CHAPTER 2

THE HOUSE OF FAME: “I WOT MYSELF BEST HOW Y STONDE.”

One of the richest moments in Chaucer’s writing comes in the early dream vision—The House of Fame—where Geffrey, the poet-dreamer, replies, with immediate (and uncharacteristic) irritation, to the question, “Artow come hider to han fame?” (The House of Fame, III, 1872): Have you come to this place (Fame’s house) for fame? Up to this point in the nerve-wracking flight from earth through space, Geffrey has responded as a willing (but not eager) student of the eagle pedagogue. In spite of the quite real fear of falling, he has given careful attention to matters of science—celestial mapping, the physics of sound, motion, space. These scientific reasonings, clearly set out by his earnest guide, comfort him intellectually but do little to ease his fear of falling, because he is faced by the reality of his own weight. In short, Geffrey is as impressed by the information as he is fraught by his imagination and the now shrinking view of the distant spot of earth. This eagle’s eye focuses on what should entertain the poet as he makes his way through the universe to Fame’s house. The dreamer is, after all, eager to find a receptive audience for his poems. Even so, Geffrey is quick to respond to the opportunity to make a case before Fame: he says, “I wot [know] myself best how y stonde” (III, 1878). However, this edgy self-assertion gives way to open space—with no authority for clear answers. In fact, the effect of the poem seems to be a rich irresolution. There is a striking parallel image in the Cloud-author’s chapters 31 and 32. The Cloud-author argues quite seriously that his student is to ignore worldly distractions (even those that are charitable):

thou schal stalworthy step aboven it with a fervent sterying of love, and treed hem down under thi fete. And fonde to cover hem with a thicke
cloude of forgetyng, as thei never had ben don in this liif of thee, ne of other man outhre. (31: 1208–12)

Do that in thee is to lat as thou wist not that thei prees so fast apon thee, bitwix thee and thi God. And fonde to loke as it were over theire schuldrre, seching another thing; the which thing is God, enclosed in a cloude of unkowyng. (32: 1218–21)

The recommendations, images, and cast of minds suggest that those things that the Cloud-teacher recommends for his young student point up remarkable connections among fourteenth-century didactic philosophies.

Geffrey’s response to the question of his desire for fame expresses a radical idea for a man of the fourteenth century in England, an answer seriously wrong in two important ways: (1) in the face of the abiding Anglo-Saxon tradition that fame, based on action, offers immortality and (2) in terms of the doctrine that only God knows the human heart and so knows best how one stands. Skirting either of those principles to avoid some cultural or doctrinal cliché raises important questions about Geffrey’s sense of his place in the culture of the fourteenth century—its recorded past and its anagogical future, its historical realities and its spiritual obligations. Geffrey the dreamer is not asking for recognition for his civic, esthetic, political, or spiritual contribution. Nor is he willing to give up conclusions about himself to any crowd of readers of his poetry, especially future readers. He will not stand still for the authority of public opinion to forward an assessment. Moreover, he apparently will not stand still for spiritual bookkeeping. After all, where does he “stand”? How does he “stand” among the authoritative names carved in ice and in the absence of someone of great auctoritee? What is more, what place does his text take—in time or in the space of the world?

By means of scientific demonstration embedded in a dream, there is the suggestion of a poet’s hope of a new text that draws attention to spatial and temporal incertitude as it provides the place for seeing. Long ago, Wolfgang Clemen argued that the eagle sets out “real factual observation to substantiate castles in the air.”1 On the other hand, Michel de Certeau recasts such an image in his discussion of the “mediating role” of borders and frontiers that offer a “transformation of the void into a plenitude, of the in-between into an established place.”2 In both thinkers—Clemen and de Certeau—the effect is a new place to stand so that we freely consider both here and there. Paul Zumthor appears to point out such possibilities when he says, in 1993, that by the sixteenth century it would be the case that “l’espace aura perdu ses axes, expansion infinite, comme la lumière.”3 We can usefully read lumiere as both light and understanding.