Parables of Freedom and Necessity: The Rising Levels of Secularization as Manifested in Two Literary Works

Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri

Epilogue

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Frankeleyn's Tale" and Bertold Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* seem to have very little in common. Chaucer's medieval narrative poem tries to follow the norms of its genre and fulfill the reader's expectations, whereas Brecht's modernist experimental play violates many of the rules of drama laid down by Aristotle and other classical critics. It deliberately shocks the reader out of any facile identification with the characters as well as any willing suspension of disbelief. But despite their many obvious differences, this study argues that their similarities are quite relevant and significant. Both works deal with the themes of human freedom, moral responsibility, and ability to transcend. These are among the major themes of literature throughout time—but they have acquired particular poignancy in our modern time with the rise and gradual unfolding of what I term the "paradigmatic sequence of secularization." Since the terms "paradigm" and "secularism" are already quite problematic, and to talk of "a paradigmatic sequence of secularization" is even more so, some kind of clarification and even redefinition is in order.

Paradigms

When a critic singles out two literary works for comparison, the choice is not guided by some universally established objective rules, but rather dictated by a certain set of assumptions, norms, criteria, biases, and so on. When he/she engages in the critical act itself, pointing out structural and thematic relations (of similarity and dissimilarity), he/she does

Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri is professor emeritus at 'Ayn Shams University, Cairo, Egypt.

not deal with an objective quality or an empirical fact found in the two works, but rather presents a discovered relationship. In other words, there is a definite element of subjectivity involved both in the initial choice of literary works to be compared and in the critical reading thereof, which raises a question regarding the "objective validity" of the choice and of the reading.

A paradigm is an analytical tool that enables the comparatist to overcome this polarity of subject and object and of part and whole. In English and western lexicons, the term *paradigm* has long been associated with Thomas Kuhn and the controversy surrounding his definition. Coming from a different cultural tradition and lexicon, I find Kuhn's ijtihad (interpretation) both interesting and useful, but not binding. There is no reason to keep such an extremely useful term locked within the lexicon of a single author, especially when he himself has changed his definition several times. I have tried to give my own redefinition of the term elsewhere,[1] but suffice it to say that paradigms are abstract mental constructs (something like Weber's "ideal type") that represent what we consider to be the fundamental relationships that obtain in what we consider to be reality.

A paradigm and empirical reality are not one and the same thing, for the fundamental is different from the actual (the actual being expectedly much more complex than our mental and theoretical constructs). Nevertheless, empirical reality without a paradigm would be projected on our consciousness as mere fragments, as little meaningless self-referential icons or atoms. An explanatory paradigm is not something objectively found in reality, nor is it something subjectively dreamt up by the comparatist; it hovers delicately between the two worlds. A paradigm is definitely a mental construct carved by the comparatist, but it is carved after a long process of repeated observation and interaction with the literary works being analyzed. Once constructed, it does not remain within the confines of the comparatist's subjectivity, for it can then be tested against the literary works under study. The relationships that the comparatist claims to have discovered (through his/her analytical paradigm) are not accepted ipso facto, but are tested against the literary works. If there is little or no correspondence between the explanatory paradigm and the latent paradigm(s) operative in the works, the analytical paradigm would have very little or no explanatory power and could then be rejected or pronounced inadequate.[2]

Secularism

The current paradigm of secularism as separation of church and state confines secularizing processes to the political and economic (or to what is commonly called "public life") realms. We argue, however, that secularism is a comprehensive world outlook that operates on all levels of reality—it is the underlying and overarching paradigm in modern west-

ern civilization (and in all modernists for that matter), that operates on all levels of reality, and that shapes the modern individual's private dreams, public life, and conduct.[3] Like all world outlooks, it involves a view of God, humanity, and nature.[4] Secularism does not necessarily deny God's existence; it simply marginalizes Him, claiming to concentrate exclusively on this world (humanity and nature). Instead of a metaphysics of transcendence, where the universe achieves coherence and meaning through a center that is external to it, secularism operates in terms of a metaphysics of immanence, where the center of the universe is immanent in both humanity and nature or in either. This results not in a duality but in a dualism that is, however, an illusory dualism that resolves itself into a monism.[5] Reality projects itself first as an oscillation between a humanity-centered and a nature-centered outlook, between extreme individualism and extreme collectivity, between solipsism and reification, between a self-referential human self that considers itself the locus of immanence and a self-referential physical nature that is considered the locus of immanence.

This humanity–nature dualism turns into monism when the human solipsist self-centered self that has placed itself above nature realizes that the ultimate referent is actually not humanity but nature. An autonomous human self that operates in terms of its own human laws, which are distinct from the laws of nature and even at times contrary to them, would be an anomaly that would subvert the very basis of western modernity, committed as it is to a metaphysics of immanence and a materialistic rationalism (namely, a rationalism rooted in the concept of nature–matter). Humanity's whole being, within that frame of reference, is not determined by any human laws but rather by ferocious natural (material) forces and drives that are either immanent in its physical being (e.g., genes, instincts, libido, eros), or in the physical nature surrounding the individual (economic or ecological factors).

A human being, therefore, is merely a natural being; on the social level he/she is either "economic man" (propelled by economic self-interest, the profit motive, and the desire for accumulation of wealth and goods), or "physical man" or "libidinal man" (propelled by the desire for immediate self-gratification, eros, and the endless pursuit of pleasure). In lieu of the complex, responsible, free, and autonomous individual who is capable of transcending his/her material environment and natural self, "natural man" is centered around his/her natural self and is subject to natural law and to a variety of material and natural determinisms. Secularism can be redefined as the belief in the universal validity of natural law and its applicability to both physical and human nature. Therefore it could be labelled "naturalization," namely, explaining all of reality not in turns of human norms but in terms of nature–matter and of paradigms derived from the physical sciences. This means, in point of fact, the liquidation of all "unnatural" specificities and transcendental norms, dualities, and even the initial dualism of humanity and nature found in the secular outlook. A

cosmic naturalistic monism, therefore, dominates, and the primacy of the natural over the human is stressed.

With this simplification of human nature and its reduction to the level of nature–matter, the world is caught in the web of materialistic hard causality and determinism, of cause inexorably and unambiguously leading to effect, and of stimulus producing response (just as matter somehow miraculously produces mind).

Materialistic (cosmic, naturalistic) monism, the reduction of everything to one natural law that is immanent in matter, is the epistemological basis for a process of deconstruction, neutralization, depersonalization, and desanctification—not only of nature but also of humanity. Reduced to the level of undifferentiated matter, everything in this way becomes more amenable to measurement, quantification, instrumentalization, utilization, planning, technocratic engineering, programming; in brief, more amenable to a value-free rationalization that sees reality in terms of a narrow and constricted rational material calculus.

The human mind itself, within this naturalistic frame of reference, grants sanctity to nothing and itself becomes an agent of naturalization, dehumanization, and deconstruction. It sees the world (both humanity and nature) as ultimately knowable (and controllable and usable). The light of reason, knowing no limits, penetrates everything like a ruthless X-ray, judging everything by an objective and neutral criteria (firmly rooted in the ultimate category of nature–matter).

Though it claims to be a value-free process, in reality it is value-loaded, for it results in (or aims at) the control, conquest, and harnessing of all human and natural resources into the service of the individual with the most power. It thus translates everything into terms of what is useful/usable or useless/unusable matter. In other words, there is a thinly veiled ethics of self-interest, conquest, and power behind the facade of neutrality.

It might be useful to distinguish here between what I term "the human discourse of altruistic lovers" and "the secular discourse of self-centered imperialists." Within the context of the discourse of lovers, one knows his/her fellow human being from within and grows weaker on account of this knowledge, for in recognizing the other's full complexity and humanness one becomes more sympathetic and altruistic and begins to give and forgive. More knowledge begets more love and weakness. But this is the weakness of someone who has recognized his/her full humanity in himself/herself and in the other and its irreducibility to natural cupidity and stimuli. It is the weakness of someone who has achieved human strength, for instead of submitting (in a reflexive, natural, rational way) to the iron and monistic laws of natural necessity, such an individual freely rises to the generous laws of human complexity. In other words, it is a human strength that results in the primacy and autonomy of the human.

Within the context of the discourse of the self-centered imperialists, on the other hand, one knows the other from without and consequently

grows stronger, for he/she then can use this knowledge to manipulate and dominate the other, who is nothing but a useful/usable or useless/unusable object. More knowledge leads to more control and strength. But this is the strength of someone who has shed off his/her humanness completely, who has failed to rise to the level of human laws and instead has become a natural, material, nonhuman individual who has submitted to Darwin's iron laws of natural and physical necessity. Such an individual manifests natural law. In other words, it is natural strength that results in the subversion and eventual annihilation of the human.

This is actually the entire history of secularism: It started off with the declaration of the marginalization (or death) of God and of the centrality of humanity and/or nature. Now, however, it is declaring the decentering and death of humanity (postmodernism) and the imminent death of nature (ecological disaster).

The Paradigmatic Sequence of Secularization

So far we have talked of a "secularism paradigm" and a "history of secularism," which implies some kind of tension, if not contradiction. Paradigms are coherent structures that help us classify and comprehend reality and draw cognitive maps thereof. They derive their generalizing and classifying power from their relative independence from concrete history (specific times and places), for they overlook details and skip sequences. To increase their explanatory power without necessarily diminishing their generalizing and classifying power, I have tried to bring them closer to time and place by postulating what I call a "paradigmatic sequence."

Rather then view a paradigm as a timeless mental construct, it could be viewed as a coherent structure, complete only in potentio, that unfolds concretely in time through different historical phases. The different traits making up the paradigm are actualized gradually through different aspects and sectors of reality. The secularism paradigm has been unfolding since the Middle Ages. The first social sector to be secularized was the economic: the creation of economic enclaves outside the feudal economy, whose sole purpose was profit and that were unregulated by the Christian concept of fair price. In other words, economic activity became exclusively economic, deriving criteria of validity from itself.

This was followed by the secularization of the political sector during the Renaissance: the theory of the state as an end in itself (hence there is a *raison d'etat*) and its separation from the church and from all moral and human ideals. The secularization of the philosophical outlook in the eighteenth century (empiricism, rationalism, and materialism, namely, either the mind or matter referring to itself) was followed by the secularization of the imagination in the nineteenth century (romantic literature and art and

the rise of the organic metaphor) and by the secularization of dreams and personal conduct in the twentieth century (the democratization of hedonism and the determination to do one's own thing).

The process continues, covering different aspects of one's life, penetrating deeper and deeper into its farthest recesses till we come to the paradigmatic final moment where all aspects of human activity become autonomous, self-validating, and self-referential, outside the individual's grip and choice. Consequently all human activities are divorced from humanity and "liberated" from human norms, which leads to the total desanctification of humanity and nature and to the decentering and debunking of humanity, which confronts all aspects of its life as alien to itself. Rebellion is absurd; submission is both realistic and rational.

The nature–matter paradigm dominates completely, dispelling all illusions of human freedom. The paradigmatic final moment is a hypothetical moment, for it is the impossible moment of the total realization of the paradigm. Even though it is hypothetical and impossible, we come very close to it in social Darwinism, child pornography, nuclear tests, the standardization of modern life, and related trends. Probably it was actually realized in Nazi Germany, where one of the most thorough forms of materialistic utilitarian rationalism dominated, where old people and handicapped children were classified rationally as "useless eaters," where Jews, Gypsies, Polish intellectuals, and others were deemed disposable "human surplus."

Using the paradigmatic sequence of secularization sketched above, a comparison between Chaucer's narrative poem and Brecht's play might prove quite revealing. The first was written at the time when the secularization sequence was about to unfold; the second, immediately before the Second World War and after the secularizing sequence had been more or less realized. The narrator of Chaucer's tale is the "Frankeleyn," a substantial landowner in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Not being of noble birth, he did not inherit the land he owned; he bought it. In other words, he is basically a "bourgeois" character (like the Miller, the Merchant, and that medieval feminist, the Wife of Bath), but he has aristocratic–agrarian longings. He is part of the new economic order, but his dreams and norms belong to the old. The hero of Brecht's play, on the other hand, is a transnational imperialist merchant who has achieved a high degree of rational self-discipline, who has adapted himself completely to the laws of the market, and who entertains no dreams of nobility and transcendence. The difference between the Frankeleyn's tale and that of Brecht's Merchant parallels the difference between the first stages of the secularizing sequence, where only the economic sector was secularized and the individual's dreams were still private and free, and the final stages of secularization, where all human activities manifest natural law and submit to natural necessity.

The Exception and the Rule

Underlying Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* is a concept of the human being as an isolated individual motivated and determined exclusively by economic self-interest. Reducing everything to the level of economic law, this natural "economic man" is unable to enter into any human relationship. Thus, the play opens with a simple schematic outline of the opposing forces and of the nature of their conflict, which is almost exclusively economic. It is a play about "one who exploits and two who are exploited" (p. 111),[6] or, to phrase it differently, about the human individual reduced to the economic and the moral to the material.

Never entering in an internal relationship as lovers, friends, or relatives, the characters remain allegorized in terms of economic function and deconstructed in terms of profession. The dramatis personae does not include a single proper name. The faceless, nameless characters are simply tabulated as Merchant, Guide, Coolie, Two Policemen, Innkeeper, Widow, Leader of the Second Caravan, Judge, and Two Colleagues. All act according to type, manifest only their class interest, and never dissent or deviate from them.

Self-centered and self-referential "economic man" is unrestrained by any laws external to him; he simply serves his own interest and makes his own rules. But he also lives in a universe ruled by the natural laws of the market, to which he has to submit if he is to survive. In other words, he oscillates between an illusory dualism of self vs. world but eventually is engulfed by a monistic world of natural necessity. His world resembles a Darwinian jungle where "sick men die/but strong men fight," where only the "fittest" survive, and where "the weak lag behind/but the strong survive" (p. 113). It is a world bereft of all meaning, for the only reality in it is that of senseless competition and the accumulation of power. Inevitably this irresistible rule of the market–jungle, with its ethics of power, is elevated to the status of a moral ideal to be followed and revered—"and that is how it should be" (p. 127).

The Merchant, a limitless "economic man," is a truly imperialistic character, both solipsistic and insatiable. As nothing satisfies him, he must be ever conquering a new territory or yet another human being. Never loving or hating, never entering into a human relationship, he is always triumphant over something or someone. He first fires the Guide, then breaks down the Coolie and eventually kills him. Viewing the Coolie as merely a means of production, he mumbles in his anger that he should have taken a "more expensive" one, for the more expensive tools "repay your investment" (p. 112). Nature is treated as nothing more than an object for conquest, for it must be manipulated and used, broken down and ravaged to secure its treasures. In one of his lyrical Darwinian outbursts, the Merchant links his exploitation of "brother" man to his rape of "mother" nature:

Why should the earth give up its oil,
And why should this coolie carry my baggage?
To get the oil we have to struggle
Both with the earth and with the coolie. (p. 119)

This attitude of imperialist mastery reaches its dramatic peak after the Merchant's conquest of the river, when he, with his revolver pointed at the Coolie's back, forces the latter to cross the desert and once more breaks into a Darwinian chant:

This is how man masters the desert and the rushing river.
This is how man masters man.
The oil, the oil we need, is his reward. (p. 125)

This motif of the subjugation of "brother" man and "mother" nature is all-pervasive and results in a total objectification and commodification of humanity. But the irony is that in objectifying humanity and nature, the Merchant turns himself into an object; in instrumentalizing others, he instrumentalizes himself. He is aware that in a world without human or moral values and populated by limitless, insatiable, self-centered, and self-interested egos like himself, it would be stupid not to be constantly on guard. There can be no sleep in a contractualized world devoid of trust. This is what Macbeth, to his profound sorrow, came to realize after the murder of gracious Duncan. Macbeth, during the agony of his guilt, hears a voice telling him "Sleep no more" (Act II, Scene 2).

But the system of values to which Macbeth subscribes, even as he violates it, envisions humanity in complex terms, as a unique creature with moral burdens, not simply as a rational object with no heart or mind. In Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*, on the other hand, as demonstrated earlier, humanity is mere matter and natural physiçal strength is the only criterion. Thus, "a strong man asleep is not stronger than a weak man asleep" (p. 128). This simple mathematical, rational, and logical deduction leads to the ultimate form of alienation: the individual's self-denial of the simplest form of human activity. "Man shouldn't have to sleep," says the Merchant. This is no external voice haunting him the way it did Macbeth; it is rather the voice of cool, level-headed, and rational calculation.

At this point the circle of conquest is complete, for the Merchant, having vanquished the Coolie, the desert, and the river, has also conquered himself. He too becomes a mere means of production, a tool completely engulfed in the vertigo of a blind dynamism whose moral or psychological objectives have never been defined. This is the irony of "economic man": in his instability he breaks through all limits, denying their very existence, and thus becomes a law unto himself. But then the one who dreams of absolute power and freedom finds himself/herself in a lawless

universe without any freedom or inner security, a universe that turns one ultimately into a mere instrument without will or choice—a simple manifestation of rational, natural economic law.

During the trial in Brecht's play, the Guide sums up the universe he is moving into: "In the system which they created/humanity is an exception" (p. 141), because what dominates here are monistic, deterministic, and economic laws that deny humanity's ability of transcendence, its complexity and duality, and the possibility that the individual can be motivated by noneconomic and nonmaterial incentives.

A simple human act motivated by love or even by fear—the Coolie's motives are not clearly noble—has no place in this world. When the Coolie offers the Merchant his flask of water, the latter shoots him for giving water to his enemy. An altruistic act that does not necessarily serve one's own economic self-interest is an irrational "exception" and, in the Merchant's words, "one must go by the rule, not by the exception" (p. 141). One must go, that is, by the rational economic rule rooted in the uniform natural laws immanent in matter, not by the irrational exception that results from human freedom and choice. Even if the Coolie were in reality acting in a human way and, after transcending his class antagonism, gave the water flask to the Merchant, the latter, operating in terms of the natural discourse of imperialists and espousing its ethics of self-interest, power, and conquest, acted in "self-defence," for from a natural rational point of view "he couldn't assume it was a flask." The Coolie, in other words, had no reason to give the Merchant something to drink. The Merchant, let it be remembered, did not belong to the same class as his carrier and therefore had to expect the worst from him: "The accused acted, therefore, in justifiable self-defence—it being a matter of indifference whether he was threatened or must feel himself threatened" (pp. 142-43).

The legalistic language concluding the play is called for by the dramatic context, but it also expresses the world outlook developed in the play. Its precision is that of the language of contractual, objective relationships of a value-free rational utilitarianism, of a Darwinian jungle where the ethics of self-interest and power dominate, a godless universe of self-centered imperialists—yet helpless naturalists—who ravage both humanity and nature and bleed them both to death, and, in so doing, liquidate their own humanness.

That this world has been reduced to the level of collective rational economic rules and marketplace machinations is quite clear, but this is not the last word. This economic jungle is also framed by the playwright's didactic exhortation: Humanity must transcend. In both the prologue and epilogue to this work, Brecht (despite his ideological commitment to materialism) affirms the principle of transcendence, of human beings unconfined by any "natural order," persistently questioning, always going beyond established limits. If a rapacious pattern of behavior is established, as it is in this play, the reader is invited to with-

draw, to judge, to see the "bloody confusion," "the rule," the "ordered disorder," the "planned caprice," and the "dehumanized humanity" for what they really are—mere "abuses," temporary phenomena to be "altered" by a mind that can create order out of disorder, that can transcend economic self-interest and Darwinian ethics, and that can rise to higher human laws.

But all elements of transcendence in *The Exception and the Rule* exist outside the dramatic context proper. They appear rather in the didactic frame, the play itself remaining devoid of any dialectic potential that might challenge the ruthless cycle of economic determinism.

The Frankeleyn's Tale

In Chaucer's "The Frankeleyn's Tale," we have a surprisingly similar situation—but only up to a point. Even though the world of the "Frankeleyn's Tale" is highly ceremonious, where passions are implicit and where both good and evil are mostly latent, there are nevertheless some striking though subtle similarities with *The Exception and the Rule*. Even though there are no "economic men" in this medieval narrative poem, there exists an unmistakable insatiability that pulls the characters into a ruthless power struggle that enslaves them all.

The faithful wife, Dorigen, deeply saddened by the departure of her husband Arveragus, indulges in an unbridled and uninhibited sorrow (not unlike the insatiable desire for conquest characteristic of the Merchant in Brecht's play). She weeps for the absent husband, voicing her indignation at the ships that come and go without him, even protesting against the very divine scheme of nature with its "grisly rokkes blake"[7] ("black and grisly rocks") (1. 131).[8] With her faith shaken, she questions even God's wisdom:

> But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,
> That seemen rather a foul confusiun
> Of werk than any fair creacioun
> Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,
> Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?
> . . .
> See ye nat, Lord, how mankinde it destroyeth?
> (11. 140-44, 148)

> (But Lord, these fiendish rocks are laid
> In what would rather seem a foul confusion
> Of work than the creation and conclusion
> Of a God so perfect, wise, and stable,
> Why madest Thou Thy work unreasonable?
> . . .
> Lord, seest Thou not how they destroy mankind?)

This possessive, narcissistic humanity-centered view of nature is somewhat reminiscent of the Merchant's economistic, self-centered, utilitarian attitude and his determination to control and possess everything.

With this challenge to God, there is also an implicit doubt of the possibility of transcendence and a subtle shift in perspective. We leave the world of piety and conjugal love, of loyalty to a higher law, and move to a pagan world replete with earthly paradises:

> . . . craft of mannes hand so curiously
> Arrayed hadde this gardin, trewely,
> That never was ther gardin of swich prys,
> But if it were the verray paradys.
> (11. 181-84)

> (the hand of man with such cunning craft
> Had decked this garden out in pleach and graft
> There never was a garden of such price
> Unless indeed it were in paradise.)

This is a world of young lovers in the service of Venus who pray to Apollo, and whose love does not bring peace and harmony but rather causes one to languish "as furie dooth in helle" (1. 222). The counterpointing of the image of an earthly paradise with a fury in hell is quite significant, recalling in some aspects "economic man's" dream of complete freedom and his subsequent loss of all freedom in practice. The paradise of natural lawlessness has become the hell of natural necessity and inevitably.

When the pagan youth, Aurelius servant of Venus, approaches the impatient Dorigen to express his love, she asks him half-jocularly, but as we know on the basis of her sad soliloquy also half-seriously, to change God's plan:

> I seye, what ye han maad the coost so clene
> of rokkes that ther nis no stoon y-sene.
> (11. 267-68)

> (when, I say, you clear the coast
> So clean there's not a single stone to boast.)

If he were to achieve this objective, then she would love him "best of any man." And in a very solemn tone she adds: "Have heer my trouthe in all that ever I can" (11. 269-270).

Wretched Aurelius, driven by his desire to possess Dorigen, turns to his brother, a scholar who once saw a book about "magik naturel" (natural magic) (1. 396), the precursor of modern science and the whole ideology of conquest and power. The narrator takes pains at this point in the narrative

to remind us of the world of piety and harmony, of which we have already lost sight, when he recalls that the Holy Church does not approve of such a practice, which is considered to deal in mere illusions (1. 406).

Aruelius and his brother go to a magician in Orleans who not only impresses them by his power but also drives a hard bargain: he demands one thousand pounds. From the world of love and then a pagan world of earthly paradises, we have now arrived in the world of power and cash. Once assured of his fees, the magician takes out his astronomical engines of power, the tables of Toledo (1. 571)—a clear reference to Muslim science—but without its ethical and metaphysical underpinnings. Via calculations and equations, he achieves "this miracle" (1. 571), a usage of the term in reference to magic, which is a forerunner of our quasi-religious belief that science will bring about salvation. Aurelius, falling at once at his master's feet, thanks the Lady Venus—not God—and goes to possess Dorigen.

By this point in the narrative, all characters are more or less deprived of their freedom. Dorigen is bound by her vow to Aurelius; Aurelius is indebted to the magician; the magician is demanding his money; and Arveragus, upon his return, finds himself bound by his wife's vow. This determinism and entrapment in external material circumstances are quite reminiscent of *The Exception of the Rule*. In both cases, insatiability and the desire to achieve control lead to their very opposite: confinement within the iron laws of necessity. Dorigen, like Aurelius before her, contemplates suicide, the ultimate sin of self-annihilation, which is ironically reminiscent of the Merchant's decision not to sleep! What passes through her mind at this moment are scenes of lust and lechery, of violated maidens, of self-centered men dominating women: a world of self-centered imperialist conquest and control. Gone is the world of the altruistic lovers, of harmony and mutuality.

"The Frankeleyn's Tale," like that of *The Exception and the Rule*, celebrated a different world, a world of altruism in which there is neither conqueror nor conquered, where there are no debts to be paid or credits to be collected. Love binds the knight Arveragus and his lady Dorigen, and even though he is "hir housbonde and hir lord" (1. 13), who has "lordship as men had over hir wyves" (1. 14) "of his free wil" he has decided that:

> Ne sholde upon him take no maistrye
> Agany hir wil, ne kythe hir jalousye,
> But hir obeye and folwe hir wil in al
> As any lovere to his lady shal.
> (11. 19-22)

> ([He would not exercise] his authority,
> Against her will or show jealousy,
> But would obey in all with simple trust
> as any lover of a lady must.)

The knight Arveragus had wanted "the name of soveraynettee" only for the dignity of "his degree," not for any inner satisfaction (11. 23-24). Dorigen, in turn, has decided to be his "humble trewe wyf" (1. 29). The narrator then briefly digresses to point out that love and (imperialist) domination ("maistrye") are two different things:

For o thing, sires, saufly dar I seye:
That frendes everich other moot obeye,
If they wol longe holden companye
Love wol nat been contreyned by maistrye;
When maistrye comth, the god of love anon
Beteth hise wings, and farewell! he is gon!

Love is a thing as any spirit free;
Wommen of kinde desiren libertee,
And nat to ben consteyned as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal.
(11. 32-42)

(For there's one thing, my lord, it's safe to say;
Lovers must each be ready to obey
The other, if they would long keep company.
Love will not be constrained by mastery
When mastery comes the god of love anon
Stretches wings and farewell! he is gone!

Love is a thing as any spirit free;
Women by nature long for liberty
And not to be constrained or made a thrall,
And so do men, if I may speak for all.)

The calculus of happiness in love is different from the rational mathematical calculus that dominates the secular world of the market and imperialist conquest. The one who gives more receives more:

Loke who that is most paceint in love,
He is at his avantage al above.
(11. 43-44)

(Whoever's the most patient under love
Has the advantage and will rise above the other.)

This, then, is the world portrayed in the prologue; it provides an alternative to the rule of determinism and self-interest. But unlike *The Exception and the Rule*, this moral alternative does not stand out in isolation from

the rest of the drama. On the contrary, it is fully worked out, concretely and dramatically, within the narrative itself. The change comes when an impatient Dorigen shakes off her despair and thoughts of suicide, transcends her situation, and decides to tell her husband the whole story. And Arveragus, refusing to surrender to the iron laws of necessity and self-interest—be it his natural jealousy or his rational legal title of sovereignty—rises to the higher laws of humanity: "Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe," says he, asking his wife to keep her vow, to freely conform to the higher law of morality rather than slavishly submit to the iron law of necessity. The constraining cycle thus is broken and, rather than subjugation to blind necessity, the inner laws of human love are triumphant, for all the characters successfully choose to be free. Aurelius is overwhelmed by this nobility of mind, this "gentillesse," and in turn decides:

> That fro his lust yet were him lever abyde
> Than doon so heigh a cherlish wrecchednesse
> Agayns franschyse and alle gentillesse!
> (11. 794-96)

> (to forego his passion than to force
> An act on her of such a churlish kind,
> And against such nobility of mind.)

He not only returns Dorigen to her husband but also makes a vow: "My trouthe woul I kepe, I wol nat lye" (1. 842). Thereupon he goes to the magician to relate the story of the new freedom stemming from his inner commitment to human law and his ability to transcend. Roused by pity for Dorigen and her husband, moved by the nobility of his example, and going beyond narrow self-interest, he tells the "philosophre":

> . . . right as frely as he sent hir me,
> As frely sente I hir to him agyn.
> This al and som, there is namore to seyn.
> (11. 876-79)

> (I sent her back as freely then as he
> Had sent her to me, let her go away.
> That's the whole story, there's no more to say.)

The magician is expectedly overwhelmed and, rather than insist on his cash, he recognizes the freedom of being human, of conforming to inner human laws instead of to the laws of external necessity. He also decides to emulate that "gentil dede" by forgiving Aurelius's debt.

The Exception and the Rule ends with an urgent reiteration of the Prologue's moral exhortation, for the human possibilities conjured up

there have been frustrated brutally in the dramatic context itself. "The Frankeleyn's Tale" ends with harmony restored and reasserted and with the speaker posing a triumphant rhetorical question: "Which was the most free, as thinkest yow?" (1. 894) (Which seemed the finest gentleman to you?" [more literally "most generous"]). He is inviting the readers to share in that freedom of choice resulting from the triumph of the human over the physical and the natural, and the triumph of "gentillesse" over contract and cupidity.

It might seem foolhardy to try to identify a literary work with its broader sociohistorical context, but nevertheless a grasp of the relationship between the one and the other, no matter how tenuous it might be, enlightens and enriches the work. Chaucer's world, it seems, is one in which the necessitarianism of our secular modern times, with its denial of the possibility of moral choice and transcendence, was beginning to emerge. There was still available, however, an alternative view of humanity. Thus, harmony might be violated but also restored; freedom might be undermined but also reaffirmed. In the deterministic world of *The Exception and the Rule,* all human relations are frozen and all humanity is objectified into classes and functionalized into means of production (a world not unlike Nazi Germany) without any possibility of regeneration. Nothing is left for the artist but to preach a humanistic alternative, knowing beforehand that he/she is being unrealistic and visionary, that is, a revolutionary.

Epilogue

The issue of freedom and necessity, as indicated above, is both significant and relevant to all human beings, but I would argue that it is more so for people in the Third World (the Muslim world included). We stand at the threshold of modernity (more or less like Chaucer himself and his Frankeleyn), and therefore can see it with a kind of detachment. We not only see the sequence of secularization but also its consequences (e.g., alienation, imperialism, economical disaster, and reification). We cannot be as jubilant as the early secularizers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, who embarked on the project of secular modernity with such splendid innocence and noble naivete. Unlike us, they had not heard of instrumental reason and deconstruction, of Eliot's disillusioned "The Wasteland" or Beckett's absurdist *Waiting for Godot*, of Nietzsche welcoming nihilism as a permanent guest in our midst, or of Derrida welcoming all of us to a world of gliding signifiers without anything being signified. Unlike us, they had not been through the imperialist pillage of the world, the Holocaust, or Chernobyl.

But some of us like to argue that precisely because we stand at the threshold of secular modernity, not completely encapsulated in it the way the West is yet aware of the consequences of modernity, we will have a choice, no matter how limited. This feeling of having a choice, true or illu-

sory, is what underlies the overdue concern with the moral significance of literary works. A moral stance is impossible without the possibility of a choice. Without it, there is either the nightmare reality of modernism, where heroes are metamorphosed into roaches and decisions are made in the full knowledge that everything is doomed to failure, or the phantasmagoric unreality of postmodernism, where simulacra replaces real objects and things happen for no obvious reason. The parables of freedom and necessity are important for all individuals, at all times, and in all places. But for people in the Third World, they might have more urgency, immediacy, and relevance.

Endnotes

1. See my "Paradigms and the Islamization of Knowledge" (Cairo: IIIT—Cairo Office, 1992), Monograph (in Arabic).

2. Another way to approach this same problem from a completely different cultural tradition is to analyze the Arabic verb *naṭaqa*, which means "to articulate" or simply "to talk, speak, or utter." The words *manṭiq* (logic) and *niṭāq* (boundary) are derived from the same root. We notice the presence of two opposite dimensions in the term: one objective (boundary, logic), the other subjective (to utter and speak), with the middle level dimension of reconciliation (to articulate). There is a form of this verb that describes the comparatist's work: *istanṭaqa*, which means literally "to cause to articulate or utter." So when we say that the comparatist has *istanṭaqa* the works compared, we are actually saying that the texts are uttering their own words and thoughts because the comparatist has caused them to do so. Without him/her they are mute. On the other hand, the active comparatist cannot say anything except through the texts; without them he/she is mute. Nothing exists in itself and nothing exists exclusively for us. The comparatist and the texts exist through each other. Although each has his/its inactive autonomy, for the active life they need each other. To put it in different words, the rationale for a comparative study of any two works is something that lies both in the work compared and the comparatist.

3. This argument is not exactly completely new, for it is implicit in the works of many authors. Max Weber, for one, assumes some kind of relatedness, if not synonymity at times, between such terms as "secularize," "modernize," "rationalize," "desanctify," and "disenchantment." In other words, like many other sociologists, he assumes the existence of some kind of unified "secular" world outlook.

Samuel Huntington, in his essay "The Clash of Civilizations," quotes various statements from the works of a number of authors, which implies a comprehensive and complex paradigm of secularism. For instance, there is George Weigel's statement about "the un-secularization of the world," Bernard Lewis's reference to "our secular present," and Kamal Ataturk's attempt to build "a modern, secular, Western nation state." See "Toward a More Complex and Explanatory Paradigm of Secularism," in John Keane, ed. *The Collapse of Secularism* (forthcoming).

4. The concept of nature in western philosophical discourse is central but quite problematic. The romantic aura that has surrounded it weakens its explanatory and analytical power. Therefore, I suggest that whenever the term *nature* occurs, it should be read as *nature–matter*, and thus *naturalistic* would be synonymous with *materialistic*.

5. I distinguish between duality and dualism: Duality implies a relationship or even a dialogue between two elements that, even though unlike each other, still have some traits in common. Therefore they can interact in a meaningful way without merging. Dualism occurs when two elements of equal status and power are diametrically opposed and thus

can never experience any kind of interaction. On the other hand, one element can eventually absorb the other, replacing the dualism by a monism.

6. Bertolt Brecht, *The Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1965). To reduce the number of footnotes, all page numbers will be cited in the body of the essay itself.

7. Walter W. Skeat, ed., *Chaucer: Complete Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 637-48. The first edition was published in 1894.

8. All modernizations are from Nevill Coghill, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952), 425-40.