CHAPTER FOUR

TRUTH AND INSTABILITY IN THE PROSIMETRA

We have seen how writers revived the form and the procedures of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* in an attempt to make sense of various contemporary crises, as Boethius—at least by the measure of the first three books of the *Consolation*—managed to make sense of his imprisonment, conviction, and impending execution. Boethius succeeded by a careful re-adjustment of his perspective on the individual and the human generally, as they relate to the cosmic and the divine. Of the twelfth-century writers, Adelard alone is able to replicate Boethius’s orderly point of view, expressing an unwavering confidence in the study of the liberal arts as a path to salvation, a confidence that Alcuin had articulated in the ninth century and bequeathed to the novice-scholars of subsequent generations. Although Adelard was not a monk, this thoroughly Carolingian and monastic attitude governs the *De eodem et diverso*. While remnants of this manner of optimism appear here and there in the other four prosimetra, their conclusions about humanity’s potential for assisting its own salvation are rather more complex, and, for the most part, less sanguine.

Recent studies have placed a new emphasis on a current of pessimism in the twelfth century. Stephen Jaeger, while affirming the intellectual, artistic, and social developments that led Charles H. Haskins to designate the era as a “renaissance,” has pointed out that twelfth-century intellectuals themselves had a gloomier view than their twentieth-century explicator did of their position in the historical process: “The predominant categories available to us from that culture’s language of self-conception are quickly surveyed: “decline,” “decay,” “senility,” “corruption,” and “collapse.”¹ The Latin prosimetra can certainly be adduced as evidence in this debate, although scholars have expressed some disagreement as to what side they would tend to support. Debate has focused on Bernard's *Cosmographia*, which has offered a rich mine for proponents of both sides of the argument.

The mythological optimism of Bernard, where it appears, and the dialectical optimism of Adelard develop different constructions upon the same Alcuinian foundation. Both recognize the uniquely human predicament in which an immortal soul and a mortal body are joined; both have a certain faith in the power of the kind of harmony adduced by Boethius that knits together not only human body and human soul but the workings of the rest of the cosmos; and both recognize that the reconciliation of opposites, the balancing out of opposing forces or tendencies, is one of the fundamental organizing principles of the cosmos. Adelard displays a great pride in his ability to reconcile what appear to be opposed views on the question of universals. For Bernard, it is a point worthy of emphasis and admiration that humanity, on several levels, echoes the concord of the cosmos itself, as the principle of harmony governs the unchanging heavens, the joining of eternal soul to evanescent body, and the composition of the human body itself. In Microcosmus X, when Noys charges the three creator goddesses with their task, she declares,

Mens, corpus—diversa licet—iungentur ad unum,  
    ut sacra conplacitum nexio reddat opus.

Mind and body, though of diverse natures, will be joined into one, such that a mysterious union will render the work harmonious.

The final two sections of the Cosmographia, which narrate the construction of the human body by the goddess Physis, repeatedly point out that the crucial part of the task lies in achieving harmony by establishing a proper balance among the various parts of the body, and by ensuring a proper correspondence of those parts with the greater cosmos. First, the elements and the humors they correspond to are set in careful balance, and this very balance is unique among created beings:

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2 On the pervasive idea of cosmic harmony in the Middle Ages, see Stephen Gersh, *Concord in Discourse: Harmonics and Semiotics in Late Classical and Early Medieval Platonism*, Approaches to Semiotics 125 (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996) and Peter Dronke, “L’amor che move il sol e l’altre stelle,” *Studi Medievali* 6 (1965).

3 Adelard of Bath, *On the Same and the Different*, 20–23, where Philosophia herself presents the argument, concluding, “Sic viri illi, licet verbis contrarii videantur, re tamen idem senserunt.” “Thus, although those men in their words seem to be at odds with each other, in reality they thought the same.”