

IN MEMORIAM
PETER DRONKE
(30.V.1934–19.IV.2020)*

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Peter Dronke, who died on 19 April, 2020, was truly a man of pan-European culture. He was born in Germany (in 1934), educated in New Zealand (1939–1954), and Oxford (1954–1957, 1958–1961), spent an enriching year in Rome (1957–1958), and finally settled in Cambridge (1961), whilst spending his summers in Brittany. Through his wife, Ursula's, interests he had a sympathy for Iceland and Nordic literature. And through academic contacts, who became close friends, he was a frequent visitor to most European countries, as well as North America. His first book *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric* (1965–1966, 2nd ed. 1968) begins with a survey of love poetry ('the courtly experience') from several early medieval European cultures, but including Arabic and Persian poetry. Peter always quoted texts in the original languages, several of which (German, French, Italian and Spanish) he spoke fluently. His upbringing within an immigrant family living

* Among the several accounts of Peter Dronke's life and works, the following are most revealing: JAN ZIOLKOWSKI, « In Memoriam Peter Dronke (1934–2020) », *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 30 (2020), p. xxiii–xxxv; MARINA WARNER, « Peter Dronke Obituary: Scholar of Medieval Latin who Shone Light on Hildegard of Bingen and Other Female Writers of the Middle Ages », *The Guardian (UK)*, 14 May, 2020; *Sequentia*, Dronke Nachruf: <http://www.sequentia.org/images/Dronke_Nachruf.pdf> (accessed 7 December 2020). See also JOHN MARENBNON, « Peter Dronke and Medieval Latin at Cambridge », in JOHN MARENBNON (ed.), *Poetry & Philosophy in the Middle Ages. A Festschrift for Peter Dronke*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2001 (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte, 29), p. 1–5 (on the occasion of Peter's retirement; this includes a bibliography of works mainly relevant to the theme of the Festschrift). I have derived some details from these generous tributes.

in Auckland, New Zealand, precluded him from being typically British, but his allegiances were to Europe and more widely, to the Mediterranean. When any aspect of this culture was threatened, he reacted – for example, when the National Library in Skopje was destroyed in 1963, Ursula and he were generous in their donations. A pan-Mediterranean culture consisted of a mosaic of languages, whose mutual contacts, through translation and adaptation, fascinated Peter. But at the heart of these languages was Latin, from which and into which the literature of other languages was translated, but which, in itself, provided a rich source of original and engaging literature.

Medieval Latin has always been a Cinderella subject – at most, subservient to other subjects (e.g. as a necessity for historians and theologians studying the Middle Ages). Only in certain German universities was its literature regarded worthy of a Seminar of its own. In Cambridge it lay hidden in the ‘Department of Other Languages’ alongside Catalan, Modern Greek and Danish. Peter was responsible for establishing its greatness in the British Isles. His appointment to a lectureship in Cambridge was itself a bold initiative on the part of the university. In the course of his tenure, he was elevated to a Readership, and eventually to a personal chair (1989–2001); he made the subject popular with undergraduate students, and attracted a series of research students, several of whom spread his interest in other universities throughout the world. In his undergraduate teaching he would recite poetry in several languages off by heart, and demonstrate (by means of a model made by his daughter Cressida) how the 3-D sphere of the cosmos was created from the rotation of a 2-D semicircle. Once one embarked on independent research one was invited to his house in Parker Street (between Emmanuel College and the bus station), to discuss papers given by one’s peers. The atmosphere was both convivial and invigorating, but slightly unnerving for the paper-giver, who knew that, if Peter’s reaction was ‘very interesting’, this was not an expression of praise.

Peter counteracted the prevalent association of Latin with the church in the Middle Ages, and the tendency for ‘medieval Latinists’ to be clerics (especially in France). He showed that Latin greatly exceeded the boundaries of theological literature, and that medieval churchmen (and women) were interested in much more than purely ecclesiastical matters. In drawing up a list of participants in a conference on the abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, he wrote (confidentially) « I’m sure one could keep the purely pious people to an absolute minimum ». He was more attracted to extraordinary individuals within the clerical environment – Peter Abelard for the honesty in which he expressed his feelings, and Hildegard for the vividness of her imagination. Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Alexander of Hales, Duns Scotus and the rest, are not so conspicuous in his writings.

The ability of human beings to express the full range of emotions and their most profound thoughts in beautiful ways, was the focus of Peter’s concern. Thus he was

attracted to love poetry, poetic expressions of philosophical truths, the writings of women, and the expressive intimacy of letters, to all of which he devoted books (from his early work, *The Medieval Love Lyric*, through his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, his *Verse with Prose from Petronius to Dante: The Art and Scope of the Mixed Form* and his *Lecturae Dantis*, to his final works on the most poetic of philosophers, Johannes Scotus Eriugena – cf. the title of his essay: « *Theologia veluti quaedam poetria. Quelques observations sur la fonction des images poétiques chez Jean Scot* », in *Jean Scot Érigène et l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris 1977), and (unfinished) the *Problemata* of Peter Abelard, which were his epistolary answers to Heloise's intimate concerns. He was intent on producing elegant translations of his own, which were faithful precisely because of their elegance, and he was dismissive of the literal translation, which was alright for a crib, but not worthy to be placed opposite the original of a fine example of medieval literature. I quote from a letter he wrote, which, incidentally, is a typical example of his habit of understatement:

[The translation] may always have a slightly outlandish air to it: even when correct, it's an English that doesn't respond to the nuances of [the original author's] thought. [...] [When] an *editio maior* is published, it would be very nice to have a 'crib' of this kind [...] to help a wider range of students with the text – but it isn't quite of a level of English to stand opposite the text in the new Cambridge series [...] for this series it is the sheer command of nuances that will count most.

The 'New Cambridge series' is the series which Peter set up with Cambridge University Press, which he called 'Cambridge Medieval Classics', indicating by the title that there *are* classics in the Middle Ages, written in Latin and Greek, and stating in the description of the series that these classics should be made more accessible, through « versions in lively modern English ». The chosen texts, Peter writes in the preface to the individual books, « are representative of key literary traditions [...] which offer penetrating insights into the culture of medieval Europe. Medieval politics, society, humour, and religion are represented ». This could well be a description of his own works.

His love of language shone through his lectures (e.g. the *Lectura Dantis* that he gave almost every year in Cambridge), from which it was transferred to his books and individual articles (e.g. « L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle », *Studi medievali*, 3/6 (1965) – to pick one article among the many that are collected in his *The Medieval Poet and His World* (1984), *Latin and Vernacular Poets of the Middle Ages* (1991), *Sources of Inspiration: Studies in Literary Transformations, 400–1500* (1997), and *Forms and Imaginings from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (2007).

One may say that Peter was very sensitive to the musicality of poetry. Many of the Latin (and other) poems that he studied were undoubtedly sung and/or accompanied by music. In his *The Medieval Lyric* (1968) he had written that « the melodies are an essential complement to the texts; ideally, where the music

survives, it would always be printed together with the words before the discussion of any lyric begins », and, as an appendix to the book he included several examples of the musical accompaniments. He collaborated with the foremost interpreters of medieval music – *Sequentia* – in preparing texts and translations (from 1981 to 2017), and program notes for the LPs that they produced, especially on Hildegard of Bingen, whose *Ordo Virtutum* Peter edited; their last collaboration was concerning the musical settings of the metres of Boethius's *De consolacione Philosophiae*, whose study happened to be the last work that Peter published (a new edition of the whole work). For the conference he organised at the Warburg Institute on Hildegard of Bingen in 1995, he invited Barbara Thornton of *Sequentia* to give a recital. He was always attending concerts both in Cambridge, and in London, and on one occasion, when I was performing in Verdi's *I due Foscari* he told me that this was the twenty-fourth opera of Verdi that he had listened to.

He was also sensitive to visual imagery: writing about the use of colour-imagery (especially in Hildegard), the imagery of trees, and of Paradise. At home his 'card-catalogue' was not a catalogue of his books, but a collection of images on cards: of paintings, sculptures and buildings, and Ursula and he frequently visited art exhibitions.

He was always generous in his praises (e.g. of the Warburg Institute where he was « a long-standing, happy and frequent guest »: Preface to *Hildegard of Bingen*, London 1998), but did not hesitate to criticize other scholars if they failed to meet his standards (of one scholar he wrote: « I have always doubted [x's] capacity for thinking seriously ») and he was particularly hard on any copy-editor who dared to alter the position of one comma. The unprepossessing blue door (once graced by a hanging basket) to 6 Parker Street, Cambridge, was always opened to guests; and one could imagine being in Florence or some other European city as one sat on the first floor balcony enjoying a drink and warm conversation.

Several themes ran throughout his life: Peter Abelard and Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen, Dante, Plato's *Timaeus*, imagination and imagery. But common to much of his writing was the transfer of ideas and the processes of their subtle changes in the course of transfer: how Classical themes were transferred into Medieval literature (including the twelfth-century commentaries on Classical works by Virgil, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella), or how Medieval (Latin) traditions were taken up by Dante (e.g. in *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, Cambridge 1986), not to mention the role of Norse and Celtic (*Growth of Literature: the Sea and the God of the Sea*, with Ursula, Cambridge 1998), and Germanic culture (e.g. *Barbara et antiquissima carmina I. Le caractère de la poésie germanique héroïque II. Waltharius-Gaiferos*, Barcelona 1977, with Ursula). For his *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (Cambridge 1988) he commissioned a chapter on « The Arabic inheritance » from Jean Jolivet. He traced the influence of Arabic Aristotelianism on the intellect in *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, and discerned

Arabic influences in Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia* (Leiden 1978). It would not be inappropriate to transfer to Peter Dronke the epithet applied to Idithun *saliens in montibus, transiliens colles* (Song of Songs, 2, v. 8), to which he devoted several pages in his *Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World* (Florence 2003, p. 44–45). « Jumping over mountains, and leaping over hills » he explored the whole gamut of medieval Latin literature, and made his final bound to heaven in the Spring of 2020.