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William of Conches and the tradition of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*

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INTRODUCTION

William of Conches, one of the most brilliant masters of the first half of the twelfth century, has long been associated with the so-called School of Chartres, that reputedly unique centre where there emerged a humanistic study of classical texts, a rationalistic reading of the work of Nature *secundum physicam*, a daring approach to the Scriptures, and a Platonically inspired poetry. Although the concept of the School of Chartres seems to have outlived its usefulness,¹ it is still often (for better or worse) used as a short-hand term to characterize exciting intellectual innovations in the twelfth century.² One of the fiercest opponents of this concept, Sir Richard Southern, does not consider it superfluous to reprint his earlier, controversial essays in his latest book from 1995. As is well-known, in these essays Southern tried to explode the myth, kept alive by generations of scholars, of the School of Chartres. His claim, to which he still adheres, is two-fold:³

(1) The historical evidence (charters, wills and contemporary reports) for the existence of a school at Chartres as an institution is shaky to the extent that not all the famous masters such as Bernard of Chartres, Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches and Gilbert of Poitiers, who have traditionally been associated with the School, can confidently be linked to it. His principal argument is that the appearance of a master as a witness to charters connected with Chartres is no evidence that that master was actually teaching in the cathedral school.

¹ This at least was the opinion of the majority of scholars gathered at a workshop on 12th-century natural philosophy at the Warburg Institute (London) in April 1998.

² The adjective 'Chartrian' appears in almost every study on 12th-c. philosophy. See most recently A. Speer, *Die entdeckte Natur. Untersuchungen zu Begründungsversuchen einer 'scientia naturalis' im 12. Jahrhundert*, Leiden 1995, 14-15, who writes that although the concept of the 'School of Chartres' 'nicht unumstritten ist, so steht sie doch für eine gemeinsame intellektuelle Tendenz, die eine bestimmte, auch lokal aufeinander bezogene Gruppe von Gelehrten des 12. Jahrhunderts verbindet...'. See also *The 'Glosae super Platonem' of Bernard of Chartres*, ed. with introd. by P. E. Dutton, Toronto 1991.

³ R. W. Southern, 'Medieval Humanism' and 'Humanism and the School of Chartres', in his *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*, Oxford 1970; id., *Platonism, Scholastic Method and the School of Chartres*, Reading 1979; id., 'The Schools of Paris and the School of Chartres', *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, eds. R. L. Benson and G. Constable, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, 113-37; id., *Scholastic Thought and the Unification of Europe. Vol. 1. Foundations*, Oxford 1995 (where the paper from 1970 on the School of Chartres is reprinted with a reply to his critics).

(2) The enormous philosophical reputation of the masters associated with the School of Chartres is unfounded, for 'all their thoughts', Southern wrote in characteristically lapidary style, 'were old thoughts' and neither the method nor the outlook was 'a matter for individual choice; they were imposed upon all masters by their common methods of interpretation, analysis and conflation of texts'.⁴

This generation of twelfth-century masters, living as they did just before the introduction of the Aristotelian corpus, were at the end of a cul-de-sac: 'To gather new material, to systematize the new as they had systematized the old, to reach out to new patterns of thought, and to fill the vast empty spaces of ignorance, were tasks that belonged to the future'.⁵ But Southern too could not neglect the fact that the new Greco-Arabic learning, which at this time began to be translated from Arabic and Greek into Latin, had a strong appeal to the very same scholars. Where this ambiguity could lead is well illustrated by the confusing use of metaphors. He speaks of William and his contemporaries in terms of 'youth', but also as men 'reaching the end of the road because they had reached the end of the available facts', having 'old thoughts', and in still another place he refers to a 'bridge between the meagre scientific resources (...) and the massive influx of new material'.⁶ In view of Southern's principal motivation which, I think, has always been to stress a continuing reassertion of the claims of human dignity and the dignity of nature itself during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, his final picture is nevertheless clear: these early twelfth-century scholars did not do a bad job, but given the time and circumstances in which they had to work, it was a limited job, guided only by the light of Plato, who was soon to be replaced by his disciple Aristotle, and to witness the culmination of this process the 'Chartrian' generation, alas, was born too early.

Criticisms were soon voiced. Two of Southern's most important critics, Peter Dronke and Nikolaus Häring, both pointed out a number of flaws and rash conclusions in Southern's

⁴ Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 83, and *Platonism*, 21.

⁵ Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 83.

⁶ Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, 77, 81, 41. Cf. my 'Huizinga's Lente der Middeleeuwen. De plaats van de twaalfde-eeuwse renaissance in zijn werk', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 108, 1995, 3-23 on 20-1 for a comparison between Southern's viewpoint and Huizinga's similar though differently motivated ideas on the 12th-c. 'renaissance'.

arguments.⁷ Although they too qualified the over-enthusiastic picture of earlier generations of historians, they continued to argue forcefully for the existence of a 'Chartrian' philosophy, characterized by a humanistic interest in classical texts and a Platonic worldview, one imbued with a poetic intuition, which in the words of Wetherbee, is finally the only means of linking 'philosophy and theology, pagan *auctores* and Christian doctrine, *sapientia* and *eloquentia*'.⁸

It is not my intention to review, let alone to resuscitate, these debates. Briefly put, I think that for most scholars, Southern's second argument, that 'all their thoughts were old thoughts', has not been acceptable, but that some scepticism was called for with regard to the historical evidence for the existence of an unbroken tradition of teaching at Chartres, although on this point too it has been shown that Southern was too sweeping in his statements.⁹ More importantly, the evidence of the manuscripts known to have been in the cathedral library in the twelfth century clearly shows that Chartres was an important place for the assimilation of new works into the old curriculum.¹⁰

What is of relevance here however is that the name of William of Conches has always loomed large in the debate on the School of Chartres and that an assessment of his scholarship has been strongly influenced by historians' views on the place of the twelfth-century 'Renaissance' (another term that has been subject to some demystification) within the broader developments of medieval thought and culture. Some have stressed the new elements in William's thought and his formative role in the emergence of scholastic philosophy. As Flatten wrote: 'Bei Wilhelm von Conches sehen wir bereits einen Ansatz, ein System der

⁷ P. Dronke, 'New Approaches to the School of Chartres', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 6, 1969 [publ. 1971], 117-40, and N. M. Häring, 'Chartres and Paris Revisited', *Essays in Honour of A. C. Pegis*, ed. J. R. O'Donnell, Toronto 1974, 268-329.

⁸ W. Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres*, Princeton N.J. 1972, 4.

⁹ See esp. Häring, 'Chartres and Paris Revisited'. Scepticism on this second point, however, has recently been reinforced by Dutton in his *Bernard of Chartres*, 21-45, who has reviewed the skimpy evidence for Bernard's career.

¹⁰ See in particular Dronke, 'New Approaches'; C. Burnett, 'The Contents and Affiliations of the Scientific Manuscripts written at, and brought to, Chartres in the Time of John of Salisbury', in *The World of John of Salisbury*, ed. M. Wilks, Oxford 1984, 127-60; and id., *The Introduction of Arabic Learning into England*, London 1997 (the Panizzi Lectures, 1996).

theoretischen Philosophie zu schaffen, einen Ansatz, den das 13. Jahrhunderts auf der des Aristotelismus zur Durchführung brachte'.¹¹ Others have viewed him as adumbrating not so much thirteenth-century scholasticism but rather the scientific spirit of the seventeenth century.¹² Still others have underlined the traditional outlook of William's *métier* as a master: 'to extract honey from many sources for others to use'; for them William 'represents the culmination of three hundred years of patient building and stands on the threshold of a new life'.¹³ It is only one step further to see William standing beyond this threshold and participating in this new life, giving him a typically twelfth-century Janus face. According to this view, he is a transitional figure between the old and new traditions of learning, embracing a wide variety of old and new sources, developing old techniques of glossing into more systematic readings of texts, and experimenting with varied ways of conveying his ideas.

These views of course are not mutually exclusive. It depends only on the angle or the focus. And this is equally true for the debate on the school of Chartres in which William has always played an important role. It is for this reason that I cannot help thinking that this debate has sometimes been unnecessarily complicated or confused because several questions were not clearly distinguished. Is the discussion about the use of sources, the methods of teaching, the contents of teaching, the literary aspect, the scientific achievements, a particular discipline, or is it about learning in general? And do we view developments in the early twelfth century in the light of a much larger theme (such as the role of 'scholasticism' in the unification of Europe) or do we try to assess what is new in comparison with what went before (such as the introduction of Greco-Arab learning within a limited period) or to see the development of a particular philosophy in some of its more literary guises within a certain time-span (such as the development of medieval Platonism)? We must be clear about which issue or development we are speaking, and also what period we are taking as our framework. For instance, while such a scholar as Dronke can suggest with much justification that the

¹¹ H. Flatten, *Die Philosophie des Wilhelm von Conches*, Koblenz 1929, 188.

¹² Cf. E. J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanisation of the World Picture*, Oxford 1961, 120 (Dutch original 1950, 133).

¹³ Southern, *Platonism*, 25; J. Beaumont, 'The Latin Tradition of the *De consolatione Philosophiae*', in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. M. Gibson, Oxford 1981, 278-305, on 300.

appropriation of the new medical learning by William of Conches was a sure sign that at Chartres something new and exciting was happening, a scholar such as Southern can insist with equal justification but from a different perspective that the very same phenomenon was just another illustration of a time-honoured technique that was to provide the foundations of a world view that would reach its zenith in the European scholasticism of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

It might seem that this is to labour the obvious, but one need only think of ongoing discussions, not merely about 'Chartrian' thought or the School of Chartres, but also touching on much larger questions such as the (un)suitability of a distinction between a twelfth-century ('humanistic', Platonic) renaissance versus thirteenth-century ('anti-humanistic', Aristotelian) scholasticism, to see that these questions are far from exhausted.

Without directly entering into these large-scale discussions, I shall approach in this study the question of William's originality and debt to earlier traditions of learning by looking more closely at his earliest work, the *Glosae super Boetium*.

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