Because the *House of Fame* breaks off near what is clearly its end, the incomplete state of the text seems to bear on the commonly felt inconclusiveness of its form.¹ Critical debate about the man who “seemed for to be / A man of gret auctoritee” (2157—58) suggests that identifying him or his function would reveal the occasion for the poem, or in some way help us understand better its illusive meaning so that we would not need to accept inconclusiveness as a poetic condition in Chaucer.² However, since poems like Gottfried’s *Tristan* and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* remind us that incomplete works are not necessarily inconclusive, the incompleteness of the *House of Fame* may not be responsible for the inconclusiveness of its form. Rather inconclusiveness may account for its incompleteness.

Like the other dream visions of Chaucer’s early period, the *House of Fame* presents a shifting and unresolved sense of what it is about.³ Each of its books concerns different conceptual problems, the logical contingencies of which are not fully apparent. The first book deals chiefly with literary transmission; the second is about the poet as student and the physics of sound; and the third examines the nature of fame and its relationship to rumor. As in the other dream visions, Chaucer filters these shifting concerns through the anxious persona, who responds with ambivalence and skepticism to most of what he sees and hears.⁴

Fear creates the persona’s anxiety from the beginning: “God turne us every drem to goode” (1). Between a wish and a prayer, this utterance asks a simple effect—good is simple—from an obscurely understood set of causes about to be enumerated. Chaucer takes the posture of a simple, perhaps too simple, believer who, after a breathless catalogue about the etiology of dreams (2—51), cannot even form an opinion:
But why the cause is, nought wot I.
Wel worthe, of this thynge, grete clerkys,
That tret of this and other werkes;
Nor I of noon opinion
Nyl as now make mensyon,
But oonly that the holy roode
Turne us every drem to goode!

This rhetorical *dubitatio* humorously establishes a skeptical persona, drawn to seek answers, yet ambivalent about their value because the complexity of the issue leaves him mystified, anxious.\(^5\)

Anxiety can be functional. After the proem it motivates an invocation, “at my gynnynge” (66), to the God of sleep “my sweven for to telle aryght” (79), which reveals both the persona’s concern for decorum and his skepticism of the invocation’s efficacy—“Yf every drem stonde in his myght” (80). It produces a defensive prayer for the poem’s reception: to eternal God (81–82) the persona prays for the reward of “joye” (83) for all “that take hit wel and skorne hyt noght” (91), and to “Jesus God” (97) he prays, curiously, that those who “mysdeme hyt” (97) receive “every harm that any man / Hath had, syth the world began” (99–100)—“I am no bet in charite!” (108). This anxiety, moreover, reappears early in book one where we learn that the persona falls asleep in exhaustion like a pilgrim who goes to the shrine of Saint Leonard “to make lythe of that was hard” (118).\(^6\) We do not yet know what is hard, but once asleep the persona undertakes to tell what he saw in the “temple ymad of glas” (120), Venus’s temple (130), especially to tell the story whose beginning he sees “writen on a table of bras” (142):

\[
\begin{align*}
I \ wol \ now \ singen, \ yif \ I \ kan \\
The \ armes, \ and \ also \ the \ man \\
That \ first \ cam, \ thurgh \ his \ destinee, \\
Fugityf \ of \ Troy \ contree, \\
In \ Itayle, \ with \ ful \ moche \ pyne \\
Unto \ the \ strondes \ of \ Lavyne.
\end{align*}
\]

Here in octosyllabic couplets we find the first translation in English of the opening of Vergil’s *Aeneid*. To the translation the persona has added
a delight-producing clause of personal intention that reveals anxiety about his ability as a translator. This is, after all, a famous work whose opening, at least, every schoolboy knows.

Once we understand that the anxiety relates to the poetic enterprise, we retrospectively understand the persona’s confusion about the etiology of dreams, for dreams are the prototype of the form of poetry Chaucer composes. Some kinds, like the *visio*, offer themselves as appropriate models for visionary literature; but others, like this “drem” (62), may be ambiguous—may, in fact, be deceptive or untrue. If dreams are ambiguous or deceptive, Chaucer may have thought, what then is the relationship between dream-vision poetry and truth? More to the point of this dream vision, how does a poet determine what in a source should be directly translated, like the opening; what may be telescoped and varied by paraphrase, like the description of the remaining events of book one of the *Aeneid* (198–225); what may be abridged or summarized, like the last six books of Vergil’s poem (429–65); and what may be so fundamental to the translator’s purpose that it bears rhetorical amplification, like the betrayal and subsequent bereavement of Dido (240–46)? The anxiety of book one of the *House of Fame*, then, is one about a poet’s control, his responsibility as a “makir.”

The central activity of book one, occupying 327 of the book’s 396 lines, is the persona’s telling of the legend of Aeneis as images represent it in the Temple of Glass. But what is the purpose of this activity? If it were simply to tell the story of Aeneis, the undertaking is a colossal failure, for the story that book one presents carries little emotional force and less narrative interest. Sheila Delany claims that its purpose is to suggest the dualizing effect on this famous legend created by intertwining elements of Ovid’s sentimental version with Vergil’s. But then why does the persona go out of his way to claim as his own Dido’s moving complaint, which appropriates Ovid’s pathetic tonality?

In suche wordes gan to pleyne
Dydo of hir grete peyne,
As me mette redely;
Non other auctour allege I.

[311–14]
Actually, the purpose of the activity appears not to be related specifically to the content of the legend. Rather it describes the relationship between a storyteller and the medium through which he tells his story. Repeatedly the persona reminds us that we are hearing (reading) his perception of images representing a story, not a story itself—“next that sawgh I” (162), “and I saugh next” (174), “ther sawgh I graven” (193). Instead of responding to events in the content, we watch the persona respond to them. He says “allas” (157) after telling us that he saw Troy destroyed; he comments that he saw

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How Creusa was yloset,allas!
That ded, not I how, she was;
How he [Aeneis] hir soughte, and how hir gost
Bad hym to flee the Grekes host.
```

[183–86]

Instead of representing Aeneis’s turbulent journey to Carthage, he reminds us of the emotive power of the images representing the action to him;

```
There saugh I such tempeste aryse,
That every herte myght agryse
To see hyt peynted on the wal.
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[209–11]

These persistent intrusions not only distance us from the legendary content, they make the problem of telling interfere with our natural desire to hear a story by creating involvement with the persona and his interests.

The persona’s interest in the story is the tragic effect on Dido of believing in the false appearance and false promise of Aeneis (296–374). It is the only part of the story that he chooses to exemplify. The tension between teller and tale, which has accompanied the recitation throughout, dissolves during Dido’s lyrical complaint of suffering and remorse. The intrusive persona becomes an unobtrusive narrator: “I saugh” becomes “quod she,” and we are enchanted into the fictional plane. This is, of course, the section of the story that the persona calls his own, the significance of which he seeks to verify by the amplified catalogue of tragic lovers who suffered from broken promises (384–426). Except for this section, however, the skeletal telling of the story
of Aeneis is an exercise in recitation, not the telling of a story but the enumerating of the images representing a story.

When the recitation ends, we may wonder why the persona’s method changed from telling to showing when he reached the point where Dido confronts her betrayal, her shame, her loss of good reputation. A reasonable inference is that the poem is, or will be, in some way about loss of fame when a mistress is betrayed, Dido being a symbolic example. But Chaucer turns out not to deal with this theme until the Legend of Good Women. In book one of the House of Fame, the theme is nascent but undeveloped, implying relevance, never revealing it. When the anxiety that opened the poem returns toward the end of book one, the issue of deception in artistic representation replaces the issue of deception in human relationships, which has disappeared. The persona has been impressed by the “noblesse” (471) of the images he has seen in the temple of glass, wondering who “did hem wirche” (474) and “what contree” (475) the temple is in. His discovery, however, that this workshop for his imagination is in a desert where lives “no maner creature / That ys yformed be Nature” (489—90) suggests both an uncertain value to the images and an uncertain value to the experience. Understandably the persona reacts in fear:

“O Crist!” thoughte I, “that art in blysse,
Fro fantome and illusion
Me save!”

[492—94]

As Delany has shown, fantome and illusion are terms expressing the medieval sense of the imagination’s power to deceive and mislead. But the appearance of an abstract golden form in the sky, which turns out to be Jove’s eagle, provides a note of hope to the anxiety-producing experience.

In book one Chaucer raises questions about the nature and value of poetic appropriation and implies a relationship between the deceptive nature of human communication and the possibly deceptive nature of artistic representation, which is also a form of communication. But he neither provides answers nor draws conclusions. The hopeful appearance of the eagle makes the inconclusiveness of the first part of the poem immaterial, however, because it promises a development of pre-
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... sumably relevant issues. But what follows does not develop the issues of the first part of the poem. In fact, the eagle flies off on a tangent because none of the answers about the universe and sound that he happily provides relate directly to the questions about truth in love-promises and truth in poetic appropriation from images. Moreover, the relationship of these issues to those presented once the persona reaches the Houses of Fame and Rumor is moot.

The flight to the House of Fame is at once the most intense and most humorous section of the poem. Despite the eagle's reassurances that the flight is meant for his "lore" and "prow" (579), the persona is continually frightened, hardly overcoming his shock at being swept off his feet:

For so astonyed and asweved
Was every vertu in my heved,
What with his sours and with my drede,
That al my felynge gan to dede;
For-whi hit was to gret affray.

[549–53]

His giddy fear manifests itself in worry about the meaning of the action:

Shal I noon other weyes dye?
Wher Joves wol me stellyfye,
Or what thing may this signifye?

[585–87]

It also shows in his negative responses to the eagle's pedagogical offers:

... quod he ...  
"Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?"
"Nay, certeynly," quod y, "ryght naught."
"And why?" "For y am now to old."

[992–95]

This humorous negativity occurs because of the persona's frank fear of flying, and of falling. The eagle, after all, has tried to explain the doctrine of the locus proprius of every natural object while flying high above the earth with the portly Geffrey, "noyous for to carye" (574), in his talons.
Yet there is also a remarkable sense of wonder in this part of the dream. Anxious questions about the reliability of dreams and of art as a source of knowledge give way to a sense that what some books teach is true to personal experience, hence worth believing:

For more clere entendement
Nas me never yit ysent.
And than thoughte y on Marcian,
And eke on Anteclaudian,
That sooth was her descriptioun
Of alle the hevenes region,
As fer as that y sey the preve;
Therefore y kan hem now beleve.

Later, this new ability to believe in authority gives him the excuse to decline to experience more than he cares to. When the eagle offers to show him firsthand the constellations, the coward in the persona asserts:

“No fors,” quod y, “hyt is no nede.
I leve as wel, so God me spede,
Hem that write of this matere,
As though I knew her places here.”

This belief in the truth of literary representation stands in direct contrast to the fear expressed earlier in the poem. The contrast between prior skepticism and current belief suggests a distinction of literary kinds that creates the different responses. Earlier the persona observed representations derived from poetry about legendary history. Here personal experience verifies the observations of scientific and philosophical poets. Science and philosophy (synonymous in the fourteenth century) concern the truth of actuality, what can be proved by reason and the senses—the “sooth” of a thing. Legendary history, on the other hand, concerns the actions of human beings and the moral and psychological elements of human nature that poets report—the “trouthe” of a thing. The persona’s experiences at the House of Fame reveal that his fears about “trouthe” in the Temple of Glass were indeed well-founded, for all communication that is not firsthand, like tidings and
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legends, must come through Fame, whose Greek cognate, phēmē, means utterance or report and whose nature to Chaucer is morally ambiguous.

To us “Fame” is an attractive phenomenon. To make it connote negatively, we must attach a pejorative adjective (ill fame). To Ovid, whose Fama provides Chaucer with elements of both Fame and Rumor, the concept simply meant Rumor, which “veris addere falsa / gaudet.” Chaucer distinguishes between the Latin concept of Fama, calling it Rumor (2088–2105), and “Fame,” which, closer to our notion, is synonymous with renown:

Heryed be thou and thy name,
Goddesse of Renoun or of Fame!

Rumor resembles a kind of inchoate noise or sound that has no verification. Its house is a very large dwelling built with “tymber of no strengthe” (1980). Its ceaseless turning, its axis with no foundation, and its numberless windows suggest randomness, lack of value. About the potential of the House of Rumor to endure, the persona tells us:

Yet hit is founded to endure
while that hit lyst to Aventure,
That is the moder of tydynges
As the see of welles and of sprynges.

As wells and springs flow from the sea (a curious perception), so Rumor derives from Chance—a principle of absurdity or a principle of “non-principledness.”

Fame, on the other hand, represents a stage of this inchoate noise considerably more advanced. She differs from Rumor in that she has a personified form and dwells in a highly ornate castle with towers, halls, bowers, “babewynnes and pynacles” (1189), tabernacles and “habitacles” (1194), and she has the power to judge. By judging she confers a kind of authentication on the objects of her judgment even though the foundation of her house is a “roche of yse, and not of stel” (1130), and the basis of her judgments are utterly undependable. The long and tedious passage describing the process of Fame’s arbitrary judgment indicates at once how frequently her decisions are unjust to
those who plead for earthly renown and how frequently they are just (1520–1867). In addition, Fame has the power to substantiate rumor once Aventure has given it life:

And she gan yeven ech hys name,
After hir disposicioun,
And yaf hem eke duracioun

Finally, Fame has a relationship with poets that counterbalances the negative moral conclusions that her fickle and nonprincipled judgments imply. Running between the dais and wide doors of the great hall of her castle, a series of pillars enshrine statues representing Josephus, Statius, Homer, Dares, Tytys (Dictys), Lollius (whoever he may be), Guido delle Colonne, Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian. Each poet represents a category of literary or historical matter like love, the story of Thebes, of Troy, of the Jews, of Rome, and so on. Together their production constitutes the sum of secular historical knowledge, providing poets like Chaucer with content and techniques. Their works undoubtedly fill the leaves of the “bokes” that the eagle has claimed Geoffrey spends most of his free time reading. From Vergil, for example, Chaucer got material for the first book of this work; from Ovid he got material for both books one and three. From Lollius he will get his Troilus. Fame then is not simply a phenomenon of sound like Rumor. She is at once an undependable judge and an attractive figure who keeps good and significant company.

Distinctly different from his response earlier in the poem, the persona’s reaction to the House of Fame reveals from the first a skeptical understanding of Fame’s ambiguous moral value, pursuit of which he ultimately rejects:

I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, by my hed!
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde.
I wot myself best how y stonde;
For what I drye, or what I thynke,
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as I kan myn art.
We admire the persona’s integrity. Having recognized Fame’s “feble fundament” (1132), and having witnessed the curious relationship between the nine suits to Fame and her judgment, his rejection shows a refusal to gamble his own reputation on Fame’s “condicioun” (1904) or on the fickle “ordre of her dom” (1905). But how does this partially allegorized episode, after which Chaucer names the poem, develop or realize the confusing and fearful issues driving the narrative to this point? Geffrey himself explicitly asserts no connection between what he thought he was going to learn and what he actually has learned:

The cause why y stonde here:  
Somme newe tydynges for to lere,  
Somme newe thinges, y not what,  
Tydynges, other this or that,  
Of love, or suche thynges glade.  
For certeynly, he that me made  
To comen hyder, scyde me,  
Y shulde bothe here and se,  
In this place, wonder thynges;  
But these be no suche tydynges  
As I mene of.” “Noo?” quod he.  
And I answered, “Noo, parde!”

He expected something different from what the eagle intended. So did we. The experience of the House of Fame has refused to answer the questions about truth and verification that the first part of the poem asked. Instead it has answered an assumed question about the value of posterity. The first questions are epistemological, the second is moral.

The episode in the House of Rumor, presumably the last intended segment of the poem, repeats the pattern of revelation and disappointment that was established at the House of Fame. Tracing sound backward toward its source, the persona discovers that tidings (content for his poetry) are compounded of “fals and soth” (2108) even before their image receives a final imprimatur by the nonprincipled Fame. The epistemological implications of this discovery are tendentious: the truth-value in tidings is impossible to ascertain, the lie-value is significant, repute is unreliable, and representation therefore untrustworthy.

As if to avoid the skeptical conclusion that the experience has been
implying, however, the persona uncharacteristically leaves the side-
lines from which he has been observing most of the action. He joins
the swirl of rumormongers and energetically tries to play, to learn:

And eke a tydynge for to here,
That I had herd of som contre
That shal not now be told for me—
For hit no nede is, redely;
Folk kan synge hit bet than I;
For al mot out, other late or rathe.

These lines are complexly ambiguous and confusing. The speaker
claims to want “to here” a tiding he “had herd,” which will not “now”
be told “for me.” The surface of “for me” denotes that the subject is the
recipient of the “not-telling,” but the context of the passage requires
the subject to be the agent-producer—“Folk kan singe hit bet than
1.” If the subject is the recipient of the tiding, then the grammatical
aspect is confused, unless we separate the poet “I” from the persona
“me” because the past perfective indicates an action or event completed
in the past. Did the poet hear the tiding before the dream and will the
dream not “now” reveal that tiding to the persona? Or, for the sake of
avoiding the schizophrenic implications that such a reading implies,
should we interpolate the eagle’s promise of a tiding during the flight
for the tiding itself, so that the past perfective form of the verb can
indicate a completed event within the persona’s fictional existence? In
addition to the problem of the role of the subject and the aspect of the
verb, it is not clear whether “of some contre” means “from” or “about”
some place. If it means “about” some place, the antecedent of “som”
could be the desert where the persona asked the name of the “contree”
(475), although there is no place where he could have heard the answer
without us also having heard it. Or the antecedent of “som” could be
the country of the stars through which the eagle carried the persona at
the time he promised a tiding in the future. Moreover, if “of” means
“from,” then the antecedent of “som” could refer to the meaning
implicit in the persona’s experience of the Temple of Glass. Although
his experience there was visual, his perception of Dido’s complaint was
aural. Finally “of som contre” could have an extratextual referent in a
piece of gossip or news relevant to the audience. The grammatical
ambiguity of these lines does not allow for a single coherent explanation. It does, however, allow us to draw the general conclusion that the tiding will not "now" be forthcoming—"for hit no nede is redely"—with the promise that eventually "al mot out."

Having reached this ambiguously stated nonconclusion functioning as a conclusion, the action turns toward the appearance of the man who seemed "of gret auctorite." New energy arises in the noise of the people running to hear him. But he never speaks. His appearance promises an extension of the narrative but not a conclusion, for what kind of authority could anyone in the House of Rumor claim that would bring the many unresolved elements of this poem to an appropriate end? The experience of the Houses of Fame and Rumor has played a trick on us. We have been led with the persona to seek meaning for the poem or the dream only to encounter frustration every time meaning seems to be indicated. It is as if every step we have taken toward the source of all meaning, from observation through a flight explaining scientifically the nature of sound, from Fame, to Rumor, to a specific authoritative rumor, has not led to the essence of things but rather has led to insubstantiality. Sound and the meaning it supposedly carries becomes finally what the eagle has claimed it is, "noght but eyr ybroken" (765), equivalent to the broken and meaningless air that creates logical and logistical problems in the Summoner's Tale.

In the House of Fame, Chaucer has created a complex and ambiguous experience to which his ambivalent persona responds with confusion, fear, skepticism, and finally with accepting disappointment. The poem raises problems about verifiability, credibility, and the value of personal proof, but does not solve them. The persona's anxiety early in the poem about the meaning first of dreams and then of the materials of the past appears to be one cause of the poem's inconclusiveness. The alternately repellent elements of Fame and her attractive relationship with poets appears to be another. The flight, which serves as a spatial transition from one locus to another and from one kind of problem to another, provides interesting information about the persona's studiousness and promises a reward in terms of a tiding. But the reward never comes. Instead a skeptical conclusion begins to surface until the persona grows mysteriously enthusiastic, the text grows confused and
shortly thereafter breaks off, and the relationship between the persona's waking state and his dream never gets worked out. Irrespectively of the state of its ending, the form of the *House of Fame* is at best inconclusive, at worst incoherent, because of the strange interaction between the persona and his experience. The poem raises various subjects about literary craft and about the end of poetic achievement in fame. But the persona's responses to the issues are not sufficiently mediated for the objects of his experience, ambiguous as many of them are, to provide him with understanding and us with a sense that the poet is in control of narrative coherence. Embarrassed by the *House of Fame*'s failure to provide coherent meaning, Muscatine claims that it "is most charitably seen as an experiment, wherein the poet's energy and imagination by far outrun his sense of form." Yet the experimental nature that renders the poem's form inconclusive represents its greatest critical fascination.

Despite the completeness of the *Parliament of Fowls*, its form is inconclusive. Chaucer comfortably juxtaposes several contradictory allegations about love and about the tradition of writing love poetry so that they lie contiguously. But he does not resolve the contradictions. The poem ends at the height of its argument, when the parliament of birds has reached a stalemate and Nature has agreed to table the decision for a year. The poet awakens and turns to other books to find "a certeyn thing" (20) that he has not yet found. This is not a conclusion but an indication of future plans based on previous failures. The coexistence of contradictions and the unresolved central argument create inconclusiveness. But unlike the *House of Fame*, which also contains contradictory elements and an unresolved argument, the *Parliament of Fowls* shows Chaucer controlling those elements that make the poem's form inconclusive yet not uncomfortable with the pluralism that the varying claims about love, its subject matter, suggest. In fact, the form of the *Parliament of Fowls* offers inconclusiveness as its own poetic principle. For the first time in Chaucer's poetic career, we find a formal indication of what the poet will do on a much larger scale with contradicting opinions and various genres in the *Canterbury Tales*.
Unlike Chaucer’s earlier dream visions, where structural confusion contributes to inconclusiveness, the *Parliament of Fowls* is clearly structured. Although there are moments, including the opening stanza of the poem, when the narrator expresses confusion, the poem has a straightforward linear movement. Events, descriptions, and speeches are tersely handled within the rhyme royal stanza. The structure of the poem is more clearly ordered and its parts more equitably deployed than in the *Book of the Duchess* or the *House of Fame*. Yet its form is inconclusive because of the nature of its content (its subject matter) and the persona’s inability or refusal either to draw conclusions from his experience or to resolve the set of varying claims about love that his experience suggests.

Compared with the persona of Chaucer’s earlier dream visions, the most striking feature about the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* is that he is relatively uninvolved with the process of both the poem and his dream. Although his confusion about love and his experience in learning about it are the ostensible subjects of the poem, the persona is only involved with action in four specific places: at the beginning where the subject is raised; at the end where it is treated again; and at two transitional points in the plot, the first when he turns from book to bed and dream, and the second when he needs to move from without to within the park. Unlike the persona of the *House of Fame*, who is continually involved with what is happening to him, the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* comments little on the elements of his experience. He remains aloof from what he is seeing and enters the action only where he has to pass through some line of structural demarcation. To be sure, he repeatedly tells us that he saw one thing or another, as he does in his other dream visions. But there is little sense of musing, of fear, of sympathy for or about what he sees and little moral comment on any of the action. It is as if Chaucer were using the persona, especially in the section of the poem presenting the dream, as a living camera through whose lens we are allowed to see what he sees, but who rarely manipulates our responses by his own interjections, emotions, or amplifications.

One of the reasons for our sense of the persona’s aloofness is that he is relatively affectless. The persona is hardly felt as a significant actor in his reading or in his dream experience, as he was in the readings and
dreams of his earlier poems. The experience of the dream, when it occurs, has the same quality of paraphrase that the retelling of Macrobius's book has in the early part of the poem. The persona's lack of involvement with his dream accounts for the more tranquil manner of this poem when compared with either the *Book of the Duchess* or the *House of Fame*, and for the lack of intensity felt in most of its form. Yet, even though the persona's aloofness makes the poem's mood different from the mood of the other dream visions, those four points in the narrative where he intrudes contribute to the poem's inconclusiveness, for they provide that same sense of ambivalence and naively limited understanding that the persona provided to the other dream visions.

The first appearance of the persona is, of course, at the opening, where we are given a complicated definition and the persona's confused response to it:

The *sententia* of the first line is common enough—related to the classical "ars longa, vita brevis"—but its application is not clearly pointed and its syntactic references are complicated, as if purposely to complicate its meaning. We are led to consider first that the speaker is talking about life and craft, both of which require a "sharp" conquering, both of which may be characterized by the oxymoronic "dreadful joye" because the pleasure of both presumably slides away so easily. At line four of the stanza, however, we are told that what came before it did not actually refer to life and to craft, but that life and craft and their attendant anxieties refer to love. It is finally love that causes the persona's astonishment. The complexity of this opening makes the persona insecure; he does not know whether he is floating or sinking. The syntax of the opening lines is so ambiguous that readers encountering them for the first time frequently wonder whether the persona is

\[1-7\]
commenting on life, on art, on love, or on all three. The three terms function in paratactic balance without subordination so that they appear synonymous. The persona tells us, however, that by art and craft, with their anxieties, he means love. But if "al this" means love, then the love he has in mind is a concept more encompassing than ours. It is apparently capable of including within its definition lived experience and human activity such as writing about lived experience; it represents the foundation upon which human life and human action ultimately rest.

The persona's broad definition of what he means by love should contain some core of certainty upon which the various elements of love within the poem will rest. But it does not because the persona, having created an ambiguous definition, does not understand it. The stanzas that follow the opening present someone who, like the persona of the *House of Fame*, is so overwhelmed by the breadth of the definition that he denies knowing "Love in dede" (8); so he dedicates himself to learning about it from books that will disclose or test the validity of the definition. He tells us "out of olde bokes, in good feyth, / cometh al this newe science that men lere" (24—25). But, whereas the book he turns to reveals to him a metaphysical end of human life and of human action, it does not reveal to him "a certeyn thing," which he apparently hopes will help him through his confusion.

The persona's contribution to the inconclusiveness of the form of the *Parliament of Fowls* resides precisely in the distinction I have been making between the breadth and complexity of definitions about love and the limiting narrowness of his search for a certain answer that will satisfy his curiosity and help his career as a writer of love poetry. Whenever the persona enters the action of the poem, he responds to his experience with ambivalence or disappointment. After he paraphrases the contents of Macrobius's book, which describes a greater metaphysical end to love than he apparently can use in his search, he comments with disappointment:

For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
And ek I nadde that thyng that I wolde.

[90—91]

When confronted by the contradictory sign above the entrance to the
park of his dream, he is immobilized—"Right as, betwixen adamauntes two / of evene myght" (148–49)—and he needs to be shoved forward by his guide. The fearful reaction to the sign seems caused less by the danger that the warning suggests than by the contradiction itself, which claims polar opposites to be true of the same experience. Were it merely fear, the persona would undoubtedly flee. His immobilization suggests his fear that experience within the gates will be complicated, a totality created by a balance of opposites. Complication is not what the persona wants to encounter in his search for that "certeyn thing." Finally, after experiencing the phenomenon of the parliament of the birds, the awakened persona's final response, which brings the poem to its unconcluded end, is again one of disappointment, as if his dream experience had left him in the same state of confusion with respect to finding out that thing as his reading of Macrobius:

I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,  
To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.  
I hope, ywis, to rede so some day  
That I shal mete some thyng for to fare  
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.  

[695–99]

He dedicates himself to continuing to search because he has not found the answer—one presumably about love, life, and craft—in either book or dream.

It is not only the persona's narrowly aimed search and his disappointment, however, that make the Parliament of Fowls inconclusive. Other elements of the poem as well contribute to the inconclusiveness of its form: the definition of love, the relation between the subject of Macrobius's book and the dream, the elements both abstract and concrete within the park as well as their relation to the sign over the entrance, and, of course, the parliament of birds and its conclusion, or lack of it. But, as we look at these elements, we shall see that inconclusiveness is so much a part of Chaucer's conception in his poem, so much based on what may be called a pluralistic vision of reality, that their sum total does not constitute a narrative form made incoherent by its inconclusiveness. Rather, it suggests that an inconclusive form can be successful.
Like the curious opening stanza with its shifting expectations of subject, the content of the larger structural units of the *Parliament of Fowls* creates expectations for one kind of meaning only to undercut them with new content implying another kind of meaning. For example, the unit of the poem concerned with the paraphrase of Macrobius leads us to expect a dream connected in some way with what has been read. In the *Book of the Duchess*, the persona’s reading of Ceyx and Alcyone ultimately had something in common with the greater purpose of the dream that followed. But the dream in the *Parliament of Fowls* is not only unclearly connected to the reading of Macrobius (except in the appropriation of Affricanus as the guide into the dream park) but the persona’s disappointed response to his reading makes us wonder why the paraphrase was there at all, what contrastive feature the upcoming dream might have. Neither a comparative nor a contrastive connection is ever implied or drawn. In fact, once the persona has passed into the dream park and Affricanus has disappeared from the action, Macrobius’s book is all but forgotten. Although we might choose ultimately to interpret the bird parliament as an ironic working out of Affricanus’s assertion that the virtuous man must look to the common profit, the interpretation seems more strongly motivated by our modern need to find a thematic or structural unity in poetry than it is based on what connections the poem itself suggests. Bennett is, I think, correct in asserting of the scenes in the dream that we cannot establish more than an antithetical and oblique relation between them and African’s discourse in the Proem. There the emphasis is on immaterial joys of heaven, here on joys and sorrows of a very material earth. Scipio’s dream is chiefly concerned with Eternity and the Life of spirit; Chaucer’s with Nature and the impulses of the flesh.23

I would argue, however, that the very obliquity and antithetical quality of relation between Chaucer’s dream and Scipio’s does serve a function, although the function does not suggest unity.24 Rather, it serves to support the persona’s disappointment with whatever he has learned from his reading and to undermine or question the particular validity of the authority that Macrobius’s book and its doctrine represent. In light of the personal experience of the persona’s dream, Affricanus’s
teaching to Scipio appears to be not a conclusive enough monition to be valid for everyone.

The inconclusiveness created by the constrastive nature of the two dreams in the poem also manifests itself throughout the different units of the dream. For example, on either side of the gate to the dream park are contradictory oppositions that immobilize the persona because each one appears as an assertion of truth. Once inside the park, however, the persona describes only one of the sign's statements, namely "that blysful place / of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure" (127-28). In fact, what the persona sees in the park openly contradicts the warning written on the dark side of the gate. Whereas the assertions in black had stated "ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere" (137), the persona sees a park in which "were trees clad with leves that ay shal laste" (173), a park in which there is a garden "of blosmy bowes . . . with floures white, blewe, yelwe, and rede" (183-86). Whereas the gate had read "This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were / there as the fish in prysoun is al drye" (138-39), the persona sees

. . . colde welle-stremes, nothyng dede,
That swymmen ful of smale fishes lighte,
With fynnes rede and skales sylver bryghte.

[187-89]

Whereas the gate had threatened to lead "unto the mortal strokes of the sper / of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde" (135-36), the path in fact leads to a temple of brass about which are dancing women and before which are regaled the pleasing and familiar personifications of courtly allegory: "Pleasaunce," "Curteysie," "Gentilesse," as well as some less familiar but no less pleasant figures like "Dame Pees" and "Dame Pacience." It is true that the catalogue of courtly personifications contains what seems one less than pleasant figure:

And of the Craft that can and hath the myght
To don by force a wyght to done folye—
Disfigurat was she, I nyl nat lye.

[220-22]

But this is the only truly unpleasant personification in the park, and the persona's response to its disfigured aspect—"I nyl nat lye"—somehow makes it appear less egregious because it is recognized as different
from, but acceptable within, the list of other pleasant personifications. It is also true that there are some unpleasant aspects suggested about love within the temple itself. But these unpleasantnesses are represented at a considerable remove, for they are perceived not as existing within the park but as being symbolically depicted on the wall in the form of a story or a catalogue. The persona's initial response to what he experiences in the park—"But, Lord, so I was glad and well begoon!" (171)—never changes throughout his description of whatever he sees there. In consequence the reader soon forgets the dark warning on the one side of the gate. Or, if one does not forget it, one recognizes that the authoritative, though contradictory, quality of conclusiveness of the statement itself has been undercut by the action following it. It is as if Chaucer were suggesting a conclusive sounding sententia in order purposefully to undercut it or to question its conclusiveness by his descriptive technique.

Not, however, until we reach the main or central issue of the poem—the bird parliament—do we recognize clearly why Chaucer has been undermining the conclusive sententiae that the elements of his poem have been asserting. Here the technique of undercutting expectation is not simply a device to test the conclusiveness of authority; it is part of the poet's conception, whereby created inconclusiveness can suggest, and even validate, a pluralistic vision of reality.

The section begins with Nature explaining the customary procedure of bringing together on Saint Valentine's day all species of birds to choose their mates. It is expected that the choosing will be carried out in traditional medieval fashion, with the birds of highest order beginning and the birds of lower orders following according to an understood qualitative hierarchy of bird society. The problem, however, arises when, after the "tersel egle" makes his choice, another tersel "of lower kynde" lays claim to the same mate, whereupon a third tersel objects and lays yet another claim to her. The unexpected contention not only lasts "tyl dounward drow the sonne wonder faste" (490); it makes the other birds impatient because the arguments do not convince the group which of the three the female ought to accept. They are "withouten any preve" (497). The implication of their objection is that the kind of courtly rhetoric which expresses the suit of each of the three eagles has interfered with the process of Nature, a process she has
established as the reasonable method for choice of a mate. Moreover, their argument has interfered with the selection by birds of lower order who also have rightful claims to relevant choices of their own. The parliament that follows, in which Nature ordains each order of bird to have a say in the matter, begins with a direct response to the question before them all, namely, how to choose the most worthy of the three suitors; but it soon moves wide of the issue and becomes a parliament in which each class of bird speaks in general to the issue of love and mating, and reveals a spectrum of opinion on the subject. The point of the argument is that wherever there is a disparate group, there will be disparate opinions with respect to any issue. Furthermore, each of the disparate opinions, whether more or less noble, has about it a political validity that makes unanimous consensus impossible and even obscures the question at issue.

Chaucer never leads his readers to any conclusion about which claim is more just or more important. To be sure, his stylistic parody of each class of birds suggests absurdity in the claims of certain classes, like that represented by the goose. But it criticizes as well the claims and the method of making claims of the courtly class. The opinions of all classes are opened to scrutiny, but we are never urged to accept the claims of one class as more valid than the claims of another. Rather, Chaucer directs our attention to the fact of pluralistic opinion. True, the speaker for the birds of ravine suggests that the choice should be made according to which of the three suitors is "the worthiest / of knyghthood . . . most of estat, of blod the gentilleste" (548–55); true, too, the opportunistic argument of the goose is made to seem ridiculous because it is so ignoble. If nobility were at issue, then we could easily discover which class of birds had the best argument. Nobility is not, however, the issue. The issue is rather opinion itself, and what claims the opinions of different species of birds reveal. The spectrum of birds displays a spectrum of bird opinion about love, each of which appears valid and appropriate for the class of bird opining it, whether it be the sentimental idealism of the turtledove or the practical sense of choice represented by the duck. Nature's final decision to leave the choice of mate up to the female eagle suggests that Chaucer is offering individual choice in love as the only viable alternative to a selection process where opinion is valid. By doing this, he is also leaving the subject of love,
about which the entire poem is concerned, up to individual choice, implying that there is no one authoritative definition or attitude that holds true at all times or in all places. Authority, in fact, is here being undermined by an implication that individual opinion has its own validity.

Even the attitude of the figure Nature supports the pluralism that the spectrum of bird opinion suggests. While Nature functions throughout the parliament as leader, as mediator, and as customary agent appointed by God to see His plan carried out, she separates her allegorical quality from the quality of Reason, who presided over all the judgments of Nature since at least the time of Alanus de Insulis's *Anticlaudianus*. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, Nature comports herself in accordance with Reason; she even recognizes that the advice of the birds of ravine is the most reasonable. But she also recognizes that on the question of love she is different from Reason:

> If I were Resoun, certes, thanne wolde I
> Conseyle yow the royal tercel take,
> As seyde the tercelet ful skyfully,
> As for the gentilleste and most worthi.

Hers is the traditional, reasonable counseling, the counseling that would look to nobility and to rank when making a decision for a mate. But Nature accepts the request of the female eagle who says:

> I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide,
> Forsothe as yit, by no manere weye.

She accepts the eagle's request for a year's respite "to have my choy al fre" (649). The poem makes clear, then, that the argument which concerns the parliament cannot be settled because in matters of love Nature and Reason are different and, by implication, in matters of the heart the authority of Reason no longer holds total sway over the claim of varying individual or, at least, class opinions.

The *Parliament of Fowls* ends on this purposely inconclusive note. After the "roundel" (actually a *triolet*), which the birds sing to Nature, Saint Valentine, and Summer, the persona awakens and tells us emphatically that he has not found the answer he has been looking for.
Despite the inconclusiveness of the form of the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, there is no sense of an incoherence of meaning, as there was in the *House of Fame*. Rather, the poem’s form is satisfying, completely realized, and convincing because its parts were conceived to function in an indeterminate way and to suggest an indeterminacy of meaning. Inconclusiveness has been useful to this form whose interest has been to articulate the possibility of a valid pluralism. Chaucer will create such an inconclusive form again, though without the allegorical paraphernalia. The *Canterbury Tales* may be seen as a more complex working out of the principle of inconclusiveness the end of which suggests a pluralistic vision of reality as valid.

Before examining how Chaucer creates this inconclusive narrative form on a far vaster scale than in the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, we must first look at the other main line of narrative development in Chaucer’s career, the line that concerns the persona, turned narrator, at work on objective, legendary narration as opposed to subjective dream vision experience, for it too teaches Chaucer how to control narrative development, so important an element of each of the tales within the *Canterbury Tales*. In the next chapter, I shall examine what problems the poet confronted and mastered in his rendering of legendary materials, as they most fully may be witnessed in *Troilus*. 