CHAPTER 2

THE BROKEN FLOOD OF THE MILLER’S TALE

C hristianity inherits the poetic imbalance of classical literature’s Old Man, his “natural immortality,” which—to my knowledge—remains peerless in the catalogue of Platonic oxymoron. The ambrosial plunderbund of Olympus merges into a more brooding and self-sacrificial singularity. A harder, incarnate deathlessness joins the contest to describe the aporetic divergence of eternity and perpetuity. Chaucer seems to have adapted without much fuss to this dual genealogy in the history of ideas: “And forthi yif we wollen putten worthi names to thinges and folwen Plato, lat us seyen thanne sothly that God is ‘eterne’, and that the world is ‘perpetuel’” (Boece, V pr. vi, 96–98). From a different vista, the Miller’s Tale magnifies the same debate: Does poetry belong to the current “perpetuel” world where Tithonus exists by sheer tenacity or the delayed “eterne” one where he exists by sheer inevitability?

Here, the attempt to empty the Flood of its religious meaning ignites a war of epistemologies. “Deerne love” and “Goddes pryvetee” are two universes set on a collision course. Human secrets will scale the wall to unseat God’s. The dust settles and the corroded theology of this New Flood opens on to a barren landscape. It is religious metapoetry, “the mighty, and the terrible God”¹ cut loose from its mission and witness. Theology splinters into a chilly science of art rather than doctrine and “the rock of my strength, and my refuge”² gives way to Fame’s “roche of yse.”³ It is one matter for religion to hover as medieval tropology, place Nicholas’s pagan spree in the crosshairs, and stump from our shores that “pride goeth before the destruction.”⁴ It is another for religion to become the world-weary irony that exploits his shortcomings as a poet and mythographer.
The Miller’s Lost Life Story

For both the Miller’s Tale and this book, a few obstacles need clearing before the story begins. The best backdrop for that steady and non-partisan purpose is the Miller’s Prologue and its magisterial torching of so many sacred cows. And this is how an ungrateful Prologue sketches the disembodied “Founder of the Feast”:5 “The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this” (3182). Now, it must be said (and it must be qualified) that this absentee churl, this “impolite and mean spirited person of low birth,”6 is something of an intellectual and is aware of the anagogical7 forces in the poem, but wishes to convert them into a literal experience. The qualification has less to do with what the sentence means than the potential problem of attributing to the Miller a ‘will’ to do anything. I do not mean to reanimate psychology as a guiding light in Chaucerian criticism and locate a web of desire for the ‘Miller- as-character.’ I would however like to describe rhetorical effects and modes of voice and action that move through a prologue and poem his name sponsors. The sentence could read: The collected philosophy of a major species of narrative voice in the Miller’s Tale “resonates ironically with disparate literary and academic discourses,”8 and enacts a strategy to convert anagogical forces into a literal experience. But it would be as David Lawton describes:

The language in which criticism is conducted may unintentionally foster what…we may call the “psychological heresy.” I have not avoided constructions like “the Pardoner sets out” or “the Pardoner says.” It would be too clumsy to keep emphasizing that Chaucer has given us the name of a fictitious narrator and there seems no harm in using it. But we should not mistake the name for the thing itself. When I use such shorthand I am not psychoanalyzing the Pardoner but evaluating the literary content and effect of certain lines attributed to him.9

For the special purposes of this discussion, we will detect rhetorical perspectives whose momentum belongs to the logical defense of mind and body, to buoyant Epicureanisms, and bleaker Physicalisms. Observations of this sort will set in motion philosophical architectures independent of character-motivation. Without reference to his innermost hopes and dreams, a young scholar’s bedding of a married woman by devastation of the Biblical Deluge quite usefully elides with the larger smoke and silence of the poem’s competitive epistemologies. Any interlocutor, “Nicholas” might just be in the market for some “deerne love.” It could be opposite. He could love Alisoun “like a man loves a woman he never touches, only writes to, keeps little photographs of.”10 Neither would be