PHILOSOPHY, COMMENTARY, AND MYTHIC NARRATIVE IN TWELFTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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The early twelfth century is an important time in European education. Urban culture, commercial and professional in outlook, was becoming a counterweight to the traditional dominance of aristocratic wealth and privilege, and the bureaucratization of government and administration in Church and state was creating new avenues for advancement and new functions for educated men. One consequence was that education itself assumed a new prestige. The Liberal Arts were becoming the province of cathedral schools located in urban centers, and competition among masters in these schools is a striking feature of the period. Abelard is only the best known of those magistri who achieved fame through acknowledged expertise in a particular art or area of study. Secular learning—the Liberal Arts and the ancient authors whose writings defined their scope and function—was valued not simply as a means to the understanding of Scripture and religious truth, but as enlarging the sphere of mental activity, making the study of man and nature a complement to traditional religious studies.

The scholars with whom this essay is concerned, whose names have been persistently associated with the cathedral school at Chartres, were known for their wide learning and speculative energy. They viewed themselves primarily as grammatici, teachers explicating the texts of the ancient authors, a task which they viewed as a means to new and authentic knowledge, an invitation to genuine speculation and a potential source of insight into the divine plan. [On textual

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interpretation as a form of philosophic investigation, see chapters 2 (vii), 3, 14, and 17. —ed.] Their master-text was Plato’s mythic cosmology, the *Timaeus*, in a fragmentary Latin translation accompanied by the commentary of Calcidius. All could be described as Platonists in their approach to interpretation, but they augment their Platonic sources with a growing awareness of Greek and Arab astronomy and medicine. Their commentaries mark a new stage in the engagement of medieval thinkers with classical antiquity, and they can claim a place also in the history of philosophy and natural science.

**Bernard of Chartres** (d. after 1124), the ‘old man of Chartres’ whose teachings assume a legendary authority in John of Salisbury’s *Metalogicon* (1159), produced glosses on Plato’s *Timaeus*, stressing the rational coherence of the natural world and its relation to the higher world of archetypal Ideas, which largely defined the interests of this group of scholar-teachers. **William of Conches** (c. 1085–1154), who was Bernard’s student and probably taught at Chartres, produced commentaries on Boethius, Macrobius, and the *Timaeus*, as well as encyclopedic compilations of his own. The famous teacher **Thierry of Chartres** (d. after 1156), possibly the brother of Bernard, and Chancellor at Chartres in the 1140s, wrote important commentaries on the *opuscula theologica* of Boethius, and a highly original hexameral treatise which undertook to explain the work of the six days in the light of pagan cosmology and natural science. **Bernardus Silvestris** (c. 1100–1160), who taught at Tours, is best known for his *Cosmographia*, a *prosimetrum* on the creation of the universe and mankind. Dedicated to Thierry, the *Cosmographia* is both a brilliant distillation of, and a shrewd commentary on, the achievement of Thierry, William and Bernard.

The ‘School of Chartres,’ to which all of these thinkers can be directly or indirectly linked, was long regarded by modern scholars as a sort of beacon of humanism and innovative scholarship in the early twelfth century. This view was first set in perspective by M.-D. Chenu, who showed the many varied forms taken by the concern with man and nature in this period, then sharply questioned by R.W. Southern, for whom the alleged humanism and intellectual pioneer-

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3 Chenu’s essays on twelfth-century thought have been collected and augmented in *La théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris, 1957); a selection from this volume is available in English as *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, tr. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago, 1968).