# PETER DRONKE

Ernst Peter Michael Dronke

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1984

by

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*Summary*. Peter Dronke was a wide-ranging scholar of literature and thought from *c.* 200 to *c.* 1400, in Latin, Greek and the whole gamut of European vernaculars. Educated in New Zealand, he came to Oxford in the 1950s and, from 1961 to 2001, he was University Lecturer, Reader and finally Professor of Medieval Latin at Cambridge. His earliest work was on love lyric, but he had a lifelong interest, predominant in his later work, in late ancient and medieval philosophers, especially Calcidius, Boethius, Abelard, William of Conches, Bernardus Silvestris and Dante. He was also a pioneer in appreciating the work of medieval women writers, such as Heloise and Hildegard of Bingen.

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Peter Franke

# I

Ernst Peter Michael Dronke – Peter, as he was always known – was born in Cologne in 1934, not a propitious time and place: his father, [Adolf] John Dronke, a District Court judge, was well-known as a socialist and opponent of Nazism, and his mother (Minnie Kronfeld; stage name, Maria Korten), an actress, had a Jewish father and a Catholic mother of part-Jewish descent, although she had become a committed Catholic after her father's death, taking Maria Magdalena as her baptismal name. Hitler's racial laws made it impossible for her to return to the stage in 1936, after the birth of Peter's sister, Marei. Through Maria's Church connections, she was able to leave Germany for Newcastle in 1938. She was joined there by her children, their governess, known as Lölein (i.e Fräulein – she had previously been Maria's own governess, later her chaperone and dresser); and finally by her husband. The family was not allowed to remain in Britain, but succeeded in obtaining visas for New Zealand, where they arrived in August 1939.

From Peter's own account of his years in New Zealand it emerges how remarkably, given so many adverse circumstances, his parents adapted to their new surroundings – and also how they refused to adapt to them.[1] All their possessions (including a grand piano, paintings, sculptures, Persian rugs and a large library) had been lost at sea when the war began. John's legal qualifications were not recognised. His visa had in fact been granted to him, an exceptionally fine amateur musician, to come and play the double bass in the about-to-be set up New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. The establishment of the orchestra was delayed, however, until after the war. In the meantime, John mastered the skills to work in a factory making artificial limbs, and also acted covertly as the government's censor for German material. Maria, who as well as perfect French had excellent, though German-accented, English, became the family's main earner, rebuilding her dramatic career as a producer and as trainer for many of New Zealand's first generation of professional actors, while Lölein looked after the children. Maria championed the classics of English poetry, but also experimental mass theatre in the wake of Max Rheinhardt, in which she expressed her Catholicism very publicly: a Christmas play that ended with actors and audience merging to sing *Adeste fideles* and *Silent Night* in 1944, and three years later an acclaimed production of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in Wellington's Old St. Paul's Cathedral.[2]

[1] Peter Dronke wrote and circulated among a few friends a 20,000-word memoir of his early life (up until 1959). I have used it as my main source for the account of this period, supplemented by the articles cited in n. 2 below. I am grateful to Maria Warner for sending me a replacement copy when, after Peter's death, I could no longer find my own one.

[2] For information on Maria Dronke, see Beaglehole (1998) and Tempian (2011). Tempian uses unpublished writings by Maria Dronke as well as conversations with her.

The Dronke family was an oddity in New Zealand. They maintained the high cultural ideals that had become natural among the judges and chief justices from whom John descended, and which assimilated Jews, such as the Kronfelds, had made even more their own.[3] Apart from a period of adolescent rebellion, when he tried to fit in with the sporty, anti-intellectual ambiance of his schoolfriends, Peter, a brilliant child to whom learning came easily, followed his parents' ideals. Although in short supply, money was always found for books and concerts; Peter read poetry with his mother, witnessed her readings and stagings, and read voraciously on his own in English and German. At his mother's insistence, Peter went to Catholic schools in Wellington and Auckland, none of them academically distinguished. But he was allowed to skip two years and so, at the age of sixteen – when in England he would have been entering sixth form – he joined the Victoria University College of Wellington (now Victoria University of Wellington) as an Arts student specialising in English and Philosophy, as well Ancient Greek, in which, although a complete beginner, he quickly overtook his better-prepared classmates, choosing as his prize for being top the five-volume Oxford Plato without translation.

In Philosophy, Peter was taught by the newly appointed professor, George Hughes, who would later become a renowned expert on contemporary logic and a pioneer in understanding the 14th-century logician, John Buridan. Peter's studies with him were decidedly unmedieval: Aristotle's *Ethics,* Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Wittgenstein. Although in his fourth year Peter was officially an English student, he still followed all the Philosophy courses, and he was invited by Arthur Prior, probably the outstanding logician of the mid–20th century, to be a junior lecturer in his department at Christchurch.

His first English teacher at Victoria was Joe Trapp, who soon left for England where, as Librarian and then Director of the Warburg Institute, he and his wife would be among Peter's closest friends. Peter was then taught the subject, which became his specialism, by James Bertram, 'a Marxist and something of an aesthete', who had spent time in China and learnt Mandarin, before being made a prisoner of war by the Japanese. Becoming an academic only in mid-life, Bertram wrote on 19th-century literature, and translated poetry from German, Italian and Chinese (Thomson 1998). Bertram also became a friend, and encouraged Peter's MA thesis project – a critical comparison of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets.* Peter's time at Victoria, especially the end of it, was the period of his greatest admiration (he himself terms it 'excessive – indeed almost unhealthy') for German culture. Each month he read *Merkur,* the journal founded a few years previously as a mouthpiece for German thinking, with articles by luminaries such as Martin Heidegger, Ernst Robert Curtius and Romano Guardini. Yet

[3] Peter's grandfather was a judge of the Supreme Court and then Chief Justice of the Rhineland; his great-great-grandfather was a philologist who worked with Grimm. On the high culture of the Kronfelds, see Tempian (2010: 126–7).

Peter also took private French lessons, studying 19th- and 20th-century poets such as Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry and Éluard, and even trying with his teacher to translate *Finnegans Wake* into French.

Peter's immersion in the arts extended to the cinema – which would remain a lifelong enthusiasm – to see films by Renoir, Carné and others; as well as to acting and theatre producing. He already had a talent for developing close friendships with people substantially older than himself. He spent much time with Lou (Louis Johnson), an established poet, whom he helped by going through foreign poems, such as those of Rilke, and translating them more literally than his parallel text editions. He also came to know well the outstanding New Zealand poet of the generation, James K. Baxter.

Meanwhile, the circumstances of Peter's parents had improved. John obtained a position, though not a senior one, in the Ministry of Justice in 1950. Germany offered him the post of Senior Judge in the Court of Appeal (*Senatspräsident*) and, when Maria and John decided against a return to Europe, he received its pension entitlements.[4] They received compensation as victims of Nazism, with which in 1952 they bought a 'small but wonderfully romantic wooden house' in Eastbourne, the last of a series of bays facing Wellington. It was here that Peter lived during his last three years at Victoria.

Despite the intellectual and cultural richness of Peter's life at Victoria, especially by 1955, when there were frequent visits by the best European chamber groups and plays by the New Zealand players, he strongly wanted to study abroad: indeed, it was because it seemed unlikely to give him such an opportunity that he had turned down the offer a junior lectureship in Philosophy. One route to Peter's aim would have been a Rhodes scholarship, but he lost not just this opportunity, but nearly his life, when in November 1954 the taxi taking him to the interview with the Governor-General collided with a lorry. Instead, it was as the holder of a New Zealand Travelling Scholarship in the Arts that he reached Britain late in September 1955. The Travelling Scholarship would have allowed him to go and study in Germany, where at that time his strongest intellectual affiliations lay. But Bertram, his English teacher, persuaded him to go to Oxford and, specifically, to Magdalen, where his close friend and fellow New Zealander, the Middle English scholar Jack (J.A.W.) Bennett would be his tutor.

On his arrival in Oxford, Peter already thought of himself as an aspirant medievalist, who wanted to write a thesis on 'the relations between Latin and vernacular love-lyric in the Middle Ages' – exactly the subject of the big book he would go on to publish eleven years later. When he was dissuaded from enrolling for a PhD, a degree that still at that time the best aspiring Oxbridge academics avoided, and so needed to choose an

[4] Peter's Memoir mentions only promotion to *Senatspräsident* for pension purposes, but in her unpublished autobiographical sketch (*c.* 1981), 'Rosemary for Remembrance and Rue for Thought', 46, as cited by Tempian (2011: 63), Maria states unequivocally that John was offered the job.

undergraduate subject to study for two years as an Affiliated Student, his problem was 'that there was no course in any way flexible enough to help a would-be medievalist.' In the end, Peter chose English, but followed the course negligently, because it covered already familiar ground, and because he regarded his teachers, especially the medievalists, although some of the leading British figures in the field, as insular, narrow-minded and condescending.

Peter was equally unenthusiastic about most of his fellow undergraduates, who in their turn found him puzzling – from New Zealand but not like a New Zealander – and were, he felt, more interested in pigeonholing him than in engaging in open discussion about ideas. His propensity for getting to know older, often distinguished figures rescued Peter from what might have been a dismal two years. The most striking, though most fleeting of these acquaintances came when Peter noticed the initials 'T.S.E.' on the briefcase of an older man walking down the same street in London: he was indeed Eliot, and Peter was able to talk to him about his views on Rilke before their ways parted. Peter took Arabic lessons from Sophie, wife of the great Arabist Richard Walzer, and was a frequent guest at their house, with its astonishing art collection, where a 'distinctly continental manner of entertaining graduates and faculty colleagues' had been transplanted to North Oxford (Russell 1987). His friendship with Joe Trapp deepened: he became an afficionado of the Warburg Institute and enjoyed conversations with its formidable Director, Gertrude Bing. Rather than attending undergraduate English lectures, he attended those by Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, the great expert on the Latin Aristotle, by Passerin D'Entrèves on Dante, and by Friedrich Waismann, leading member of the Vienna Circle, on logic.

To this 'Oxford' experience, dominated by figures from his own ultimate background, the wholly or partly-Jewish intelligentsia of pre-war Europe, Peter added, in the year after his BA (where he effortlessly gained a First, at that time awarded to fewer than 5% of the candidates), another continental element. He spent 1957–1958 in Rome, on an Italian Government scholarship, working especially on manuscripts in the Vatican Library and staying at the British School, but unlike most of the other students there, using his increasingly fluent Italian to make new Italian friends. These included two men only slightly older than himself, with whom he would remain close, the medievalist Claudio Leonardi, at that time a *scriptor* in the Vatican Library, and Tullio Gregory, whose *Anima Mundi*, a study of 12th-century Platonism, he already knew. But Peter also, characteristically, developed an intimate friendship with a much older scholar, the recently retired Bruno Nardi, perhaps the greatest of 12th-century Dante specialists and, as Peter perceptively puts it, a defender of the 'originalities and diversities' of medieval philosophy against 'simplistic, propagandistic Thomism'.

Peter was able to continue at Oxford thanks to a three-year Merton research fellowship. He made close friendships with two senior fellows there: Neville Coghill,

the Chaucer specialist, and Michael Polányi, a Hungarian Jewish polymath. Polányi had a strong influence on his thinking, so that in later life Peter was inclined to dismiss developments in analytic philosophy as having already been shown as wrong-minded by Michael. Other aspects of college life were less attractive, such as high-table dinners, dominated by H.W. Garrod, a classicist, target of some of Housman's sharpest sarcasms, turned Professor of Poetry, but characterised by Peter as 'philistine'.

## II

The two years 1960 and 1961 were the great, and the only major, turning point in Peter's life, personally and professionally. As well as what he terms 'Platonic friendships' with women, Peter had had a number of girlfriends ever since his time in Victoria. In his second year at Oxford, indeed, he became engaged, until he and his fiancée faced up to the incompatibility of her wishes for him to secure a well-paid job, and his to pursue his research, come what may, and each decided independently on a break. In 1959, however, Peter met Ursula Brown, fourteen years his senior, a fellow and tutor of Somerville College and an internationally respected specialist in Old Norse. They were married in 1960.[5] In 1962, she gave birth to their only child, named Cressida but now, in a transformation that would have made Chaucer smile, known, like her grandmother, as Maria.

After her marriage, Ursula had to give up her position at Somerville, but she went on later to be acting professor of Scandinavian Studies at Munich and then, from 1976 to her retirement in 1988 Vigfússon Reader in Old Icelandic Literature and Antiquities at Oxford and fellow of Linacre College. Her great work, begun in 1960s and completed only the year before her death, was the edition, translation and commentary of the Poetic Edda. Occasionally, Peter and Ursula collaborated formally and officially, but Ursula was a constant, informal presence in all Peter's work, and their marriage was founded on their joint cultural interests, but, above all, their joint academic values. They were partners in a half-a-century-long conversation. The worst day of his life, Peter told me, was when, a few years before her death, Ursula suffered a stroke and, at first, was unable to speak coherently. Happily, she made a quick and complete recovery. In the final months before her death in 2012, however, she required constant care, which Peter provided lovingly. At Ursula's funeral, in the dismal Cambridge Crematorium, Peter gave as an address an account of her work that might have been the eulogy on her admission to a learned academy – a sign, not of hard heartedness, but of how he had rejoiced in a marriage of academic equals.

[5] For fuller details, see O'Donoghue (2016).

Peter and Ursula's household would be, not in Oxford, but Cambridge. There from 1930 the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages (MML) had allowed students to study Medieval Latin, which was taught by Frederick (Freddie) Brittain, a fellow of Jesus College, who published books on the pronunciation of Church Latin and on the medieval lyric in Latin and the vernaculars. When in 1946 a University Lectureship was established in Medieval Latin, Brittain was appointed to it. Medieval Latin studies at Cambridge had been further enhanced by the appointment in 1948 as Fellow of Jesus College of a scholar who soon became his firm friend: Frederic Raby, who, despite a lifetime's career as a civil servant in the Office of Works, had through his two extensive histories of Christian and then secular medieval Latin poetry become internationally renowned.[6]

On Brittain's retirement the Medieval Latin post was advertised, and Peter was appointed to it in 1961. At the age of 27 it gave him – an impossible dream for any young academic today – a secure post at one of the world's leading universities. Although Cambridge did not have, as now, a well-oiled system of promotion, Peter's increasing international reputation led to his award of a rare, personal readership in 1979 and, ten years later, an even rarer personal professorship. By that time, he had already been made a Fellow of the British Academy (1984), and other honours followed, including election as a foreign member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1997, and as a corresponding Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America in 1999, the Premio Internazionale Ascoli Piceno (1988), and the Premio Rosanna Bettarini (2014).

Although Peter was one of Cambridge's most distinguished Arts professors and, by the 1990s, one of its longest-serving, he was never really integrated into the university. Cambridge is a collegiate university, and its living spirit as an institution lies (or lay, because now it is moribund) in the intellectual contact between fellows of colleges and the undergraduates they teach, and between fellows of a college and each other. With a university job in an area unlikely to attract each year more than one or two undergraduates in any given college, and without a prior Cambridge college connection, major colleges would be unlikely to have offered Peter a fellowship. In 1964 he became one of a small group of scholars pre-elected to a fellowship of Clare Hall, the one mixed, male and female college at the time, before its formal foundation in 1966. Clare Hall was to include university teaching officers, like Peter 'whose principal focus was research', visiting fellows from the world over, graduate students, but no undergraduates. Although Peter may have been involved in college life early on, by the time I knew him, in the mid–1970s, he visited Clare Hall rarely.

[6] On Raby, his friendship with Brittain and the teaching of Medieval Latin at Cambridge in the mid–20th century, see Lapidge (1997).

Peter did not find congenial colleagues in MML, although he had good relations with the Dante specialist Patrick Boyde and his predecessor, Uberto Limentani. Medieval Latin was placed in the Alice-in-Wonderland-like Department of Other Languages, along with Modern Greek, Hungarian and Dutch, the regional super-power. Despite some efforts at geniality, Peter seemed distinctly uncomfortable at the department's motley meetings, where he did not conceal that he found his colleagues' administrative problems an unnecessary distraction and their managerial contrivances distasteful. Peter certainly had some Cambridge friends, such as the Greek scholar Colin Austin and his wife Mishtu, the two formidable medievalists Michael Lapidge and Jill Mann (and, in his later years, myself and my wife, Sheila Lawlor). But mostly he looked beyond Cambridge, to London, where Joe Trapp had become Director of the Warburg Institute, and to friends from Italy, such as Claudio Leonardi, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Piero Boitani and Sonia Gentili.

Peter and Ursula settled on Parker Street, on the edge of Cambridge's New Town, the area developed in the early 1800s that still offers the style and layout of a Georgian town in miniature. The ground floor of their house, not large but well-proportioned and light, was given over on one side to a sitting and dining room, decorated in pastel colours and furnished with a Wittgensteinian spareness and elegant simplicity, whilst on the other was Peter's study, with its simple light wood desk in front of the window, and, from top to bottom on the rest of the walls his working library; the books on his wider interests – visual arts, music, symbolism – were next door. On the first floor Peter had opened up a terrace, and he loved to soak up the sun there.

Peter wrote of the Walzers in Oxford that they 'lived quite frugally, their passions were books and art and learning, they were unassuming, wholly unpretentious and wholly genuine.' His words apply well to his own life with Ursula in Parker Street over half a century, but with two differences. To books, art and learning, Peter added a strong interest in music and a veritable passion, hardly surprising in view of his mother, for drama and cinema. His most cherished memories and subjects of conversation were of remarkable theatrical productions he had witnessed, in different European venues and sometimes under improbable circumstances. It was here, or in talking about an art exhibition, rather than in conversation about ideas or politics or even about medieval Latin, that one felt his passions were fully and joyously engaged. And, while there was indeed a frugality in the way Peter and Ursula kept the decor and furnishings of their house unchanged decade after decade, that word does an injustice to Peter's cultivated palate for wine, which he had developed at Merton, his taste for good food, his skill as a cook and his generosity as a host. Adapting recipes ingeniously to Ursula's somewhat awkward dietary requirements, Peter would produce, from a tiny kitchen, with the simplest, antiquated equipment, dishes to surprise and delight his guests – a delicate, subtle cuisine, minceur without its Puritanism – before

the occasion was rounded off with *schnapps*, served in the tiny, silver goblets that lined the mantlepiece.

Every summer, Peter and Ursula would pack up their current books and papers in their small car and head for Brittany, where they would spend most of the Long Vacation, from June to late September, in a simple house they had bought there. The stays gave them the long hours they both needed for their writing, but they were not lonely, because Peter became a close friend of his neighbours in the village.

Peter had the one quality necessary and sufficient to make him an excellent teacher of university students: a deep, dedicated enthusiasm for his subject, which communicated itself to his listeners. The forum for this communication were his seminar-style lectures: he never developed a taste for Oxbridge-style individual tuition of undergraduates, and supervisions, when he rarely he gave them, were group-affairs for five or six students at a time. Peter had hated those of his teachers who treated their students with condescension – for instance, assuming that an article in a foreign language would be inaccessible for them. Peter, by contrast, did not think but to treat his students as fellow scholars, who just happened to know a little less about the topic in question. The presumption was that students would deal with any linguistic problems themselves and would come to the lectures to follow up on content and interpretation. Scholarship at the time in this area was mostly in French, German and Italian, and Peter quite simply and without comment referred us to books and articles in these languages. All of a sudden, one was being treated as a grown up and for me, at least, the experience was exhilarating.

The mixture of texts on offer for the Medieval Latin paper, changed by him every year, was heady: it included, I remember, Boethius's *Consolation*, Book I of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, sequences by Notker, plays by Hrotsvitha, lyrics from the *Carmina Burana* and poems by the Archpoet, Alan of Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, John of Hauteville's *Architrenius* and the letters of Abelard and Heloise. It was a selection, and the same was true every year, that went far beyond the usual bounds of Medieval Latin as it had been taught by Brittain or, indeed, as it was pursued in the seminars devoted in Germany to *mittellateinische Philologie*. Peter had hated the way in which his English colleagues at Oxford had tried to pigeonhole him, and this dislike of academic labelling and the restrictions it imposed stayed with him. Not long before his death, Peter told me, with obvious amusement, about an exchange of letters with a friend of his, an eminent literary historian. The subject was the controversy over whether, as the leading Abelard scholar Constant Mews had argued, in addition to the famous love letters, Abelard and Heloise were also the authors of a set of anonymous letters between a master and a female pupil. Many specialists rejected the attribution. They included Peter's friend, Peter and myself. His friend had complained to Peter about my contribution to this debate – not the contents of what I said (which chimed with his own views), but that I should have written

about the subject *at all*. Such questions, he said, should be left to those trained in *mittelateinische Philologie*. Peter had written back to saying that I was his pupil and therefore was indeed a trained medieval Latin philologist, and his friend had demurred. Peter clearly thought it absurd that attention should be given to a scholar's label rather than their arguments.

Exciting, mind-broadening and even life-changing as it was, Peter's undergraduate teaching also, however, became the occasion of his only professional failure. The Medieval Latin paper was never a popular one, of course; but between those taking the MML Tripos and Classicists and students of English, who could borrow the paper, there were 5 or 6 people a year, sometimes more. A number of undergraduates from traditional schools had studied Latin from a young age and, even if they had not specialised in it, were in a position to tackle the paper. As the years passed, there were fewer such students, and numbers for the paper dropped. A few years before Peter was due to retire, he (perhaps under pressure from the Faculty) decided that, henceforth, there would be not one, but two Medieval Latin papers, one of them specialising in a particular area. In line with Peter's interests at the time, the specialist paper would be on works from the 5th to 8th centuries. With long texts from authors such as Dracontius and Martianus Capella, it must have been the most linguistically demanding undergraduate paper in the University and perhaps anywhere. If the idea was to attract more students to Medieval Latin, it backfired comprehensively. No one wanted to take the new paper, and the existing one became even less popular than before. Although Peter's professorial appointment was purely personal, in the normal run of things on his retirement his position would have been advertised at Assistant Lecturer/Lecturer level. Given the lack of student demand, however, and Peter's decades of aloofness from his MML colleagues, it is hardly surprising that the Faculty should have chosen to re-assign the post (to Russian). Medieval Latin, which had been studied at Cambridge for over 30 years before Peter came to teach it, vanished irreparably from the syllabus as soon as he retired. That this outcome was not inevitable is illustrated by the continuing success at Cambridge, despite the rebarbative character of much of its textual material, of Insular Latin, established by Michael Lapidge in the mid–1970s in the more hospitable setting of the Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Tripos.

Peter did not have a large number of doctoral students, but at least three of them became leaders in their fields, each reflecting aspects of their teacher's interests. Charles Burnett (PhD 1976), a Classics graduate who added Arabic to his Latin and Greek, has enjoyed a long career at Peter's beloved Warburg Institute and become the world's foremost authority on the transfer of scientific knowledge from the Islamic to the Latin world. Jan Ziolkowski (PhD 1982) has been a professor at Harvard for over 40 years and was Director of Dumbarton Oaks from 2007 to 2020; he has published prolifically on medieval Latin poetry and on the reception of medieval literature. Peter Godman

(PhD 1980), a fellow New Zealander, but less easy in his relations with Peter than the others, held positions in Oxford, Tübingen and Rome and published on subjects ranging from Alcuin, the Archpoet and Abelard to the secret archives of the Vatican. I was also Peter's research student. He gave me what I needed from my supervisor: a short meeting three months into my research, where he took me to task for my sloppiness and indicated that I was getting myself lost down blind alleys; a longer meeting after a year or so, when I had drafted a chapter, when he gave me the encouragement to write the rest; an introduction to the world's leading expert on my particular field (Edouard Jeauneau), with whom I spent months talking about every aspect of my work; and, above and beyond all, his support and loyalty. That support and loyalty, when Peter had chosen to give them, were extraordinary, more like what a child expects from a parent than a pupil from his master. Without them, I should have had no academic career.

In politics, Peter was by upbringing and by inclination of the Left. His father was a socialist; many of his New Zealand teachers were socialists or Marxists; Marei, his sister, became an activist for left-wing causes. Marriage to Ursula, who joined the Communist Party when she was 15, strengthened these convictions. Peter was, however, uninterested in day-to-day UK political affairs. He read *Le Monde* rather than any British newspaper, and was far, far happier talking about the theatre or painting than politics. And he showed no sort of intolerance to those, such as myself and wife, whose political views were the polar opposite to his own.

Peter was brought up as a Catholic, the religion of both his parents, although in his father's case it was of the liberal, Rhineland variety, tinged with anti-clericalism. Although his schooling was exclusively Catholic, the Church played little part – at least by his own account of it – in the intellectual and imaginative world of his early years, and by the time he was at Victoria he had begun to 'relativise' the religion of his upbringing. Peter's choice of word is telling. He did not decide that Christian belief should be rejected for scientific or philosophical reasons, but rather, in the light of his interest in pre-Christian mystery religions, symbolism and his reading of authors such as Jung, Kerenyi, Eliade, Scholem and Rahner, he began to reject the Church's exclusive claim to truth. While his certain faith in God was lost, it was not replaced by certainty of God's non-existence. He was, he insists, never an atheist, but an agnostic – and he was guided by a sense, though not a rational conviction, of the numinous. When his daughter was born in 1962, he refused to let her be baptised, despite the distress this caused his parents, but his decision was motivated, he explains, by a fear that, if christened, she would be pigeonholed as a Catholic and subject to indoctrination.

Peter's transfer to emeritus status in 2001 changed his pattern of life little; he had nearly twenty productive years and produced some of his best work after this very notional retirement. Especially in the years after Ursula's death, he became less mobile. He eventually sold his house in Brittany and, finding travel more difficult, had to limit

his trips to give papers or attend conferences abroad. His academic ambitions were not, however, dimmed, and when he was nearly 80 he accepted the vast task of writing a commentary, volume by volume, on Eriugena's *Periphyseon* – a project completed and published before his death, although interrupted by stays in hospital that became more frequent and longer. His daughter Maria's devoted attention in these final years – regularly shopping and cleaning for him – made it possible for him to continue living independently and go on with his work: even from his hospital bed Peter would summon his proofs or a xerox of some article, which I would be asked to make. Meanwhile, his grandchildren, Gabriel and Lara, acted to provide a bridge – tolerated only in so far as it was necessary, for bookings and travel – to the online world. At a time when even some of Peter's older scholarly colleagues, such as Edouard Jeauneau, had become deft with computers, he persisted with the 20th-century's equivalent of the quill pen, a portable typewriter. The internet, in particular, was anathema. He thought it a channel for the Americanisation of culture, and when once I tried to convince Peter of its benefits, by Googling a term that would interest him – perhaps it was 'Eriugena' – the search returned as its first hit a US-based site, and my case was immediately lost.

How reassuring, walking back home in 2018 or 2019, to see the study window at 6 Parker Street lit up by the desk lamp and to know that Peter was there, in his mid–80s, working slowly, carefully and, still as always imaginatively, line by line on his little typewriter. A certain ideal of an academic life still flourished. It perished, though, unceremoniously, in bleak, socially-distanced 2020, when visits to Peter were no longer possible, and I learned from his daughter that he had died in hospital of kidney failure.

## III

A presentation and assessment of Peter's work is not easy. Its range is vast. Although he specialised in Latin, he also wrote about literature in the romance and Germanic vernaculars. Chronologically, he ranged from late antiquity to Dante and sometimes later. He had, perhaps, a particular enthusiasm for the 12th century, and also, especially in his later career, for the earliest part of the period (300–900), but he cannot be nailed down as predominantly a specialist of this or that century; neither, although he had favoured writers, of this or that author. Nor – as he would no doubt have been happy to see – does he fit into any single professional academic pigeonhole. Some colleagues, as the incident recounted above about his friend, the eminent literary historian, illustrates, would class him as a philologist, specifically as an exponent of a discipline recognised in the German-speaking world, though hardly among anglophone scholars: *mittellateinische Philologie*. Peter, as that incident also brings out, would have thought this description not wrong, but limiting. He did not just pursue a technical academic discipline. He was also a literary

critic – a *good* literary critic (unlike many who populate university departments), offering his readers imaginative engagement and food for reflection, rather than the definable results of scholarly research. Moreover, a large amount of his activity, especially as his career went on, concerned authors and themes normally associated with intellectual history or the history of philosophy, rather than literature.

Is his achievement, like that of many fine scholars, therefore mainly a cumulative one, the heaping of many stones in many places on the pile of scholarship? Or is there an underlying thread whereby he, like the great writers of the past he studied, contributed something distinctively individual? In the following paragraphs, which must be highly selective, I shall argue for this, second alternative. There is both a unifying thematic thread, found certainly not in all, but in many of Peter's works; and, despite the variety of types of writing he considered, a unifying approach.

The place to begin is Peter's first book, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric* (Dronke 1965a, 2nd edn 1968a = *MLRELL*),[7] where – with one important exception – the preoccupations and methodological choices that would tie his output together, both thematically and in approach, are already present. The second of its two volumes collects and comments on newly edited texts of medieval Latin love lyrics. It is the fruit of what Peter had become in his Oxford years, and would remain: an inveterate reader in the great manuscript libraries of Europe, with an eye to the exciting new material to be unearthed. The first volume begins by discussing the nature of courtly love, or what Peter prefers to call 'the courtly experience', in which the woman is elevated by her lover to near-divine status, and then looks at the complex context of ideas within which it took shape. Peter continues by illustrating how poets in the different medieval vernaculars used these ideas in their love poetry, turning only in the last two chapters to their presence in Latin learned verse and love lyric.

The underlying theme of the book is, then, how love was understood and made the subject for literature in the Middle Ages. Peter was writing against the backdrop of two views, opposed to each other, and even more sharply to his own line of thinking. One of them was represented outstandingly by C.S. Lewis, briefly Peter's Cambridge colleague as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English until his premature death in 1963. *The Allegory of Love*, which Lewis had published in 1934, was in the 1960s and 1970s still standard reading for Cambridge students of medieval literature. For Lewis, courtly love was an invention of 11th-century Provence, an entirely novel valuing of romantic love of men for women, characterised by 'Humility, Courtesy, Adultery and the Religion of Love' (Lewis 1936: 2–22). Lewis saw the Religion of Love as parallel to the real religion of Christianity. Although a fusion was possible, as in Dante, usually courtly love

[7] The second edition took the opportunity to correct errors and benefit from a new edition of some important material: cf. Janson (1967).

was no more than 'a temporary truancy' from its 'tremendous rival' (Lewis 1936: 42). The other approach against which Peter set himself, here implicitly, was the 'historical criticism' advocated by D.W. Robertson.[8] For Robertson, medieval writers and their audience enjoyed no temporary indulgence, as Lewis imagined, in a parallel religion of romantic love. They were all, from start to finish, Christians wedded to a nuanceless interpretation of Augustine, programmed to find in poetry nothing but exhortation to Christian charity, and to recognise satire in any seemingly approving descriptions of carnal love.

Against such views Peter argues that 'the courtly experience', in which a man sees a beloved woman as quasi-divine, is a human universal, and its poetry has 'always existed', in texts both courtly and popular, as he illustrates by case studies ranging from Egypt more than three thousand years ago, through Byzantium, the medieval Islamic world, and Iceland in the 10th century, to Calabrian popular poetry written in a Greek dialect.[9] Peter also rejects the idea that the courtly experience must involve adultery, holding that the conclusion is based on just a few examples and that the text often cited in support of it, the *De amore* by Andreas Capellanus, has nothing to do with courtly love.[10] Most important of all, the use of religious language to describe human, sexual love is not taken by Peter as a parallel religion, to be discarded in face of the true one, but as a genuine fusion. The point is brought out by an exploration of the different conceptions of love available in a long and broad intellectual background that makes Robertson's Augustinian vision of the Middle Ages seem impossibly blinkered: a mystical conception of love, one linked to the Biblical figure of Wisdom and a noetic one linked to Neoplatonism, in order to explain which Peter writes dizzyingly about Platonism, the School of Chartres, Arabic Aristotelianism and its 13th-century Latin followers; even John Scottus Eriugena appears fleetingly on the sidelines.[11]

Peter brings out the core of his thinking about medieval conceptions of love, even more clearly than anywhere in *MLRELL*, in an early article about an author he clearly

[8] Dronke does not mention Robertson in *MLRELL*, but he and his readers could not but have been aware of the approach he championed, especially as expounded in *A Preface to Chaucer*, published in 1962. Later, Peter would explicitly criticise Robertson's application of his method to the love letters of Abelard and Heloise (Dronke 1976, at 256–7 of reprint in Dronke 1992) and to the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus (Dronke 1994b, at 112 of reprint in Dronke 1997). Robertson gives his counter-readings to two *Carmina Burana* poems discussed by Peter, treating his opponent with clumsily ironic politeness: Robertson (1976).

[9] Dronke (1968a: I, 1–56). *The Allegory of Love* is explicitly cited on p. 2 to represent the view Peter is opposing, although Dronke says that it is espoused by many other scholars too.

[10] Dronke (1968a: I, 46–8, 82–5). Later (Dronke 1994b) Peter would suggest that the supposed name of the author of *De Amore,* 'Andreas Capellanus', is, like much else in the work, witty, literary artifice.

[11] Peter's discussion of the intellectual background in *MLRELL* is complemented by an essay he published the same year (Dronke 1965b), 'L' Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle', which traces the idea of love in that concluding line of the *Commedia* to Boethius and his predecessors, through Eriugena, William of Conches and Bernardus Silvestris, and then on to Chaucer.

admired, but rarely discussed in print, Geoffrey Chaucer (Dronke 1964). The final passage of *Troilus and Criseyde* has seemed to most critics to be a palinode, where the poet, having described with apparent sympathy a story of romantic love, rejects the world and its allurements – 'a faire … that passeth soone as floures faire' – and asks his readers to turn their sights to heaven. Lewis describes it as the clanging of a bell, at which 'the children, suddenly hushed and grave, and a little frightened, troop back to their master' (Lewis 1936, 43). For Robertson, at such a moment the medieval poet drops his mask of irony and hammers out literally the message implied all along. But Peter takes issue, not directly with them, but with a critic much closer in outlook to his own, Talbot Donaldson, who in a famous essay reads the final stanzas as a delicately balanced enunciation of the poem's moral that humans should make the 'best of, enjoying, and loving a world from which they must remain detached and which they must ultimately hate …' (Donaldson 1970: 100). Peter wants to remove world hating entirely. The ending of *Troilus* celebrates the 'greatness of his [Troilus's] beatitude', of which his carnal love for Criseyde has given him a foretaste: 'a divine dimension in human love'. And, in a way that would characterise his work, Peter picks a minute, precise textual detail to substantiate his point. Describing the bliss of Troilus's fulfilled love with Criseyde before she betrays him, Chaucer substitutes for Boccaccio's 'oh sweet night' a phrase, 'o blissful nyght', which echoes the liturgy of the blessing of the Easter Candle: *o vere beata nox, in qua terrenis caelestia, humanis divina iunguntur*.

The theme that unifies large areas of Peter's work is not love itself, but, as the comments above may already have suggested, what underlies discussions of it in medieval Latin Europe: the relationship between Christian orthodoxy and what, despite the thoroughly Christian character of society in medieval Europe, lay outside and complemented it. This complement consisted of the golden inheritance bequeathed to the Middle Ages, the ancient pagan culture of Greece and Rome, which from the beginning was entwined with the stretching of, and pushing beyond, doctrinal limits as a result both of doubting, questioning and reasoning, and of the strains caused by human nature at odds with an exacting ideal. The conflicting views about courtly love put forward by Robertson, Lewis, Donaldson and Peter himself represent different judgements about the predominance of the two elements in the medieval writing they value: from Robertson's, where Christian orthodoxy excludes all else, to Peter's, at the opposite extreme, where it survives only when thoroughly absorbed into its complement.

*MLRELL* did not just anticipate a unifying thematic thread in Peter's work, but also his method of approach or, more precisely, his way of solving the problem about how to set the range of his field and about how then to approach the material. He formulated this approach in relation to two important scholars in the area.

The first was the outstanding British scholar of medieval Latin in the 1960s, a Cambridge figure in his later years, Frederic Raby, who had published a weighty

*History of Christian-Latin Poetry* in 1927, followed by an even weightier two-volume *History of Secular Latin Poetry* in 1934.[12] In his inaugural lecture of 1990 Peter recognised Raby's command of the sources, describing the two books, with carefully measured praise, as 'lucidly ordered historical surveys' (Dronke 1990: 1). In his two *Histories* – divided on what he seems to have taken as an obvious distinction between the Christian and the secular – Raby, indeed, aimed for a historical completeness of chronologically arranged material, comprising extensive quotations (so that his books serve also as anthologies), biographical notices and brief, well-turned evaluative comments that rarely focus on a single verse or phrase. Peter's approach was the opposite in almost every respect, both in his first book and throughout his career. He never wrote one-author *Histories*.[13] *MLRELL* surveys its field but selectively, and while the range of material included in his later books about women writers (Dronke 1984a) and *prosimetra* (Dronke 1994a) is wide, the approach is always selective. Peter quotes frequently, but his aim is never to anthologise, but to put before the reader the words and sentences he will discuss in detail. This is the greatest difference between Peter's approach, from the beginning to the end of his career, and Raby's. Like Raby, Peter evaluates, but his evaluations are based on close, often unobvious and sometimes controversial interpretation of textual detail.

The second scholar – far, far more important for Peter – was the author of the most influential book on medieval literature from the post-war years, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (*ELLMA*): Ernst Robert Curtius.[14] The title of Peter's first book, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric*, is a deliberate echo of it. It might seem, at first sight, that this allusion is a piece of cheeky mockery on the young academic's part, since in his book Peter strongly rejects the central features of Curtius's approach. In *ELLMA* Curtius uses a new tool he has devised, which consists in tracing *topoi* (for instance: inexpressibility, youth and age, the *locus amoenus*, the world-upside-down) back to the ancients, through medieval Latin texts, and into vernacular literature up to the time of Goethe. Curtius claims that medieval texts are made up by using these *topoi*, and they should not be thought of as the expression of individual thoughts and feelings. In *MLRELL* Peter attacks the scientific pretensions of topical analysis and, in his detailed discussions, goes strongly against the claim that medieval authors lack individuality. He would go on in his next book to make more explicit his objections to Curtius's approach. Its very title, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, challenges one of its central claims. Peter also rejects, both in practice in *MLRELL* and in theory in *Poetic Individuality*

[12] On Raby and his Cambridge connection, see above, n. 6.
[13] Peter did indeed *edit* a *History*, though of philosophy, but here his manner of proceeding is far from Raby's: see below, pp. 721–2.
[14] Curtius (1953). The German original had been published in 1948.

(Dronke 1970: 1–11), Curtius's procedure of always looking to the written tradition of Latin literature for the origins of forms, themes and ideas in vernacular writing. Traditions, Peter stresses, can be oral as well as written. Medieval vernacular literatures did not grow up, as Curtius thought, at the moment from which we have the first written records of them; each has a long, rich and mainly oral pre-history.

Yet these differences, serious as they are, were with the scholar and critic who, more than any other, influenced Peter. Curtius's work had long been known to Peter. When, at the age of 20, he was recovering from the motor accident that almost killed him, he read Curtius's volume 'with excitement and awe' and 'decided there and then' that he wanted to 'write something about medieval Latin and vernacular love lyric' (although characteristically he already disagreed with Curtius's central view about the primacy of Latin). There is nothing in Peter's account to suggest that before then he had any special interest in medieval literature, but he arrived in Oxford the next year as a fully paid-up medievalist, wanting to pursue the project he had formulated when reading Curtius. It does not seem an exaggeration, therefore, to say that Peter was made into a medievalist by reading *ELLMA*. What was it about Curtius's work that enticed him? Curtius's vast range of reading in Latin, English, French and German no doubt attracted Peter, who would emulate and go beyond it. But maybe what most impressed Peter was both that Curtius's scholarship was explicitly in the service of the most pressing cultural needs of his time, and that he was not merely a scholar. Curtius was a determinedly unscholarly, cultivated literary critic of recent and contemporary European literature, who turned to the Latin Middle Ages and devised a rigorous scholarly machinery, first in a vain attempt to prevent disaster, as the Nazi grip on Germany tightened, and then, when disaster came, to salvage what he could from the ruins.

Much later (Dronke 1980), Peter wrote a beautifully subtle and insightful essay on Curtius. There he shows how Curtius was pulled in two directions, that of the supposedly scientific philology of his training, reinvented in his *topos* technique, and that of his evaluative critical writings on modern literature, from both before *and after* the Nazi period and the composition of his masterpiece, *ELLMA*. He brings out how Curtius could himself be almost like a poet in the imaginative quality of his critical writing and that, in structuring *ELLMA*, he may have looked to Joyce's *Ulysses*. The tension Peter diagnosed in Curtius's work was one that affected him too. He was pulled towards the scientific, positivistic claims of scholarship. His Inaugural Lecture ends by justifying his own discipline: 'in order to trace both the continuity of ancient thought and imagination and their creative renewals, the discipline of medieval Latin literature is a necessity' (Dronke 1990: 30), words Curtius might have used about his method in *ELLMA*. Yet many of Peter's writings deserve to be thought of, not as academic articles, discrete contributions to *Wissenschaft*, but as essays, artistically written, intended to form rather than inform,

to mediate rather than communicate.[15] Peter was able to handle this tension, however, without Curtius's dramatic changes of direction, by putting the literary critic's trained, disciplined but essentially imaginative attention to images and their verbal formulation at the centre of his approach. On the one hand, the rise of the New Criticism had by the 1960s made this type of precise, evaluative interpretation respectable as an academic pursuit. On the other hand, Peter was able to satisfy his desire for rigour, discipline and scholarship, not by pretending to follow a rigid system, such as that of *topoi*, but through two paths Curtius never chose to follow. The one was that of searching out, deciphering and editing manuscripts, through philological acumen and expertise (in areas such as *cursus* and versification) and through a mastery of many medieval and modern languages;[16] the other was to include within his range – indeed, in the later part of his career to concentrate on – philosophical material, with its many technical challenges for the interpreter, but still using principally his method of approach based on words and images.

The philosophical side of Peter's work is discussed below. Peter's method, rather than his favoured theme, unifies an impressive quantity of writing that can be classed as literary criticism or literary history. It consists in part of monographs: Peter's second book, an enthusiastically multi-lingual introduction to the medieval lyric (1968b); his book on individuality in medieval poetry (1970), where case studies follow the methodological chapter mentioned above; his study of medieval women writers (1984a); and his book on 'the mixed form', a study of prosimetra from antiquity to Dante (1994a). But, rightly given the jewel like brilliance and delicacy he gave to each, Dronke's literary critical production was predominantly in the form of articles, most of which he subsequently re-published in a series of volumes (1984b; 1991; 1992; 1997; 2008b; 2016), of which two-thirds or more of the contents are literary criticism or literary history.[17] Despite the vast range in chronology (from the 1st-century BC Rome of Sulpicia to Francesco Colonna in the 15th century) and genre (lyrics, saint's lives, commentaries,

[15] The contrast between 'form' and 'inform' was used by Victor Goldschmidt in discussing Plato, and it was adopted and often repeated by Pierre Hadot. I have picked up the final phrase from an essay by Curtius on *The Waste Land*, as translated by Peter (Dronke 1980: 28): 'Criticism always remains an adventure. Evaluation cannot be justified by argument. The justification is probably there, but only as intuition. This can leap across as a spark. It cannot be communicated, only mediated. That is the beauty of criticism.'

[16] Lapidge (1993: 174) describes Peter's professionalism in exactly this way: 'a precise but widely ranging knowledge of Latin and vernacular literature is combined with thorough grasp of manuscript materials and secondary literature, no matter what language it is written in.'

[17] Dronke (1992) (appropriately called *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*) is more evenly weighted between Peter's literary strand and the more philosophical one, discussed below. The same is true of Dronke (2016) – perhaps not coincidentally the final one of these collections, containing essays mostly written after 2000; and the articles here *do* pick up Peter's favoured theme, as the title, *Sacred and Profane Thought in the Early Middle Ages*, indicates.

dialogues, prosimetra, prayers, allegories, satire …), the studies are unified by Peter's constant attention to particular images and their power to convey ideas. Peter was also fully alive to the strong links between medieval lyric and music. From 1982 he collaborated with the medieval music ensemble 'Sequentia' in their performances of works by Hildegard of Bingen and other medieval poets.[18]

One element in this rich mixture stands out, because unlike the others, which are already found or suggested in *MLRELL*, it is almost totally unexpected. True, in that book there are some remarkable pages on Hildegard of Bingen (I, 66–70), but its perspective is strongly male: the courtly experience is that of a male lover idolising a woman. Yet Peter would go on to make two female authors among his principal subjects for study and edition, and to write a wide-ranging book on medieval women writers. One of the female authors is, indeed, Hildegard. Peter returned to her in article after article, collaborated in organising a conference on her work (Burnett & Dronke 1998) and publishing its proceedings, and co-edited her *Liber divinorum operum* (Hildegard of Bingen 1996).[19] The other woman is Heloise, whom Peter takes out of her famous lover and husband's shade.[20] Both are given substantial chapters in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (1984a). The book contains shorter, but extended treatment of Dhuoda, who wrote a manual for her son in the early 9th century, and the 10th-century nun and playwright, Hrotsvitha. The book also studies a wide range of other texts by women, some anonymous: it is not a survey or a *History*, but a study of texts selected for their intrinsic literary interest by a scholar whose extraordinarily wide reading enables him to pluck from obscurity the voice of poets such as the Merovingian aristocrat Eucheria (28–29) or the Provençal Tibors, sister of Raimbaut d'Aurenga (99–100), and to show the subtlety of, for instance, the 3rd-century martyr Perpetua, whose own contribution he disentangles from the account of her *Passio* (1–16). Although Peter's discussions are always aware of the restrictions under which medieval women lived and wrote, his concern is not to chronicle their oppression, but to celebrate both the occasional instances of their real power – Gandersheim, Hrotsvitha's convent, was, he remarks, 'a small, proudly independent principality, ruled by women' (55) – and the ability of some to express their individuality with at least as much sophistication as male writers.[21]

[18] See http://www.sequentia.org/images/Dronke_Nachruf.pdf

[19] Already in 1972 Peter writes at length about Hildegard in an essay on colour imagery (1984: 82–7, 96–8); in 1981 he published a long literary historical investigation about her (1992: 143–91), in a 1992 essay he explored her allegories (1997: 61–81), and he went on to write even more prolifically about her – his two latest collected volumes (2008b; 2016) contain six essays on her that he published between 1997 and 2013.

[20] The 1992 collection contains an entire section of three essays called 'Heloise with and without Abelard' (247 – 342). Peter's last project, left incomplete at his death, was an edition of the *Problemata Heloissae*.

[21] Peter's untheoretical approach to women's writing does not imply that he failed to think about feminism: see, for instance, his characteristically delicate juxtaposition of Brigitte Bardot in the film *Et Dieu créa la femme*, as seen by Simone de Beauvoir, and the Provençal female poets (99, 101).

## IV

Michael Lapidge, writing when Peter was still in post, remarked that 'Medieval Latin studies in Cambridge are not wholly concerned with literary criticism. The distinctive characteristic of Peter Dronke's work, for example, is a combination of interest in the ideas as well as the literature of the Medieval Latin world.'[22] In fact, although a majority of Peter's articles are mainly literary, after the first three (*MLRELL*, *The Medieval Lyric* and *Poetic Individuality*), his books and all his editing projects were weighted strongly to the philosophical side of his interests.[23] It is tempting to think of this side of Peter's work in terms of poet-philosophers (philosophers who were also poets), such as Boethius, Eriugena and Abelard, and philosopher-poets (poets who wrote philosophically), such as Bernardus Silvestris and Dante, or to speak about writing that 'lies on the indistinct borderland between philosophical and poetic reflection'.[24] But this conception does not do full justice to Peter's interest in philosophical ideas, and it is hard to see how it fits some of his favourite authors – Calcidius, William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres, and even Eriugena (whose *poetry* was the part of his work that interested Peter least). Peter was not a literary critic who strayed into philosophy. His interest in philosophy went back to his days as a student in New Zealand, and he was already then reading medieval philosophy, outside the requirements of his course. He had come to know Eriugena, while searching for the ancestry of Rilke's angels. He also read widely in Aquinas. Peter reports that he found the 'neatness' and 'closedness' of his *Summa Theologiae* 'disconcerting', but concluded from his reading of *De ente et essentia*, *De Veritate* and the commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* that Aquinas was a giant who 'needed rescuing from twentieth-century Thomists.'

Despite his respect for Aquinas, though, Peter never gives him serious attention in his writing. Peter was deeply interested in philosophy throughout his adult life, but much less in arguments than in ideas and how they can be expressed, a concern that is central to some poets, and to some philosophers – in the Middle Ages usually those strongly influenced by the Platonic tradition even if, like Abelard, they were also Aristotelians. Rather than suggesting that Peter looked especially to poet-philosophers and philosopher-poets, it would be more accurate to say that he most often looked at poetry

[22] Lapidge (1993: 175). This side of Peter's work has been rightly noted and discussed by his obituarists: see Ziolkowski (2020: xxxii-xxxiii); Pereira (2020: 24–6). The volume I edited to mark Peter's retirement (Marenbon 2001b) commemorated it by making its theme the relations between poetry and philosophy in the Middle Ages.

[23] Marenbon (2001a) gives an annotated bibliography of this side of Peter's writing up to 2000. The paragraphs below fill in the picture for the last two decades of his life; articles not mentioned individually will be found in Dronke (2008b) and (2016).

[24] These are the terms in which I thought and wrote when I edited a collection I called *Poets and Philosophers in the Middle Ages* to mark Peter's retirement: see Marenbon (2001a: x, 3).

as a philosopher, and at philosophy with a poet's eye; and that he tended to choose texts that responded to this approach. Indeed, Peter dealt with the whole range of texts that especially interested him, whether they are ones generally held to be more literary, or ones considered more philosophical, in a very similar way. There is then something artificial about the division made here between Peter's literary critical writings, surveyed above, and the broad philosophical strand in his work, which is about to be examined. So, although his first more philosophical monograph was published in 1974, *MLRELL* already contained dozen of pages about philosophers, and the 1974 book was especially concerned with philosophical approaches to imaginative literature.

The authors considered there – the central ones are William of Conches, Abelard and Bernardus Silvestris – are, or should be, numbered among the outstanding medieval philosophers. The book's title, *Fabula*, nicely points out the angle of treatment: an examination of their use of myth and metaphor. This approach would surprise historians of philosophy, but Peter is looking, no less than they – and perhaps more successfully – for what these writers have most importantly to say. At the same time, he is probing the question raised by his main technique as both literary critic and historian of ideas and philosophy. How do images and stories – especially the make-believe stories – convey thought in ways that clear, philosophical prose cannot? And how did medieval authors themselves approach and answer this question?

A few years later Peter published an edition of Bernardus Silvestris's most famous work, the *Cosmographia*. The *Cosmographia* is a re-thinking of Plato's *Timaeus* in prosimetric form (Bernardus Silvestris 1978), placed in Christian times, written by a Christian author for a Christian readership, and yet explicitly using only Plato's language and Platonic myth: an exploration, therefore, of Peter's central theme. Although intended only as a stop-gap until a complete critical edition was made, Peter's has become the standard text, and his summary of the work is both a useful introduction and, in its choice of emphasis and explanatory comments, an original reading of Bernardus.[25]

In the 1980s Peter developed and broadened his philosophical interests in two books: a study of Dante, and a collective volume on 12th-century philosophy. From its title, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Dronke 1986) appears to be a literary study, and it is true that the focus is on Dante's poetic masterpiece, the *Commedia Divina*. Yet, as some historians now are willing to recognise more clearly than even Peter himself would have seen forty years ago, Dante is an important, original philosopher in his great poem just as much as in his scholastically presented political treatise, *Monarchia*, or his discursive *Convivio*. In Peter's delicate analysis of individual cantos, passages and phrases, the

[25] Peter himself seems not to have classed Bernardus as a philosopher, since he chose not to include him in his *History* of 12th-century philosophy. Here Peter was, unusually, narrow-mindedly following convention: if the *Cosmographia* is not philosophy, neither is the *Timaeus*!

philosophical tradition – Boethius and pseudo-Dionysius outweighing Aristotle and Averroes – is rarely absent. The book begins with what is perhaps his most wide-ranging treatment of the idea examined in *Fabula*, which explains why Dante is simultaneously a poet and a philosopher: the capacity of non-literal language to be, not merely decorative, but the channel for what is otherwise incommunicable. The book concludes by looking at *Paradiso* X, where the spirit of Aquinas introduces those of the great philosophers and theologians of the Christian tradition: Boethius, Aquinas, Albert and, more surprisingly, the Arts Master Siger of Brabant, whom Aquinas had strongly opposed. The theme Peter brings out of this canto – harmony, won through knowledge and love, between Siger, advocate of an Aristotelianism irreconcilable with the faith, and the more accommodating Aquinas – echoes Peter's wider theme of Christianity and its complement.

By contrast with the monograph on Dante, *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (1988) wears its philosophical credentials on the sleeve. It is the one publication where Peter, acting as editor, looks – through his differently skilled contributors – at the whole range of investigations in a period that can be described as philosophical, including philosophy of science and logic, rather than just at those areas he found important. Yet it is not a neutral *History*, as might have been drawn up by a panel of experts. The excuse for the volume was the gap left in the Cambridge University Press's series of *Histories* between the volume on late ancient and early medieval philosophy (up to the 11th century) and the *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Kretzmann, Kenny & Pinborg 1982): despite the sub-title 'From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600' of the latter, the 12th century is treated there merely as a prelude. The idea that there was a 'Twelfth-Century Renaissance' was an old one, popularised by Charles Homer Haskins in his 1927 book of that name, but he and other scholars envisaged a broad revival of culture, which included philosophy but did not challenge the predominant view of medieval philosophy – paraded by Kretzmann, Kenny and Pinborg in their subtitle – as being centred on the 'rediscovery' of Aristotle, which came to fruition in the 13th-century universities. Twelfth-century philosophy looked different and more special in its own right to Peter, partly because he was willing to give the Platonic tradition equal or more weight than the Aristotelian. Peter's volume has thus been historiographically important for historians of philosophy, setting a trend for how they periodise their subject.[26] The choice of topics for the chapters – the volume begins with three chapters on the Platonic, Stoic and Arabic 'inheritances' of 12th-century Latin philosophy, and ends by looking at Aristotelianism in medicine in Salerno

[26] See e.g. Cesalli, Imbach, De Libera & Ricklin (2022); Valente (forthcoming); cf. also the conference at the Collège de France in 2016, organised by Alain de Libera, 'Philosopher au douzième siècle', available as videos at https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/agenda/colloque/philosopher-au-xiie-siecle

and in natural philosophy just after 1200 – characteristically achieves a juxtaposition of Christian and non-Christian traditions, parallel to that in the 13th century traced in the Dante volume.

This juxtaposition is encapsulated in Peter's choice of a subject for his final monograph, published in 2008: the 4th-century philosopher Calcidius, translator and commentator of the *Timaeus*. Calcidius was, Peter contends, both a Christian and what he calls, using a rare word coined at the end of the 17th century, a 'Free-seeker', who allows his interest in Plato's positions and arguments free rein, without feeling constrained to Christianise them.[27] Peter then traces what he calls in his title Calcidius's 'spell' on writers including Boethius, Eriugena, William of Conches and Bernardus Silvestris.

Over the next decade Peter dedicated himself almost entirely to philosophical editing and commentary, choosing four of the authors who meant most to him: Abelard and Heloise, Eriugena and Boethius. He left at his death nearly finished the first modern edition of the *Problemata Heloissae*, a text jointly by Abelard and Heloise, where she puts theologico-philosophical problems that troubled her and her nuns, and he provides the answers. He had already finished, though it would not be published until three years after he died, an edition of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, with an introduction and a commentary substantially longer than the text itself (Boethius 2023). The version of Boethius's text is Peter's own, based on three existing editions, with parallel Italian translation, of the prose by Michela Pereira, the verse by Piero Boitani. The *Consolation* was a text to which Peter constantly returned throughout his career, and it is fitting that in this, his last completed work, he provides a view that is profoundly scholarly but also intensely personal, the secondary literature relegated firmly to the sidelines of a four-way confrontation between Boethius, who is made more of Calcidian Free-seeker than many would accept, his sources, the medieval authors who used the *Consolation*, and Peter himself.

As already mentioned, Peter spent his late 70s and early 80s commenting on Eriugena's masterpiece, the *Periphyseon*, for an Italian series (Johannes Scottus 2012–2017). He did not go back to the manuscripts, because his friend and colleague, Edouard Jeauneau, had provided a scrupulous and thorough account of the manuscript evidence in his monumental edition of the Latin text, completed in 2003. But Peter aimed to use the evidence to arrive at a text even closer to that which, he believed, Eriugena himself had intended, with his additions and changes, but without others' revisions and with what he regarded as glosses removed from the flow of the argument. The text, so

[27] The most recent monograph on Calcidius (Reydam-Schils 2020) raises the question of whether he was a Christian at all, and suggests that, while no definite answer can be given, if he was a Christian, it made no difference to how he interpreted the *Timaeus*. Peter would have disagreed, strongly!

reconstructed, has a facing translation into Italian by Michela Pereira, and each of the five books, published as separate volumes, has an introduction and a section-by-section commentary. In these days of International English and reader-friendly scholarship, what better way to bury a major work than to translate it into Italian and divide it among five volumes?[28] But it *is* a major work, in many ways Peter's *magnum opus*: a six-hundred-page journey through Eriugena's dialogue. It is as if the greatest connoisseur of Michelangelo were to be with you in the Sistine Chapel, taking you through the frescoes inch by inch – except that every detail of them has been subject to multiple scrutiny, whereas there is much in the *Periphyseon* that Peter is the only scholar to discuss closely. This physically dispersed but intellectually and imaginatively unified book, which of course needs to be read in conjunction with the text itself, is one part of an indispensable introduction to Eriugena.

Peter had already, a few years before he began this project, supplied the other part, in his penultimate monograph, *Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World* (2003). This is also the book that provides the best example of his unified approach, which dissolves the differences between literary and philosophical understanding (or at least one aspect of it). It is also centrally concerned with the relations between the Christian and the non-Christian. As Peter explains, in the course of working on the project, he moved from thinking in terms of Christians assimilating and transforming imagery from pagan authors to realising that 'they inhabited essentially the same imaginative world' (2003: 231).

The book begins with a discussion of accounts in the ancient and early medieval world where imagination is exalted, being 'seen as seeking truth rather than as capricious' (5). He finds this approach above all in pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena. The idea, developed to its fullest extent by Eriugena, that God is known only through his theophanies, becomes a way, not of stressing divine unknowability, but the importance of all sorts of images, appropriate or dissonant, real and fictitious. The remaining chapters take as their subjects areas of imagery as different as dance, the sea, earthly paradises, animals, light and fire – a literary critical romp, it might seem, but the authors considered range through not just Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Old French, Italian and Irish poets, but Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and many philosophers: Plato, Cicero, Plotinus, Proclus, pseudo-Dionysius, Olympiodorus,

[28] Even Peter's obituarists do not make the extent of his achievement here evident. Jan Ziolkowski, in his detailed and moving essay (2020: xxxiii), remarks in connection with the Eriugena volumes, all too truly alas, that '*Anglophone readers who are not determined bibliographers may miss other weighty contributions by Peter Dronke*', but then writes of it simply as an edition Peter 'oversaw'. The irony (especially given Peter's dislike of all things digital) is that these volumes are, in fact, extremely easily available, freely downloadable at https://archive.org/details/fondazione-lorenzo-valla

Boethius and Eriugena. Images are everywhere revealed as the bearers of ideas. A further unity is given by the author who is 'the consummate embodiment of the unifying imagination' of the period, who unites 'ideas and images, the Irish and the Continental worlds, the Latin and the Greek, Neoplatonism and Christianity, with a daring, probing visionary power …' (2003: 231–2): Eriugena. And Peter goes on to suggest that Eriugena marks not just the culmination of a period, but the conclusion of 'an intellectual arc', spanning from the 1st century AD to the 9th.

This suggestion of an extended late antiquity, both despite and because of Christianity, with a break somewhere around the turn of the millennium, is an important historiographical proposal. It is not, however, just that: it also has methodological implications. 'Intellectual arc' immediately raises the question: in the history of philosophy, or that of literature, or – and this would be Peter's answer – in the world of intellectual imagination and imaginative intellect that unites both? In his obituary, one of Peter's close friends, Piero Boitani, judges that he was 'perhaps the greatest literary medievalist in the world after Curtius, Auerbach and Spitzer'.[29] The 'after' here is presumably chronological, rather than evaluative. But, if 'literary' is meant in its usual contemporary sense, it does Peter an injustice to put him on the level even of the greatest literary scholars of the last century. He succeeded in going beyond the merely literary and the merely philosophical in a unique way that gives the widest intellectual value to his painstaking, erudite researches, his carefully-tooled and lovingly polished expositions, and his strikingly expressed sensitivity to the will-o'-the-wisp of a poet's or a philosopher's imagination.

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[29] Boitani (2020): '... forse il più grande dei medievalisti letterari del mondo dopo Curtius, Auerbach e Spitzer.'

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