INTRODUCTION

There is a sphere of medieval writing in which the abstract and the concrete, ideas and images, are inextricably conjoined. The first great monument in this sphere is Scotus Eriugena's *Periphyseon*¹ (completed in the years 864-6); later, in the twelfth century, it extends to writings as diverse as William of Conches's *Dragmaticon*, Bernard Silvestris' *Cosmographia*,² and Hildegard of Bingen's *Liber divinarum operum*. In form and conception these three later works would seem to have little in common: William's is—like Eriugena's masterpiece—a dialogue on the creation and structure of the universe; Bernard's is an allegorical epic, in alternate prose and verse, in which goddesses, directed by a divine artist, shape the world and man; Hildegard's is a record of her private visions of cosmogony, and her meditations upon those visions. Yet, disparate as they are, these and the *Periphyseon* exemplify with exceptional clarity a fundamental creative element, which also distinguishes certain other medieval texts commonly grouped as 'Platonic'. They are achievements not only of the rational intellect but of the fictive imagination. Their cosmological insights are nourished by imaginative springs as much as by the disciplined sources of abstract thinking. Theirs is a realm where sacred vision and profane myth can combine with analytic thought, poetic fantasy with physical and metaphysical speculation. In terms of scholarship it is a realm which, because it is at the borders of several genres, is still in many ways a neglected one. The four works I have mentioned, for instance, are not given a central place in histories of medieval philosophy any more than in histories of medieval literature. To read them at all, one must still have recourse to antiquated and garbled editions,³ or else to manuscripts.

¹ This is the correct title of the work often known as *De Divisione Naturae* (cf. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, *Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae Periphyscon Liber Primus*, Dublin 1968, pp. 9-10).

² Here too the title of the work in the earliest and best manuscripts was long forgotten, and the epic is still commonly known as *De Mundi Universitate* (cf. W. Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century*, Princeton 1972, p. 159).

³ The *Periphyseon* is being edited in a fine Latin-English edition by I. P. Sheldon-Williams, in the series *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, which will replace the edition in P. L. 122. Books I and II have already appeared. For the *Dragmaticon* one must

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My aim in this book is to study the roles of concept and image—how they unite and how they act upon and enrich each other—in certain medieval texts belonging to this sphere of imaginative thought. It is to see some of the interactions between imagination and argument—as these interactions were conceived theoretically and as they were exploited creatively. I proceed by way of close discussion of a small group of outstanding testimonies, from the ninth century to the twelfth. A number of them are unpublished; none are yet known in detail to any but a handful of specialists. Even among the published texts that I cite only one or two, from Peter Abelard and from Alan of Lille, have been edited in a way that meets modern scholars’ demands and provides a firm basis for interpretation; for the rest, manuscript evidence must constantly be used to check and complement the printed texts, to arrive at something nearer to what the authors wrote.

The first chapter is concerned with two medieval thinkers, William of Conches and Peter Abelard, and their theories about the use of imaginative and symbolic modes of thought. The other four chapters are explorations of various actual uses of such modes: they show how a number of fabled narratives became more than fables, how they were transformed into speculations about man and his place in the universe.
In rigorous argument, which aims at establishing truths, is there any legitimate place for the fables which human imagination constructs? Often this has been denied. Often the negation has taken the form, 'Poets are liars'—a pronouncement that has its own long and distinguished history. In Greek thought, Xenophanes and Plato—both of whom nonetheless wrote verses—are among the first champions of this view. In the Middle Ages it is perhaps Thomas Aquinas who, following and extending a thought of Aristotle's, expresses some of the most trenchant arguments in this direction:

The poets lie, not only in saying that the deity is envious, but in many other things too, as the common proverb says...

The poets Orpheus, Musaeus and Linus, of whom Orpheus was the most famous... treated some aspects of the nature of the universe through the enigmas of fable (aenigmatibus fabularum). For they said that Ocean, where the floods gather, and Thetis, goddess of the waters, are the parents of generation.

It was through this fabled image (fabulari similitudine), Aquinas claims, that the poets misled the philosopher Thales into claiming that water was the ultimate principle of things. But this, he goes on, is to 'recognize only a principle that belongs to the class of material causes'. Aquinas' language here is Aristotelian; yet underlying it is

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1 Thomas Aquinas, *Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. M.-R. Cathala and R. M. Spiazzi (2nd ed., Torino-Roma 1971) I iii, 63 (p. 19), I iv, 82-83 (p. 25). I iv, 92 (p. 26). Compare the notable discussion of the theme of poets and truth in E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (2nd ed., Bern 1954) ch. 11 (Poesie und Philosophie) and ch. 12 (Poesie und Theologie). Curtius stresses Aquinas' hostility to the poets' claims to truth. But this should perhaps be qualified in one respect. Where Aristotle says that the philosopher, whose thought is stirred by wonder at the universe, must be to some extent a lover of myth, since fabula consists of wonders (in the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, et philomythes philosophus aliqualiter est; fabula namque ex miris constituitur, ed. cit. p. 17), Aquinas adds a comment that has no counterpart in Aristotle, in which he links the Philosopher's inspiration with the poet's:

To be a lover of fabula is characteristic of poets... The reason why the philosopher is like the poet is that both reflect on wonders (I iii, 55, p. 18). Here Aquinas may have been influenced by the thought of Abelard (see below p. 64). Nonetheless, the predominant impression in other works is that Aquinas makes no concession to modes of symbolic thought. Thus in the commentary on *De Caelo* : Orpheus and Hesiod, 'called theologians because they handed down matters divine in a poetic and mythic mode (postice et fabulariter),' and Plato too, thought the world had a beginning but will have no end. Aquinas continues:

Yet some people say that these poets and philosophers, and especially Plato, did not mean it the way it sounds from the surface meaning of the words, but that they wanted to conceal their wisdom in certain myths and enigmatic modes of utterance (fabulis
an assumption that the greater part of the Platonic tradition likewise shared. The makers of fabled images are untrustworthy: they can deceive themselves and others into thinking fabled images are truth.

But this is only one side of the argument. The present study is concerned with another. Here we shall observe some of the countermoves to the deprecation of the fabulous that were evolved in the earlier Middle Ages, in the period before Aquinas and before thirteenth-century Scholasticism: in fact, in the heart of the Platonic tradition itself. We shall see how certain thinkers, culminating in the most brilliant of the twelfth-century Platonists, attempted the defence and the use of the realm of imagination. In the Patristic period we can observe beginnings in this direction by noting, for instance, new shades of meaning that are given to rhetorical concepts such as *integumentum* and *involucrum* (literally 'covering' and 'wrapping'): both come to suggest that valid hidden meanings may lurk in imagery and story-matter. Especially with Augustine a positive valuation of such concepts comes into play, countering a prevailing older attitude that tended to equate the 'covering' of meaning with mystification or obscurity. Again, in the ninth century, Scotus Eriugena renews for the Latin West the high significance which Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) had given to concepts such as *aenigma* and *symbolum*. But the most far-reaching development in this direction, the elaboration of a new theory of the fabulous modes and their ways of arriving at truth, was to come later. In the early twelfth century William of Conches and Peter Abelard, far from dismissing *fabula* and *aenigma* in Aquinas' fashion, go to some lengths to demonstrate that these can have a cognitive function and value of their own. So, too, with other terms that pertain to the

*et aenigmaticis locutionibus*); and that it was often Aristotle's habit to object not to their meaning, which was sound, but to their choice of expression, lest anyone fall into error through such a way of speaking... But however this may be is of little concern to us, since philosophy is pursued not in order to know what people may have meant, but to know how the truth of matters stands (*in De Caelo* I 10, lect. 22, *Opera Omnia*, Roma 1886, III 90-91).

Even more outspoken is the attack on Platonic imagery in the commentary on *De Anima*. Here Aquinas fully accepts the notion that Aristotle 'often rejects Plato's views not for their meaning but for the way they sound. He does so because Plato had a bad way of teaching (*malum modum docendi*): for he expresses everything figuratively (*figurate*), and teaches by way of symbols (*per symbola*), meaning by the words something other than the words themselves proclaim—"as when he said the soul was a circle" (*in De Anima* I 1, lect. 8, ed. A. M. Pirotta p. 31).
imaginative sphere — *imago, similitudo, translatio* — and to the mythopoeic. *Fabula* itself is often used by the twelfth-century thinkers to mean 'myth', though it can also extend more widely, to fiction and animal-fable;¹ the terms *integumentum* and *involucrum* likewise come to be used as near-synonyms for 'myth', but with special emphasis on the 'inner' meaning of the mythic narrative, which it is the philosopher's task to discover.

The greater part of the first chapter is therefore devoted to William of Conches, whose discussion of symbolic and mythopoeic thought, at the outset of his commentary on Macrobius, is remarkably comprehensive and original,² and as yet is entirely unknown, the text having

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¹ On *fabula* as a term for 'myth', see Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* VI 5:

*A fabulis enim mythicon [genus theologiarum] dictum est, quoniam μιθάος Graece fabula dicitur.*

In view of the widely divergent interpretations of the concept *'myth'* in recent years, it may be helpful to cite a definition by the distinguished anthropologist and historian of religion Åke Hultkrantz, which corresponds to what I have in mind, and broadly (I believe) to what William of Conches had in mind when he discussed pagan narratives concerning supernatural beings:

The *myth* is an epic narrative dealing with figures belonging to the supernatural sphere: cosmic beings, gods and spirits. The action of the narrative takes place in a remote prehistoric period, but in principle the once consummated course of events is still of topical interest: timeless and eternal as the course of the planets. The scene of the drama is as a rule (but not always) another world than our own: heaven, the underworld or an unknown country. The myth gives instruction concerning the world of the gods, and therewith concerning the cosmic order; it confirms the social order and the cultural values obtaining in it and it is in itself sacred. It is therefore self-evident that it is intended to be embraced with belief and reverence. (*The North American Indian Orpheus Tradition*, Stockholm 1957, pp. 12-13).


² The full extent of William's originality cannot be established with certainty until we have a comprehensive survey of the manuscripts of Macrobius' *Commentum*, with detailed information on their dates and on the glosses that they contain. This would have to be a *conspectus codicum* analogous to the admirable one compiled by J. H. Waszink for the Calcidian *Timaeus*, in the introduction to his edition in the Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi (London-Leiden 1962). Meanwhile, it is possible to gather information about the influence of Macrobius in the West prior to William of Conches from a variety of studies that are listed below. On the basis of these, at least, one can affirm that nothing so far observed suggests that William, in his approach to the Macrobian problem of *fabula*, was relying on earlier, intermediate discussions.

M. Schedler's *Die Philosophie des Macrobius und ihr Einfluss auf die Wissenschaft des christlichen Mittelalters* (Beiträge XIII 1, Münster 1916) is still the only attempt at a
remained unpublished. But the ideas of Abelard are also considered in some detail, by way of comparison and contrast. Throughout, reference is made to the most relevant classical and early Christian texts, in order to show some of the ways in which the twelfth-century thinkers adapted, transformed and criticized the views of their predecessors in the ancient world. For it was above all Macrobius' observations on fable and myth, and the severe restrictions with which he hedged their use in philosophic thought, which set the medieval Platonists a challenge at a high level of discussion.

The first chapter is the most abstract and technical in the book. It projects certain theoretical perspectives of the early twelfth century, in which the particular developments of fabulous materials—presented in Chapters II to V—may be viewed. But there is nothing immutable about proceeding in this order: it could be as meaningful, and perhaps less demanding for the reader, to begin with the four more concrete chapters, devoted to the fables themselves, and turn to the theoretical perspectives afterwards.

especially their use for new cognitive purposes, to provide the imagina-
tive extension of speculation and vision at the limits of conceptual
statement. This can be seen as a conscious renewal of the method
Plato had used in his *Timaeus*, a work which from the ninth century
to the twelfth was not only a school-text but often a living inspiration.

In showing (Chapter II) how the ancient image of the world-egg, and
the cosmogonic myths associated with it, were developed creatively
within a Christian framework of ideas, I focus on four texts. Two are
unpublished: an anonymous ninth-century exposition of Boethius' 
hymn to the God ‘who governs the universe with perpetual reason’, and
a cosmogonic poem by a mid-twelfth century poet, Milo. The other
two, by Abelard and by Hildegarde of Bingen, are known, but have
not yet, I think, been seen in their historical context or assessed at
their true significance.

The ‘fables of the soul’ (Chapter III) are again unpublished. Though
they are found in a relatively late manuscript, I am convinced that
they record some authentic teachings of William of Conches, and that
his inspiration is at the heart of these fables. Here the commentator
turns creative artist, building fable upon fable, using moments from
Martianus Capella’s fantasies about Hymenaeus and Mercury, and
Mercury’s search for a bride, together with ninth-century allegoriza-
tions of such moments, as a starting-point for his own fabricated
narratives about how human souls are related to the world-soul, human
knowledge to divine knowledge.

The ‘fables of destiny’ (Chapter IV) occur in the works of another
twelfth-century thinker, Bernard Silvestris, who is also a profound and
original poet. I have tried to show how in each of his three major
works (*Cosmographia, Mathematicus, Experimentarius*) Bernard returns
to the problem of destiny, which was crucial to him both scientifically
and humanly, and how on each occasion a direct intellectual analysis
passes over into the indirections of *fabula* and *aenigma*, as the modes
most suited to expressing his unique attitude, without over-simplifi-
cation. Bernard has often been presented as a determinist; I try to
show in what essential ways this naïve conception of his thought must
be modified.

The brief concluding chapter, an interpretation of a youthful work
of Alan of Lille’s, is an illustration of the freest treatment of ancient
fabulous material known to me from the twelfth century. It is less a
transformation than a spontaneous invention, using ancient themes
and images as a springboard. Here the interaction of images and
concepts is seen at its most self-conscious, intellectually precious perhaps, but also exhilarating.

The illustrations chosen throughout these four chapters are instances of the unusual in medieval thought and literature, not of the typical. In many ways they present difficulties of interpretation more formidable than those in the more conventional texts of the time. This means that here, as in my other books, I have tried to open discussions rather than close them. Here too—as with the problems concerning medieval poets' expressions of love, or their attitudes to poetic innovation and experiment—I have become convinced that certain questions ought not too readily to be regarded as settled. The popular concepts, still frequently invoked, of 'the medieval mind' and 'the medieval model of the universe', make necessary a constant watch against too easy generalization; they must constantly be challenged by the comparison of new specific and untypical instances. Only in this way will the perception of the truly enlightening pluralisms of the Middle Ages—the diversity of minds, the diverse images of the universe—not be blurred. The problem is particularly acute as regards the twelfth-century Platonists. One eminent historian has claimed, even as recently as 1970, that 'All their thoughts were old thoughts.' In these explorations I try to show in detail that many of their thoughts were new: not, of course, new thoughts developed in a vacuum, but thoughts whose newness arises through a penetrating and fresh re-thinking of the old.

In pursuing these researches I have been helped enormously by some of the expert editions and studies that have appeared in the last twenty years, notably those of Edouard Jeanneau, Tullio Gregory, and Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny. But I should also mention one older work, and one on the periphery of my enquiry, that have proved particularly illuminating. Nearly half a century ago Hans Liebeschütz gave a lecture at the Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg, 'Kosmologische Motive in der Bildungswelt der Frühscholastik'; it was publish-

2 The Medieval Mind is the title of H. O. Taylor's well-known book (3rd ed., 2 vols., New York 1919); the expression is by no means obsolete. 'The medieval model of the universe' is a central concept in C.S. Lewis's lively study, The Discarded Image (Cambridge 1964).
ed in 1926.¹ This was a masterly sketch of certain cosmological speculations from the ninth century to the thirteenth—from Scotus Eriugena to William of Auvergne—of those speculations, in fact, that did not fall easily into fixed categories such as medieval theology, or scientific writing, or metaphysics, or vision-literature. Thus Liebeschütz’s concern, like mine, was with something largely ignored by the standard histories of philosophy and theology, and by literary histories. He was the first to sketch this important medieval realm where abstract thought and imaginative vision interpenetrate, the first to give a conspectus of some of the principal works belonging to that realm. The other work I would mention specially is Jean Pépin’s *Mythe et Allégorie* (Paris 1958). Pépin presents a comprehensive historical picture of ‘les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes’ of the intellectual attitudes to myth and interpretations of myth. He ranges from the pre-Socratics to Emperor Julian and Saint Gregory Nazianzen. My own book is sharply selective, and on a far smaller scale, but for certain moments in the medieval West I hope to have achieved in some measure a continuation of Pépin’s line of enquiry. I also hope it will become clear that in the twelfth century there are thinkers whose attitude to myth, and to the allegorical and symbolic modes of renewing myth,² are as richly complex—and as demanding of the reader—as Pépin has shown for a thinker of the stature of Plotinus.

I have limited myself to a few testimonies only, so that the tone and texture of particular arguments, and particular uses of the fabu-

² The conceptions allegory and symbol, and some medieval analogues to the Romantic distinction between allegory and symbol (as defined in Goethe’s *Maximen*) are discussed below, pp. 119-122. The term *symbolum*, in certain usages akin to Goethe’s sense of *Symbol*, is more briefly discussed on pp. 44-5. I mention only incidentally the development of a sacramental or incarnational view of the universe, in the Augustinian tradition and the Victorine tradition of the twelfth century. (On this see especially Johan Chydenius, *The Theory of Medieval Symbolism*, Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 1960; M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle*, 2nd ed., Paris 1966, chs. VII-VIII; H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* II 2 (Paris 1964), ch. VIII; T. Gregory, ‘L’idea di natura’, *Congresso* pp. 27-65; H. Brinkmann, ‘Die “Zweite Sprache” und die Dichtung des Mittelalters’, *Miscellanea Medievalia VII* [1970] 155-71). This ‘sacramental’ view, too, has often been called a ‘symbolic’ view of the universe, and is relevant to the study of some important currents of medieval thought. But for the purposes of the present argument and of the texts here discussed, this type of symbolism is of lesser importance.
lous, could be closely observed—observed, too, with reference to the historical roots of the texts considered. The texts here presented and discussed represent only a small fraction of what I have examined in manuscripts since 1966, and that itself is certainly only a small fraction of what remains to investigate. There are a number of other problems in the discussion of which twelfth-century thinkers relied to a striking extent on fabulous material in advancing their arguments: the nature of the primordial chaos, for instance, or the nature of matter, or the role of the four elements in the cosmogonic process. For these, too, I have collected many unpublished testimonies, including some that are of the first importance. Yet, with reluctance, I have excluded them from the present study. To treat these themes as well, with adequate textual and historical evidence, would have delayed this book, which has been eight years in the making, many years more—and still there would have been no question of completeness, only of a further range of sampling. Despite the numerous fine editions and studies of individual texts in recent years, the riches of unpublished material, and the gaps in our understanding of the published, are still very great.

This leads me, finally, to comment on the form this book has taken. The comment is both an explanation and an apology. The book consists of five specific explorations into the problems of imagination and argument in the period before the thirteenth-century flowering of Scholasticism. They are not five separate essays, each of which could as well have been published independently: they are interrelated, as even the number of cross-references among them will make plain. At the same time, they are not a finished, coherent treatment of the subject, or even of a part of the subject. A more definitive and comprehensive historical synthesis cannot, I believe, be undertaken by a single scholar at the present time without over-simplifying and falsifying. There are too many vital tasks of detailed interpretation still to achieve. It was in this way, for instance, that C.H. Haskins conceived his Studies in the History of Medieval Science—an outstanding group of fragmentary but linked contributions to his subject, rather than yet another attempt at a historical survey such as those of Duhem and Thorndike. So, too, Bruno Nardi refused right till the end of his life to attempt a comprehensive work on Dante and medieval thought, because of the over-simplifications it would have entailed. Instead, he has left us a remarkable series of diverse and interrelated studies, such as his Dante e la cultura medievale. With the
example of these scholars as an inspiration, I have tried—*si parva licet componere magnis*—to bring together certain particular explorations, in the hope that, incomplete as they are, they may further an awareness of the greater problems, and be viewed as contributions towards a future synthesis.