance of these two refined intellectuals reside mainly in the originality and novelty of their approach and of their figurative creations, which would enjoy a tremendous success in the centuries to come, establishing what Economou defines "the most significant allegorical figure of medieval Latin and vernacular poetry" (Economou 2002: 58). The figure of Natura was certainly widely imitated at least up until the sixteenth century, as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* testifies.

Their representation of Natura is not only a matter of rhetorical and figurative stock, however, but it is also the expression of an idea, an interpretation and an elaboration of the idea of nature itself and of all the relationships involved in a philosophical and theological discourse on the cosmos, that is to say, the relationship between nature and creation, between nature and God, between nature and humankind, and, ultimately, between God and humanity.

There are many and important common points between Bernardus and Alain, who took some central points from Bernardus' work and developed them, so that "the three works of Bernardus and Alain appear to form a kind of trilogy" (Economou 2002: 102). In both cases, nature, or Natura, emerges as a feminine personification of a somewhat god-like, divine figure who has been entrusted by God Himself with the task of governing procreation in the sublunary world. Already in Bernardus, Natura is thus an *artifex*, a creator replicating God's original Creation: "utrorumque corporis at anime formative concrecio, de celestis ordinis emulatione" (Bernardus Silvestris II.11.1). As Hugh White writes, "Nature is personified as a power operative in the constitution and organization of the universe" (White 2000: 68).

Bernardus introduces some other important characteristics: besides being a procreatrix, Natura is also represented in the act of complaining, of lamenting, *natura plangens*, a characteristic that will inspire the title of Alain's work. In the *Cosmographia* Natura complains about the state of chaos, of disorder of the world. Natura also has the function of joining soul and matter in the creation of human beings; this aspect has direct influence from the *anima mundi*, the world-soul, of the Platonic *Timaeus*, which represents the joining of idea and matter, "of material and immaterial" (White 2000: 68).

Natura clearly emerges as *vicaria Dei*, as God's entrusted agent on earth, but she is limited in the range of her functions: "The complaining Natura admits her helplessness in the face of chaos" (Economou 2002: 63-64): since she creates out of *emulatio*, making things alike, she cannot therefore operate on contraries, on disorder to make order. Being limited, she is aided in her work of ordering the cosmic chaos by other personified powers and agents of Noys, which in Bernardus' poem corresponds to the Nous (*Noῦς*) and is defined

as "summi et exsuperantissimi *Dei* est *intellectus*" (Bernardus Silvestris I, II, 152). Endelechia, Urania and Physis are thus summoned to help: Endelechia helps giving shape to the world, but for the creation of man Natura is aided by Urania and Physis. The choice is somehow self-explaining: Urania, as the name tells us, is more concerned and closer to the celestial sphere, and her function seems to concern then the spiritual aspect of man; Physis, on the other hand, is more connected to the physical, material aspect. Physis is the Greek word for nature, and also by this very, linguistic fact, she is represented as very close to Natura; it is however not easy to define its exact function: as C. S. Lewis suggests, "Natura is, in fact, a personification of the general order of things […]. Physis is less easily understood. […] She is almost 'organic nature', the object of biology: she is the reservoir of vital possibilities on which the general ordering of Natura draws" (1939: 94).

Somehow, Bernardus seems to be more concerned with concrete, physical, quasi-scientific facts and issues: "This connection with Physis […], indicates that in Bernardus' conception Nature is profoundly implicated in the material" (White 2000: 83). A further proof of Bernardus' interest in strictly physical and 'scientific' matters is represented by his use of other scientific disciplines, such as astronomy: "The Neoplatonic background of Bernard's Natura is complemented by the concept of a generating celestial nature found in astronomical writings" (Economou 2002: 65).

Another very important element of Bernardus' writing is the tight correspondence he traces between the macrocosm, the universe, and the microcosm, the human being. Natura created humanity in similarity with the larger universe, and human nature "exhibits profound affinities" with the natural world (Wetherbee 1990: 3). This similarity, this affinity is the mark of Natura's working, and, through her, of God's.

Alain starts from these ideas and borrows some elements from Bernardus: first of all the motif of the *natura plangens*, which also gave the title to his work; the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm; and Natura's role as *vicaria Dei* with limited powers, although Alain expands her functions to providing human beings with reason in addition to body and soul. Another difference lays in the fact that Natura here complains not about the cosmic chaos, but about humanity's unnatural behavior, that is, behaviors and acts not in accordance with her laws. Her role, though, as said, is confined to that of creating, of joining soul and matter, of endowing humanity with reason, and of regulating and promoting procreation, re-generation that, with regard to humanity, is contemplated, for Alain, only within marriage.

Natura in Alain thus involves more directly moral matters; the literary and figurative representation of the present human state of disgrace is located around the image of Venus' adultery, which is seen as an abandonment of her duties. After Venus' example, humanity has abandoned reason, that is a choice of behavior in conformity to the laws of nature. Natura laments her despair to a particular person, appearing in a dream-vision to a poet who at first fails to recognize her, and only "once he has been informed of her identity, Alan's poet-narrator is able to sing her praises with knowledgeable accuracy and a fund of information" (Economou 2002: 81). This narrative event signifies man's awareness and consciousness of his strong bond with Natura, of the nature of this bond, and of Natura's identity and powers; he is only too self-absorbed and maybe slightly clouded by his choice to follow lust instead of reason, and has thus lost sight of his role and position in the universe. He cannot defy Natura's laws, or that will take its toll.

Even if Natura, much like in Bernardus, does not have the power to intervene and mend things, she calls her priestly assistant, Genius, to perform a quite radical act: the pronunciation of an anathema upon whoever does not comply with her laws.

Natura laments her powerlessness, but there is a sense of the possibility of salvation. It is not only against lust which Natura rails at, though; as Hugh White also observes,

> Although she is certainly much concerned about illegitimate sex, Nature is surely also genuinely concerned about the whole range of sin; and whilst it seems to be true that she is ineffectual in the face of human sinning, this does not mean that her views on what ought to be are mistaken, or that her intentions are invalid. If human beings were to follow the law of Nature, which is the law of reason in *DPN* [*De planctu naturae*], they would be in harmony with God's purposes (White 2000: 85, n.77).

It is therefore not only humanity's choice to follow lust, or in general to sin, that afflicts Natura, but the consequent disruption of the order she established according to God's will, a disruption over which she has no mending power: "once the inner unity of the created world, of which the figure of Natura is the image, has been subverted by man's willful disobedience, Natura has no power to correct it" (Economou 2002: 82).

But this does not mean there is no solution, even despite Genius' anathema. Natura has endowed humanity with reason, so that it could use its passions sensibly; humanity, however, made a conscious choice of acting against reason's advice and thus against nature's laws: "The process of human history, determined by mankind's moral choices […] has divorced man from his original bond with Natura" (Economou 2002: 82).

The state of conflict and disorientation of humanity is represented by Alain through the figure of Venus which he innovates with respect to the mythographic tradition of the two Venuses, a virtuous one and a vicious one, by representing a single, double-faced Venus: "The fusion of two Venuses into one is a literary innovation that provides an appropriate metaphor for the confusion in human psychology" (Economou 2002: 86); it also reflects the presence of good and evil within humanity, and the inevitable struggle between them.

But Natura's discourse to the confused poet does not only have the task of enlightening the poet, and, through him, humanity, about the nature of his confusion, about his mistakes and his neglect of reason, but the vision also offers a way out, the solution which she cannot carry out, but which exists, and is presented at the end of the poem, when "Genius returns to Natura" (Economou 2002: 96). It is precisely a return to Natura and her laws which can allow man to restore the original conditions of his coming to life: "By following his reason, which is to follow Natura, man may seek to emulate his first condition and thereby return to the state of grace that means salvation" (Economou 2002: 96). By following reason, and thereby nature, humanity will not only ensure its own salvation, but will also contribute to keeping the balance and harmony of the world to which it belongs.

I agree with Economou when he criticizes Curtius' judgment of Bernardus (Economou 2002: 60): a judgment which aims at minimizing both the literary and the philosophical achievements of the *De Mundi Universitate*. In fact, as Economou also maintained (2002), Bernardus' work, and, with it, Alain's as well, have been fundamental for the medieval literary history. But there is even more, especially with regard to the

present study. What Bernardus and Alain have done in representing Natura, the personified allegorization of nature, as the procreatix, the creator of man by God's will, by identifying man's vicious behaviors as a direct consequence of man's loss of communion with nature, and finally by suggesting a solution to Natura's reason for complaint (that is man's unnatural behavior, where unnatural signifies irrational, or not in accordance with Reason) and to man's loss of sense of his place in the universe, they also envision and express a solution to all these issues in a return of man to nature, which means a return to follow the natural laws, which, in Alain, is another way of saying man should behave according to the reason with which he has been endowed by God through nature.

Once taken away the peculiar elements of the historical period and of the rhetoric and literary milieu and tradition in which these works have been written, we will observe that the same paradigm and the same principles of man's return to nature as a solution to both his moral and spiritual misplacement have been advocated before the Chartrian poets by Pliny, Lucretius, Virgil, and even Plato, as we have seen in the previous chapters, and are advocated by nature writers, environmentalists, and ecologists today.

Both authors envision and represent nature as a personified figure which symbolizes the role, function and idea of nature according to the Chartrian philosophy, but more in general to the intellectual milieu of the twelfth century, an epoch of great interest in the natural sciences: "what happens in the twelfth century might be characterized as the emancipation of nature from the realm of the sacred" (White 2000: 76). Nature came to be seen as a reality with its own identity and existence, rather than just a reservoir of symbols: as M. D. Chenu puts it, this "discovery of nature [was] the realization […] on the part of those twelfth-century men that they had to do with an external, present, and intelligible

reality [...], they became aware of the fact that they were also part of this universe they were about to dominate" (Chenu 1983: 26).

This nature was perceived as a whole, whose structure and phenomena, though independent from God's direct doing, reflect His work and His presence, in nature's continuous emulation of the divine creation act. The influence of Albertus Magnus' ideas is rather manifest in this way of interpreting nature, which sees a coexistence between God's existence and work and the autonomous existence and workings of the natural world, which is in origin God's own creation: "it is not the first time that in the history of science the idea of a whole and solid, compact world takes shape thanks to and within religion" (Chenu 1983: 27). The investigation of nature is thus not in conflict with faith and Christian doctrine, but we should rather make use of the reason nature (and God) endowed us with to understand the workings of nature itself, the order and laws of the universe which, being natural order and laws are God's order and laws, since nature is the vicar of God on earth.

Once medieval men had realized the existence of nature, and its existence as a whole, it acquired its identity and existential status, and was thus personified. The personification of Nature, besides establishing a literary figure of great and lasting success, was then the expression, the natural point of arrival of this new realization of nature's autonomous existence and identity.

Besides the fantastic, allegorized, and at times frightening nature found in bestiaries, and the ideas emerging from the psychological constraints deriving also from precarious living conditions, people discovered a powerful nature which could be known,

understood, and which was not in opposition to God's power; rather it was exactly expression of God's greatness.

Science and knowledge certainly still had a long way to go, as well as humanities, and religious doctrine itself; but these twelfth-century scholars were animated by sincere curiosity and thirst for knowledge, and identified the important reality of the world being a whole system, made up of numerous interconnections, of most variously assorted elements, and of micro-systems, which rather than invalidating its wholeness, concur to its unity and harmony.

In cultural milieus such as the School of Chartres, concerned with issues and discourses apparently very different and distant from today's environmental crisis and debate, the starting questions and final conclusions seem to be the same. An unbalance is perceived between humankind and the natural world from which humans clearly come from and to which they belong; the solution, at which a reflection on the issue arrives, is that man has to return to that world, nature, he has to recover his original bond with it, if he is to solve this unbalance. The way to achieve it is by means of an interior journey which would bring him back to a balanced use of his reason, of his intellect and mind, which will inevitably reflect on his relationship with nature.

One fundamental difference with today's ecological and environmental stances lies in the fact the at the time of Bernardus and Alain, as clearly and artfully showed in their works, man still feels that he is a part of nature, that he comes from nature and belongs to it; the man/nature dualism, though somehow present, is not as radical and fossilized as it grew to be in the modern era. And this is one further proof of the fact that the dualism was not (or not solely) generated by Christianity, within which precisely in the Middle Ages

we can find truly ecological and sustainable models of human behaviors towards the natural world and the environment.

3.1.2. Seemingly Ecological: The Natural World for
Saint Francis and other Monastic Orders

From its ancient oriental origin, eremitism was characterized by a retreat to solitary life away from cities and villages, and thus from worldly preoccupations, in order to focus on meditation and prayer. The privileged place for this ascetic retreat was the wilderness, identified either with the forest (as in ancient Hinduism) or with the desert, especially in Mid-Eastern religions and areas, where ascetics were however very attached to and dependent from the few and peculiar vegetal forms of the desert, such as palm trees (Merlo 1997: 56-57); a thicket of palm trees is moreover usually a reliable, if not certain, indicator of the presence of water.

The ascetic tradition was characterized from the very beginning by an interest in and fascination with nature: "a tradition actually possessing a great potential for appreciation of the natural environment, a tradition which often expresses sentiments of a universal relevance" (Sorrell 1988: 15). When monasticism was introduced into Western Europe, the first ascetics, or monks, chose to retreat in forests, before the practice of building monasteries and living in religious communities established itself, and were usually solitary anchorets, hermits, as the word monasticism suggests (deriving from the Greek root μονος, "lone man"). One of the most famous Christian figures to practice this form of religious asceticism was Saint Benedict, who lived as a hermit in a cave for three years.

The twelfth-century renewal movement also invested the monastic institution: "Spiritual leaders of the twelfth century, like those of the third and fourth centuries, manifested a revived and intense concern that Christianity return to the literal practice of what they conceived to be the true original Christian way of life. […] Both the Cistercian and the Franciscan reform movements (as well as various heretical movements such as the Cathars) arose in this context" (Sorrell 1988: 28). A paradigmatic example of such trends and movements within the variegated world of the Christian religion is represented by the charismatic figure of Saint Francis and the religious and monastic movement he founded and inspired. Francis' choice to live in the forests of central Italy probably aligns itself in this tradition, and it probably also fits in and is a reaction against the political and religious situation of his historical period, characterized by a harsh conflict between the Church and the state, between spiritual and temporal powers, in the so-called War of Investitures. This conflict basically resulted from a fierce competition for power over lands and offices, and it ended up corrupting the nature itself of the Church, since the German bishops came to be elected by virtue of their wealth and of their relation to the Emperor, rather than for religious merits. In this decadent context, the choice made by Francis assumes a deeper significance: "La salvezza della religione, ai tempi di Francesco, non poteva che stare nel ritorno alle origini, alla vita apostolica: per farlo bisognava isolarsi nel digiuno e nella preghiera, e dedicare interamente se stessi all'aiuto dei bisognosi" (Paci 2002: 33)[42].

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[42] "At the time of Francis, salvation for Christianity could only lie in a return to its origins, to the apostolic way of life: in order to do it, one had to isolate himself/herself practicing abstinence from food and praying, and at the same time entirely devote himself/herself to help the needy", (my translation).

This way of living the Christian faith, directly inspired by the evangelical example, could be seen as one of the most positive aspects of Christianity at the time, torn as it was by power struggles on the one side and rampant heresies on the other. Not everything in Francis' ideas was original or particularly new; in fact, many other reforming movements had been preaching and practicing a Christian experience similar to his, made of self-abnegation, poverty, an attempt to return to the apostolic life of the Gospel: "Since the latter [Francis' attitude toward the natural environment] developed out of the former [the Franciscan ideal], one should not be surprised to find it also included many unoriginal or traditional elements" (Sorrell 1988: 39). His figure and movement did not immediately meet with public enthusiasm, nor institutional approval, precisely for its being similar to other, even heretical, movements.

One aspect of his preaching was that not only he tried to follow as literally as possible Jesus' example, but he also accompanied his words and acts with literal references to the Bible, both to the Old and to the New Testament. He chose a different way of preaching God's words and celebrating His greatness and power, but always within the boundaries of orthodox Christian and Biblical doctrine.

He abnegated himself by refusing all worldly possessions and by re-establishing new personal and social ties in his preaching the word of God to the believers. The first step towards this change was taken towards the wilderness though. He achieved his full conversion by re-establishing his communion with the created world. Isolated retreat in remote places favored for Francis a direct contact with creation: he had close encounters with a number of animals in his solitude, and somehow learned to commune with them. Nature writer Barry Lopez describes the process of coming into communion with the

environment, with the landscape, with a place, and all that inhabits it; he suggests how to achieve this relationship with the natural environment by

> paying intimate attention; a *storied* relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place--as a fundamental human defense against loneliness. If you're intimate with a place, a place with whose history you're familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you're there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned (Lopez 1997).

As Lopez has illustrated in his *Arctic Dreams* (1986), man should divest himself of all assumptions and become receptive of the landscape, of the environment around him, and establish with it a sort of conversation, a form of reciprocal communication . It is this process that Francis sets going: by choosing to live in total poverty, as a hermit in the woods, he put himself on a level of equality with all other creatures; his encounters and contact with them probably originated a relationship based on empathy and even admiration: "Francis' devotion to animal arise[s] from his early eremetic experiences […]. These intimate eremetic contacts with creatures gave Francis a love and sympathy for them " (Sorrell 1988: 42).

In this perspective, Francis' epithets toward creation in the *Canticle* assume a new significance. He calls them "Frate Sole," "Sora Luna," "Frate Vento," "Sor Aqua," "Frate Foco," "Matre Terra", "Sora nostra Morte corporale" ("Brother Sun," "Sister Moon," "Brother Wind," "Sister Water," "Brother Fire," "Mother Earth," "our Sister bodily Death"); he addresses and considers them as siblings, as relatives, and thus equals them to himself as another creature of God, like themselves: "By implicitly humanizing creatures through these affective links, he makes it easier for others to share his bond with

creatures" (Sorrell 1988: 128). Francis had certainly no intention to "romanticize nature by reading human reactions and qualities into non-rational creatures," as Doyle also points out (Doyle 1974: 397), but he only wished and tried to create an emotional, intimate connection between humanity and the other creatures. Through his experience, Francis had enacted precisely what Barry Lopez suggests: he had established a contact, a connection and a dual-channel communication with the whole of the environment in which he lived and operated.

Francis' insistence on the fraternal aspect of the relationship between humanity and creatures supports and strengthens his belief about the deep interrelations and interdependences existing among all creatures, including humans: "All creatures, separate in functions, worth, desires, and beauty, are bound together in a harmonious interdependence ensured and presided over by the just and benevolent eye of God" (Sorrell 1998: 133). Francis' ideals were certainly new in part, particularly for his literal reading and practice of the Scriptures and Gospel, but he should not be considered a man out of place in his time: he was profoundly medieval in many ways, including the belief in a cosmic hierarchy which necessarily saw humanity as somehow superior to the rest of creation. This superiority, though, does not invalidate his ideal of humanity and creatures as brothers and sisters under God; Francis' vision of creation and of the interrelations among all its members is original yet firmly rooted in Christian tradition, and it is also utilitarian, while being at the same time "a vehicle for appreciation and respect" (Sorrell 1998: 134).

The Franciscans were a mendicant order that lived on the alms offered by the believers, but also on what mother nature had to offer them; this meant that they made use

of what they found in the woods, and exploited the forests, but with a peculiar attitude, they did silvicultural work according to their needs of self-subsistence, private consumption, and to provide for the poor (Borchi 1996). They did not overexploit the woods, but ran the forestry management and looked after the forests in a very moderate way: "le utilizzazioni furono assai contenute e comunque eseguite con criterio colturale, in modo da favorire la rinnovazione del bosco e da ridurne la densità eccessiva" (Paci 2002: 36)[43].

Sorrell justly points out in his Introduction, and elsewhere in his book, that it would be a mistake to consider Francis as a man having modern ideas in his time, because he was and remained a profoundly medieval soul and mind despite his originality and novelty: "he had concerns that might be labeled as 'ecological' in the popular definition of 'concern for the environment'" (Sorrell 1998: 139). But as we have seen, his ideals actually caused his followers as well, and for centuries to come, to adopt behaviors that are ecological in every sense of the word. It is true that the label "ecology" is of relatively recent birth (s. above, Chapter 1), but the underlying idea is certainly not so recent: ecology in fact does not stand for 'concern for the environment', or not only for that, which is instead a product of its original meaning resulting form the environmental campaigns of the 1960's and 1970's; strictly speaking, ecology indicates the set of relationships between all living organisms in the biosphere, the relationship between organisms and their environment, and the way in which they interact and affect each other (Odum et al. 2005). In this sense, Franciscans definitely adopted ecological attitudes and behaviors, because instead of

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[43] "Their use of the woods was rather limited and in any event performed according to cultivation criteria, so as to aid and favor the forest natural regeneration and to reduce excessive forest thickness and density", (my translation).

imposing themselves on the environment they had to do with, they established a balanced relationship through their moderate and considerate use and exploitation of natural resources: "è quella che oggi si potrebbe definire una gestione ecologica del bosco, di cui non si esclude l'uso, purché moderato e rispettoso di un bene che appartiene a tutti" (Paci 2002: 37)[44]. Medieval people would certainly not have called this attitude as 'ecological', but it corresponds to what we would call ecological today when we have the linguistic material to do that.

The point is that the Franciscan ideal considered humanity, creatures and the environment as parts of the same large system, or ecosystem in modern terms: "Il bosco, per i francescani, non era una semplice appendice del convento, ma parte integrante di questo" (Paci 2002: 37)[45], because humanity and the natural world do not live in two different spheres, but in a spatial (and spiritual) continuum.

Besides the obvious and great importance of Francis' work for his own time and the centuries to come, though, one specific aspect of his vision and experience is significant for the meaning and purpose of this study. Not only one of his basic messages and the motivation behind his *Canticle* is important, that is "to exhort people to appreciate creation, respect it, and recognize human kinship to other creatures" (Sorrell 1998: 142); it is also important that his life and experience set an example that, as Sorrell also underlines (1998: 145), might inspire us today. The key point is that, as this thesis claims, despite the fierce, but in the end constructive, criticism coming to the West about its environmental attitudes and behaviors from Eastern cultures, the West, the criticized European and

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[44] "It is what we could define today as an ecological management of the woods, which does not exclude its exploitation as long as it is moderate and respectful of a resource that belongs to the whole community", (my translation).

[45] "For the Franciscans, the forest was not simply an addition, an appendage of the monastery, but an integral part of it", (my translation).

Christian West, has, in its long history, known and experienced ecological, sustainable, respectful attitudes towards the environment as well. Francis' example shows that "the Western Christian thought about the relationship between humankind and other creatures is not static and rigid, but contains abundant potential" (Sorrell 1998: 144).

Franciscanism was not the only monastic order to be concerned with the respect and preservation of forests and natural environments though. Virtually all of them held wilderness in high respect, precisely because originally the wilderness was the place where monasticism was born. Examples of other famous monastic orders to carry out sustainable forestry and environmentally friendly practices are the Cistercians and the Camaldolese, both engaged in preserving as well as developing and exploiting natural resources and environments. The Cistercians, since their foundation in the XI century and, slightly later, under the lead of Bernard of Clairvaux, elected the woods as the ideal place to preserve their spirituality, and from which to acquire knowledge: "Experto crede: aliquid amplius invenies in silvis, quam in libris. Ligna et lapides docebunt te, quod a magistris audire non possis" (Bernard, *Ep. CVI*, coll. 241-242). But it was also a place on which to draw resources for their subsistence. They were famous farmers, and according to the Benedictine rule followed by the order, labor was the organizing principle of their life: labor in the fields and woods in their case. For them, as well as for other orders such as the Camaldolese, besides the contemplation of nature, monks should be involved in a more concrete relationship with it, by making use of it for the benefit of the community (Paci 2002: 35). Not only the Cistercians or the Camaldolese monasteries depended on the produces of the land, but the villagers and people living in the precincts of the monastery: so the work of the monks served a larger community than the sole religious men.

Both orders tried as much as they could to increase their amount of woodland through donations, and were at times aided in this by popes and emperors who often imposed a prohibition to build or even have cattle graze in the woodlands pertaining to the various monasteries (Merlo 1997: 110). These monks were earnestly concerned with the preservation of such areas as well, and showed quite early preoccupation for the degree of deforestation performed in order to gain tillable land: "La foresta per i camaldolesi è stata un'importante fonte di guadagni, ma essi si sono sempre preoccupati di mantenersi dentro i limiti di un moderato sfruttamento economico, in modo da non mettere in pericolo la conservazione della foresta stessa" (Merlo 1997: 121)[46].

3.2. Literary Images of Nature: The Enclosed Garden and the Wild Forest

In not strictly religious, but instead rather lay and worldly representations, the natural world is viewed and rendered in a very different manner. Literary representations of nature are highly stereotyped and symbolical, but they ultimately stem from concrete realities. Nature was essentially envisioned in two dominating literary images: the enclosed garden and the wild forest.

The *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden finds its origin in the Biblical imagery of the *Canticle of Canticles* (or *Song of Songs*), where the woman is compared to an *hortus conclusus* and a sealed fountain: "*Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*" (*Canticle*, 4:12), a symbology which later gave origin to an iconographic trend concerning the Holy Mary.

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[46] "The woods have always been an important source of profit for the Camaldolese, but they also always took care not to exceed the limits of a moderate economical exploitation, so as not to put in danger the preservation of the forest itself", (my translation).

The enclosed garden also found widespread diffusion in the monastic world: coenobitic communities often lived in monasteries provided not only with external woodland and fields destined to subsistence agriculture, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, but also with an enclosed area – the cloister - surrounded by porches and walkways leading to the cubicles and to the various wings and areas of the monastery. Cloister gardens were very often used to grow herbs, especially medicinal herbs, and some other useful or at times even ornamental plants. Its main function was thus practical, but also spiritual, since it provided a quiet place for meditation, and it also represented an important study tool, since monks could observe the plants' vegetative cycle. Last but not least, an ancient form of enclosed garden is to be found in Roman architecture, which was in turn influenced by other traditions, mainly Oriental. An enclosed garden was usually located in the *peristilium* of the Roman villas and palaces. In all cases, probably originating from the Biblical image, a well or a fountain was a characterizing feature of enclosed gardens, forming a focal point.

This garden model was successful also among lay, secular buildings; castles and manors were very often provided with an enclosed garden within the high castle walls, and they served both aesthetic and practical functions: kitchen herbs, fruit trees and vegetables were grown, as well as flowers and ornamental trees and arbors. The enclosed garden also had a highly symbolical meaning: it represented the paradise garden, the garden of Eden, but most of all it represented a human idea about nature and about the relationship between humankind and nature. A human-made garden, neatly organized, tilled, kept in order and place (from a human perspective) represented the kind of nature

people were glad to enjoy and were not afraid of, because they had created it and could dominate it.

This idea obviously opposed itself to the idea about the rest of nature, the wild nature outside the castle or even the city walls. The other dominating natural image was, in fact, that of the wild forest. The fortune of the wild forest in medieval literary imagination equals and possibly surpasses that of the enclosed garden. The symbolism and imagery of the wild forest has ancient roots as we have seen (s. Chapter 1), but the very idea of the forest underwent a development during the long historical period of the Middle Ages, and its symbology was not monolithic, but instead it presented various aspects. It was a privileged place and companion for hermits and monks, for which the forest had essentially positive connotations (s. 3.1.2.), but in secular culture the wild forest itself had an ambivalent significance. In general, it came to symbolize "l'atavica paura dell'uomo di fronte al pericolo e alla morte, rappresentati di volta in volta dalle fiere del bosco o da esseri spettrali prodotti dalle più angosciose fantasie" (Mari & Kindl 1989: V)[47].

The forest was a symbol of the danger of the unknown and the unpredictable, and a place of highly probable bewilderment and confusion, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense. Yet, although wild forests represented humanity's deepest fears, they also exerted an undeniable curiosity and fascination, which produced successful and beautiful metaphors. But this vision of the forest was also the result of a concrete reality. Massimo Montanari has clearly explained how the forest ended up being considered as opposed to civilization: through later early medieval hagiographies he could reconstruct a

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[47] "The atavic human fear of danger and of death, represented at times by the wild beasts inhabiting the forest or alternatively by eerie and ghostlike creatures, a mere product of the most distressing fantasies", (my translation).

development in the view people had of the forest: it is a negative image where the forest is "equiparato a ciò che non è civile. Questa nuova rappresentazione mentale del bosco è la conseguenza dell'emergere di una cultura agraria, la quale tende a considerare il bosco come una realtà residuale" (Andreolli e Montanari 1988: 46)[48]. As Vito Fumagalli suggests, it is the cultivated areas that become more familiar to people after the early Middle Ages, while the uncultivated, wild areas become alien, strange, and unfamiliar (Fumagalli 1992: 25), and are therefore less known and more easily related to the danger and fear of the unknown.

The most famous literary wild forest of the Middle Ages is perhaps Dante's *selva oscura*, from which he will eventually exit by undergoing a long spiritual and interior journey, figuratively carried out through all levels of the Christian other world. The forest represents both the state of deep bewilderment the poet had fallen prey to and the place where he meets Virgil, his guide through part of the wondrous journey. This formative and cathartic function of the forest is common in myths and legends. An individual left alone in an unknown, wild, dangerous and frightening place undergoes a sort of initiatic process which will eventually empower him/her, once his/her fears are overcome on exiting the forest labyrinth.

Chivalric literature made large use of this symbolic function of the forest, and in an era informed and characterized by Christian religion, through this literature "la selva gettò un ponte tra la cultura celtica e quella cristiana" (Paci 2002: 38)[49]. In the Celtic-Germanic tradition, the forest is seen as a place propitious for the encounter with the numinous

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[48] "Equaled to what is not civilized. This new mental representation of the woods is the result of an emerging agrarian culture which considers the woods as a residual reality", (my translation).

[49] "The forest threw a bridge between the Celtic and the Christian cultures", (my translation).

believed to inhabit the forest, with the divine, and thus favourable for spiritual experiences; it is a boundary area between the earth and the otherworld, as Le Goff explains (Le Goff 1988: 27 and ff.).

In Chrétien's *Perceval* the motif of the wild forest probably finds one of its finest expressions: in the poem the forest performs a double function, and in this way represents a double-faced idea of the forest in the cultural mentality of the Middle Ages. The forest is the place where the hero, Perceval, is brought up by his mother separated and isolated from the civil world; it is the place where he meets his destiny through the encounter with King Arthur's knights; the place through which he undergoes his initiation to adult life and he begins the journey toward knighthood; the place where, bewildered after his meeting with the King Fisherman, he will wander in search of answers and explanations; and it is the place he will go back to, to find his mother whom he had abandoned a long time before. In the forest he will look for and find answers to his questions, through adventures and encounters, and his going back to his mother represents the recovery of his lost identity. In a way, his mother and the forest might both be seen as symbols of a larger idea. The forest, as symbol of nature, is the place where a person can recover his/her identity as a member of, as part of the natural world, and thus return to Natura (the mother) with this new awareness:

> Nel bosco l'uomo può ritrovare le sue radici, scoprire di appartenere egli stesso al regno della natura vergine e riconoscere la propria animalità. L'uomo, ormai irrimediabilmente scisso dal regno della natura intatta, […] ha rimosso e dimenticato le sue origini selvagge e ha sostituito quell'ordine naturale e primitivo con un ordine umano e razionale; solo nell'inconscio sopravvivono i frammenti di quella realtà primordiale,

misteriosa e terrificante perché non più conosciuta" (Mari & Kindl 1989: XIII-XIV)[50].

It is the experience of the forest, the solitary journey through it that revives and recalls to mind those forgotten fragments: thus the forest is not only a symbol of an interior journey which could take place anywhere, even within walls, but, as it has been for St. Francis, also the actual, physical place of this return to the primeval natural essence of humanity. Moreover, the very fact of projecting one's unconscious onto nature, onto the forest, on the one side draws on an ancient tradition where man has always looked to nature to find terms of comparison, similes, metaphors to express his own condition; on the other side, it reflects the proximity with which humanity and the natural non-human world lived.

3.2.1. Garden and Forest in *Sir Orfeo*: A Functional Reversal

Late medieval English literature offers a fine example combining both images – the enclosed garden and the wild forest – in one short and yet multi-layered poem, full of meaning and significance: *Sir Orfeo*. It is an anonymous poem, a short romance dated around the late 13th century and the early 14th century, that has reached us in three manuscripts, the oldest of which (the MS Advocates 19.2.1) dates from around 1330. The poem is a reworking and refashioning of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, known to the Middle Ages through the Virgilian version (*Georgicon*, Liber IV) and the

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[50] "In the forest, man can recover his roots, discover his own belonging to the realm of the virgin nature and thus recognize his own animality. Man, although irreparably split and separated from the intact and unspoiled realm of nature, […] has repressed and forgotten his own natural and wild origins, and has substituted that primitive and natural order for a human and rational one; only in the unconscious do fragments and remnants of that primeval reality survive, a reality which is mysterious and terrifying because not known anymore", (my translation).

Ovidian version (*Metamorphoseis*, Liber X), and through the commentaries of late ancient Latin writers, such as Boethius (*De consolation philosophiae*, Liber III, XXIV) and Fulgentius (*Mythologiarum Libri* III).

The original Classical myth is considerably modified in this poem: Orpheus and Eurydice become Orfeo and Heurodis, they are not Thracian but English; Orfeo is now an English king, ruler of the kingdom of Winchester, and Heurodis his wife and queen, and not a nymph. The Middle English story retains some of the motifs and patterns of the Classical model, such as, for example, the disruption of the couple's happiness because of some unfortunate event concerning Heurodis/Eurydice, and Orfeo's/Orpheus' talent in music. But much of the poem is also influenced by the Celtic tradition, and by other medieval works and genres, such as chivalric literature and the Breton lays. The poem thus artfully mixes and refashions to a high literary level Classical, Celtic, and typically medieval traditions.

The two topical moments of the story – Heurodis' disappearance, through her abduction by the King of Fairies, and Orfeo's finding of his abducted wife – take place respectively in an enclosed garden and in a wild forest. While Heurodis is enjoying the colors, smells and protected quietness of the castle garden, she falls asleep under a grafted fruit tree (*ympe-tre*) and is visited in dream by the King of Fairies and his retinue announcing her his will to take her with him to his fairy kingdom. Once she relates this to her husband, Orfeo tries to set up a tight defense in the garden in order to prevent the abduction, but he cannot do anything about it: the queen disappears by magic and is taken away to an unknown place, since no one seems to know the location of the kingdom of *faeries*.

Orfeo's reaction to his wife's abduction is slightly startling, because he does not even attempt to go and look for her; he simply accepts the state of things and after a period of mourning decides to leave the kingdom: he dismisses his kingly robes, leaves the rule in the hand of his steward and goes into the woods only wearing a cloak and bringing his harp with him. From this moment he will live as a hermit in the forest populated by wild animals and he will feed on what the forest seasonally has to offer. He will spend his time playing his harp to the delight of all animal inhabiting the woods. It is on one of these days in the wild that he runs into a hunting procession of beautiful women among who he recognizes his wife Heurodis, and thus decides to follow them: in so doing he enters a fissure in the rock and finds himself in a beautiful country.

The anonymous poet curiously operates a reversal in the role and symbolic meaning of the enclosed garden and the wild forest. The enclosed garden is the place where, despite the protection of walls and guards, unexpected and unpleasant events happen to the people who spend their leisure time in the garden: the creatures of the wild, numinous beings residing in the depth of the forest manage to bypass and go beyond the walls and the guards' defense to reach and abduct the queen. Thus the feeling of protection from and dominion over the tamed nature of the garden reveals itself to be an illusion. On the contrary, the forest, considered as a place of danger, where a person is defenseless from beasts and nature's powers and creatures proves to be a place of harmony and almost fraternal acceptance (the animals have towards the wandering beggar king an attitude of affectionate familiarity), a place where Orfeo recovers, if not himself, his abducted wife, who he will successfully bring back home to restore the initial order. This portrait of the two dominating and mutually opposing images of nature

somehow belies some of the convictions and beliefs about the presumed control of nature by humanity, or about the supposed innate brutality and negativity of the wild.

3.3. Bestiaries: Animals, Allegory, and Natural History

The bestiary is a kind of compilation text which describes the animal world presenting real or imaginary, fantastic creatures with a description of their physical and behavioral characteristics; these descriptions are usually accompanied by anecdotes, similes, and moralizing interpretations marked by the precepts of the Christian religion. This literary genre falls into the common medieval practice of the compilation of encyclopedic works, which would gather and collect the knowledge inherited from the Classics and from popular traditions.

The Russian scholar Xenja Muratova (1985) explains in her intervention at a Conference on man and animal in the High Middle Ages, hold in Spoleto in 1983, how the history of illumination and illustration in medieval bestiaries goes hand in hand with that of the text which accompanies them. The textual component of the bestiaries originates from the *Physiologus*, a Greek text presumably dating from around the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries A.D., and which presents a survey of descriptions of animals which are interpreted symbolically according to the religious Christian principles; it was very successful during the Middle Ages. The *Physiologus* text developed into the bestiary through the addition of texts extracted from other works which increased the number of animals described together with the number of illustrations.

Bestiaries and their illustrations do not only give account of real animals, but also of mythic and legendary creatures. The highly imaginative creativity through which the

illustrators represents these fabulous creatures extends to the portraying of existing animals, but of which there was only scanty information at the time, as well as imprecise, inventive and bizarre descriptions, since those were exotic animals which did not live in Europe and most of the Europeans had therefore not seen them directly. Thus the tiger is for example painted in blue, and the leopard in red in the Aberdeen Bestiary. The dimensions of these animals are also left to the illustrator's imagination. In her article "The Mirror of Nature Distorted: The Medieval Artist's Dilemma in Depicting Animals" (1993), Nona C. Flores traces the development of the representation of the elephant in medieval manuscripts: the earliest illustrations do not only present an unfaithful portrait of its appearance (it sometimes looks like a horse), but they also represent it as much smaller than it actually is, even smaller than a horse. It is not until the late Middle Ages that we can find illustrations and drawings that render the right proportions between humans and elephants.

The unrealistic and imaginative representations of animals are not only a result of the fact that some of those animals did not exist or had never been seen because native to distant lands. But animals commonly found in Europe and therefore presumably well-known to illuminators are also often depicted in unrealistic ways. This was the product of the circulating legends about such animals and of the work of Christian exegetes which interpreted the appearance and behavior of animals moralizing them. The main source for this allegorization of the natural world is precisely the *Physiologus*, together with the religious exegesis of Classical material such as Plinius's work. The Fathers of the Church, such as for example Saint Ambrose, have also interpreted animals in moralistic and moralizing terms, looking at them from the

perspective of what they represented for humanity. It was a common practice among Christian preachers to turn to the natural world to explain and exemplify concepts and situations and thus introduce the public to Christian mysteries and dogmas. The reason for which they resorted in particular to the animal realm might reside in the fact that virtually everyone had direct or indirect knowledge and experience thereof, since they lived surrounded by the natural world and entertained some sort of relationship with it.

As Francesco Zambon has explained in his introduction to the *Physiologus*, animal symbolism has always followed, since ancient times, the double path of either embodying vices and negative characteristics and behaviors, or, on the other hand, of representing the divine will itself by means of embodying virtues and virtuous, positive models of behavior (Zambon 1982: 11). In the bestiaries both lines have joined in the allegorical use of animals both in the text and in the illustrations: animals are used metaphorically to represent both vices, sins and dangers for humanity, and virtues, the divine spirit and the Christian teachings and precepts: "gli animali raffigurano non soltanto i vizi umani, ma gli stessi insegnamenti, morali o spirituali, della dottrina cristiana"(Zambon 1982: 14)[51].

3.3.1. The Example of the Aberdeen Bestiary

English culture and society seem to show a peculiar interest and fascination for this practice of spreading knowledge about the natural world, as testified by the great number of bestiaries compiled in England and the success achieved there by this genre of compilation works. In order to analyze and illustrate the role of bestiaries in the representation and popularization of knowledge about animals, we will focus as an

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[51] "Animals represent non only human vices, but also the moral or spiritual teachings themselves of Christian doctrine", (my translation).

example on the famous Aberdeen Bestiary (Ms. 24 of the Aberdeen University Library), presumably compiled in England around the beginning of the 13th century. Together with its cognate Ms. Ashmole 1511 kept at the Oxford Bodleian Library, this manuscript marks the height of this kind of production as far as the richness and narrative expressiveness of the illustrations are concerned. Xenja Muratova claims that in these two manuscripts "l'idea di riunire i capitoli del Genesi sulla Creazione e del testo del Bestiario trova la sua espressione più perfetta ed omogenea" (Muratova 1985: 1345).[52] The text does in fact begin with the Creation and then moves on to survey the animal realm dividing it into categories (mammals, birds, reptiles, invertebrates, fish), some mention of the vegetal world and a section about the nature and the body of humans. In support to this statement of Muratova's, Ron Baxter (1998) maintains that in England the tradition of the *Physiologus* was particularly influenced by the account of the Creation presented in the Genesis: "the changes and additions made to this [the *Physiologus*] in England […] continually acted to disrupt this structure [of a treatise on vice and virtue], substituting for it one based on the organization of the natural world as recounted in the Genesis creation myth" (Baxter 1998: xiii). More in general, the English bestiary tradition developing from the *Physiologus* was influenced by the Genesis and by Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, whose focus on the names of the animals recalls the naming of the creatures after their creation as told in the Genesis.

The range of animals described and illustrated in the Aberdeen bestiary is rather wide. In addition to the material inherited from the *Physiologus* and from the bestiary tradition which added to it material from Isidore and other authors, this particular text

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[52] "The idea of putting together the chapters of Genesis on the Creation and those of the bestiary finds its best and most homogeneous expression", (my translation).

also presents extracts from the *Aviarium* of the Augustinian Hugh of Fouilloy (Muratova 1985: 1347), and we also find a number of references and explicit citations from Lucanus' *Pharsalia*.

Although this bestiary follows the tradition quite faithfully, we can observe how the illustrations are not always concerned with representing the symbolic significance of a given animal, but at times the representation seems to be simply a more or less faithful portrayal showing the appearance of the animal described in the corresponding written passage. Since the text usually consists of a description, of a passage of natural history, and of a moralization or an allegorization of the appearance and/or of the behavior of a certain animal, or alternatively of a popular legend concerning that animal, in creating his illustration the miniaturist could decide whether to follow the 'naturalistic' description or to include elements suggesting an allegorical interpretation. This freedom of choice, however, concerned the animals which had been newly introduced and added to the text, and which had therefore not been described and portrayed in the earlier tradition; they were often common animals that had not been attributed any symbolic meaning.

A particularly interesting aspect of the Aberdeen bestiary is represented by the fact that we can find a varied typology of descriptions and pictures. Whereas some images reproduce the animal with explicit symbolic references and elements suggesting an allegory, others more simply offer a somewhat faithful portrait of the animal.

A most explicit example of a religious allegory among the illustrations of the Aberdeen Bestiary is that contained in the chapter *De palma et turture*. The text actually only tells about the palm tree, giving a moralized account and description of the aspects

relating to the difficult environmental conditions in which this plant has to grow, and to its strength in coping with these difficulties; there is no mention of the turtle dove. In the image, on the other hand, a turtle dove is portrayed (or maybe a white dove) inscribed in a circle placed in the center of a cross. The circle would represent its nest, and the cross would stand for the tree, and thus possibly the palm tree, where the nest is placed; otherwise, there is no reference to the palm tree in the illustration. The correspondence between text and image is thus rather weak in this case, although the illustration is surrounded by a rubric written in red ink at the four angles of the cross, and explaining exactly the sense and significance of the miniature.
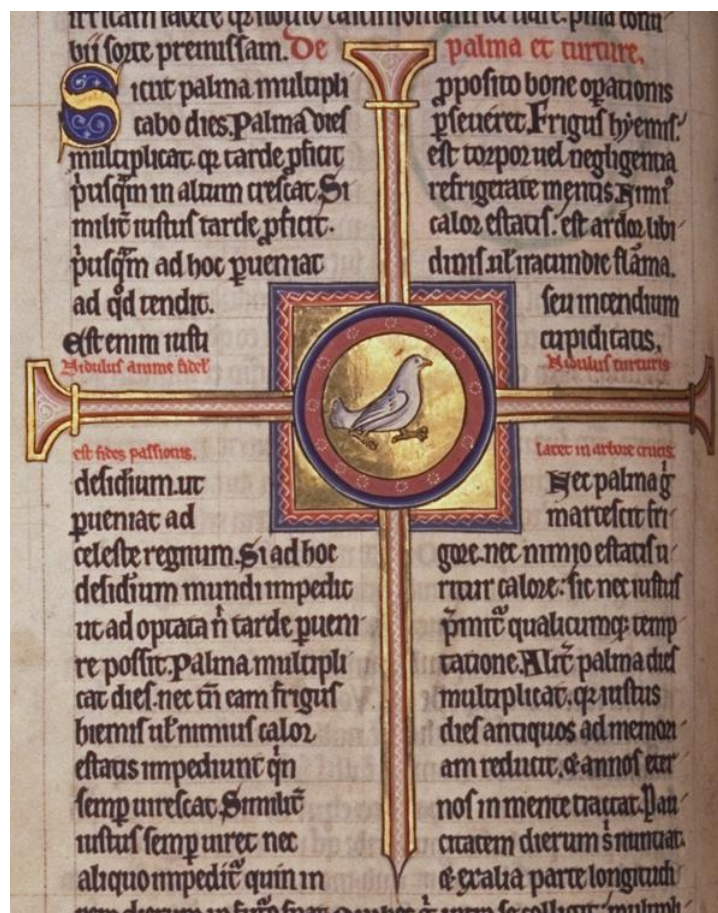
Source: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/comment/32vbirdf.hti
Rubric: "Nidulus anime fidet | est fides passionis. | Nidulus turturis | iacet in arbore crucis".

Another meaningful example of an allegoric image is represented by the illustration of the wolf, where the correspondence between text and image is very clear and strong. The wolf is portrayed in one of the situations described in the text, where it approaches a sheepfold while the shepherd has fallen asleep leaving the dog to guard the sheep. This scene has a rather plain symbolic value which is also explained in the text. The wolf would symbolize the devil who tries to catch the human soul when the person is unprotected and vulnerable. This dimension of precariousness and weakness of the human being is expressed by the image of the sleeping shepherd, who is thus not guarding his flock (or even himself), but entrusts the dog with the task.

But the illustration can have a double significance, because there are no visual elements in it suggesting the Christian allegory, which has to be explained with words, although the metaphor of the wolf threatening the flock was probably well-known, and the allegory is therefore easily distinguishable. But the absence of elements suggesting an allegory also allows a reading of the image as a representation of the relationship between man and animal: man sees the wolf as an enemy and a danger for his sheep, which are his wealth, and thus entrusts the dog to guard this wealth in his absence.

Source: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/comment/16vwolf.hti

The chapter entitled *De talpa* (the mole) is certainly among the most peculiar in the Aberdeen Bestiary. The text is very short, synthetic and concise, but at the same time it manages, in only a few lines, to provide the essential information about the animal: etymology, main characteristics (such as its blindness), living and dietary habits. The only aspect left out from the description is its physical appearance, which is left entirely to the illustration. Text and image thus complete each other. There are no allegorical clues or hints, and all information, although synthetic, is rather accurate, with the exception of the mole's dietary habits: moles are said to feed on puffball roots, which do grow underground where the mole lives, but the authors of the text had probably only assumed it and not actually seen moles feed, since they mainly eat earthworms and other small invertebrates which populate the soil. The size of the illustration matches that of the text: it is rather small compared with the other miniatures of the manuscript, and it is very simple

without much decoration, but it is also extremely realistic, even in such details as the legs and tail.

Source: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/comment/24rmole.hti

Most of the animals described in this magnificent bestiary are moralized as far as their behaviors and habits are concerned, and their legends are also moralized and interpreted allegorically, so that there is nothing 'scientific' in their descriptions.

Some of the chapters or some passages in some chapters, however, as in the case of the bear, where its hibernation is mentioned and reported, or the way it stands on its hind legs is described, and also some elements in various illustrations (always in the case of the bear, for example, the color of its fur and the setting of the illustration) indicate a tendency towards a certain realism of the representations. It is rather obvious that some animals have been observed in life at least from the author of the model manuscript; and in the case of common animals, the miniaturist and the author or the copyist were most probably familiar with some of them.

The aim of the manuscript, as for most bestiaries, is that of celebrating the divine creation of the world, and this is confirmed by the introductory part of the Bestiary which

illustrates the Creation quoting the Genesis, as well as by the constant presence of biblical quotations and of Christian moralizations and allegorizations of the descriptions of the animals. These works thus have as their purpose the "glorificazione del Creatore"[53] (Muratova 1985: 1339) and are mainly compiled in monasteries or in any case in ecclesiastical sets, and they constitute a point of reference for preachers in search of metaphors and *exempla* to use in their sermons. But they also attest to the development of an interest towards the natural world which goes beyond the search for symbolic significances and religious models.

There already existed, after all, works which described animals without interpreting them allegorically, such as those compiled for the benefit of hunters; a famous example is represented by the *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* of Frederick II, based on the direct and from life observation of animals, and which occasionally belies the various legends circulating on certain animals (Flores 1993: 8-10). Within bestiaries as well, though, we can observe the development of a growing tendency to present descriptions at least partially based on objective data, and the illustrations keep pace with this by taking on an increasingly realistic character, as Nona C. Flores has shown in her aforementioned study on the representations of the elephant. Although bestiaries were usually composed in religious centers and, as Muratova writes, this tradition "sembra aver lasciato relativamente poche tracce nei centri di studi come Oxford e Hereford, dove si formulavano i primi principi d'una metodologia scientifica dello studio della natura" (Muratova 1985: 1341)[54], the presence in the Aberdeen Bestiary of such a small, common

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[53] "The glorification of the Creator", (my translation).
[54] "Seems to have left relatively few traces in study centers such as Oxford and Hereford, where the first principles of a scientific methodology in the study of nature were being formulated", (my translation).

animal as the mole, with no symbolic value attached to it, and in particular the nature of its description and illustrations are certainly suggestive of this tendency to look at nature in and for itself, with an almost proto-scientific attitude, which anticipates the future developments of the Renaissance period.

One last issue needs to be explored: one that concerns the bestiary as a genre. Ron Baxter (1998) underlines the presumptuousness with which modern people regard, interpret and define the genre of bestiary, because he maintains that the labels and definitions attached to it by critics are based on modern concepts and ideas, and not on ideas circulating during the Middle Ages, and such definitions are therefore conceptually wrong. We need to think about what bestiaries were to the medieval users of those texts, and not about what they are to us, modern readers. Baxter writes that bestiaries have been variously defined as "moralized natural history" (Baxter 1998: 183), and he raises two objections to this idea about the nature of the bestiary: one has to do with 'moralized' which would not take into account the changes occurred in the structure and, I would add, the purpose of this kind of texts; the other concerns the label of 'natural history', which according to Baxter cannot be assigned to a text which used to be produced in a time where the very concept of 'natural history' did not exist yet, and according to him, this definition, which he rejects, "could only be justified if we were able, through the exercise of an objectivity unavailable to its users, to state that this is what it really was. Since we cannot, the use of the label puts us in a position of discussing the Bestiary in terms of a concept foreign to both its medieval consumers and to any notion of objectivity" (Baxter 1998: 184).

It is true that the original purpose of the bestiary (and of the archetype, the hypotext from which the bestiary tradition sprang from, the *Physiologus*) was that of presenting a moralized interpretation of the animal world, and in general of the creation, of the universe, guided by the Christian principles and doctrine, thus offering both wrong, sinful and right, virtuous models of behavior, and also that of offering explanations on the origin and nature of things which are in accordance with this moralizing interpretations and allegorizations. But as time went on, the bestiary evolved from a text which would offer moral, doctrinal, and spiritual teachings through the figurative representation of animals and other natural creatures and creations, into a text which would collect a more general knowledge about the animal and natural world, including popular and folkloristic lore, and developing at the same time the visual illustration of the animals from mostly imagined representations of both real and fantastic creatures to increasingly realistic portraits of existing animals. In this sense, Baxter is right in considering 'moralized' as a limiting definition for the bestiary: later bestiaries in particular do not only present moralizations of animals and their behaviors, but, as already said, extend their range to the account of local popular legends which are more often than not exempted from an allegorical interpretation in religious or moral terms.

But his objection to the label 'natural history' is rather superficial and incomplete, in my opinion, because the issue is much more complicated and complex than he puts it. Baxter claims that the expression 'natural history' denotes a modern concept, that was unknown to people before "the middle of the seventeenth century" (Baxter 1998: 184). There is no doubt that modern natural history is different from the ancient natural history, but the concept, and the very expression, are very old. Part of Aristotle's *Physics* is also

natural history (especially the books on animals), and so is Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, from which the expression was probably coined; these works are a description and classification of all the elements of the natural world, based on direct observation (in the case of the Stagirite) and on a collection and compilation from other such works (in the case of Pliny). Natural history, then, signified in the remote past roughly what it signifies today in modern times. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that after the scientific revolution of the XVI-XVII centuries, but especially in modern times, the natural sciences have ramified and specialized in diverse branches and disciplines (geology, biology, anatomy, chemistry, physics, and so on), while in the past natural history comprehended all scientific knowledge and disciplines. It was the study and observation, and subsequent classification of all the universe, as opposed to natural philosophy which was concerned with the dynamics, functioning and workings of the natural world.

Even though the term is used to convey such a wide significance, this does not mean that it signified something different from what it signifies today: natural history today indicates a description of the natural world in its parts, and it classification in categories, based on direct study and observation; one of the various modern definitions of 'natural history' reads: "Natural history is the scientific research of plants and animals in their natural environments. It is concerned with degrees of organization from individual organisms to an entire ecosystem, and emphasizes identification, life history, distribution, abundance, and inter-relationships. It may include an aesthetic component" (Herman 2002: 93?).

Although the natural history expressed in ancient and medieval works a description of nature probably not as 'scientific' as it would today, and also partly

influenced by misunderstandings, superstitions, popular legends and beliefs, the underlying concept and purpose was still that of providing a description of the world.

The case of the bestiary is of course different: as already explained, the text from which the bestiary tradition originated and the bestiaries themselves did not have that descriptive purpose, but rather an explicitly moralistic one, inspired by the spreading of Christianity. As we have also remarked, though, in its development, the bestiary tradition also came to be influenced by other works, such as Isidore's *Etymologiae*, and also by Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, which certainly did not have the same purpose of the *Physiologus*. Moreover, in the late Middle Ages the change of attitude towards nature was reflected also in the bestiaries, which eventually included common animals described only for knowledge's sake, as shown in this paragraph.

It is therefore a bit ungenerous to state that bestiaries cannot be regarded as natural history because they lack the objectivity of method; that is not their original purpose, but it becomes one of their characteristics in the late Middle Ages. They are not natural history writings for us, for what we mean today with 'natural history', but they probably were in part considered as natural history for their consumers, at least from a certain point on.

The shift from moralized interpretation of the universe to encyclopaedic compendium less concerned with religious or moral symbolism is rather evident, and it has most likely been detected by medieval readers as well, since it reflected an ongoing change in people's culture and mentality.

3.4. Science in the Middle Ages

When talking about science in the Middle Ages, we must of course keep in mind that in this case the word 'science' refers to a different concept from that we are familiar with today. What we now call 'science' was in the Middle Ages defined as 'natural history' and 'natural philosophy', and although much more monolithic and less diversified and specialized than modern sciences, it still presented a variegated situation, with numerous sub-disciplines. In the last decades, much effort has been put in rediscovering and revaluing the state of science in the so-called Dark Ages: one scholar in particular, Edward Grant, has thoroughly and brilliantly investigated the subject showing how the basis and premises for the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries were firmly put precisely during the 'dark' Middle Ages.

Although most ancient Greek scientific treatises were unavailable in Europe during the early Middle Ages, and some of them were known only through summaries or references found in available works, the intellectual world studied ancient Latin texts (such as, for example, Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*) and contemporary early medieval texts concerning the natural world, the cosmos, which came to be considered, much under Platonic influence, as a system that functions according to laws established by God and that could be comprehended with the instruments of human reason and Aristotelian logic. God had rendered nature autonomous and self-sufficient, capable of generating causes, and the universe was thus objectified in an ordered entity regulated by laws which the human intellect could investigate and comprehend (Grant 1996: 20-21). But it is not until the 12th century that the study of nature marks a real and significant advance, largely owed to the contribution of the Arabic culture, through which many important scientific

Greek texts were thus made available to Europe: "They began to translate treatises from Arabic and Greek into Latin because, as their prefaces often inform us, they wanted to present the treasures of the East to the West and thus relieve the "poverty of the Latins" (*Latinorum penuria*) in so many fields. Their translations constitute one of the true turning points in the history of Western science and natural philosophy" (Grant 1996: 23). They often also integrated the translations with their own contributions, particularly in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics; and their commentaries were found to be helpful tools in understanding the works of the Ancients, especially those of Aristotle, largely commented by Avicenna and Averroes. These translations became object of study not only in monasteries, the educational and intellectual centers of the Middle Ages, but also in the new-born and rapidly flourishing universities.

Aristotle's thought and works constituted the basis for a new description, understanding and explanation of the universe: he had given the world a strong and coherent order, so that this world appeared less frightening and unpredictable. It was especially his *libri naturales* that constituted the most appreciated guide to know and understand the universe (Grant 2001: 191). His thought had the merit not only to instruct medieval scholars and provide them with a scientific methodology, but it also stimulated them to debate over issues: these debate took the literary form of a peculiar genre, the *questiones*, which was structured as a debate, a dispute, organized in a way which basically constituted the Scholastic method: the presentation of the problem, followed by the presentation of arguments (*rationes principales*) supporting either the positive or the negative thesis concerning the *question*, and the first thesis to be presented was usually the one opposed by the writer in the third part, the *oppositum*, which based on authorities

(most often Aristotle himself) was aimed at confuting the first thesis; finally, the author presented and expounded his opinions. *Sententiae*, *summae*, *compendia* and *tractati* were other privileged genres for scientific speculation. All these works dealing with natural history and philosophy had as their objective that of describe and investigate the structure and working of the universe, including all its creatures and situations (Grant 2001: 200).

In particular, great emphasis was put on direct observation and empiricism, so that opinions, theses, and theories were supported by objective data: such figures as Roger Bacon and Robert Grosseteste were particularly involved in this objective and demonstrable aspect of scientific research and reasoning. The scientific method was likewise important for them, since they recorded the manner in which they investigated and the results obtained.

Most of these scholars were theologians, proving that the scientific study of nature based on logic, empiricism, and on trying to provide rational explanation for natural phenomena was not necessarily in conflict with the Christian doctrine and faith. As R. Numbers explains, late medieval natural historians and philosophers criticized whoever invoked miracles and prodigies to explain certain events and phenomena rather than search and investigate possible natural and rational explanations (Numbers 2003). They did not exclude divine creation and the possibility of divine intervention, but were also convinced of the autonomous nature of the physical world, which, although created by God, functioned by its own natural laws and principles in complete independence.

Scientists in the Middle Ages were less narrow-minded and clouded than we are willing to think, or have been willing to think until very recent times. Grant underlines how even scientists such as Galileo could add little or nothing to what had been said and

explained by medieval thinkers on certain matters (Grant 2001: 254): believing that the Middle Ages gave no contribution whatsoever to the development of modern science would be a mistake in principle, because such an opinion ignores centuries of historical and scientific evidence. Many wrong scientific assumptions and theories were obviously made by medieval scientists, but their contribution is nevertheless not to be underestimated. It is in fact thanks to the vivacious intellectual milieu in which they operated and to the scholarly effort they put in their studies that the way was paved for later discoveries.

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As the previous pages have been attempting to show, contrary to modern Western and Eastern beliefs, the Western European Christian world has known forms of respectful and sustainable attitudes towards the environment from ancient times. In fact, precisely in the Middle Ages there developed a view of the natural world which rediscovered its autonomous value and its independent identity, after a long time where nature was seen only either as a reservoir of destructive and supernatural powers or as the embodiment of atavic human fears, often seasoned by the too zealous interpretations of both pagan and Christian thinkers, who saw either natural environments or creatures as symbols and personifications of evil and of the devil. Thanks to the contribution of the Arabic culture which introduced into Europe both its own tradition and the up to then lost tradition of Hellenic philosophy, and especially natural philosophy, through the fundamental works of Aristotle, Western medieval thought revalued the status of the natural world which not only was seen as autonomous, self-sufficient, ordered and regulated by natural laws, but

also as a system of interrelations and phenomena which could be studied and understood with the simple human tool of reason. Whether this new vision of the world was somehow strictly scientific, as for the Scholastic and the other philosophical schools, or was lived and preached as a spiritual, emotional and religious experience, as for Saint Francis, other monastic orders and religious movements, the divine creation of the world and God's mark on it was never put into question or doubted; and precisely because of this, the focus was put by philosophers and religious people on the concrete reality of the physical world they inhabited. It was also the natural world that natural philosophers were eager to understand, describe, and explain; it was the totality of creation that Saint Francis celebrated in his *Canticle* and which he exhorted believers to love and respect; and even monks, retired from the world in religious contemplation, were involved in the matters of the local reality they lived: the territory was their spiritual shelter, but also their physical and material reality, which they managed for their own subsistence and that of the people around them.

With all the due differences, the emphasis on the autonomous identity and status of the natural world, and the interest and study lavished in understanding and explaining it, in describing and representing it, and in celebrating it, gives an idea of the central role that the idea of nature and the relationship between humanity and the natural world played in the medieval mind of both learned and unlearned people.

Another fundamental aspect, at least for the purpose of this study, concerns the emotional and spiritual aspect of the medieval vision of nature and of humanity's relationship with it. Although autonomous and independent, nature is, as we have seen, a creation of God: this common origin of nature and humanity, and the perceived spiritual

dimension of nature, its vitality and the idea of the world as possessing a soul inspired in people a certain religious awe of and respect for nature. This attitude, together with the idea of the cosmic hierarchy in which each creature and object has its own place and function to concur in creating and keeping balance and harmony, certainly calls to mind the contemporary ecological idea of ecosystem, where all the components of a delimited biological environment share the living space and interact in a sometimes complex web of relations. By connecting with the natural world and its creatures on an emotional level as shown by Saint Francis, and by using its resources with respect and moderation as shown again by the Franciscans and by other monastic orders is a first step toward an sustainable attitude and an ecological vision of the world and of the relationship between humanity and the non-human part of the world. The scientific and scholarly interest shown by medieval philosophers and scientists, while empowering humans through knowledge of a theretofore feared and unknown reality, also brings to the foreground the complex web of interconnections between humanity and the natural world and it brings human and non-human closer, since human fears in the approach to nature subside behind the newly acquired understanding of life.

CHAPTER 4

Chaucer's Representation of Nature

A man's interest in a single bluebird is worth more
than a complete but dry list of the fauna and flora of a town.
Henry David Thoreau

Chaucer's vast and varied production allows a lot of space for the representation of nature and of the relationship between humanity and nature, human and nonhuman. For the present study a selection of his works has been made on the basis of both economical and thematic, narrative and narratological criteria. I have chosen to focus on *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parlement of Foules*, and a small selection of tales from the *Canterbury Tales*, including the General Prologue: the choice is motivated in particular by the narrative perspective from which the issue is represented and by the narrative strategies carried out in these works by Chaucer to make statements about humanity's attitude toward the nonhuman.

The works will be examined following the *fil rouge* of the love/nature relation as a means of exploring humanity's place in the universe, its relationship with the rest of creation, and an implied reflection on humanity's inner conflict between its rational, intellectual part, and its instinctual, physical, natural part. This conflict is particularly well portrayed in the selected texts, which also display a shifting perspective from the general to the particular or vice versa, whenever Chaucer wants to emphasize the relationship between humanity and nature.

The selection has intentionally left out Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, for a series of reasons: there is still some debate as to whether it is a translation or Chaucer's own

work; it is not a fictional work but a scientific and theoretical writing; and most of all, it does not really focus on the relationship between humans and the rest of creation, but on technical data and information about the astrolabe and its use. As Jennifer Goodman has remarked, it would

> complicate our efforts to understand Chaucer's attitude to the natural world. [It focuses] our attention on that dimension of Chaucer's natural philosophy that seems most akin to modern science, with its emphasis on measurement, mathematical calculations, and observation. […it also distracts] us from the underlying principles of Chaucer's thought about the universe (Goodman 1997: 418).

The very existence of this *Treatise* is however significant of Chaucer's deep and sincere interest in all aspects of the universe and of knowledge.

Most of the works analyzed here were written in a period of time stretching from the late 1370's to the middle and late 1380's. That was a rather interesting period for Chaucer's literary career and development: his works started to show influences from traditions other than the French, especially the Italian with Dante and Boccaccio, but he also seems to be open to and receptive of yet other traditions, such as possibly the Spanish, which was the vehicle for the diffusion of certain narrative genres, such as the oriental frame narrative. This very ancient genre has reached Europe through the Arab invaders settled in Spain and Sicily who had, in turn, received it from Persia and India. Chaucer would use this genre in the *Legend of Good Women* and in his masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*.

The works are presented not in chronological order but according to a narratological progression from one narrative strategy to another, thus aiming to show

how Chaucer managed to construct the same idea in various and likewise efficient ways. Before we move on to the analysis of the works though, it would be useful to have a closer look at the tradition of discourses about nature and its literary representation, focusing on the *Roman de la Rose*, especially on Jean de Meun's section, and also on other examples of literary discussions and elaborations of the issue represented by Chaucer's fellow English writers William Langland and John Gower, with particular attention to the motif of the association between love (intended both as a feeling and as an urge for procreation, therefore a physical kind of love) and nature.

We should also always keep in mind that Chaucer's idea of nature, and in general the concept and idea of nature in the Middle Ages, is very different from ours: it is related not only to the natural and physical environment, phenomena and aspects of life, but also to the spiritual, the religious, and has effects even on the political and social spheres. For this reason, the following analysis will not focus solely or primarily on the representations of natural or seemingly natural landscapes, sceneries, or creatures, often rendered through conventional *topoi* such as that of the enclosed garden, or of the typical spring setting; it will also linger on other aspects of the poems, on parts that might seem not to bear any significance for a discussion on nature (such as Troilus' ascent to heaven, or Chaucer's visit to the House of Fame, for example), but which are in fact the sections that better express Chaucer's position.

4.1. The Love-Nature Paradigm:
Chaucer's Models and Other Middle English Representations

As we have seen in *Sir Orfeo*, conventional images of nature have been reversedly used to provide the poem with even more layers of significance, including, as I suggested, that of humanity's relationship with and ideas about nature. There are many other works which make use of nature in their figurative and/or allegorical representation and framework. A briefly above mentioned example, although outside England, is Dante's allegory of the *selva oscura*, but Boccaccio also dedicates some room to the natural world in his works, and both poets exerted a great influence on Chaucer's writing.

The range of literary representation of and reflection upon the natural world and humanity's relationship with it is rather varied, despite some dominant ideas. Chaucer's position in this cultural background is quite peculiar. For the representation of nature, Chaucer's main sources and models are Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae* and the *Roman de la Rose*; other influences are detectable in his works, such as, as we will see, those of the great poets of the Italian Trecento, but we will see that the scientific debate of the age, as a resulting from the scientific speculation of the previous centuries, also stimulated the English poet.

Other English examples which provide representations of humanity's reflection upon its relationship with nature are represented by William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and by John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and the latter, like many of Chaucer's works, follows in the tradition of one of the most influential medieval works and a major source for much of Chaucer's production, the French *Roman de la Rose*.

Chaucer knew the *Roman de la Rose* very well, since it is commonly agreed that he has endeavored in translating it into Middle English as *The Romaunt of the Rose*. There has

in effect been much debate as to the authorship of the English version of the *Roman* and about the authorship of other various works believed to be Chaucer's production, but the *Romaunt* is one of the apocrypha which gathers more consent as to being if not translated (or, better, entirely translated) by Chaucer, at least directly influenced by him or partially translated by him. As F. N. Robinson explains in the introduction to his edition of the text, the reasons to consider it as a byproduct of Chaucer's genius and literary fertility are various and not irrelevant: "The whole work, if not Chaucer's, is conspicuously Chaucerian" (Robinson 1957: 564). In fact, as Robinson also notes, it is Chaucer himself who informs us of his translation work of the *Roman* in the small narrative fiction included in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, where the god of Love accuses Chaucer:

> […]. Thou mayst yt nat denye,
> For in plain text, withouten need of glose,
> Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,
> That is an heresye ayeins my lawe,
> And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe;
> (LGW, ll. 327-321)55.

But even regardless of this authorship discourse, it is beyond doubt that the French poem exerted on Chaucer "a more lasting and more important influence than any other work in the vernacular literature of either France or England" (Robinson 1957: 564), and in particular for the ways in which he depicts nature.

But the *Roman* itself is not entirely original in its representation of nature either, since Jean de Meun draws a lot on Alain de Lille and other authors in his portion of the work. Taking as a model the poems of the Chartrian writers, Jean de Meun reworks the

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55 *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, second edition. Oxford: OUP, 1966 (1957). All quotations from Chaucer are from this edition, hereafter cited in the text.

material inherited mainly from Alain together with ideas and speculations borrowed from contemporary philosophical movements, inspired by the rediscovery of Aristotle's works thanks to the Latin translations made available by *judíos* and Arabs settled in Spain: "he had at his disposal not only the Platonically inspired works of the Chartrian allegorists but also the most current philosophical investigations of the nature of the universe" (Economou 2000: 107).

Following Alain and the Natura tradition, Jean de Meun introduces Natura as a personified goddess busy in her forge creating beings and thus ensuring the continuity of the species. But he does not describe her appearance: "Invoking the inexpressibility topos, Jean refuses to describe Natura, for since she is entirely the work of God, her beauty exceeds his power of expression" (Economou 2000: 105). Descriptions of nature and landscapes (in fact modeled by human action) are dedicated to the two gardens of this allegorical poem. The first garden, the *Jardin de Déduit* (Garden of Diversion), is described in the first part of the *Roman*, the part written by Guillaume de Lorris, a receptacle of vanities, vices, dangers, and illusions, and characterized as a walled garden whose walls are painted on the outside with figures of lecherous people to warn whoever wants to enter the garden: "Comme la laideur des figures peintes, le mur constitue lui aussi un obstacle et une barrière sur le chemin de désir" (Ait Azizou 2009: 43)[56]. Beyond the wall is a typical *locus amoenus*, a garden of paradise and pleasure with flowers, singing birds, and a water-feature as its focal point: the Fountain of Love. Similarly, in the second part of the poem, Genius (another figure mutuated from Alain's poem) describes in his sermon to the Lover the place of reward that awaits those who will follow Natura's laws, that is the

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[56] "Like the obscenity of the figures painted on the wall, the wall itself constitutes an obstacle, a barrier along the path of desire," (my translation).

Garden of Paradise, namely the Good Shepherd's Park, which, unlike the first garden, is a garden of truth and completeness, since, as Economou suggests and notes, its fountain – the Fountain of Life – "reflects the truth and the entire garden" (Economou 2000: 113).

Jean de Meun's choice not to offer us a description of Natura and that of having recourse to a stereotyped representation of nature in its tamed, domesticated aspect of the enclosed garden, originating from a figurative tradition which conferred to it high symbolic value, as it is still retained during the Middle Ages, is an indication of his will to bring the discourse about nature and its correlated theme of love on a rather abstract level.

The Love-Nature association had already been introduced in the allegories of the Chartrian poets through the motif of procreation, but the exploration of this theme reaches in the *Roman* a more complex and also deeper level. The discourse extends, in fact, in Jean's section, to an analysis (and fierce critique) of the most popular typification of love in the Middle Ages, that is, courtly love, and to an ethical and philosophical consideration of the matter, not only in a Christian and teleological perspective, but also in the light of the latest philosophical achievements in the field of the study of the universe.

In this sense, Jean's characterization of Nature as explained by Economou becomes even more significant: "[Jean] concentrates on the human quality of a macrocosmic force that he [Alain] had personified as a woman" (Economou 2000: 121). This Natura naively believes in the *Roman* that Cupid and Venus intend to help Lover pick the Rose and thus help her in her procreative task; it is only Raison (Reason), another allegorical figure, who can clearly see their true intentions. Unlike Alain, who makes his Natura as the giver of reason to man, Jean limits the power of his Natura whose sole sphere of action remains that of perpetuating the act of creation: "In humanizing the august goddess of the twelfth-

century poet and in limiting her moral sphere to a demand for fruitful procreation, Jean produces a strikingly novel figure of Natura" (Economou 2000: 123).

Natura is divested in Jean's representation of any moral aspect or implication, and through the poet's abstract treatment of Natura's function and significance he manages to deliver us what we could define a much more naturalistic image of nature, somehow reduced to the unavoidable cosmic force that both urges to and accomplishes procreation and thus continuity of species and of life. Unlike Alain, he clearly distinguishes between nature and reason, viewing the two as explicating a very different function, and their separation is emphasized by the fact that Natura does not provide man with reason, and Reason becomes an allegorical figure of its own. This new vision of Natura is most likely a result of Jean's assimilation and introduction of the scientific speculations of his time, which had a more objective and rational approach toward the cosmos considering it in its autonomy, although never diminishing God's role in the creation of the universe and the imprinting of the cosmic order. These two aspects – divine act and essence, and objective physical reality – were not irreconcilable for medieval scientists, as they are not for Jean de Meun either, given the mystical tone of the end of the poem.

Nature is thus in the *Roman* not so much a physical realm, a concrete reality, as it is an abstraction, a concentrate of order, powerful forces and laws that no being can escape, but that humans can thwart, misuse, and they can upset and disrupt its balance when they choose not to comply with those laws, but instead follow their interests and desires.

That the debate about nature was an ongoing and unresolved issue is testified in England also by the linguistic situation concerning the definition of 'nature.' There were in fact two Middle English words to signify this comprehensive concept: the word of Anglo-

Saxon origin *kynde* (from OE *gekynde*) and the Latin word *nature*. They were used interchangeably to signify most of nature's semantic connotations, and Chaucer himself used them both. His contemporary William Langland, instead, chose to use in his masterpiece, the *Visio Willelmi de Petro Plowman* (ca. 1360–1387), commonly known as *Piers Plowman*, an allegorical poem in the narrative guise of a dream-vision, the Anglo-Saxon strain of *kynde* to signify nature in the sense of natural world, but also of innate nature, natural instincts. Nature is not the work's or the protagonist's main concern, which is rather of a markedly theological as well as social character: Will, the protagonist, wanders in fact around "in search of the answer to his question 'How can the soul be saved?'" (Asaka 2009: 4), and not inquiring about the meaning or status of nature.

Kynde is in *Piers Plowman* both the Creator and the created world, and it is love (Asaka 2009: 6); but Langland seems to show a lot of interest in the concept of 'law of nature', especially since his allegorical poem is concerned with theological matters, and the law of nature as expressed in *Piers Plowman* "is governed by reason" (Asaka 2009: 9), which is a God-given quality of humanity. Langland's thought is furthermore influenced by the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his doctrine of the four laws, whereby he defines natural law as such:

> Sed omnis creatura rationalis ipsam cognoscit secundum aliquam eius irradiationem, vel maiorem vel minorem. Omnis enim cognitio veritatis est quaedam irradiatio et participatio legis aeternae, quae est veritas incommutabilis […].Veritatem autem omnes aliqualiter cognoscunt, ad minus quantum ad principia communia legis naturalis. In aliis vero quidam plus et quidam minus participant de cognitione veritatis; et secundum hoc etiam plus vel minus cognoscunt legem aeternam. (ST, I-II, q. 91, a. 2).

Thus, since humans can partake in the cosmic order through a proper use of their intellect and of their rational part, and thus know the cosmic order, it is advisable that "the divine order of the natural world should be emulated by humans, considered [as] a technique of governance" (Asaka 2009: 10). Furthermore, Langland indirectly praises the hierarchical nature of medieval society, seen as a reflection of the cosmic hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being: he describes "a society that values the preservation of both the order maintained by the guidance of Reason and Conscience and the order of a stratified society" (Asaka 2010: 4-5). Both aspects are seen as belonging to the law of nature, since they confer order to the world of humans by analogy with the divine order imprinted by God on the cosmos and on nature, "il modello dal quale derivano tutte le leggi" (Di Rocco 2002: 180)[57].

Nature is thus not personified as a goddess or woman in Langland's work, which does not draw on the Chartrian and Natura tradition as in the case of Chaucer's works. For Langland, nature's relevance concerns its theological and ethical aspect with reference to the concept of 'law of nature' or, in Langland's words, 'lawe of kynde.' The only physical aspect of nature touched upon by Langland is that of human natural instincts and needs, that falling within the sphere of the law of nature are in some cases (as in the state of need) not mystified or condemned as sinful. Langland's nature is thus an abstract concept "founded in Reason" (Asaka 2010: 10) more than a physical reality to relate to.

The concept of 'law of nature' is the focus of another great English writer of the fourteenth century, John Gower, who develops it in his *Confessio Amantis* (ca. 1386-1390), which, despite its Latin title, is in fact his first work to be written in the English vernacular probably under the influence of Chaucer's example. The work is organized in three

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[57] "The model from which every law derives", (my translation).

narrative levels: the external matter of the prologue, digressions and epilogue; the frame narrative; and the embedded stories. The frame story draws on the Natura tradition, although Natura does not appear as a character: the protagonist is Amans, or the Lover, a suffering lover who wanders in a forest in May as is typical of knights and medieval lovers in the chivalric tradition, and he laments about his miserable condition of frustrated love. He invokes the winged god of Love, Cupid, and his mother Venus, who, in turn, summons Genius, her priest, to listen to the Lover's confession. This confession constitutes the bulk of the frame story and is interrupted by Genius' telling of stories to instruct Amans on the seven deadly sins by way of practical examples.

The reference to works of the Natura tradition is rather obvious in the frame story, but in Gower's elaboration of this matter Natura does not appear as a personified goddess, or as a character at all. Nature appears as part of the scene. We cannot really extract a definite idea of what nature is for Gower in the *Confessio Amantis*. It is ambiguous in its representation and also in the linguistic choice made to define it, since Gower alternates between *nature* and *kinde*. It is not always clear even if Gower intends the terms *nature* and *kinde* to mean the same thing, although it emerges from Genius' discourses how they both represent natural instincts, and how nature is for him mostly opposed to reason (s. Book II, l. 2594; l. 3053), which is God-given and is what sets humans apart from the rest of creation. The range of nature's influence and action is thus limited to what is physical, bodily. Even so, since nature never speaks in the poem, it never asserts its identity, its role and function in a definite way. Gower chooses not to personify nature, but to include it in his work through the image of the dark forest and through a deeply ambiguous representation.

The fact that Gower does not really give nature a voice and does not personify or make a character of it, but instead surrounds it with ambiguity can be regarded as a sign of his own indecisiveness about it, as White also points out (White 2000: 219). This is, in my opinion, underlined and supported by Gower's frequent use of the expression 'laws of nature' ('*lawes of nature/kinde*'), which is an indication of his concern with the matter, that had important moral, ethical, and therefore also social implications. This indecisiveness, though, is not only Gower's: it characterizes the whole medieval debate on the issue, and Chaucer himself gives different representations expressing different perspectives.

Amans' own confusion about the law of nature symbolizes not only Gower's intentionally ambiguous representation of nature, but the relevance and topicality of the issue of the law of nature, which implied a debate on the double nature of humanity, partaking of both the natural, instinctual world and the rational sphere of its being. During the Middle Ages, such topic was of even greater relevance and interest, because of the pre-eminence of Christian doctrine and ethics.

The idea of nature and natural law evolves in the course of the poem from being a natural instinct, characteristic of animals, as well as humans, to being a higher form of love that can govern instincts through the use of reason, which appears as a character in the end to cure Amans from his folly.

In short, Gower distinguishes between a sensible law of nature and a rational law of nature, as suggested by Emilia Di Rocco (Di Rocco 2002: 203), and humans would (and should) refer to the second since they are endowed with reason, unlike the rest of creation, and they should let reason guide them in the observance of the laws of nature. Gower's concern with regard to nature thus pertains to the relationship between humanity and

nature, especially intended as a world organized and regulated by an order and by laws of divine origin. As a result, his main interest in the issue has ethical and social motivations and a debate on it necessarily concerns ethical and social implications and effects. We can detect in Gower's elaboration of this topic the influence of such thinkers as Saint Thomas Aquinas, according to whom reason allows humans to be part of the divine order infused by God in the cosmos (*ST*, II, q. 92), as observed also by Di Rocco (2002: 180). Gower intends to discuss the atavic issue of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation in a philosophical, and most of all ethical context, which has direct consequences on and correspondences in the actual social and political context of his time. Nature is for him then more a philosophical, ethical, and abstract reality rather than a concrete, physical world, which in fact plays no relevant role in his works.

4.2. The Poet's Words: Chaucer's Own Writing and Re-writing of Nature

Chaucer is perfectly conscious of the complexity and of the inherent conflict in the relationship between man and nature, and his representation of this relationship and its implications reflects the ongoing debate of his time, touching upon diverse aspects and expressing various perspectives. Nevertheless, he also clearly expresses his position and ideas which, while inspired by and drawing upon the preceding tradition, in particular that of Alain de Lille, also show how he distances himself from that tradition, instead embracing the more recent philosophical developments. This concerns in particular the relationship between nature and reason, a dichotomy that is entirely human, and at the basis of the ecological crisis of our time, but also the backbone of an inner human conflict that has very ancient origins. Humans have been torn between their dual nature of

intellectual, and also spiritual, and physical beings for a long time, and this is the conflict that is at the basis of our ecological crisis. For us, the point is how to reconcile a sustainable use of the land and of natural resources which respects the balance and diversity of the environment, and an inevitable strive for technological progress and the consequent use of those same natural resources. For Chaucer and his contemporaries, the issue was more directly influenced by religious and moral implications, also due to the strong influence of Christian religion, but it was also reflected on social and more practical matters and behaviors.

Jean de Meun had already separated nature and reason by way of making reason God-given and not a Nature-given quality. In Alain's *De planctu naturae*, Natura endows man with reason as well; Jean's Natura has a limited power in this sense, and reason is bestowed on man by God, and is a peculiarly human trait. Chaucer on the one hand follows Alain's Natura more closely, in particular as far as its aspect is concerned, and for the emphasis put on the difference of love within marriage and love out of wedlock. On the other side, though, Chaucer follows in the path of Jean in differentiating reason and nature, inspired by the late medieval philosophy based on Aristotle's method, which emphasizes man's use of rationality and intellect in the study and understanding of nature. The difference between nature and human reason, as we will see, is rendered in various ways in the examples provided here: it is inserted in passages that develop ethical themes, or cosmic themes, or social and political themes, or existential themes, depending on the general content of the work in question.

4.2.1. Nature in *Troilus and Criseyde*: A Cosmic Force Close to Humans

Troilus and Criseyde is one of Chaucer's finest works, composed around the mid 1380's, as reference in the work to astronomical phenomena seems to testify (Robinson 1957: 385), and it is a retelling of the tragic story of Troilus and Criseyde. The immediate source for what has been defined by F. N. Robinson as the work in which "Chaucer reached the height of his powers" (1957: 385) was Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (ca. 1337-1339), in turn based on the *Roman de Troie* (ca. 1160-1170) written by Benoît de Ste.-Maure, which enjoyed wide success also thanks to the Latin version of Guido delle Colonne. As it was his custom, Chaucer did not merely translate or adapt his model, but he rewrote and refashioned the story elaborating especially on the psychology of the characters, and introducing such changes as would fit his intent, primarily a change in the narrator's perspective: the real poet, Boccaccio, and the narrator of the *Filostrato* were personally involved in the story they write and tell (the work is in fact likely to have been occasioned by Boccaccio's personal experiences during his Neapolitan stay), whereas the poet-narrator of the Chaucerian poem is an extra-diegetic voice that does not partake in the events if not as an external observer. In Windeatt's words, Boccaccio's "poet's experience both in writing and in loving [is] replaced by that familiar Chaucerian narrator-character, the bookish outsider of love" (Windeatt 1983: 164). This change for a more (seemingly) objective and not directly involved outlook allowed Chaucer to give a more general and universalistic hue and tone: "These shifts in perspective by Chaucer are bold and radical strokes in the whole process by which the significance of Troilus and Criseyde's experience is changed in translation" (Windeatt 1983: 164). In particular, "he enriched the whole narrative with moral and philosophical reflection" (Robinson 1957: 387), mainly

inspired by such authors as Boethius, whose thought deeply influenced the Englishman's mind (and whom Chaucer knew well since he had translated his *De consolatione philosophiae* as *Boece*) and Dante, whose stylistic features and thoughts on love have left a mark in the poem. Another significant change is represented by a minor emphasis on the sensual aspect of the love of the two protagonists: "The English lovers are made to express what they see in their experience together less in terms of individual sexual fulfillment, present though this is, but in more hyperbolically generalized terms, often drawing on religious phrasing and associations" (Windeatt 1983: 169). This does not only have consequences on the psychological construction of the characters, developed more in depth than the Italian model and characterized by a stronger moral awareness, but it also creates the basis for the rather surprising finale of the Chaucerian version which magnifies the work's focus on the themes treated.

Despite much critical disagreement on certain issues concerning the poem, there is general consensus as to the dominant position of fate and destiny in the story. The treatment of this theme is not only influenced by the thought of Boethius, but combines elements originating in other philosophical contexts concerning the relationship between nature and humanity.

As Akiyuki Jimura has rightly pointed out, natural phenomena and elements in the poem reflect the emotions of the characters and "nature controls both the development of the story and the characters' states of mind in this work" (1997: 58). The psychology of the characters, in effect, often finds a correspondence (from our point of view of humans) in the natural descriptions which accompanies the scenes. Thus, for example, the description of spring in the beginning of Book I sets the tone for the subsequent event: the

reawakening of life in April with the return of spring corresponds to the reawakening of

Troilus' heart, which will be revived by the encounter with Criseyde, with whom Troilus

will immediately fall in love

> And so bifel, whan comen was the tyme
> Of Aperil, whan clothed is the mede
> With newe grene, of lusty Veer the pryme,
> And swote smellen floures white and rede
> (*TC*, Book I ll. 155-158).

An even merrier and more advanced description of spring in May in the first stanza

of Book II is foreboding of the positive development of the love affair, which follows a

period of sorrow for the desperate Troilus

> In May, that moder is of monthes glade,
> That fresshe floures, blew and white and rede,
> Ben quike again, that wynter dede made,
> And ful of bawme is fletyng every mede;
> Whan Phebus doth his bryghte bemes sprede,
> Right in the white Bole, […]
> (*TC*, Book II ll. 50-55).

The proemium to Book III has a different natural description and tone altogether:

nature is described as beautiful and joyful, but in a timeless dimension since it refers to the

goddess Venus

> O blisful light, of which the bemes clere
> Adorneth al the thridde heven faire!
> O sonnes lief! […]
> In hevene and helle, in erthe and salte see
> Is felt thi might, if that I wel descerne;
> As man, brid, best, fish, herbe, and grene tree

Thee fele in tymes with vapour eterne.
(*TC*, Book III ll. 1-3, 8-11).

This suspension of time finds its corollary in the love scene between Troilus and Criseyde

What myghte or may the sely larke seye,
Whan that the sperhauk hath it in his foot?
I kan namore, but of thise ilke tweye, –
T o whom this tale sucre be or soot, –
Though that I tarie a yer, somtyme I moot,
After myn auctour, tellen hire gladnesse,
As wel as I have told hire hevynesse
(*TC*, Book III ll. 1191-1197),

and further down

[…] "O swete, as evere mot I gone,
Now be ye kaught, now is ther but we tweyne!"
(*TC*, Book III ll. 1206-1207).

With these words Troilus emphasizes the topical moment with his words: the two lovers have lost any notion of time, feeling as they are alone in the world.

Furthermore, as Jimura also underlines (1997: 62-63), Criseyde and Troilus complain about both night and day: Criseyde laments the too quick passing of the night

O nyght, allas! why nyltow over us hove,
As long as whan Almena lay by Jove?
O blake nyght, […]
Thow doost, allas, to shortly thyn office,
Thow rakle nyght, ther God, maker of kynde,
The, for thyn haste and thyn unkynde vice,
So faste ay to our hemysperie bynde,

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> That nevere more under the ground thow wynde!
> For now, for thow so heist out of Troie,
> Have I forgon thus hastily my joie!"
> (*TC*, Book III ll. 1426-1442),

and Troilus complains about the coming day

> "O cruel day, accusour of the joie
> That nyght and love han stole and faste iwryen,
> Acorsed be thi coming into Troye!
> For every bore hath oon of thi bryghte yen!
> Envyous day, what list the so to spien?
> What hastow lost, why sekestow this place,
> Ther God thi light so quenche, for his grace?
>
> Allas! what have thise loveris the agylt,
> Dispitous day? Thyne be the peyne of helle!
> […]
> What profestow thi light here for to selle?
> Go selle it hem that smale selys grave;
> We wol the nought, us nedeth no day have.
> (*TC*, Book III ll. 1450-1458, 1461-1463).

It is noteworthy how these apostrophes to night and day attribute to the natural phenomena essentially human characteristics and behaviors: the night is accused of being too hasty in performing her work and duty, and of being vicious, malicious ("for thyn haste and thyn unkynde vice", l. 1438); the day is accused by Troilus of being cruel, of being an accuser and an intruder in their private affairs, of being envious, pitiless and spiteful. Troilus and Criseyde thus project their own fears and preoccupations of what other people might think of their affair, if they were discovered, and conscious of the illicitness of the affair itself, in an act of self-defense they accuse the guiltless cycle of night and day, and implicitly any eventual person who might judge them.

But some parallels between nature and the human world are not drawn by analogy as by contrast. The sun and the brightness of day, or even the stars and moon, have in the

poem evident positive connotations, whereas darkness, clouds, wind, and rain are associated with negative situations and emotional statuses. In surprising contrast with this trend, however, Book III presents darkness, night, rain, wind, and storm as the phenomena allowing the meeting of the two lovers. The bad weather and dark evening create the conditions for a secret meeting between Troilus and Criseyde, thoroughly organized by her uncle Pandarus, and with Troilus' knowledge of the plan. The sudden rainstorm forces Criseyde and her retinue of dames and maids to stay over at Pandarus', where they had dinner, so that his secret plan can be realized. Thus nature comes in aid of Pandarus' plan, or, if we want to reverse the perspective, Pandarus finds in nature an ally to carry out his plan.

Through these few examples we can already see how nature in this poem is seen to go hand in hand with human affairs: there is a correspondence between the natural and the human worlds, whether based on analogy or on opposition. They are however strongly interconnected. The perspective, though, is mostly, if not entirely, human: it is in fact typically human to consider rain, storm, cold, darkness as *bad* weather, as negative; from a natural perspective they are qualitatively neutral at the least, if not positive when they are a necessity (like a rainfall in a time of drought).

Despite this clearly anthropocentric view, though, there are a couple of instances where the situation is rather different. Nature does not appear here as a personified goddess, a definite figure; it is instead a pervasive presence, an omnipresent essence. The weather, the alternation of day and night and of the seasons, the grass, flowers, and trees, the animals, the landscape, the sun, stars and moon, they all are natural elements and

phenomena: tangible, visible, sensible, incontrovertible, and unavoidable. This shows the degree of awareness with which Chaucer considered the natural world.

But nature is present in the work also on an abstract level: love itself is identified with nature, and is as unavoidable as the alternation of day and night

> That Love is he that alle thing may bynde,
> For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde
> (*TC*, Book I ll. 237-238).

The idea of the law of nature is taken up again by Chaucer as well, as it was by his contemporaries: the connection between love and nature is a driving principle of life on earth, and that of falling in love and procreate is an unavoidable law of nature for all creatures. Nature is thus close to every being, including humans, and at the same time it is a superior force which makes no distinction in its actions, in enforcing its laws.

And in Book V, as pointed out by Jimura, "the eternal beauty of nature is represented" (1997: 66); in the account of Troilus' ascent to the eighth sphere of heaven after his heroic death in battle, fallen at the hands of Achilles, nature is described in its majesty

> And whan that he was slayn in this manere,
> His lighte goost ful blisfully is went
> Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere,
> In convers letyng everich element;
> And ther he saugh, with ful avysement,
> The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye
> With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie.
> And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
> This litel spot of erthe, that with the se
> Embraced is, […]
> (*TC*, Book V ll. 1807-1816),

"the imagery here is epic, presenting time's relentless course, and although the passage of time portends sorrow, nature maintains its beauty" (Taylor 1969: 252). We are thrown again in a timeless dimension, where the majestic nature of the heavens is not perturbed by human affairs: "Since nature is stable and constant, she keeps her dignified air, regardless of the fate of the characters" (Jimura 1997: 66).

In this way, nature is deeply connected with the theme of fate developed in the poem. And in fact, as Goodman suggests, nature is destiny from the perspective of the Aristotelian natural philosophy: "Our natures draw us to our natural destinations. These "natural places" are our destinies" (Goodman 1997: 420). Troilus and Criseyde are thus not able to oppose themselves to "the pull of their natures, "For no man may fordon the lawe of kynde"(I, 238). Criseyde gravitates naturally to Troilus, pushed by Pandarus but also attracted by his stability" (Goodman 1997: 422). But Chaucer also expresses humanity's possibility to follow nature and one's destiny by using reason and thus making the right choice: this lesson is conveyed in Troilus' decision to stay in Troy to fight for his city rather than follow Criseyde made captive by the Greeks. As a result of this choice he will be rewarded with a flight to the heavens after his death: the flight will allow him to put life in perspective and attain a knowledge difficult to achieve on earth.

By way of its detachment from human life and condition as shown in Book V, and most of all by way of its direct and somehow providential intervention (at least to our minds) in favor of the two lovers in Book III, nature is given a voice, a way to express itself and space for action by Chaucer. It can assert its identity, its existence as a reality not

opposed to but coexisting with the human world, and that functions by its own order and laws which apply to plants, weather, and animals, as well as humans.

Chaucer, however, also develops the motif of the conflict inherent in humanity between nature and human reason or the human need to act rationally, rather than according to human natural instincts. The theme is developed around Troilus' actions and behaviors with regard to his relationship with Criseyde, and to his public status of one of the King's sons. His initial scorn towards love is an attitude that opposes nature in vain, because there are natural laws that even humans cannot avoid; once his futile resistance has been overcome by the inevitable law of natural love, Troilus is carried away by his passionate love for Criseyde, in spite of the illicitness of the affair, given the fact that she is a widow and that they are not married. At the end, when Criseyde is taken to the Greek camp as a prisoner, Troilus rationally chooses not to follow his emotional instinct and go after her, but to remain in the battlefield and fight for his homeland. His rational choice allows him to make a celestial flight after his death, and through this flight he acquires a sort of higher knowledge disclosing the meaning of love and life. In this way, Chaucer has shown how natural instincts should not be followed thoughtlessly, but should not be stubbornly opposed either; in the same way, humans should make a proper use of their reason in discriminating when and how to follow natural instincts and behaviors and when to act according to reason, considering and weighing the consequences of one's actions both for oneself and for the community.

4.2.2. Nature as Poetic Material: *The House of Fame*

The dating of the *House of Fame* is controversial: usually placed among Chaucer's later minor works, it is chronologically framed between 1374 and 1385 by the poet's own reference in the text (line 653) to his daily 'reckonings' ("rekenynges") of the time he worked at the customs (Robinson 1957: 280). The *House of Fame* marks the beginnings of the Italian influence, in particular of Dante's *Commedia*; Robinson argues a rather early composition, within the above-mentioned time frame, based precisely on the extent of the Italian influence on the poem, since the text is "strikingly free from the influence of Boccaccio's long narrative poems, which so pervaded Chaucer's work in the decade of the eighties" (1957: 280), save for the introduction of Venus in Book II, which Boitani traces to the *Teseida* (1983: 122).

The supposed subject of the poem is not nature, but fame, in particular the fame resulting from the composition of literature and poetry; the protagonist is "Geffrey", the poet himself, who in a dream-vision is carried in flight by an eagle up in the heavens. Nature and humanity's relation to it are nevertheless present in the poem: nature does not figure as a personified allegory, and not only in terms of scenery and setting; it is represented by the eagle and most of all by the content of its speech. It is precisely the eagle and its lecture to the poet that will be the focus of this analysis.

Nature is in the *House of Fame* more than simply scenery and background: it is the subject of a long speech held by a rather peculiar being: a huge eagle with feathers of gold that swooped down to grab the disoriented poet who, in his dream, found himself in the middle of a sand desert and next to a glass temple of Venus. After carrying the character Chaucer up high, the eagle spoke to him

> Til at the laste he to me spak
> In mannes vois, and seyde, 'Awak!
> (*HoF*, II, 553-554).

The wondrous bird explains to the bewildered man that it was Jove who had sent it to bring him to a place where he will be able to hear and come to know many stories about love, as a reward for his long and committed dedication to the composition of love poems. During their ascent towards the House of Fame – the destination of their aerial journey – the eagle explains to "Geffrey" how the goddess Fame manages to hear all that is said and all sounds made by every creature. Every word, voice, sound reaches her in her castle located

> Ryght even in myddes of the weye
> Betwixten hevene, erthe, and see
> (*HoF*, II, 714-715)

which, according to J. A. W. Bennett's interpretation, "must therefore be at the extreme edge of the sphere of the air (and well beyond the moon [...])" (1968: 80). By means of this location, Fame is able to hear sounds and voices from all earthly creatures, but also from the "eyrysshe beste" (932), the "citizens" of the heavenly spheres.

Fame can thus perceive sounds and noises from all of creation, all of "kynde"; Bennett argues in fact that " 'Kinde' in that poem [the *Parlement of Foules*] as in this includes not only animate nature but the universe that was created by the knitting of the elements, from stone to star" (1968: 59). In consideration of this, the eagle's discourse has an

interesting bearing to our study. But before we take a closer look at the bird's speech, it is necessary to say something about the speaker itself, that is the eagle.

It is well known that Chaucer is indebted to Dante for this eagle, which finds its model in *Purgatorio IX* and other influences from *Paradiso XIX* (Boitani 1983: 118; Steadman 1960: 153; Bennett 1968), but the eagle has a long and unexceptionable tradition before Dante, as Steadman has thoroughly explained in his short essay (1960), a tradition that identified the eagle as a contemplative symbol. This symbology is certainly well suited for Dante's use of the eagle in the *Commedia* during his celestial journey through the Purgatory and the Paradise of the Christian otherworld. But the Dantean eagle of *Purgatorio IX* does not speak, and this is one of the main differences between the two works, the main one being the very significance of the two flights. Comparing the Chaucerian eagle with the "falcone" of *Paradiso XIX*, though, we can see how both birds in these instances speak with human voice and, as observed by Steadman, both poets present the birds with "an intellectual doubt, which the bird immediately answers with considerable erudition and detail" (1960: 156). Once again, however, the two texts differ in meaning: the English eagle is characterized in a humoristic and comical way, and from its colloquial style we can immediately infer that it will not speak of the high matters of the Dantean bird.

Chaucer thus imitates Dante's use of the eagle symbolic tradition as a figure signifying the flight of thought both in a religious contemplative sense and in a philosophical and more secular sense: "It had also been explained as the intellect, as Philosophy in general, or (more narrowly) as a single branch of philosophy – mathematics" (Steadman 1960: 157). So while Dante poses to his eagle in *Paradiso XIX* the issue of the salvation of the soul for those who are not baptized in the Christian faith, Chaucer more

pragmatically wonders how it is possible that Fame can hear everything. Chaucer's eagle is thus a symbol of a more secular kind than Dante's: it could be seen as representing philosophy, 'science', philosophical knowledge, and in this case perhaps simply natural philosophy, given the content of the eagle's speech.

In order to explain to Chaucer how Fame can hear all sounds and words, the golden eagle starts its lecture with the explanation of how everything in the cosmos is drawn by nature – "kyndely" – to take its own place in the universe; in this way, light things tend to go upwards and heavy things tend to go downwards, and fall. The eagle thus offers its own explanation of the principle of natural place – "kyndely stede" – citing in support of its words the real authorities on the matter in the Middle Ages, that is Plato and most of all Aristotle:

> "Geffrey, thou wost ryght wel this,
> That every kyndely thyng that is,
> Hath a kyndely stede ther he
> May best in hyt conserved be;
> Unto which place every thyng,
> Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng,
> Moveth for to come to,
> Whan that hyt is awey therfro;
> As thus; loo, thou mayst alday se
> That any thing that hevy be,
> As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte,
> And bere hyt never so hye on highte,
> Lat goo thyn hand, hit falleth doun.
> Ryght so seye I by fyr or soun,
> Or smoke, or other thynges lyghte,
> Alwey they seke upward on highte;
> While ech of hem is at his large,
> Lyght thing up, and dounward charge
> And for this cause mayst thou see,
> That every ryver to the see
> Enclyned is to go, by kynde.
> And by these skilles, as I fynde,
> Hath fyssh duellynge in flood and see,
> And trees eke in erthe bee.
> Thus every thing, by thys reson,
> Hath his propre mansyon,
> To which hit seketh to repaire,

Ther as hit shulde not apaire.
Loo, this sentence ys knowen kouth
Of every philosophres mouth,
As Aristotle and daun Platon,
And other clerkys many oon;
(*HoF*, II, 729-760).

As observed by Bennett, there is not much originality here on Chaucer's part, since Beatrice also provided a brief exposition of the principle in *Paradiso I* (Bennett 1968: 76). But Chaucer expands the discourse, providing not only a lengthy theoretical exposition, but also empirical explanation and support. Further down, in fact, the eagle elaborates on the theory's relatedness with Fame and the sounds she can perceive:

I preve hyt thus -- tak hede now –
Be experience; for yf that thou
Throwe on water now a stoon,
Wel wost thou, hyt wol make anoon
A litel roundell as a sercle,
Paraunter brod as a covercle;
And ryght anoon thou shalt see wel,
That whel wol cause another whel,
And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,
Every sercle causynge other,
Wydder than hymselve was;
And thus, fro roundel to compas,
Ech aboute other goynge,
Causeth of othres sterynge,
And multiplyinge ever moo,
Til that hyt be so fer ygoo,
That hyt at bothe brynkes bee.
Although thou mowe hyt not ysee
Above, hyt gooth yet alway under,
Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder.
(*HoF*, II, 787-806).

In corroboration of the explanation it is about to give, the eagle describes another physical phenomenon, that of the circular waves produced by throwing a stone into the water: a series of concentric waves propagates from the point where the stone hits the

water. Similarly, a sound, which is made but of air, will cause a movement in the air and thus propagate in circular air waves as far up as Fame's palace.

The scientific discourse of the eagle is well rooted in the natural philosophy tradition still dominant in Chaucer's time, and essentially based on Aristotle's physics; but we can also see the influence of the advances in medieval science, and in particular that of the British scientists. The interest in the matter expounded by the eagle is also scientific on Chaucer's part, as testified by the mention of the three fundamental tools and stages of the Scholastic method

> Now herkene wel, for-why I wille
> Tellen the a proper skille
> And a worthy demonstracion
> In myn imaginacioun.
> (*HoF*, II, 725-728),

where, according to J. D. North, "proper skille" corresponds to the Latin *ratio*, "demonstracion" is obviously Latin *demonstratio*, that is to say the proof of an argument, and "imaginacioun" would indicate "the faculty of forming an image; it could mean an illustration in a geometrical treatise, and even the unfolding of an argument, or scheme" (North 1988: 14).

The reference to medieval science (or natural philosophy, if you will) is rendered also by the bird's repetition of the expression 'by experience' in line 788 (s. above) and later

> Thou shalt have yet, or hit be eve,
> Of every word of thys sentence
> A preve by experience;
> (*HoF*, II, 876-878).

Direct experience, observation was not only characteristic of Aristotle's method, but it was also the basis of the new and developing medieval science (s. above, Ch. 3, par. 3.5).

As Sheila Delany rightly observed and reminded us, we should not forget that the eagle's speech, however, is to be taken partly seriously and partly ironically, because of the essentially comical characterization of the bird. The speech is not only a scientific lecture, but it is also a parody of the methodological rigidity imposed by science and its exaggeration of this rigidity and method (Delany 1972: 74-75). This critical attitude is conveyed in the text through the eagle's ironic words on the high-sounding style of philosophers and scholars, which using difficult words do not make themselves understood, while in fact it is possible to explain theory "simply, |Withouten any subtiltee" (*HoF*, II, 854-855). And it is also noticeable in the naivety of the eagle which, while it underlines the importance of 'experience', it explains the acoustic theory which allows Fame to hear all sounds by analogy with the circular waves of the water at the throwing of an object into it, and not based on actual experience, observation and objective data.

Nevertheless, despite this critique on the rigid application of scientific methods, Chaucer makes no effort to hide or minimize his profound interest in the natural world: proof of it is the hammering repetition of the words "kynde/kyndely" in the eagle's speech, as to underline how in fact not only Fame is the subject of the poem. Inspired by Dante's poetic example, and prompted by "Dante's interest in the world of nature and man" (Boitani 1983: 118) into searching for new fields of thought and expression, "Chaucer is now prepared to sing not only of love, but also of all aspects of the natural, animal and

human world" (Boitani 1983: 118). After the eagle's lecture on physics, the poet looked down and could see the world with all its elements:

> And y adoun gan loken thoo,
> And beheld feldes and playnes,
> And now hilles, and now mountaynes,
> Now valeyes, and now forestes,
> And now unnethes, grete bestes;
> Now ryveres, now citees,
> Now tounes, and now grete trees,
> Now shippes seyllynge in the see.
> But thus sone in a while he
> Was flowen fro the ground so hye,
> That al the world, as to myn ye,
> No more semed than a prikke;
> Or elles was the air so thikke
> That y ne myghte not discerne.
> (*HoF*, II, 896-909).

Seeing the world from above, in its entirety, and as a small dot in the sky, as at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, puts everything into perspective: in Book III, while at the House of Fame, Chaucer does not ask for fame to the goddess, as all the people gathered there are doing; he sees a small building made of twigs – the Domus Dadaly – and hears sounds coming from it: he goes there because he wants to know what it is about, he wants to learn more, much to the eagle's satisfaction. His intellect pushes the character "Geffrey" to enquire about how sounds produced on earth can reach Fame in the heavenly spheres. In his specific curiosity is implied a typically human curiosity and thirst for knowing about the ways in which nature works, in which the various elements are interconnected by means of natural and physical laws. This knowledge he wants to attain through reason: he wants to understand logically and rationally, and through direct observation and experience; the logical and rational method is represented in the eagle's speech, the

importance of direct observation and experience in Geffrey's will to visit the Domus Dedaly.

A comprehensive view and experience of the world allows Chaucer to make his leap into a further poetic stage: the earth as he has seen it from above while flying carried by the eagle and all "the 'tidings' of natural, animal and human phenomena" (Boitani 1983: 120) which he experienced in the Domus Dadaly, represented the raw material of the poet, who can "explore […] the full range of possibilities offered to poetry by the world of man and nature" (Boitani 1983: 126). The gap between the highness of Dante's arguments in the *Commedia* and Chaucer's argument in the *House of Fame* is thus reduced, as the journey to the House of Fame as a reward for his poetic work was in fact a pretext for a reflection on the relationship between humans and nature explored and expressed through poetry as well as through science, and this implies an encouragement to humanity to use their intellect and reason to observe and understand the natural environment and system.

4.2.3. The Parlement of Foules

With the *Parlement of Foules* Chaucer tests himself once again in the genre of the dream-vision having love as its main subject and he also introduces the motif of the *demande d'amour*. The dating of this poem is a thorny issue over which critics have debated for decades: scholarly efforts lavished in establishing a realistic date have been based for the most part on an allegorical correspondence with actual political marriages or marriage plans occurring in the English court toward the end of the fourteenth century. Others have been trying to find textual references to astronomical events in order to place its composition within a definite time period. While no certainty has been attained on the

issue, there is now however a general consensus on dating the composition of the *Parlement of Foules* in the early 1380's.

The poem is structured on three narrative levels, shifting from the reality of the poet's writing and the relating of the content of the book he is reading to the telling of the poet's (who is both the protagonist and the narrator) own dream ensued by that reading and by his own concern with finding about the meaning and the nature of love. An effective short summary of the text is provided by F. N. Robinson in his edition:

> In the opening stanzas the poet declares himself to be without direct experience of the ways of the God of Love. […] he has learned of the subject from books. […] Just lately he has been reading a most profitable work, the Somnium Scipionis, and he relates at some length how the elder Africanus appeared to Scipio the younger in a dream, and took him up to the heavens, where he showed him the mysteries of future life. […] the poet […] fell asleep and dreamed that Africanus came to him in turn and stood at his bedside. To reward him for the study of "his olde book totorn," the Roman took him to a beautiful park, where he saw the temple of Venus, and to then to a hillside, where all the birds were assembled before the goddess of Nature on Saint Valentine's Day. They had come, in accordance with Nature's ordinance, to choose their mates. And then to fly away. The first choice belonged to the royal tercel eagle, […] Straightaway a second and a third tercel, both of lower rank, disputed the first one's claim, and the three noble suitors pleaded their causes before Nature. Then the issue was debated by the general parliament of the birds. Finally Nature ruled that the choice should rest with the formel eagle herself, and she asked a year's delay before making her decision.
> (Robinson 1957: 309).

According to rhetorical traditions, the poem's *praefatio* expounds in the first stanza the theme that is to be explored, that is Love:

> The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
> Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
> The dredful joye, alwey that slit so yerne;
> Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge
> Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge
> (*PoF*, 1-5).

In the *Parlement of Foules* Chaucer resumes the Natura tradition, in particular the works of Alain de Lille and the *Roman de la Rose*, but he manages to innovate combining it with other sources and influences, such as Dante and Boccaccio, and with the philosophical influence of Boethius, thus showing "a remarkable awareness of European literary tradition" (Economou 2002: 125). Through his refined combination of both explicit and allusive literary references he expresses his own personal view on love, nature, and society.

If the *praefatio* identifies love as the theme of this composition, it is not likewise easy to determine the real significance of the poem, despite much critical attention. Together with the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, it is in fact one of the most studied texts in the analysis of Chaucer's idea and representation of nature. And indeed nature is one of the protagonists of the *Parlement of Foules*.

Nature appears as scenery in the images of the park and garden beyond the gate that bears two Dante-inspired inscriptions – one in gold letters and the other in black letters: the first one invites to a "blysful place" (127) where spring is eternal and it is always May, whereas the other envisions a barren and sterile landscape characterized by sorrow. And Nature appears also as the "noble goddesse Nature" (303), the allegorical figure directly inspired by the goddess Natura of Alain's *De planctu naturae*, as Chaucer himself tells us in line 316.

J. A. W. Bennett observes that there is not much natural philosophy as such in the poem (1965: 8), and truly enough there are not many direct and explicit references and examples to the scientific theories and studies of the time, but Chaucer's representation of nature in the *Parlement of Foules* is more than merely decorative. At the surface level of the

text, it is certainly mostly used in conventional ways to express and symbolize emotions, ideas, or themes. It is represented by an enclosed garden or park, which being a park is in fact, at least in part, a human creation, expression of humanity's organization of natural elements, of the imposition, better, of humanity's idea of order on nature. But this garden of love also presents non-human traits and elements, almost figuring, in this way, a truly natural environment. It is characterized as a paradise garden where trees are always dressed with fresh leaves of a lush green, fresh water streams flow through the meadows, flowers bloom in every color and emanate sweet perfumes, birds gaily sing and deer, squirrels and other animals of "gentil kynde" (197) populate the landscape. It is a place that knows not the passing of time: it is eternal and blissful. Through this description, nature's presence and beauty become almost overwhelming, as it is for the narrator on seeing the park once he has stepped inside the gate:

> For overal, where that I myne eyen caste,
> Were trees clad with leves that ay shal laste,
> Eche in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene
> As emeraude, that joye was to seene.
> […]
> A gardyn saw I, ful of blosmy bowes,
> Upon a ryver, in a grene mede,
> There as swetnesse evermore inow is,
> With floures white, blewe, yelwe, and rede;
> And colde welle-stremes, nothyng dede,
> That swymmen ful of smale fishes lighte,
> With fynnes rede and skales sylver bryghte.
> On every bow the bryddes herde I synge,
> With voys of aungel in here armonye,
> Some besyede hem here bryddes forth to brynge;
> The litel conyes to here pley gonne hye.
> And ferther al aboute I gan aspye
> The dredful ro, the buk, the hert and hynde,
> Squyrels, and bestes smale of gentil kynde.
> Of instruments of strenges in acord
> Herde I so pleye a ravyshyng swetnesse,
> That God, that makere is of al and lord,
> Ne herde nevere better, as I gesse;

> Therwith a wynd, unnethe hit myghte be lesse,
> Made in the leves grene a noyse softe
> Acordaunt to the foules songe alofte.
> Th'air of that place so attempre was
> That nevere was grevaunce of hot ne cold;
> There wex ek every holsom spice and gras,
> No man may there waxe sek ne old;
> Yit was ther joye more a thousandfold
> Then man can telle; ne nevere wolde it nyghte,
> But ay cler day to any manes syghte.
> (*PoF* 172-175, 18.-210).

This dreamlike experience, representing a not very naturalistic landscape, is however also brought out in the text in concrete, tangible, and sensible terms: it is described not only as a spiritual event but as an experience of the body as well, since it is highly sensorial. The poet illustrates the park in terms of sight, sense of smell, hearing, and also touch, when he describes the cold stream water, or when he refers to the lack of heat or coldness, and to the gentle breeze and fresh air. It is thus described both in a spiritual and in a physical sense.

If it is certainly true that the poem is built on contrasts, as argued by Bennett (1965), then the enthusiastic admiration of the poet in this passage is opposed to the strenuous *contemptus mundi* conveyed in the section of the *Dream of Scipio*. The scenery continues to be described, as the poet sees other corners of it, and once again the description's rhetoric is based on contrasts, on oppositions. The narrator spots the figure of Cupid by a well under a tree, and not far from him a brass temple guarded by "Dame Pees" and "Dame Patience," the latter standing on a "hil of sond" (239-243). The image and the symbology of the temple stand in starkest contrast with the preceding idyllic image. The brightness of the eternal spring sun of the park is replaced by a gloomy darkness, and the fresh air of the spring breeze by the hot and humid air due to the sighs of the lovers suffering from love sorrows.

The description of the park is thus the description of an ideal place, a paradisal place, but it is described in all its aspects, from the most "blysful," freshly eternal and eternally fresh and beautiful, to its most destructive and painfully sterile sides. This completeness of vision justifies precisely the presence of the temple within and not outside the park, as part of the greater picture and scope of nature.

The temple is never said by the poet to be Venus' temple, although it is identified as such by the great majority of scholars[58], given the nature of the scenes and figures painted on its walls, the presence of Venus (languidly lying half-naked and half-covered only by a thin lacy cloth) and the temple itself, filled with sorrowful sighs of lovers, and crowded with allegorical figures such as Jealousy, Patience, Promise, and with figures of pagan gods such as Bacchus and the here deified Priapus, all clearly relating to the sphere of love. But the kind of love evoked by the image of the temple will stand, again, in sharp contrast with that suggested in the last section of the poem, the *demande d'amour* placed at the birds' assembly, typical of the refined doctrine of courtly love. The love connected with the temple of Venus is a passionate love which merely pursues the pleasure of the senses, and for this reason it is not only sterile and fruitless, but also destructive.

From this place, which stands for the scenario envisioned by the black inscription on the gate, our narrator is glad to return to the park, and he comforts himself with a walk in its eternally vernal landscape and weather. It is during this refreshing walk that the figure of the goddess Nature appears, standing on a "hil of floures" (302), as opposed to Dame

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[58] One notable exception is represented by Victoria Rothschild (1984), who, elaborating on an interpretation of the poem's structure, which, according to her, would be based on precise astrological principles and calculations, argues that it is not the temple of Venus, but the temple of Mercury. While it is true that in many instances Chaucer showed his profound interest in astronomy and astrology in his works, and that this fact would support Rothschild's suggestion, it is in my opinion irrelevant for the interpretation of the meaning of the temple in the poem's treatment of the theme of love, which in fact remains unvaried in her study as well.

Patience's hill of sand (symbol of sterility), and surrounded by a chirping and cawing multitude of birds. This noisy assembly is gathered around her on Saint Valentine's Day, like every year, to choose their mates. Two are the main aspects of this final scene that need to be explored for the purpose of this study: the role and characterization of the goddess Nature and the significance of the birds' parliament.

It is Nature herself who has ordered the event, like she does every year, and it is only by her order that the assembly will be dissolved until the next year. The sole purpose of this annual gathering is that of ensuring procreation and through it the preservation and continuation of the species, of nature's variety and diversity. This is one of Nature's main functions as *vicaria Dei*, "vicaire of the almighty Lord" (280), as conceived of in the Natura tradition of which the *Parlement of Foules* represents "the last medieval work" (Economou 2002: 125). But Chaucer's representation of the goddess Nature and of her power, role and functions, while faithful to and inspired by its models to the extent that the poet refers his audience to "Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde" (316) for a description of Nature's appearance, it also innovates, introducing new motifs and most of all emphasizing the difference between nature and reason. Chaucer's Nature presides over procreation, ordering all creatures to cooperate in the preservation of the species and of their diversity, as in the original model, but she also presides and moderates over the birds' assembly, whereby every bird is entitled to speak and state its opinion. Moreover, she has the function of ensuring the preservation of the natural hierarchy: so at the beginning of the assembly she reminds the feathered members that the most noble species have the right to choose first, and then all other birds will advance their claims according to rank and species.

It is also in the birds' council that Chaucer introduces some significant innovations. Assemblies of birds were fairly common in medieval French literature (Lewis 1939; Bennett 1965; Asaka 1987), but Chaucer's example presents remarkable differences: he brings in other species of birds than birds of prey in the assembly and most of all he gives voice to them. Despite the possible example provided by the English *The Owl and the Nightingale*, which also features a bird not belonging to the birds of prey group, the introduction of many other bird species seems to be Chaucer's own contribution to this tradition of speaking birds: "The notion of introducing other birds besides eagle and falcon as lively characters with speaking parts seems to be his own" (Bennett 1965: 137).

Over this varied council, Nature acts as moderating figure, establishing order and organization. The chirping multitude is in fact strictly organized in groups according to dietary habits or to habitat: we have the water-fowl, the seed-fowl and the worm-fowl; and set apart from these categories are the "noble" birds, essentially birds of prey such as eagles and falcons, which were traditionally associated with the noble class in medieval courtly and chivalric literature.

Various interpretations have been given about the significance of the birds' parliament and the various voices that speak within it, the different characters, and the division of the birds in a stratified hierarchy. Some have thought the birds to represent the social organization of fourteenth-century England, with eagles and falcons being symbols of the noble class, and the other, lower birds as representatives of the lower classes, of the churl, thus picturing a social conflict (Brewer 1972) that, if we think of the presumed date of composition of the poem, is not a thesis to be ruled out[59]. But the birds' council has also

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[59] Those were in fact years of strong social unrest resulted in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

been taken to be a representation of the English Parliament itself, with the eagles and falcons representing the House of Lords and the other birds representing the House of Commons (Bennett 1965: 140; Brewer 1972). This is also a very reasonable reading, since the council is called parliament by Chaucer himself, who had direct experience of the English political and bureaucratic system, and the avian parliament does enact a debate where various voices, representing different categories, confront their ideas on a certain matter with the aim of settling a situation in a way that would benefit the "comune spede" (507). In fact, as Economou points out, each bird that takes the floor in this parliament speaks for selfish interests (2002: 145). In general, they all show an eagerness to find a solution to the love dispute among the three suitors quickly, so that the choice of the mate can resume and bring to a conclusion of the session. They are impatient to find their mate and comply with Nature's "ordenaunce."

The birds' assembly can thus be seen as representing a cross-section of English society, and particularly of the social and political conflict ensuing between the noble class and the burgesses of the emerging middle-class who were acquiring more influence on the political sphere due to their increasing wealth (Coleman 1983). Rothschild has suggested yet another interpretation of the significance of the birds' parliament: they would symbolize the human world on the one side (eagles and falcons) and the animal world on the other (the rest of the birds); she underlines Nature's different treatment of the eagles and of the other birds, proposing a division between creatures endowed by Nature with "will, reason, and individuality, the right to make an advised choice, to abstain from natural impulses, or to make a permanently binding match [and] another [on which] she imposes her will" (Rothschild 1984: 174). The parliament would thus represent not a cross-

section of human society, but one of natural hierarchy: "the higher class of creature […] is man; and the others […]the lower orders of creature – all creatures, that is, to whom Nature has not given a will of their own" (Rothschild 1984: 174-175). This view is supported also by White, who writes that "Chaucer is working a contrast between humanity with its natural capacity of free choice and the non-human world (the lower birds)" (White 1989: 170). This interpretation is certainly on the right track: the difference in the portraying of the two classes of birds – noble and lower – is quite obvious and overstated. If the relationship ensuing between the tercel eagle and the formel eagle were in fact a "permanently binding match" and the mating of the other birds were instead an annual commitment just to ensure procreation, this view would find even stronger support, also in the light of a lack of moral critique about the love behaviors of the lower birds on Chaucer's part. Since he has clearly shown to support sexual love within the legitimate bond of marriage, he should be critical of the lower birds just 'mating', but he is not. But despite the differences between the two classes, both are subject to certain laws: when Nature expounds the way in which the parliamentary session is going to take place, and the conditions to which they all must be subject, namely that the chosen female agrees to the claim, these instructions concern all birds and not only the eagles. But Rothschild's interpretation has hit the nail on the head of the matter: these birds are not only representative of human society, they are also representative of animal society, which has an existence and identity of its own and which, according to natural laws, is likewise hierarchically structured. After all, or first of all, they are birds; and the presence of gods and of a human in the whole park scene testifies to their different nature, to their animal nature.

Nature thus calls on both humans and animals to participate in the preservation of life, of the species, and most of all of the cosmic order and harmony. The concepts of harmony and order are central to the *Parlement of Foules*, Bennett and Economou pointed it out already some decades ago: we can infer this from the frequency with which the words are used, and the ultimate identification of harmony and order with the "blyss" and the "commune profyt" praised and hoped for by Scipio. Words signifying order, harmony, accord, or related to them, appear as such in the poem: "commune profyt" (47, 75) and "comune spede" (507); "armonye" (63, 191); "acord" (198, 371, 382, 668; v. "acorde" 608; adj. "acordaunt" 203); "statut" (387); "governaunce" (387); "ordinaunce" (390); "ordre" (400); "agree" (409). Harmony is a characteristic of the park as it is of the music of heavenly spheres and of the voices united in the roundel that the birds sing at the end to thank and praise the goddess Nature; melodious harmony is also that produced by the spring breeze flowing among branches and leaves in the park scene before the temple scene. Harmony thus extends from earth to the celestial spheres, identifying the range of Nature's power, which in this poem is not confined to the sublunary world; and her power also regards those who stay at the temple, who decided not to follow Nature's "ordenaunce", and were thus confined to the brass temple in a state of "plyt" rather than bliss. The paradisal park prefigures the "blysful place" where the rightful lovers of the "commune profyt" will go after their carnal death, according to Scipio's explanation; despite the gate, a human artifact, it is a natural landscape, created by Nature, the deputy of God, and shaped through her just order and laws into a natural landscape whose balance is ensured by its hierarchy. In contrast, once again, stands the brass temple, by definition a human artifact, where the "brekers of the lawe" (78) and "likerous folk" (79) will go after death.

As Economou also suggested (2002), the *Dream of Scipio* section then, rather than being a part incoherent with the rest of the poem as it might seem at a first reading, turns out to be of fundamental importance, since it is there that the poet anticipates and foreshadows the overall significance of the poem and of the theme he has chosen to treat. Love, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, is directly related to nature as the force which allows nature's function as *procreatrix* to be carried out and which knits and binds all elements together in cosmic balance and order; nature cannot thus be excluded from a poem that deals with love. In fact, Bennett points out that "all of Chaucer's poems about the state and fate of lovers involve us in cosmology" (1965: 37): it is so in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in the *House of Fame*, and in the *Knight's Tale*. And love has many facets which Chaucer has represented in this work: the reference to courtly love embodied by the three suitors is made to be reconcilable with Nature in the *Parlement of Foules*, since it is portrayed as a form of devotion ensuing a permanent and legitimate union within which to procreate. But Nature accepts other forms of love as well, as long as they comply with her law, so the love of the lower birds which is meant for procreation is not only welcome but encouraged:

> By my statut and thorgh my governaunce,
> Ye come for to cheese – and fle youre wey –
> Youre makes, as I prike yow with plesaunce
> (*PoF*, 387-390).

Sexual love is thus not considered in negative terms, as long as it is not pursued for the mere sake of pleasure, but for the main purpose of procreating. As Hugh White has

observed, the final part of the poem is an attempt to balance the two conflicting sides of the

love issue:

> The Nature scene, I think, proposes a way of reconciling sexual love with the demands of Africanan morality. The harmony between individuals which sexual love promotes can be understood as an aspect of cosmic order expressive of the divine will. So the fulfilling of individual sex drives may be felt to serve a wider purpose also, and thus perhaps may be regarded as serving 'commune profit'. (White 1989: 165).

In exploring the various kinds of love and love's nature and meaning, Chaucer

makes use of the birds seen both as symbols of humanity and of the animal realm itself to

be able to introduce the theme of nature in more concrete terms than he had done in *Troilus*

and Criseyde and in the *House of Fame*. As Lisa Kiser puts it,

> with the *Parliament*'s birds-as-humans, […] Chaucer provides himself with the chance to include the subject of nature in his poem, especially the ways in which nature is constructed and controlled by human intellectual schemes. That is, although the birds in the *Parliament* are always personified and anthropomorphized as humans, […] Chaucer never loses sight of how his poem has implications for our thinking about non-human nature. Indeed, the poem raises the seemingly modern idea that the act of representing nature is determined by social codes (Kiser 2001: 44).

The innate and natural variety and stratification of the avian world must have

seemed particularly apt to the task in Chaucer's view: "It was the all-inclusive pattern, the

sense of glorious richness in diversity produced by the juxtaposing of each genus and

species, that fascinated Chaucer (and many a medieval philosopher) more than the

'inscape', the anatomy, of the separate animal, tree, or flower" (Bennett 1965: 148). He

always represents nature in the poem in collective images: a park with all its elements and

inhabitants, the bird world with all its species, Nature in the cosmic-ranging aspects of her

power, and love, as indissoluble part of nature, in all its forms.

This diversity is portrayed by Chaucer in extremely positive terms, and rendered in

the poem through the tree catalog expounded in the first park scene:

> The byldere ok, and ek the hardy asshe;
> The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;
> The boxtre pipere; holm to whippes lashe;
> The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;
> The shetere ew, the asp for shaftes pleyne;
> The olyve of pes, and eke the dronke vyne,
> The victor palm, the laurer to devyne.
> (PoF, 176-182),

which preludes to the bird catalog of the final scene, where the poet lists all birds present at

the annual assembly.

In her ecocritical study of the *Parlement of Foules* Lisa Kiser views this botanical

catalog as a statement where

> we are told that nature, for the purposes of this poem, should be viewed
> as the raw material for human symbolic systems and, even more
> practically, as the source of technology – not as an entity existing in and
> of itself, with its own laws, purposes, or essence. A little later in the
> poem, there appears a similarly constructed bird catalogue, wherein
> birds are given symbolic attributes based on comparisons between their
> observed natural behavior and the social behavior of humans (Kiser 2001:
> 48).

But in fact, nature appears in the poem also as a personified figure with its own

laws, purposes, and essence: the allegorical figure of the goddess Nature is not only the

rhetorical creation of a long-established literary tradition, but it also embodies nature's

meaning, power and substance. Its medieval personification is not so much a result of an anthropomorphizing process that aims at canceling nature's entity and existence as a cosmic system, but rather as the result of the impossibility or difficulty to express in plain language certain concepts and ideas, hence the resort to metaphor, to allegory, to personification. Kiser further writes about the birds, stating that "each bird [is] assigned an adjective whose meaning falls within the register of human interests or values but that seems inappropriate, on reflection, to the avian community" (2001: 48). This is certainly true since the birds in the poem are, at least partially, intended as allegories of humans, but we should remember to see them also for what they are in the first place, that is birds. In the *Parlement of Foules*, defined by Maureen Quilligan as "a good poem in which to see at work the unallegorical quality of Chaucer's genius" (1981: 165), it would probably be useful to give the text a more literal interpretation as well.

Besides their undoubted allegorical function, in fact, the birds of the *Parlement of Foules* represent by extension the entire natural world that humans deal with in their everyday life, the landscape as well as the creatures which inhabit it, and with which it is unavoidable to compare oneself, or onto which it is natural to project one's own image and features. The idealized natural environment of the park besides representing an idea of paradise, with its timeless dimension and eternal bliss, also has, as already mentioned, a physical essence and a live component: "that natural beauty which he finds in the paradisal park [is] not a still-life beauty, but one of which the creatures who fill earth and air are an animated part" (Bennett 1965: 122).

The creatures that Chaucer has chosen in order to make this place even more animated and really a theatre for human and natural life are representative of the fecundity

of nature and most of all of its variety. They are however also a means by which he actualizes the poem and the debate on love and nature in the context of fourteenth-century everyday life at all levels, including that of human encounters with the nonhuman. It was in fact much easier and much more common at the time to have close contact with animals and natural environments, given the much lower degree and different kind of urbanization; Chaucer chooses to represent nature through "a variegated show of birds that would be familiar in character and colour to every reader since they were part of everyday medieval life. They abound in medieval manuscript borders because they abounded in field and forest, farm-yard and fen" (Bennett 1965: 122). Birds were most likely one of the animal classes with which it was easier to have encounters with: and the constant chirping of birds must have been easily compared with the constant speaking of humans (let us also consider how we speak of birds 'singing', an activity where humans also engage, and which is thus a shared characteristic); this might be one of the reasons why birds were so commonly used as allegories for speaking humans in collective and dialoging contexts.

Chaucer's nature is thus more familiar and homely, and this characteristic is also reflected in the goddess Nature of the poem who occasionally behaves and speaks like an ordinary woman, losing some of her divine and heavenly character when she, for example, tries to silent the noisy crowd of birds who are heatedly discussing the matter at issue

> "Now pes," quod Nature, "I comaunde heer!
> For I have herd al youre opynyoun,
> And in effect yit be we nevere the neer
> (*PoF*, 617-619).

Chaucer therefore takes care not to lose and make his audience lose sight of the fact that while the birds of his parliament symbolize human classes and society, they also symbolize the nonhuman section of the living world. He is well aware of this entity and takes care not to let his audience forget it: not only, as I suggested above, by placing other creatures in context with them (the poet and the humanlike goddess Nature) in order to emphasize the difference, but also by reproducing their own voices through what are essentially onomatopoeias

> The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also
> So cryede, "Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!" hye
> (*PoF*, 498-499).

Lisa Kiser, in fact, suggests that these representations of birds' sounds and voices are Chaucer's suggestion that there is also a nonhuman world both inside and outside the poem and that "this world may be well inaccessible to our understanding" (2001: 49). This more realistic rendering of the birds through a phonetic imitation of their voices could be thus viewed as Chaucer's statement on the existence of another world, the nonhuman world, which is regulated by hierarchy like the human world, which bases its existence and future existence on procreation and on the choice of a mate for the purpose, and which has its own voice, its own language in which to speak and express itself. Our language could be likewise obscure to them as their "kek" and "quek" are to us; the only language intelligible by both realms is the language of nature. Chaucer is conscious of the fact that much of the idea that humans have about nature is entirely a human construct, both in literature and in philosophy, and thus "this poem is trying to say something about […] the kinds of arrogant

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assumptions we humans make every time we attempt to make claims about the nonhuman world around us" (Kiser 2001: 50).

If there is no evident trace of natural philosophy in this poem, we can observe on the other hand a more important fact about the relationship between the human and the nonhuman world. Chaucer manifests a profound interest in understanding and representing all aspects of the visible world, to use Bennett's words, who writes that in the *Parlement of Foules* "there is much more than a trace of that speculative curiosity about the relation of men and women to each other and to the visible world" (1965: 8). Chaucer shows in this poem both the differences and affinities between humanity and the rest of creation, but he is also conscious of the fact that humans have constructed their image of this relationship from their own divided and conflicting essence. In the *Parlement of Foules* Chaucer emphasizes his debt to the Natura tradition and ideas by an explicit recourse to Alain's work, but he also likewise explicitly distances himself from some of his ideas, particularly that concerning nature and reason. In Nature's discourse to the formel at the end of the debate she clearly differentiates herself from reason, which is envisioned as a rather different idea and figure altogether (the capitalization of the word Reason and the use of the verb 'to be' clearly hint at a personified Reason, in the path of Jean's example):

> Thus juge I, Nature, for I may not lye;
> To noon estat I have non other ye.
> But as for counseyl for to chese a make,
> If it were Reson, certes, than wolde I
> Counseyle yow the royal tercel take,
> As seide the tercelet ful skilfully,
> As for the gentilest and most worthy,
> Which I have wroght so wel to my plesaunce;
> That to yow oghte been a suffisaunce.'
> (*PoF*, 629-637);

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Reason is here meant as a faculty that allows individuals to make well-pondered choices and take the best possible decision among a range of possibilities offered by the various situations, or, as in this case, by nature. Reason is thus a typically human tool which permits to discriminate among possibilities and choices and guides humans toward the best or most logical and profitable choice, action or behavior, and not to base these on (or solely on) instinct. The dialectic between the two distinct groups of birds within the parliament – the lower birds and the noble birds – symbolize the conflict of the human soul torn between reason and nature, between following the most logical path and rational solution or following the urge of the instincts and of the passions, in pursuing one's own interest or that of the community.

Besides being concerned with political and social implications, the poem is thus also deeply concerned on more existential, ethical and philosophical issues, with special regard to the idea that humans hold about the natural world and the relationship they entertain with it. In this sense, the level of ecological awareness displayed in the *Parlement of Foules* is certainly outstanding, especially because Chaucer manages to fuse it harmoniously with the other themes developed in the poem, so as to make it not overplaying but at the same time explicit.

4.3 Nature in the *Canterbury Tales*: General Prologue and a Few Selected Tales

The opening lines of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* are perhaps among the most famous of Chaucer's verses; they provide a description of the return of spring for which critics have long tried to establish a precise antecedent, a precise source,

but that, as Rosemond Tuve suggested long ago in her "Spring in Chaucer and Before Him" (1937), and as Rudy Spraycar also underlines, is to be traced to a "broad tradition that originated in Classical times and was common in the Middle Ages" (Spraycar 1980: 142).

The beginning is certainly a beautiful example of poetry, and it is intended to make a lasting impression on the audience, since, as I shall explain below, it contains one of the thematic strains of the collection:

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
> The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
> Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
> Inspired hath in every holt and heath
> The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
> Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne;
> And smale foweles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the nyght with open yë
> (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
> And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
> To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
> And specially, from every shires ende
> Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
> The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
> That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.
> (*CT*, A. 1-19)

The highly rhetorical style of the first ten lines contrasts with the humbler and less poetic eight lines that follow, after the caesura of line 11: the change in style corresponds to a change in subject. The lines 1 to 10 provide a chronological and seasonal setting not only through time indications (such as the reference to the months of March and April), or through astronomical and astrological references (such as the passage into the constellation of Aries), but also through a sense of description of a spatial setting and most

of all of the events occurring in it as a result of the new season. The setting is in fact not described at all: references to plants and animals are only allusive of a typical vernal scenario, of a *locus amoenus*, but the terms in which the event of the return of spring is portrayed are rather vague, abstract, and unfocused. It is not much a description of a definite location, as a portrait of a cyclical situation bound to happen everywhere in a specific time of the year; and it is thus a depiction in highly poetic and allusive style of a physical phenomenon with which most people would be very familiar.

The caesura in line 11 has given origin to a wide discussion over time, with regard to its meaning and its object of reference. The modern conventions tend to put it within brackets and separate it from the following verses through a semicolon, but this is only a modern practice which probably dates to the eighteenth century, while there seems to be no sign of punctuation in the manuscripts (Stanbury 2004: 11). This solution, while on the one hand it seems to underline the obvious and undeniable change of tone, style and, apparently, subject, on the other hand has the effect of separating the two subjects, assigning the action of "nature" as mentioned in line 11 only to the verses that precede it, and not to those that follow it. That is to say, nature would seem to concern only plants and birds and weather, but not the human sphere introduced in line 12.

Nevertheless, as Spraycar rightly points out, the inclusive meaning of the presence of the term "nature" is made rather explicit by Chaucer through the allusive intra-textual reference to a similar phrasing in the *Knight's Tale*:

> The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
> And maketh hym out of his slep to sterte
> (*CT*, A 1043-1044),

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where the parallel between sleepless humans and sleepless birds is obvious (Spraycar 1980: 143), and in both cases induced by the seasonal rebirth of life.

In fact, the connection between the second and the first parts of what Spraycar defines in the title of his article as "the Prologue to the General Prologue", that is to say, lines 1 to 19, and so between the human world and the nonhuman world through the use of the word "nature" is paramount to the significance of these lines. This connection, this relationship, seen in all its diverse aspects, effects and implications, is a fundamental part of the general subject of the work, and it will be treated in likewise different ways and from different perspectives in the various tales told by the various characters.

In the General Prologue we can observe an inversion of rhetorical strategy compared to the previous poems examined. Whereas those texts immediately identify the naturalistic descriptions and metaphors and the anthropomorphization of animals as allegories, in addition to their undoubted literal significance of natural landscapes or creatures, we see here the poet's will to lead his audience to draw a parallel between the initial description of the arrival of spring with the following human action of going on a pilgrimage. He achieves it through a grammatical and syntactic device, pointed out by Spraycar, that consists of a series of *whan*-clauses with a *thanne*-clause at the end: "In this way, even the grammatical pattern of these highly compressed lines contributes to the distinction between man and the rest of nature, because of all earthly creatures only man, by virtue of his reason, can draw a conclusion from a series of premises." (Spraycar 1980: 148). The opposition between humans and nature is thus represented in the General Prologue as well: human beings are different from nature because endowed with reason

in addition to their physical nature. But at the same time Chaucer also underlines the fact that despite this difference, humanity is part of the nature from which it stands out by virtue of its intellect and reason. The pilgrimage is in fact occasioned by the return of spring: human actions would thus be considered to be inspired or spurred by natural events. This phenomenon would be further supported by a similar parallel seen in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where to the vernal setting of the Proem to Book I corresponds a reawakening of Troilus' heart on seeing Criseyde during the spring celebrations in May (s. above, 4.2.1).

The perspective is also reversed: in *Troilus and Criseyde* and in *The House of Fame* we can see the discourse on humanity's position in the cosmic design, and thus in God's originary act of creation, develop from the single and particular human experience to a general, global view, figured by the heavenly flights of the protagonists which give a perspective of humanity and of the earth as being part of a much wider and greater system. In the opening lines of the General Prologue, on the other hand, we observe the image shrink from the cosmic framing of a regenerating nature in the spring season to the particular of human behaviors in a certain time of the year. The lens magnifies even further when the speaking voice identifies itself in line 21 as a real person who, following the vernal rebirth of nature, also feels the urge for a spiritual regeneration and therefore sets out on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury.

The scene thus shifts from a general setting to a strongly individualized one, where a single person, our poet Geoffrey Chaucer himself, is seen in his individuality in a realistic and precise context, easily identifiable by the audience. The picture then widens to include a cross-section of collective social life on a peculiar occasion which however

recurs cyclically once a year. From this perspective, the parallel with the *Parlement of Foules* becomes striking: in the love-vision poem, the goddess Nature summons the birds once a year to find their mates and procreate, thus re-enacting the birth and re-birth of life. In the *Canterbury Tales*, nature does not explicitly appear as a personification, but her agency, and her function and power show themselves precisely in the first lines of the Prologue. The results of her power and doing summon not only plants and birds to resume the cycle of life, but they also affect human activities: people's souls are stirred up by the re-generation occurring in the non-human world; in Spraycar's words, "Chaucer's pilgrims ought similarly to be led to the faithful exercise of pilgrimage as a reasonable conclusion to be drawn from Nature's regeneration in springtime" (Spraycar 1980: 148). In this case, humans are inspired by nature to act reasonably: or better, a natural fact is considered as inspiring a useful and necessary action which is deemed as such by human reason, as the syntax of the verses expresses. Whereas in the *Parlement of Foules*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *House of Fame* from the human events the perspective shifts to visualize not only the earth but the heavenly spheres or, in the case of the *Parlement of Foules*, the paradisal garden of love, in the General Prologue the movement is inversed: from the unavoidable course of natural life we are taken with an expert change of tone and register to the flow of human personal and collective affairs, with the *thanne*-clause to mark the change and difference and to signify and emphasize humanity's difference.

Chaucer expresses the idea that humanity is different from the rest of nature, but that at the same time it is part of the natural world, and this belonging to nature is rendered both by projecting human life on a cosmic scale and by projecting the effect and power of cosmic forces and natural events onto human life. This is the basis on which

Chaucer inserts one of his main intellectual concerns: the place of reason and ethics in the dynamics of relations that humanity has to entertain within its existential and social sphere and in relation to its physical and natural essence. He continues to view the issue through the theme of love, in particular the problem of reconciling the natural and instinctual sex drive with moral and religious doctrines and experience. The issue, as we know, had already been the focus of Jean de Meun in the *Roman de la Rose*: it was central to the medieval intellectual debate on the status of humanity's nature as both spiritual and physical beings, on the conflict between good and evil, virtue and sin. In particular, the reference to the question of sexual love, as nature's tool to allow the fulfillment of its function of constantly creating and replenishing the world with its creatures, is conveyed in the Prologue precisely through line 11: "So priketh hem nature in hir corages" (*CT*, A. 11), where, especially if we consider the verse to refer to both nonhumans and humans, the verb "priketh", as Sarah Stanbury has pointed out, "is one Chaucer uses elsewhere to describe sex or horseback riding. Nature acts on people in their hearts and in their groins, and then they long to go on pilgrimage" (Stanbury 2004: 11). Nature's pricking is thus both spiritual and physical, and the double essence of this natural fact is at the heart of the ethical conflict which Chaucer so often chose to describe in his works.

The opening of the General Prologue represents a development of the way in which Chaucer treats and portrays this theme, and it prepares the audience for much of the way in which it is treated in the *Canterbury Tales*, where the poet's attention is primarily focused on humanity and its relation to every aspect of life, including that of its relationship with the nonhuman. But as he has already showed in the previous works, the representation and development of the theme of love and nature allows him to

investigate and portray other themes and subjects which, at least in the medieval mind, were integral parts of the matter and of the debate.

In the hinted connection between the spring regeneration of nature and the human urge for spiritual regeneration occurring as a result of the natural seasonal process, Chaucer builds through allusion another parallel placing its foundations in line 11: through the wise use of the verb "pryketh" he suggests that people make use of the natural arising of physical and sexual drives for higher purposes, and most of all creating a link between the physical and the spiritual.

Chaucer takes up again the subject in the first tale of Fragment A, the *Knight's Tale*. In this re-elaboration and re-writing of the story narrated by Boccaccio in the *Teseida delle nozze di Emilia*, Chaucer does not imitate or follow the original slavishly, but reduces the length considerably from the twelve books of the Italian source to about 2250 lines, and the focus of the story also changes under his pen, shifting to the love rivalry for Emelye between the two Theban cousins, Palamon and Arcite. In these choices we can detect the poet's intent not to transpose the Italian text in Middle English as it is or translate it. What Chaucer wants to retain is the Classical setting, the mood of the noble class and the solemnity of tone linked to it, all of which are characteristic of the epic genre. In order to be able to compose a text which allows him to use a solemn tone and a high style, necessary for the theme he wants to represent and handle, Chaucer turns to the epic tradition through the example of a text which is itself the rewriting of an epic.

In comparison with the Italian original, in Chaucer's version the love rivalry between the two cousins is immediately sparked off, and through their verbal confrontation emerges the personality of the two lovers. Palamon appeals to their sworn

fraternity oath, which established that they would not have interfered with each other in love matters, and that they would have always helped and supported each other at the cost of their lives; he calls Arcite false and a traitor. Arcite for his part claims the fact that he has been the first to declare his love for Emelye, and he ridicules Palamon reminding him of how he has not even been able to tell whether she was a woman or a goddess, and how his feeling is thus not love but rather 'affeccioun of hoolynesse' (*CT*, A. 1158), that is devotion.

Arcite in his reply remains in the semantic field of respect of and observance to a promise, a contract, and he introduces the motif of law: for him the law of love is the higher law, higher than any other human law, than any decree, and this allows him to break his oath:

> […] 'who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?'
> Love is a grettere lawe, by my pan,
> Than may be yeve to any erthely man;
> And therfore positif lawe and swich decree
> Is broken al day for love in ech degree
> […]
> And therefore, at the kynges court, my brother,
> Ech man for himself, ther is noon other
> (*CT*, A. 1164-1168, 1181-1182).

This scene introduces, in my opinion, the theme and the central message of the tale, which also motivates Chaucer's imitative and rewriting choices. In the *Knight's Tale* the sentimental rivalry of the two cousins carries out a double function. On the one side the love theme is inseparable from an epic text or one that is inspired by epic, and in any case the courtly medieval audience would expert to find it well represented and at the heart of a work that presented itself as such. On the other hand, the rivalry between the two young

lovers and the different way in which they experience and live their sentimental situation is a symbolic representation of a conflict that is already expressed and foreshadowed in Arcite's words, that concern first the ethical and then the political sphere, within which the nobles pursue their own interests, careless of those who will be affected by the consequences of their actions. In this evident interest on Chaucer's part in the influence of the private life on public affairs, we can certainly see an allusion to the English political situation of the last three decades of the 14th century, in which the composition of the tale took place. The king at the time was Richard II, a young boy hurriedly crowned king to prevent the accession to the throne of his powerful uncle, John of Gaunt (Chaucer's friend and patron), and who was therefore incapable of administrating a kingdom, but who was surrounded by counselors who pursued only their interests though, gaining ever more personal power to the detriment of the relationship between the Royal Court and the Parliament.

But from the obvious reference to the current events of his time, Chaucer takes the discourse on a higher and more general level, as testified by the final part of the tale. In this perspective the character of Theseus takes on a fundamental role in the Middle English verse tale. If in the beginning Theseus distinguishes himself more for his tyranny than for his supposed heroic qualities, as he defeats the Amazons and marries their Queen, and as he wipes out Thebes and its inhabitants, on the other hand, he also progressively distances himself from this behavior. The search for justice and the recourse to human piety have replaced the craving for conquest and power, and have turned the Athenian king into the ruling model towards which every ruler should aspire. The figure of Theseus has become so positive for Chaucer that he entrusts him the final sermon: this discourse echoes the

ideas of Boetius. The message conveyed by the words of a now more sympathetic and pitying Theseus is that humans must learn to accept the inevitable and fate, and most of all the cosmic laws and the human limits. Rebellion against this natural order is mere folly: "And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye,/ And rebel is to hym that al may gye" (*CT*, A. 3046-3047). In this perspective, the conflict between Palamon and Arcite, besides representing the tension typical of the man of power between the pursuing of one's own interest and act with mercifulness and justice, is also symbolic of the inner conflict of the human soul. Their love rivalry is a symbolic representation of deeper and universal conflicts.

Chaucer chooses to resort to and follow the epic tradition especially because of the expectations he held for his audience, that is, that they were capable of recognizing those rhetorical forms and narrative motifs typical of the epic genre, and thus of preparing themselves for the tone and kind of subject the tale will deal with. As he tries to ingratiate himself with the noble class by way of using the epic genre to represent its counterpart in a prestigious past, Chaucer seizes the chance to cunningly emphasize its flaws and the negative consequences resulting from their behaviors.

The debate about the conflict between love as nature, an unavoidable and uncontrollable force and fact, and the human striving for order, justice, and ethical behaviors based on rationality is also paralleled and conveyed in the tale by the spatial opposition between urban and wild settings, between the orderly ruled city of Athens and the adjacent forest, reservoir of the king, but wild, a truly natural environment, inhabited by wild animals. The issue of the city/forest opposition as a sustaining motif of the tale is supported by recent studies (Eyler and Sexton 2006; Finnegan 2009). Finnegan explains the

symbolic function of the grove through comparison with the source (Boccaccio's *Teseida*)

and other symbolic uses of the forest in medieval literature, achieving these results:

> Neither Boccaccio's nor Chaucer's grove in its particular setting has the
> negative valence of the Wilderness of Wirral through which Gawain
> passes on his journey to Hautdesert; nor Dante's "selva oscura" of the
> Inferno's opening lines; nor the haunted landscape of Grendel's mere.
> Both groves may be, as Kolve remarks, places "inhabited by animals only,
> where (like Palamon) an escaped prisoner can hide... or where (like
> Arcite) a person exiled from the country can... lament his fate, far from
> human ears." But their relative isolation from Athens and the Duke's
> society makes neither "symbolically appropriate" to the chaotic "passions"
> that drive the cousins to seek each other's death. Nor do these groves
> partake of the qualities Kolve extrapolates from Bartholomaeus
> Anglicanus's discussion of woods and forests: "places... potentially
> perilous, beyond law, antithetical to human values"(Finnegan 2009: 290).

The grove of the *Knight's Tale* would thus be, according to Finnegan, not only a

symbolic representation of some interior and spiritual journey through fears and

difficulties, but also an actual space, a representation of the natural environment

surrounding the city, as was present in every city, or village or castle; the still natural

space as opposed to the urbanized areas. The actuality of this grove is further emphasized

by the great detail with which Chaucer describes its composition before it is razed to

collect wood for Arcite's funeral. As Rebecca M. Douglass points out, "the mourners do

not merely cut down trees to build Arcite's funeral pyre: they cut down "ook, firre, birch,

aspe, alder, holm, popler,/ Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chasteyn, lynde, laurer,/

mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whippeltree" (2921-23)" (Douglass 1998: 157). This natural

landscape is thus acknowledged its entity and identity: it is razed in the tale so that

Theseus could build his amphitheater, only to be found standing again later in the tale,

and subsequently razed again for Arcite's funeral pyre; it is also the theatre for the duel

between the Theban cousins. It is thus invested by violent events and acts, which are not inherent in its own nature though, as Finnegan has also pointed out: "There are, to be sure, violent acts performed in Chaucer's grove (but no Boccaccio's), one of the most brutal being its destruction. But this grove is neither violent in se, nor does it self destruct. The ferocity is imported; it is not a natural growth" (Finnegan 2009: 290).

In this way, Chaucer is calling our attention not only on the consequences of human behaviors on themselves and the social community, but also on the nonhuman world, on the natural environment, which, despite presenting some dangers, is a source for shelter, food, water, and even spiritual retreat. It is not only an inanimate reservoir of wood or other resources, but it also has a life of its own, as testified by its rebirth after the first razing. What seems to be an incongruity in the text, the forest's first razing and its somewhat mysterious reappearance later in the tale, can thus be viewed as a representation of nature's regenerating force in spite of human acts of destruction. And the poet has chosen to show these dynamics in a more concrete and direct way, although within the more general discourse on love: his interest in the concrete and visible aspect of things is never obliterated by philosophical ruminations and discourses. His insistence on the detail of the grove's botanical composition and on the continuous presence of the grove itself is thus a way of calling attention to the land and to humanity's relation to it, calling this into question, as Douglass suggests (1998: 157).

The *Knight's Tale*, one of the finest of the *Canterbury Tales* which, as written above, shares similarities with the other works examined, should have been followed according to the Host's scheme, by the Monk's tale. In the Host's mind, there was most probably the intent of organizing the tales according to a social and cultural hierarchy, since he is so

keen on organization and order about the storytelling game he has invented and devised. After the Knight has told his tale, the innkeeper suggests the monk be next to tell one, but the drunken Miller Robyn intervenes and protests that he has an interesting tale to tell. Despite the host's attempts at reestablishing order, he has to give in to the Miller's irrational insistence and lets him tell his tale.

The apparent contrast between the two pilgrims – the Knight and the Miller – and their tales, could appear as incoherent not only to the innkeeper's mind, but also to the audience's. The touching tale of the Knight, so noble and full of pathos, is quite clearly a sort of romance expressed through recourse to the epic tradition, and it is followed by a rather low genre of tales, an adaptation of the fabliau, which, by definition is rather comic, satiric and scurrile; it often focuses on sex and presents such characters as jealous and cuckold husbands, ignorant peasants and caricatures of clergymen. But it is not fortuitous that Chaucer decides to place the two tales one next to the other. In fact, both tales, albeit in rather different terms, focus on the negative consequences of human action when it does not take reason into account. Actions based on mere impulses, desires, and that do not also refer to the rational part of humanity are destined to produce negative results within the human world, and Chaucer exemplifies it once again through the natural force of love. Following love and its natural forces, drives and instincts without the support of reason inevitably brings to problematic situations. The *Miller's Tale* tells about a rather wealthy carpenter named John who recently married a beautiful and young girl, Alison, and who rents rooms at his house as boarding house for students; at the time of the events, he boards a student of astronomy, Nicholas, who Chaucer ironically describes as an expert in the slight art of seduction

> Of deerne love he koude and of solas;
> And therto he was sleigh and ful privee,
> And lyk a mayden meke for to see.
> (*CT*, A. 3200-3202),

rather than in the subject of his studies. In fact, there is a rather ironical critique of

astronomers themselves in the tale: they are judged as mad by the carpenter, because they

try in vain to know and learn about God's affairs by observing the stars and skies, while

> Men shole nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.
> Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man
> That noght but oonly his bileve kan!
> (*CT*, A. 3454-3455),

so that people should not preoccupy themselves with matters they cannot explain or

understand: implied is the exhortation to occupy oneself of issues more directly accessible,

and of which knowledge can be attained by experience.

Nature serves in the poem as a term of comparison for Alisoun's beauty:

> Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal
> As any wezele hir body gent and small.
> A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk
> A barmcloth as whit as morne milk
> Upon hir lendes, ful of many a gore.
> Whit was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore
> And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute,
> Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute.
> The tapes of hir white voluper
> Were of the same suite of hir coler;
> Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye.
> And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye;
> Ful smale ypulled were hire browes two,
> And tho were bent and blake as any sloo.
> She was ful moore blisful on to see
> Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,
> And softer than the wolle is of a wether.

And by hir girdle heeng a purs of lether,
Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun.
In al this world, to seken up and doun,
There nys no man so wys that koude thenche
So gay a popelote or swich a wenche.
Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe
Than in the Tour the noble yforged newe.
But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
As any swalwe sittynge on a berne.
Thereto she koude skippe and make game,
As any kynde or calf folwynge his dame.
Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heath.
Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt,
Long as a mast and upright as a bolt
A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,
As brood as is the boos of a bokeler.
Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.
She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.
(A. 3233-3270)

but she is in fact described not only through comparisons with wild animals and flowers (animals such as the weasel and flowers typical of spring field blooming), but also in terms of animals, plants, objects and facts relating to farming or to other peculiarly masculine interests (such as the shield in line 3266). Alisoun is thus the figure that conveys the representation of the peasant world:

> In the masterful description of Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, a portrait built through a series of likenesses to things that are primarily animal and agrarian, Chaucer also naturalizes the social world, though in this instance it is a peasant economy rather than elite leisure that is rhetorically conscripted into the order of things (Stanbury 2004: 8).

Alisoun represents a kind of tamed nature, the environmental reality with which the peasants have to deal with in their everyday life, and the last lines of the description suggest that she, as nature, is at the disposition of humans, of men in this instance. As

Stanbury further observes, while at the beginning of the description Alisoun is compared to animals or other things, and she is thus described by analogy, at one point "she is not like, but *is*. She *is* the *prymerole* and the *piggesnye*" (Stanbury 2004: 9). She ceases to be compared to the agrarian world but she becomes the very natural reality which constitutes that world: "She is domesticated nature – in a sense, nature working for human use. Natural analogy in this way elides the human and nonhuman, or even nature and culture, as it constructs Alisoun as a highly material girl whose likeness to nonhuman life are a gift for human pleasure" (Stanbury 2004: 9).

And in fact, both her husband and Nicholas want to possess and enjoy the pleasures deriving from her. John the carpenter, aware of the age difference existing between his young beautiful wife and himself is exceedingly jealous, and Nicholas has no scruples or consideration about the fact the Alisoun is a married woman and the wife of the man at whose house he is boarded. Nicholas wants to have her and he blindly pursues his objective through the use of his knowledge and intellect, as he manages to convince John of the imminent arrival of a biblical flood, so as to distract his attention and thus withdraw with Alisoun for their intimate encounter. Nicholas then does use his intellect, but he does not use it in the appropriate way: if he had thought and acted according to reason he would have desisted from trying to win over a married woman. Instead he misuses his intellect and, in a way, nature itself, since he bases his deception of the carpenter on alleged results obtained by his observation of the sky. The result of all his schemes is that he will have his behind burned with a heated iron by Absalon, another churl infatuated with Alisoun and who is trying to seduce her; Nicholas will thus not manage to enjoy the

intimate company of Alison, despite all his "reasoned" construction of a seemingly perfect plan.

Likewise, John's jealousy has put such a heavy yoke on his young wife that she has no hesitation to throw herself into Nicholas' arms. Despite all the measures he takes to guard his wife (as his light sleep testifies when one night Absalon comes to sing for Alisoun under their window), he cannot prevent his wife's infatuation with Nicholas. In the end, though, when Nicholas' plan miserably fails, he is not the only one to receive even physical damage from this failure: John has his arm broken as the water tank fixed on the roof to escape the flood tide falls to the floor. In addition to this, the whole town, rushed to see what all the noise is about, cannot but imagine how John has been fooled by his wife and the clever student, and he comes to be considered a cuckold as well as a lunatic, when Nicholas and Alisoun convince the crowd that John had organized everything because he believed that a new flood like Noah's flood was coming: insult was thus added to injury.

Through Alisoun's figure a domesticated nature is presented as available for human appropriate use, but human greed prevails over reason and the consequences are very far from expected; nature is not enjoyed and exploited by either of them, and particularly not by John, who is abandoned by his young wife in the end. By way of offering this comical and highly ironical representation of human behaviors, Chaucer shows how these behaviors do not serve humanity's real good and interest, because they are merely or mostly founded on instinct without the mediation of reason. He also invites his audience to reconsider its own individual and collective behavior: "the connection of particular objects from "nature" with a peasant or aristocratic body exposes the seamlessness of our pleasure

– and invites us to question the ease with which nature, people, and class can be conjoined"
(Stanbury 2004: 10).

Curiously, the issue of the human/nonhuman relationship is treated in these tales where the events do not include much nature in terms of scenery, creatures, phenomena; whereas other tales which include an apparent direct reference to the nonhuman, are more focused on themes and subjects related to the nature of humanity and represent them by analogy with the natural world or even by allegory, as in the case of the animal fable told in the *Nun's Priest Tale*, the famous story of Chauntecleer. In these humanity-focused tales, however, we can still find considerations about nature and an ethical attitude toward it that are subtly and discretely suggested in less and seemingly insignificant or incoherent parts.

After a brief introduction on the place where the action is going to take place, that is the house and yard of an old widow, the real and main characters of the tale are presented: Chauntecleer, the cock of the yard, and his seven hens. The yard-fowls are portrayed as speaking among themselves and with other animals (the fox) in human language, and Chauntecleer in particular preoccupies himself with typically human questions, such as the nature of his dream. In a rather ironical and comical passage of meta-fiction, the bird wants to interpret the symbology of his dream as it were an allegory; and is teased by his favorite hen for putting so much weight and thought on the dream. The irony also lies in the fact that, while Chauntecleer's preoccupations are well founded, he still manages to fall in the fox's trap when this approaches him and through cunning talk manages to capture the cock (which will however manage to escape due to the fox's bragging with its fellows). The story of the rooster and his adventure with the fox does not investigate or symbolize the cosmic theme of love and nature, but focuses on other aspects of human nature: the moral

of the tale is in fact that of keeping one's feet on the ground and being less easily frightened or impressionable, especially by dreams and illusions, while at the same listening to and following one's instinct, creating a balance through the use of reason.

The contrast between the animals' behavior and that of the only human present in the story, the fowls' owner, is quite significant. The noisy cackling of the yard-fowl is contrasted by the silence of the old woman, who does not speak a word in the tale and who conducts a very moderate life:

> A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,
> Was whilom dwelling in a narwe cottage,
> Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
> This wydwe, of which I tell yow my tale,
> Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf
> In pacience ladde a ful simple lyf,
> For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
> By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
> She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
> Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
> Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle
> Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
> In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
> Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
> No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
> Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
> Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
> Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
> And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
> The goute lette hire nothing for to daunce,
> N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
> No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
> Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak
> Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
> Seynd bacoun, and sometime an ey or tweye,
> For she was, as it were, a maner deye.
> (*CT*, VII (B^2) 2821-2846).

Through her figure (and significantly a woman), Chaucer suggests a sustainable attitude toward nature and emphasizes its positive aspects of measure and balance precisely by opposing them to the frantic, chaotic and squawking behavior of the animals.

Through these few examples we could see ways in which Chaucer represents nature and the relationship between nature and humanity and develops these themes not in separate sections but interweaving them with other themes and motifs. He is conscious of humanity's difference from the rest of creation and that this difference lies in the fact that humans are provided with reason; he is also conscious, however, of the fact that despite this difference, humanity is a part of nature, subject to its laws and forces, and bound to interact with it. Moreover, he is conscious of the fact that human nature is torn between its natural and its rational sides, and that this conflict is essentially irresolvable in itself; but it often manifests itself in our behaviors toward the natural world that are not always respectful and ultimately positive for nature and for humanity itself. Humans are however provided with reason precisely to be able to discern the difference between a negative and a positive action, a potentially destructive and a potentially sustainable behavior. Through his statements embedded in his poems he exhorts his audience to reconsider this human condition and the resulting behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

Chaucer's Idea of Nature: Can We Talk About an Eco-Chaucer?

"No other situation seems to me more tragic and more offensive for our hearts and intelligence than this humanity co-existing with other living beings with which it cannot communicate. Once Nature had a meaning everyone, in his heart, could perceive. Having lost this meaning, humankind today destroys Nature and condemns itself".
Claude Lévi-Strauss

Chaucer's idea of nature, as it emerges from the examples provided, expresses the variety and the liveliness of the fourteenth-century debate on the universe, on humanity's position in it and on the relationship between reason and nature. As Jennifer Goodman has observed, the fourteenth century was particularly rich in philosophical ideas and systems, with opposing views confronting each other through schools and individual thinkers, but also with a general ongoing debate on these issues, whereby philosophers and intellectuals did not always necessarily stood on one definite side:

> Surrounded by conflicting views, new and traditional, the fourteenth-century thinker […] might well embrace ideas from more than one school of thought. The same thinker might agree with the liberals on free will and with the conservatives on the physics of motion, as I think Chaucer did (Goodman 1997: 413).

Chaucer was an active contributor in this complex debate, where the various systems of thought were confronting themselves with the others, before one or more could emerge as dominant. He had inherited and assimilated ideas about nature from previous traditions, both ancient and medieval: the philosophical system of Boethius; the Natura tradition established by the Chartrian thinkers and poets and later developed by Jean de Meun in the *Roman de la Rose*; the medieval tradition and interpretation of Aristotle;

Dante's philosophical stand and his representation of profound themes in poetry; Boccaccio's portraying of lively and realistic characters and situations. He was also influenced by the scientific milieu of his time, through the empiricist approach of such English thinkers as Grosseteste, Bacon, and Bradwardine. Classical philosophy and literature, early and high medieval philosophy and literature, and medieval science, or natural philosophy, thus found themselves synthetically merged in the thought and writing of one of England's greatest poets, who, before being a poet, was a true man of his time, characterized by a concrete and pragmatic sense of life.

This practical aspect of his personality found its best expression in Chaucer's interest for natural philosophy, which is apparent in all his work, from the poems to the theoretical writings. One reason for this global interest in the universe might well lie also in the essence of the medieval idea of nature itself. In the Middle Ages the concept of nature was far more inclusive than it is even today. Human behaviors and human ethical issues, for example, were considered as belonging to the field of nature, since one of the main meanings of the word "nature" (also expressed through *kynde* in Middle English) was precisely that of innate characteristics, character, inclination, and thus pertained to the field of ethics.

Moreover, since nature was seen as God's deputy and agent, all matters were related to it, from the physical to the spiritual, and nature was at the same time believed to have its own influence on human life, for example through weather, seasons, and most of all through the ever-repeating cycle of life. The most emphasized of nature's functions in the Natura tradition that Chaucer embraced was, in fact, the task of perpetuating life, preserving species, and replenishing the world with new life to compensate death.

Nature's powerful tool to carry out this fundamental task was Love, intended thus also in a physical sense, and not only as an abstract emotional condition and feeling. This double nature of Love, which implicitly reflects the double nature of human beings, was at the heart of the debate about the relationship between humanity and nature. As the late Shinsuke Ando pointed out, "'Love' in accordance with the ideals of Nature cannot be removed from sexuality, but it is described as being utterly incompatible with the uncontrolled passion of sensuality" (Ando 1980: 9). The issue of humanity's helplessness in front of nature's power, which seemed to have been resolved through the Greek philosophical revolution, which had liberated humans from the yoke of the gods' whims, manifested through the natural world, and that thus offered a new idea of nature as a reality which could be understood through the use of reason, presented itself again to the medieval thinker, in a different form and with new implications, but likewise tormenting. Within the medieval Natura tradition, that question now centered on finding the right measure between humanity's response to the call of its physical nature and the Christian doctrine of a spiritual significance and act of the sexual union. The matter was then now loaded with ethical importance and meaning that gave rise to a centuries-long debate: this debate has found wide space in the works of Chaucer, who seemed to have been particularly interested in the matter. He was a Christian orthodox, since he conceived of sex only within the legitimate bond of marriage, but at the same time he was an eager and active thinker and manifested interest in studying all aspects of the issue, also taking into consideration the role of reason and free will and, like his predecessors, of law.

Nature operated through laws intended to keep order and harmony in the cosmos, an order and harmony expressive of God's will; love, and through it procreation, was one

of these laws, possibly the highest of them, as Arcite suggests in the *Knight's Tale*, because it concerned all creatures, including humans, and had not only the function of perpetuating life and defeat death through the plenitude of species, but also that of keeping all elements knitted and bound together. Order and harmony were also to be kept by means of a hierarchical organization of the created world, where human beings occupied the highest place, since they had been created in the image of God Himself, and were deemed superior to the rest of creation because endowed God with reason. Reason is a faculty that should guide humans in the choice of actions and behaviors meant to contribute to the cosmic order, harmony and life, as the goddess Nature herself implies in her discourse to the formel in the *Parlement of Foules*. Reason is thus a much needed tool since humanity has also been granted free will and choice about virtually all matters, and the rational part should therefore serve as a guideline by which to consider one's actions and behaviors at all levels. A balance between the law of nature and the guidance of reason was the ideal model of behavior, as suggested in various of Chaucer's works, including the *Knight's Tale*, where Theseus is portrayed as a model of behavior in the last part, when he has finally opted for a just and at the same time humane, sensitive behavior that is beneficial for the whole community. Love as expression of nature's procreative function was coercive, uncontrollable; only through the use of reason could humans control and channel this powerful natural force within God's plan: "Nature's literal fecundity is, spiritually considered, barren unless it is properly read by man's reason" (Spraycar 1980: 148). This is very clearly expressed by Chaucer both in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, to which this statement by Spraycar refers to, and in the *Parlement of Foules*, where the opposition between the sterility of a merely sensual love and

the fruitfulness of a full love that is both physical and spiritual is expressed in the contrast between Venus' temple and the final Nature scene.

Another feature of nature that stands out clearly from the various nature views examined in this study, from the ancient to the medieval, is nature's animate essence, its being considered as a living whole, and a complex, composite and interconnected whole. Lucretius, Pliny, and Virgil interpreted the world in this way; the Middle Ages continued to develop the idea finally expressed in the metaphor of the Great Chain of Being, or of Love, as Chaucer calls it in *Troilus and Criseyde*: all elements of the universe have their place in it, their function, and concur to keep its balance and order, and all are connected.

Nature is seen as possessing an identity, an essence, an active will and power, and as pervaded by spirituality and divinity; natural elements and objects are often seen as housing a spirit, or a god. It is a means and place by which the gods manifest themselves and forces or phenomena which they govern, as in the ancient Greek and Latin religions; and it is God's own deputy and agent, as in the medieval Natura tradition inspired by both Classical and Christian ideas. Nature is thus a subject, and not an object: humanity relates to it in an *I-thou* relationship, rather than in an *I-it* one. This view inevitably resulted in a personification of nature: its anthropomorphization testifies to the fact that it was believed to be an agent entity, capable of manifesting and expressing itself, and of exerting its power on other entities; it was not only seen as a reservoir of resources, an object for use, consumption, or destruction. And most of all it was considered as bearing a spiritual and divine significance, in an idea very similar to one of the fundamental principles of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, where Ralph Waldo Emerson thought that each individual possesses a spark of divinity in itself, so that each

creature is a microcosm and thus partakes of the same nature of the macrocosm. Ancient ideas about the world-soul accepted and re-elaborated in the Middle Ages thus find a correspondence in more modern times and thinkers, and specifically in a philosophical movement at the basis of the literary genre – Nature Writing – which constituted the original subject of ecocriticism. There is a correspondence between an ancient idea and a modern one, which is also a founding idea of environmentalism.

Chaucer embraces this view and portrays nature as a lively and active force, shaping life at all levels, from the lowest to the highest creatures and not only on earth, the sublunary world, but in the heavens as well, as shown and stated in the *House of Fame* and in the *Parlement of Foules*. Nature's range of action thus reinforces the idea of the interconnectedness of the whole universe, from the earth and its lowest life forms to the celestial spheres up to God Himself, who has appointed Nature for this task and given it its power.

Besides its cosmological and ethical, spiritual essence, nature has for Chaucer also a very concrete and physical dimension. Although he often represents it in spatial terms through recourse to conventional images and modes, such as the enclosed garden of pleasures or love, or the wild forest of internal journey and individual development, Chaucer is also very careful to keep these settings real. The detail with which he describes the grove in the *Knight's Tale* is significant of this search and pursuit of representing a concrete and identifiable reality; and it is not so much the extent of the detail that achieves this effect, as its nature. The description of the grove is not simply a list of trees, but a list of English trees, plants with which people were familiar from their everyday life and activities. The same dynamic is at work in Chaucer's portrait of Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*,

where the girl is described by way of similes and metaphors drawn from the peasant world and from the countryside.

Chaucer's poetry is always firmly rooted in his actual reality: his philosophical ideas and speculations are always brought to show and offer a way, a model, a connection with actual life in actual spaces and societies. For Chaucer and his contemporaries nature is part both of the philosophical reflections and of the real world that is affected by the results of those reflections and considerations. It includes plants, animals, as well as behaviors and actions. The connection between nature and humans is thus deep and ineradicable: speaking of nature, or writing of nature, inevitably leads to speaking or writing of humanity, and in fact, as Ando remarks, "in most cases it is with an interest in human beings that Chaucer refers to Nature" (1980: 7). Nature is a source of inspiration for human actions, as in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, where the rebirth of spring in the natural world, including in human physicality, also results in a desire and need for spiritual rebirth, which has consequences on human society as well. Through natural creatures, events, and phenomena, Chaucer explores and represents human conditions and situations: the dynamics of sound expounded by the eagle in the *House of Fame* lead to a reflection on humanity's place within the cosmos and on the typically human search for knowledge, for explanations, for answers. In *Troilus and Criseyde* and in the *Knight's Tale*, the tragic love stories of the protagonists lead to a consideration of the relationship between the pursuit and fulfillment of the love impulse and the rational choice for the best and more just behavior: it is only when he will rationally choose to perform his duty that Troilus will redeem his illegitimate passion with Criseyde and earn the ascent to his place in Heaven; when Theseus will be moved by human compassion and reason to understand

human sorrows, he will turn into the just and ideal model of sovereign, after ravaging lands and kingdoms and taking Hyppolita as his wife almost by force, in the beginning of the tale. In the *Parlement of Foules* as well, "we have been shown that the desires of an individual can produce action which opposes Nature and Reason" (White 1989: 168); the formel's inability to choose among the three suitors goes both against reason and against nature: against reason because through reason she would be able to know who is the right tercel among the three, and against nature, because her indecision and her request for a one-year deferment of her decision disrupts the natural cycle of life, which, for the year in question, will not be full and complete. This disruption is further emphasized by the final roundel which celebrates Nature's greatness and power, sung by all the lower birds who have chosen their mates, but not by the noble birds, who have been more focused on their own desires than on the cosmic harmony and order.

Through detail and concrete representation of actual life Chaucer allows his audience to identify itself with the stories and identify the stories with its actual life; through the more abstract and metaphorical parts he brings his readers and listeners to ponder and consider their own position in the world and in society. In particular, he uses this technique to expose human misuse and abuse of nature in justifying one's actions, with a special, although not exclusive, reference to the high class world and to the ruling class: "In his representation of nature as an active force shaping a human subject, Chaucer takes a critical eye, inviting our examination of her effects on social institutions and human drives" (Stanbury 2004: 13), and in so doing he shows "how social institutions call on the "natural" to justify their own privileges" (Stanbury 2004: 13).

Nature is thus seen as something that is not separate from humanity; it is not something other. Nature is the place where humans live, the creatures they encounter and deal with, the cyclical succession of the seasons and the changes in weather; and nature is also the cosmic, divine, spiritual as well as physical force that spurs all action: from primary needs to social events. It is therefore also love, the force that creates life and binds together all creatures and elements. Being the creator of life, harmony and order, nature also offers a model for humans to base their life upon. Nature is a model of behavior and order, of harmony and balance, based on laws that interconnect the life of all its creatures, objects and phenomena, and thus render each individual responsible for its actions.

Through his works, Chaucer wants to call his audience's attention precisely on human liability with respect to their actions. He certainly focuses on the aspects that are more peculiarly human, but in such works as the *Parlement of Foules*, the *Knight's Tale*, and the *Miller's Tale* too, Chaucer also takes a critical stand with regard to human attitudes toward nature. In the *Parlement of Foules* it is the effect of typically human individualistic behaviors and attitudes that causes an imperfection and a rupture in nature's life cycle; the obvious reference to England's political and social situation should not obscure Chaucer's likewise clear concern with the fate of the natural world, which, as explained above, is not only included in the poem as scenery or as human allegory, but it is present with its distinct identity, speaking its own language. Similarly, in the *Knight's Tale* Chaucer calls our attention on the grove by representing its continuous literal rise and fall, and through its detailed description which renders the forest real and actual: the grove is really being cut down to gather wood for Arcite's funeral pyre. In the *Miller's Tale*, the cultivated land which constitutes the peasants' world is represented by a young woman, depicted in

utilitarian terms as a source for manly pleasures. The carpenter's failure to keep enjoying these pleasures and to completely and permanently possess his wife, a failure which is originated precisely from his highly possessive attitude, is symptomatic of humanity's impossibility to use nature as its will and possess all that is in and of it, without paying a duty on this and being liable for this behavior and attitude.

Moreover, nature is always depicted, in the works examined, as a live, acting, moving, and speaking entity: either personified as a goddess, or portrayed as a speaking eagle, or a speaking council of birds, or compared with and embodied in a young woman. Its animate nature, its interior and thus spiritual identity is a defining feature of the ancient, of the medieval and of the Chaucerian idea of nature. Chaucer's warnings sound all the more effective because the natural world is perceived as living and is personalized. Once nature will have become merely an object of study, or of use and abuse, or of attention in general, and will be devoided of any mystical, spiritual and religious character, humanity loses every sense of communion with it, seeing nature and itself as two different and separate worlds. Northrop Frye also remarks how it is in this separation that much of the human damage to nature finds its origin:

> Perhaps our religious traditions have encouraged us to regard nature as a limitless field of exploitation; certainly, the growing sense of alienation from nature that accompanied the rise of modern science did (Frye 1982: 74).

What humans in the past centuries, and particularly from the seventeenth century onward, have clamorously failed to recognize is that the effects of their actions on and attitudes toward the natural world will inevitably affect the human community as well,

because all elements of the cosmic web are interconnected, and therefore all actions have consequences and effects on the whole world-system, or at least on the local or particular eco-system. Chaucer, on the other hand, is well aware of this interconnectedness of the natural world: he exhorts his audience to reconsider their role and position in the natural as well as in the human and social world and act accordingly.

Through all this, however, Chaucer also shows to be aware of the inborn conflict of humanity, torn between its peculiarly human characteristics and essence, and its natural, instinctual side. Human beings feel and know that they are part of nature and yet feel different and separated from it, as Erich Fromm has masterfully written:

> Reason, man's blessing, is also his curse; it forces him to cope everlastingly with the task of solving an insoluble dichotomy. Human existence is different in this respect from that of all other organisms; it is in a state of constant disequilibrium. […]
> The emergence of reason has created a dichotomy within man which forces him to strive everlastingly for new solutions. The dynamism of his history is intrinsic to the existence of reason which causes him to develop […]. Having lost paradise, the unity with nature, […] he is impelled to go forward and with everlasting effort to make the unknown known by filling in with answers the blank spaces of his knowledge. (Fromm 1999: 40-41)

This interior conflict is part of the human nature and has existed for thousands of years: it is not likely to be resolved, since it is what characterizes humanity and distinguishes it from the rest of creation. But this wholly human conflict is sometimes reflected by humans in their behaviors toward the natural world, onto which they project the opposition and contrast in ways that are often destructive for nature and ultimately for humanity itself. The problem is internal, but its manifestation is external. A possible solution might reside in humanity's recognition and acceptance of its own double and

somehow conflicting nature, and in a consequent recognition that human beings are also provided with the means to at least partially and temporarily solve the conflict. They should recognize that the tool they need lies precisely in their difference from the natural world, in reason and in knowledge: Chaucer exhorts us to consider both our natural and rational sides, rather than favoring one over the other, and thus achieve an internal balance that will inevitably be reflected in our external behaviors, within society and within the ecosystem earth.

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