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A Note on Chaucer's Conception of Nature*

Shinsuke Ando

Nature in mediaeval literature has a conception which is entirely different from what the modern term nature signifies, and its philosophical and ethical significance presents a tremendous subject which needs to be discussed in terms of the history of ideas.⁽¹⁾ Mediaeval Nature forms an extremely complex and varied conception, and the protean ambiguity of the term often escapes clear-cut definition.⁽²⁾ The present paper merely claims to be a preface to the study of Chaucer's doctrine of Nature as a result of an analysis of the term as it appears throughout his works.

* This is the English version, with additions and revisions, of the Japanese paper contributed to *The Geibun-Kenkyu, Studies in Honour of Professor Junzaburo Nishiwaki*, Keio University, Tokyo, 1963.

- (1) Cf. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 1961; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, 1945.
- (2) The problems of Nature in classical and mediaeval literature have been much discussed by various scholars. Cf. E. C. Knowlton, "The Goddess Nature in Early Periods," *JEGP*, XIX, 224 ff.; "Nature in Old French," *MP*, XX, 309 ff.; "Nature in Early Italian," *MLN*, XXXVI, 329 ff.; "Nature in Early German," *JEGP*, XXIV, 409 ff.; "Nature in Middle English," *JEGP*, XX, 186 ff.; E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (tr. by W. R. Trask), 1952; C. S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 1936; *Studies in Words*, 1960; *The Discarded Image*, 1964.

The mediaeval doctrine of Nature can be in the main described as the development of Platonic principles.⁽¹⁾ Chalcidius's translation of the *Timaeus* exercised the greatest influence on the establishment of the theories of Nature in the Middle Ages. It cannot be ascertained whether Chaucer read the *Timaeus* in Chalcidius's translation or not. But Boethius's view of Nature was undoubtedly influenced by the *Timaeus*; in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* he often refers to the *Timaeus*, and epitomizes the first part of it in Bk III, verse ix. It seems quite probable that Chaucer, the translator of Boethius, was at least acquainted with the essence of Plato's doctrine of Nature, and his theories of cosmogony, through *De Consolatione*. Moreover, he must have had a chance to learn the principles of the *Timaeus* through Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman de la Rose*.

The historical development of the mediaeval doctrines of Nature, primarily based on the *Timaeus*, can be roughly understood as the process of their assimilation with Christian teachings: it is not difficult to see a fine amalgamation of Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine in the mediaeval conception of Nature.

In the twelfth century the most comprehensive treatises on Nature were written by Bernardus Silvestris, and Alanus de Insulis, and they came to exert a great influence on mediaeval literature as well as philosophy. Bernardus's *De Mundi Universitate*, and Alanus's two major works, *De Planctu Naturae* and *Anticlaudianus*, were not only important

As for the subject of Nature in Chaucer's poetry, particularly in *The Parlement of Foules*, see the illuminating discussion by J. A. W. Bennett: *The Parlement of Foules, An Interpretation*, 1957. As for the problems in Shakespeare, see E. C. Knowlton, "Nature and Shakespeare," *FMLA*, LI, 719 ff.: T. Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, 1949: J.F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, 1949.

(1) Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 88.

as the representative expositions of Neoplatonic principles of Nature, but they made a great literary appeal because of their established use of personified Nature as a goddess. Chaucer's own works clearly show that he read both Bernardus and Alanus. As Skeat suggests, Bernardus's *Megacosmos* certainly has a bearing on *The Man of Law's Tale*, ll. 197—203. As for Alanus, it is almost unnecessary to mention the immediate relationship of *De Planctu Naturae* and *The Parlement of Foules*. In *The Hous of Fame*, *The Physician's Tale*, and *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* we can also find the lines for which Chaucer seems to have relied on Alanus.

Judging from Chaucer's direct and indirect relation to his predecessors, from Plato to Jean de Meun, his doctrine of Nature can be well imagined to have been firmly grounded on the orthodox pattern of mediaeval Nature.

In *De Planctu Naturae* the author Alanus addresses the following lines to Goddess Natura:

O Dei proles, genetrix rerum,
Vinclum mundi, stabilisque nexus,
Gemma terrenis, speculum caducis,
Lucifer orbis,
Pax, amor, virtus, regimen, potestas,
Ordo, lex, finis, via, dux, origo,
Vita, lux, splendor, species, figura,
Regula mundi.

(Migne, *Patrologia*, CCX, p. 447, A.)

These lines, with an apparent tincture of Platonic and Boethian thought, can be described as the most illuminating expression of the

essential image of mediaeval Nature. They not only depict the function and role of Nature as a procreator of things and a ruler of the world, but also illustrate Nature's ethical significance as the law and order of the universe. Nature was created by God ('Dei proles'). Nature and God, therefore, are not on equal terms as they were in Ovid, who says: 'Hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit' (*Metamorphoses*, Bk. I, 1. 20). Meanwhile Nature is the creator of things ('genetrix rerum'). As the deputy of Almighty God — in Alanus Nature describes herself as *dei vicaria* — Nature is occupied in creating things in order to fulfil the design of God. She links the elements together with a firm bondage, and rules the world by law. And she is identified also with 'love' and with 'life'. These lines of Alanus may be enough to show the diversity of meaning of the term Nature, and Chaucer's Nature will be proved to share all the aspects of Alanus's *Natura*.

II

In Boethius, Bernardus, Alanus, and Jean de Meun, Nature appears as a personified figure. In Chaucer as well there are a great many examples of personified Nature. Bennett remarks that 'Chaucer was probably the first English poet to use "Nature" in a clearly personified sense, following the examples of Alain and the *Roman de la Rose*'.⁽¹⁾ The most typical example in Chaucer is afforded by the *Parlement of Foules*.

It is in this *Parlement* that Chaucer's relation to Alanus is most clearly shown.

And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde,

(1) J. A. W. Bennett, *The Parlement of Foules*, p. 205.

Devyseth Nature of aray and face,
In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde.

(ll. 311—313)

Thus Chaucer mentions the very names of Alanus and his book. Here 'Nature' is identified with 'Kynde'. 'In using "Kynde" for *natura*,' says Bennett, 'Chaucer is following the example set by the Alfredian translator of Boethius, who regularly renders the Latin word in all its senses including "kind, species of a thing," as "gecynd"'.⁽¹⁾ In most of the cases the choice of one or other of these two words seems to depend on the rhyme or the rhythm of the line. But when we examine the appearances of 'Nature' and 'Kynde' in Chaucer, we find that they often appear alternately within a few lines. This may indicate the poet's attempt to avoid the monotonous repetition of the same word.

Goddess Nature entitled 'queen' (l. 298) or 'empress' (l. 319) appears first of all as the original creator of the universe.

Nature, the vicaire of the almyghty Lord,
That hot, cold, hevy, lyght, moyst, and dreye
Hath knyht by evene nombres acord.

(ll. 379—381)

The idea of Nature as the vicar of Almighty God is much in common with Alanus and Jean de Meun. Chaucer again presents the idea in *The Physician's Tale* (l. 20) describing Nature as the 'vicaire general'. Surely it was in the capacity of God's deputy that Nature created the world, turning chaos into order. Nature is, therefore, of a lower order

(1) J. A. W. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

than God — or sometimes Jupiter. This relation between God and Nature can be seen repeatedly manifested in Chaucer:

“O God!” thoughte I, “that madest Kynde,

(*The House of Fame*, Bk. II. 1. 584)

“But O, thou Jove, O auctor of Nature,

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, Bk. III. 1. 1016)

—God, maker of Kynde,

(*ibid.* 1. 1437)

“So wolde God, that auctour is of kynde,

(*ibid.* 1. 1765)

—Maker of kynde.

(*The Second Nun's Prologue*. 1. 41)

This kind of phrase illustrating the relation of God and Nature appears so frequently that it seems to have been a sort of *cliché*, or a conventional epithet for God. In *Complaynt D'Amour* God and Nature are linked apparently on equal terms: ‘God or Nature sore wolde I blame’ (1. 58). But this could hardly be judged to be an example of an unorthodox element in Chaucer. In Langland ‘kynd’ is sometimes treated as God. E. C. Knowlton, in his discussion of Nature in Middle English, remarks that *Piers the Plowman* was the only example of a work in which God and Nature were identified as the same thing.⁽¹⁾

In any case there is nothing ambiguous about the relation between God and Nature in Chaucer. In the *Parlement* Nature is primarily concerned with creation, as the lines quoted above indicate, and appears as the original creator of the universe knitting the elements together.

(1) ‘Nature in Middle English’, *JEGP*, XX.

In *The Physician's Tale*, however, Nature is described exclusively as the creator of living things, especially of human beings.

For Nature hath with sovereyn diligence
Yformed hire in so greet excellence,
As though she wolde seyn, ‘Lo! I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature,
Whan that me list; who can me countrefete?
Pigmalion noght, though he ay forge and bete,
Or grave, or peynte; for I dar wel seyn,
Apelles, Zanzis, sholde werche in veyn
Outher to grave, or peynte, or forge, or bete,
If they presumed me to countrefete.
For He that is the formere principal
Hath maked me his vicaire general,
To forme and peynten erthely creaturis
Right as me list, and ech thyng in my cure is
Under the moone, that may wane and waxe;
And for my werke right no thyng wol I axe;
My lord and I been ful of oon accorde.
I made hire to the worshipe of my lord;
So do I alle myne othere creatures,
What colour that they han, or what figures.”
Thus semeth me that Nature wolde seye.

 This mayde of age twelve yeer was and tweye,
In which that Nature hadde swich delit.

(ll. 9—31.)

This is the passage which affords the most enlightening picture of Chaucerian Nature. Even this single passage seems to give enough

particulars with which one can form a vivid image of Nature. Nature, here, is the maker of the living creatures on earth — ‘under the moone’ in Chaucer’s words. Except for the example in the *Parlement*, in which Nature appears as the original creator of the universe, Chaucer’s Nature is always concerned with living things, especially human beings. And in a great many examples Nature is referred to as the creator of beautiful women. This is surely one of the characteristic features of Chaucer’s Nature.

Nature was originally a subject for philosophy, and had been treated in terms of cosmogonical theories, but when its function as a creator was clarified Nature came to be closely linked with the field of literature. As Bennett remarks, ‘once Nature had been identified with the divine work of creation, and Alain had described her as creating the perfect body, the poets were quick to give her the special role of the creator of beautiful women.’⁽¹⁾

The above quoted passage from Chaucer depicting the beauty of Virginia is probably the representative example which shows this particular role of mediaeval Nature. A woman can be considered perfectly beautiful when her beauty is excellent enough to please the eyes of Nature. Even the works of distinguished artists cannot be a match for Nature’s creation. Here again is shown the traditional opposition of ‘art’ and ‘nature’ as discussed in Horace’s *Ars Poetica*.⁽²⁾

Chaucer provides so many examples in which Nature is referred to for the glorification of the female beauty that it seems to have been one of the literary conventions of the Middle Ages. One more example only will suffice:

(1) J. A. W. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

(2) As for the discussion on ‘art’ and ‘nature’, see A. M. F. Gunn, *The Mirror of Love*, pp. 261 ff.

Yong was this quene, of twenty yer of elde,
Of mydel stature, and of such fairenesse,
That Nature had a joye her to behelde.

(*Anelida and Arcite*, ll. 78—80)

On the other hand, Nature appears as the creator of handsome men in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Bk. V, ll. 827 ff., and *The Complaynt of Venus*, l. 14. Examples of this kind are not many, but this as well illustrates the same aspect of Nature's role.

All the women or men of perfect beauty created by Nature are earthly creatures living 'under the moon'. Jean de Meun's Nature is also concerned with the world:

Desouz le cercle de la lune.

(l. 16001)

Then the 'aungelik' and 'inmortel' beauty of Criseyde as depicted in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Bk. I, ll. 99 ff.) is described as the beauty that no human beings are allowed to possess. Criseyde is indeed a woman living in this world, but her beauty cannot be imagined to be of this world, as the phrase 'in scornynge of Nature' suggests. Thus Chaucer portrayed the celestial beauty of Criseyde in terms of Nature. Queen Alceste, in *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 240 ff., also possesses the heavenly beauty that cannot be found in this world. Chaucer says:

Half hire beaute shulde men nat fynde
In creature that formed ys by kynde.

(Text F, ll. 245—6)

Without very much exaggeration, the beauty of Nature in Chaucer may be described as the beauty of man. In terms of Nature Chaucer scarcely mentions the 'beauty of landscape' which 'natural beauty' signifies in the modern sense of the term. In most cases it is with a certain interest in human beings that Chaucer refers to Nature.

It is not that Chaucer's Nature always appears as the creator of a perfect and beautiful human being. But the reason for the repeated appearance of this kind of example can be attributed fundamentally to the orthodox idea that Nature is the symbol of order, beauty and perfection, and everything vicious and wicked is against Nature.

III

The world (or '*natura naturata*') created by Nature, the vicegerent of Almighty God, is thought to be the reflection of the will of God, and it is essentially recognised as the symbol of divine order. God is always believed to exist behind Nature as the 'primary cause'. Thus God and Nature were inseparably linked in the orthodox doctrine of Nature in the Middle Ages. Nature was the manifestation of Reason and Law to which human beings had to adjust themselves. The modern idea of Nature has discarded this normative and ethical significance for human beings. Now Nature can be analysed and calculated from a purely objective point of view with no reference to God, 'the auctor of Nature'. Nature is not something by which human beings are guided and controlled, but something that is to be controlled by human beings. Chaucer has little to do with this modern scientific view of Nature, whose embryo may be found in Elizabethan thought, as J. F. Danby brilliantly pointed out⁽¹⁾. For Chaucer Nature was something

(1) J. F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, pp. 20—21.

to which human beings had to be obedient, and it was undoubtedly a vice to live against Nature or the 'Law of Kynde'. We find an example in which 'Nature' is used as the synonym of 'Law' in *The Tale of Melibee* (ll. 1583 ff.).

It is really characteristic of Chaucerian 'law of Nature' that it is always associated with love or passion. In Alanus 'amor' was evidently identified with Nature. In *Troilus and Criseyde* the 'law of Nature' is linked with 'Love' that binds all the things in the world:

For evere it was, and evere it shal byfalle,
That Love is he that alle thing may bynde,
For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde.

(Bk. I. ll. 236—8)

Thus in Chaucer the 'law of Nature' is linked with 'the bond of love'. Nature, as has already been mentioned, was essentially concerned with procreation. In the *Roman de la Rose* Nature is seen always working at her forge to renew the links of

La bele chaeine doree.

(l. 16786)

Bennett explains how Chaucer came to name this chain (of being) the Chain of Love—'identifying Love with the operation of Nature'.⁽¹⁾ Certainly the idea of the 'Chain of Love' can be regarded as one of the examples illustrating the originality of the Chaucerian conception of Nature.

Nature was identified with life ('vita') as Alanus's address to

(1) J. A. W. Bennett, *op. cit.*, 125.

Natura shows again. Any such activity as causes danger to life, spending sleepless nights in sorrow, for instance, is physically 'unnatural', i. e. 'against Nature':

And wel ye woot, agaynes kynde
Hyt were to lyven in this wyse;
For nature wolde nat suffyse
To noon erthly creature
Not longe tyme to endure
Withoute slep and be in sorwe.

(*The Book of the Duchess* ll. 16—21)

Nature's bearing on man was by no means restricted to his physical aspect. In *The Parson's Tale* (ll. 451—3) Nature's gifts to both the physical and the mental sides of man are enumerated. Nature presents the human body with the 'heel of body, strengthe, delivernesse, beautee, gentrie, franchise', and the human mind with 'good wit, sharp understanding, subtil engyn, vertu natureel, good memorie.'

'Pity' or 'sympathy' may be added to this list. In the *Complaynt D'Amour* 'pity' is referred to in terms of Nature.

Sithen she is the fayrest creature
As to my doom, that ever was lyvinge,
The benignest and beste eek that Nature
Hath wrought or shal, whyl that the world may dure,
Why that she lefte pite so behinde?
It was, ywis, a greet defaute in Kinde.

Yit is all this no lak to hire, pardee,

But God or Nature sore wolde I blame.

(ll. 51—58)

This also seems to illustrate Nature's relation to human virtue.

In the mediaeval and Elizabethan doctrine Nature in itself was the normative code for human beings. An immoral act was condemned as being 'against Nature' or 'unnatural'. This ethical application of Nature as a moral ideal is frequently seen in Chaucer. In *The Parson's Tale*, for instance, 'lechery' is discussed as a sin 'against nature': — 'this (= 'lechery') is deedly synne, and agayns nature' (l. 866). Lechery, being an 'unkyndely sinne' (l. 577), is to be disapproved of by Christian doctrine, which finds the supreme achievement of love in 'Marriage'. 'Love' in accordance with the ideals of Nature cannot be unconcerned with sexuality, but it is described as being utterly incompatible with the uncontrolled passion of sensuality. Nature emphasizes the necessity of both the intellectual and the physical sides of human love, i.e. Reason and Sensuality, and insists on the importance of the balance that should exist between the two. Hence the phrase 'against Nature' had an ethical connotation. It is indeed interesting that this phrase is frequently used in such works of *exemplum* as *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*. Chaucer's Nature, as far as it has been examined above, seems to be basically grounded on the orthodox pattern of mediaeval Nature. Chaucer proves to be essentially mediaeval as far as the problems of Nature are concerned. In him, God, Nature and Man are harmoniously linked. When the word 'Nature' or 'Kynde' is explicitly used in Chaucer, its conception is to a large extent that of traditional Nature.

Nature was an 'idée fixe' for Chaucer. When he referred to Nature, it was what he could accept as an established conception. And it was

this established pattern of Nature that afforded Chaucer a vehicle for literary expression; on the basis of this pattern he could represent the beauty of man and the ideals of love.

Chaucer's view of Nature was essentially idealistic. As long as we confine ourselves to analysing the word 'Nature' or 'Kynde' as they appear in Chaucer's works, it seems rather difficult to discover a realistic view of Nature which Chaucer might have held. But Chaucer's interest in human beings was very varied and deep, and his keen observation of all the sundry aspects of humanity penetrated through the mind and heart of Love, far beyond the boundary of the moral domain strictly confined by Nature.

In the twelfth century Neoplatonists, as I have already mentioned, emphasized the balance in Nature that should exist between Reason and Sensuality in human love. But in the *Roman de la Rose*, for instance, Jean de Meun unmistakably shows much greater interest in the sensual attitude of human beings. He strongly attacks asceticism and celibacy, and Nature's doctrine of procreation is given a particular emphasis. Nature in the *Roman* has been illuminatingly discussed by A.M.F. Gunn from the viewpoint of the principle of 'replenishment' on which Jean de Meun seems to have laid special emphasis. Gunn says that Jean de Meun 'is interested more in the renewal or the repair of the links in the Chain of Being than in its original creation or actualisation. He is not, like Bernard Sylvester, writing an account of the original generation of the universe and of man; he is describing rather their continuous renewal or regeneration. It is this shift of emphasis that Jean de Meun's originality in the line of thinkers and poets to which he belongs inheres'.⁽¹⁾

This emphasis of Jean de Meun on regeneration naturally tends to

(1) A. M. F. Gunn, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

be reinforced by the scriptural command to 'multiply and replenish the earth' (Genesis, 1: 28). Abstinence from love is a serious offence against Nature and God. And reproductive organs have a special value and even a sacred character because they are instrument of the replenishment of the species. Gunn says that 'the principle of replenishment with the consequent high estimate of the generative organs — implicit in the doctrine of plenitude from the first — he (Meun) lifted out of its subordinate position in the writings of Bernard Sylvester and Alanus de Insulis and made a major theme of his work. Going further, he made this principle the ground of an attack upon the state of celibacy. And finally, by a bold but unimpeachable dialectic, he justified by the same principle the threat of damnation to the celibate and the promise of heavenly bliss to those who had been arduous in love's enterprise. Thus in the end the poet threw down a challenge to chastity, the most exalted in the mediaeval hierarchy of virtues'.⁽¹⁾

Gérard Paré also has made a brilliant comparison between Alanus and Jean de Meun, and clarifies the latter's special emphasis on the importance of the 'perpétuité de l'espèce'.⁽²⁾ Jean de Meun recommends sexual activity on a highly moral basis; i.e. procreation is a duty to God as well as to Nature. As Gunn says, 'Jean de Meun should not be described as an "apostle of naturalism", if by that term is meant one who is insensitive to spiritual values'.⁽³⁾ But, nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Jean de Meun's temperamental love of the sensible universe together with his particular emphasis on Nature's doctrine of procreation shows a tendency toward modern Naturalism.

Probably, the same sort of tendency can be seen in Chaucer.

(1) *Ibid.*, p. 255.

(2) *Les idées et les lettres au XIIIe siècle*, pp. 283—4.

(3) Gunn, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

His *fabliaux* clearly prove that he was not merely interested in Love purely guided by the moral doctrine of Nature. His sympathy lies much more with sensual pleasure and the ineluctable law of human instinct. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* can be regarded as a conspicuous presentation of the same thought as had been set forth by Jean de Meun. She appears as an advocate of the cult of experience, giving much more importance to 'experience' than to 'authority':

“Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage;

(ll. 1—3)

The Wife of Bath, surely, stands for practical experience as against received authority and unblushing sensuality as against emotional austerity.

Telle me also, to what conclusion
Were membres maad of generacion,
And of so parfit wys a wight ywroght?
Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght.
Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun,
That they were makid for purgacioun
Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon oother cause, — say ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noght so.
So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,
I sey this, that they makid ben for bothe,
This is to seye, for office, and for ese,

Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.

(ll. 115—128)

Chaucer could not have succeeded in representing such a lively character as this without a realist attitude which enables one to look at the world as it really is. It may not be far from the truth to say that the Wife of Bath represents an aspect of the poet Chaucer who could examine afresh the world of direct experience with the eye of a naturalist, free from the yoke of 'auctoritee'. This may also have something to do with Averroism whose bearing on Jean de Meun has been often discussed. Bennett suggests a possible relationship between neo-Aristotelian teaching and Chaucer's Nature.⁽¹⁾ If Chaucer's Nature is essentially incompatible with that expounded in Thomist philosophy, his realist attitude, shown in some of the *Tales*, seems to be akin to the Thomist doctrine; which draws a clear distinction between 'naturalis' and 'supernaturalis', and represents Nature of the visible world not as the symbol of God, but as something which has its own quality. Here Nature of the visible world is allowed to be examined objectively with no connexion with the primary cause. Thus Chaucer's Nature, when the term is used explicitly, is nearly an 'idée fixe' based on the orthodox pattern. But if we examine the interest and attitude with which Chaucer represented the various and varied aspects of humanity, we seem to be able to find an embryo of what may be termed modern Naturalism. It is perfectly inappropriate to label Chaucer as a 'naturalist' in the modern sense, but we may find in him a certain tincture running counter to the strictly orthodox pattern of mediaeval Nature. In this way, it can be said that in regard to Nature as well, while

(1) J. A. W. Bennett, *op. cit.* p. 109. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 88: C. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 77.

Chaucer's poetry was a full expression of the Middle Ages, it was also a preface to the modern world.