CHAPTER FIVE

FABULOUS PHILOSOPHIZING AFTER 1170

Those who wrote Boethian prosimetrum in the twelfth century combined high literary aspirations with earnest philosophical inquiry, until Alan’s *De planctu Naturae* made manifest the inherent difficulties of this mode of composition, and so signaled its end.

In addition to the instabilities founded on figurative language discussed in the previous chapter, Alan also lays bare another deep-seated tension that operates in the prosimetra and in texts influenced by this mode, namely, the fraught relationship between truth and *fabula*, which had at its root a fundamental doubt as to whether an invention of the human imagination could be a vehicle for conveying truth. Early Platonists themselves had equivocated; their double-edged formulation, that the fables of poets are to be distrusted, but on occasion the best way to approach truth is through myth, persisted in the West.¹ Boethius, too, who not only provided the Latin Middle Ages with a significant model of fabulous philosophizing in his *Consolation*, but also produced the most important textbooks of logic in Latin, was aware of this tension; he himself wished to have it both ways.² At the root of the positive evaluation of *fabula* is the habit of thinking about the created cosmos as a unit whose parts relate to one another in an orderly fashion, by means of analogy: the commonplace “man is a microcosm,” a cosmos on a small scale, is the best known example of this kind of analogous thinking. From this view of the whole as related to its parts arose the notion that a perceptive person can construct valid analogies from any part of this cosmos to various others, from physical to spiritual, from human to divine, and thus from poetic “fables” to theology, and so on.³ Among


those who were comfortable with this kind of hermeneutic exuberance, such as William of Conches, the notion that any one entity could be analogous to more than one other functioned as an inexhaustible engine of intellectual productivity, and indeed, as a source of *gaudium*, delight. Yet the twelfth-century impulse to analogy was held in check by an ever stronger trend toward specific, scientific definition as the basis for intellectual discourse. This contrary impulse, the desire to impose order by assigning each entity a particular place on the Porphyrian tree based on a set of binary choices (living or not living? human or not human? male or female?) is characteristic of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although it had begun to develop earlier. Nor were the flights of poetic analogy amenable to the syllogistic form of reasoning that came to dominate all quarters of academic inquiry by the end of the twelfth century. For Peter Abelard and his fellow logicians, “Sic et non” was not an acceptable situation, but a representation of a problem that required a solution. Constructing specificity and answering “yes” or “no” are defining characteristics of that triumph of intellectual organization known as scholasticism; but this organizing impulse was also inhospitable to the kind of multivocal signification that writers of Boethian prosimetrum had found essential.

From the middle of the eleventh century, we see increasing anxiety about the definition of terms, beginning with Berengar’s Eucharistic muddle, which arose from (and here I oversimplify grossly) a dispute about the meaning of “est” in the sacramental pronouncement about the Eucharistic bread, “hoc est corpus meum.” Intellectuals begin

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5 James Hankins analyzes the shift from Platonism to Aristotelianism in the High Middle Ages using the arguments of those who objected to the Platonic revival in the fifteenth century as possible evidence of the forces that brought about the earlier change. The irreducibility of Platonic texts to propositions or *sententiae* is just one of the reasons he adduces. James Hankins, “Antiplatonism in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 47 (1996): 359–377.
