



Peter Abelard

William Turner

Peter Abelard was born in the little village of Pallet, about ten miles east of Nantes in Brittany. His father, Berengar, was lord of the village, his mother's name was Lucia; both afterwards entered the monastic state. Peter, the oldest of their children, was intended for a military career, but, as he himself tells us, he abandoned Mars for Minerva, the profession of arms for that of learning. Accordingly, at an early age, he left his father's castle and sought instruction as a wandering scholar at the schools of the most renowned teachers of those days. Among these teachers was Roscelin the Nominalist, at whose school at Locmenach, near Vannes, Abelard certainly spent some time before he proceeded to Paris. Although the University of Paris did not exist as a corporate institution until more than half a century after Abelard's death, there flourished at Paris in his time the Cathedral School, the School of Ste. Genevieve, and that of St. Germain des Pres, the forerunners of the university schools of the following century. The Cathedral School was undoubtedly the most important of these, and thither the young Abelard directed his steps' in order to study dialectic under the renowned master (*scholasticus*) William of Champeaux. Soon, however, the youth from the province, for whom the prestige of a great name was far from awe-inspiring, not only ventured to object to the teaching of the Parisian master, but attempted to set up as a rival teacher. Finding that this was not an easy matter in Paris, he established his school first at Melun and later at Corbeil. This was, probably, in the year 1101. The next couple of years Abelard spent in his native place" almost cut off from France", as he says. The reason of this enforced retreat from the dialectical fray was failing health. On returning to Paris, he became once more a pupil of William of Champeaux for the purpose of studying rhetoric. When William retired to the monastery of St. Victor, Abelard, who meantime had resumed his teaching at Melun, hastened to Paris to secure the chair of the Cathedral School. Having failed in this, he set up his school in Mt. Ste. Genevieve (1108). There and at the Cathedral School, in which in 1113 he finally succeeded in obtaining a chair, he enjoyed the greatest renown as a teacher of rhetoric and dialectic. Before taking up the duty of teaching theology at the Cathedral School, he went to Laon where he presented himself to the venerable Anselm of Laon as a student of theology. Soon, however, his petulant restiveness under restraint once more asserted itself, and he was not content until he had as completely discomfited the teacher of theology at Laon as he had successfully harassed the teacher of rhetoric and dialectic at Paris. Taking Abelard's own account of the incident, it is impossible not to blame him for the temerity which made him such enemies as Alberic and Lotulph, pupils of Anselm, who, later on, appeared against Abelard. The" theological studies" pursued by Abelard at Laon were what we would nowadays call the study of exegesis.

There can be no doubt that Abelard's career as a teacher at Paris, from 1108 to 1118, was an exceptionally brilliant one. In his "Story of My Calamities" (*Historia Calamitatum*) he tells us how pupils flocked to him from every country in Europe, a statement which is more than corroborated by the authority of his contemporaries. He was, in fact, the idol of Paris; eloquent, vivacious, handsome, possessed of an unusually rich voice, full of confidence in his own power to please, he had, as he tells us, the whole world at his feet. That Abelard was unduly conscious of these advantages is admitted by his most ardent admirers; indeed, in the "Story of My Calamities," he confesses that at that period of his life he was filled with vanity and pride. To these faults he attributes his downfall, which was as swift and tragic as was everything, seemingly, in his meteoric career. He tells us in graphic language the tale which has become part of the classic literature of the love-theme, how he fell in love with Heloise, niece of Canon Fulbert; he spares us none of the details of the story, recounts all the circumstances of its tragic ending, the brutal vengeance of the Canon, the flight of Heloise to Pallet, where their son, whom he named Astrolabius, was born, the secret wedding, the retirement of Heloise to the nunnery of Argenteuil, and his abandonment of his academic career. He was at the time a cleric in minor orders, and had naturally looked forward to a distinguished career as an ecclesiastical teacher. After his downfall, he retired to the Abbey of St. Denis, and, Heloise having taken the veil at Argenteuil, he assumed the habit of a Benedictine monk at the royal Abbey of St. Denis. He who had considered himself "the only surviving philosopher in the whole world" was willing to hide himself definitely, as he thought in monastic solitude. But whatever dreams he may have had of final peace in his monastic retreat were soon shattered. He quarrelled with the monks of St. Denis, the occasion being his irreverent criticism of the legend of their patron saint, and was sent to a branch institution, a priory or *cella*, where, once more, he soon attracted unfavorable attention by the spirit of the teaching which he gave in philosophy and theology. "More subtle and more learned than ever", as a contemporary (Otto of Freising) describes him, he took up the former quarrel with Anselm's pupils. Through their influence, his orthodoxy, especially on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, was impeached, and he was summoned to appear before a council at Soissons, in 1121, presided over by the papal legate, Kuno, Bishop of Praeneste. While it is not easy to determine exactly what took place at the Council, it is clear that there was no formal condemnation of Abelard's doctrines, but that he was nevertheless condemned to recite the Athanasian Creed, and to burn his book on the Trinity. Besides, he was sentenced to imprisonment in the Abbey of St. Medard, at the instance apparently, of the monks of St. Denis, whose enmity, especially that of their Abbot Adam, was unrelenting. In his despair, he fled to a desert place in the neighborhood of Troyes. Thither pupils soon began to flock, huts and tents for their reception were built, and an oratory erected, under the title "The Paraclete", and there his former success as a teacher was renewed.

After the death of Adam, Abbot of St. Denis, his successor, Suger, absolved Abelard from censure, and thus restored him to his rank as a monk. The Abbey of St. Gildas de Rhuys, near Vannes, on the coast of Brittany, having lost its Abbot in 1125, elected Abelard to fill his place. At the same time, the community of Argenteuil was dispersed, and Heloise gladly accepted the Oratory of the Paraclete, where she became Abbess. As Abbot of St. Gildas, Abelard had, according to his own account, a very troublesome time. The monks, considering him too

strict, endeavored in various ways to rid themselves of his rule, and even attempted to poison him. They finally drove him from the monastery. Retaining the title of Abbot, he resided for some time in the neighborhood of Nantes and later (probably in 1136) resumed his career as teacher at Paris and revived, to some extent, the renown of the days when, twenty years earlier, he gathered "all Europe" to hear his lectures. Among his pupils at this time were Arnold of Brescia and John of Salisbury. Now begins the last act in the tragedy of Abelard's life, in which St. Bernard plays a conspicuous part. The monk of Clairvaux, the most powerful man in the Church in those days, was alarmed at the heterodoxy of Abelard's teaching, and questioned the Trinitarian doctrine contained in Abelard's writings. There were admonitions on the one side and defiances on the other; St. Bernard, having first warned Abelard in private, proceeded to denounce him to the bishops of France; Abelard, underestimating the ability and influence of his adversary, requested a meeting, or council, of bishops, before whom Bernard and he should discuss the points in dispute. Accordingly, a council was held at Sens (the metropolitan see to which Paris was then suffragan) in 1141. On the eve of the council a meeting of bishops was held, at which Bernard was present, but not Abelard, and in that meeting a number of propositions were selected from Abelard's writings, and condemned. When, on the following morning, these propositions were read in solemn council, Abelard, informed, so it seems, of the proceedings of the evening before, refused to defend himself, declaring that he appealed to Rome. Accordingly, the propositions were condemned, but Abelard was allowed his freedom. St. Bernard now wrote to the members of the Roman Curia, with the result that Abelard had proceeded only as far as Cluny on his way to Rome when the decree of Innocent II confirming the sentence of the Council of Sens reached him. The Venerable Peter of Cluny now took up his case, obtained from Rome a mitigation of the sentence, reconciled him with St. Bernard, and gave him honorable and friendly hospitality at Cluny. There Abelard spent the last years of his life, and there at last he found the peace which he had elsewhere sought in vain. He donned the habit of the monks of Cluny and became a teacher in the school of the monastery. He died at Chalon-sur-Saone in 1142, and was buried at the Paraclete. In 1817 his remains and those of Heloise were transferred to the cemetery of Pere la Chaise, in Paris, where they now rest. For our knowledge of the life of Abelard we rely chiefly on the "Story of My Calamities", an autobiography written as a letter to a friend, and evidently intended for publication. To this may be added the letters of Abelard and Heloise, which were also intended for circulation among Abelard's friends. The "Story" was written about the year 1130, and the letters during the following five or six years. In both the personal element must, of course, be taken into account. Besides these we have very scanty material; a letter from Roscelin to Abelard, a letter of Fulco of Deuil, the chronicle of Otto of Freising, the letters of St. Bernard, and a few allusions in the writings of John of Salisbury.

Abelard's philosophical works are "Dialectica," a logical treatise consisting of four books (of which the first is missing); "Liber Divisionum et Definitionum" (edited by Cousin as a fifth book of the "Dialectica"); Glosses on Porphyry, Boetius, and the Aristotelian "Categories"; "Glossulae in Porphyrium" (hitherto unpublished except in a French paraphrase by Remusat); the fragment "De Generibus et Speciebus", ascribed to Abelard by Cousin; a moral treatise "Scito Teipsum, seu Ethica", first published by Pez in "Thes. Anecd. Noviss". All of these, with

the exception of the “Glossulae” and the “Ethica”, are to be found in Cousin’s “Ouvrages ineditis d’Abelard” (Paris, 1836). Abelard’s theological works (published by Cousin, “Petri Abaelardi Opera”, in 2 vols., Paris, 1849-59, also by Migne, “Patr. Lat.”, CLXXVIII) include “Sic et Non”, consisting of scriptural and patristic passages arranged *for* and *against* various theological opinions, without any attempt to decide whether the affirmative or the negative opinion is correct or orthodox; “Tractatus de Unitate et Trinitate Divina”, which was condemned at the Council of Sens (discovered and edited by Stolze, Freiburg, 1891); “Theologia Christiana,” a second and enlarged edition of the “Tractatus” (first published by Durand and Martene, “Thes. November,” 1717); “Introductio in Theologiam” (more correctly, “Theologia”), of which the first part was published by Duchesne in 1616; “Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum, et Christianum”; “Sententiae Petri Abrelardi”, otherwise called “Epitome Theologiae Christianae”, which is seemingly a compilation by Abelard’s pupils (first published by Rheinwald, Berlin, 1835); and several exegetical works, hymns, sequences, etc. In philosophy Abelard deserves consideration primarily as a dialectician.

For him, as for all the scholastic philosophers before the thirteenth century, philosophical inquiry meant almost exclusively the discussion and elucidation of the problems suggested by the logical treatises of Aristotle and the commentaries thereon, chiefly the commentaries of Porphyry and Boetius. Perhaps his most important contribution to philosophy and theology is the method which he developed in his “Sic et Non” (Yea and Nay), a method germinally contained in the teaching of his predecessors, and afterwards brought to more definite form by Alexander of Hales and St. Thomas Aquinas. It consisted in placing before the student the reasons *pro* and *contra*, on the principle that truth is to be attained only by a dialectical discussion of apparently contradictory arguments and authorities. In the problem of Universals, which occupied so much of the attention of dialecticians in those days, Abelard took a position of uncompromising hostility to the crude nominalism of Roscelin on the one side, and to the exaggerated realism of William of Champeaux on the other. What, precisely, was his own doctrine on the question is a matter which cannot with accuracy be determined. However, from the statements of his pupil, John of Salisbury, it is clear that Abelard’s doctrine, while expressed in terms of a modified Nominalism, was very similar to the moderate Realism which began to be official in the schools about half a century after Abelard’s death. In ethics Abelard laid such great stress on the morality of the intention as apparently to do away with the objective distinction between good and evil acts. It is not the physical action itself, he said, nor any imaginary *injury* to God, that constitutes sin, but rather the psychological element in the action, the intention of sinning, which is formal contempt of God. ‘With regard to the relation between reason and revelation, between the sciences—including philosophy—and theology, Abelard incurred in his own day the censure of mystic theologians like St. Bernard, whose tendency was to disinherit reason in favor of contemplation and ecstatic vision. And it is true that if the principles “Reason aids Faith” and “Faith aids Reason” are to be taken as the inspiration of scholastic theology, Abelard was constitutionally inclined to emphasize the former, and not lay stress on the latter. Besides, he adopted a tone, and employed a phraseology, when speaking of sacred subjects, which gave offense, and rightly, to the more conservative of his contemporaries. Still, Abelard had good precedent for his use of dialectic in the elucidation of the mysteries of

faith; he was by no means an innovator in this respect; and though the thirteenth century, the golden age of scholasticism, knew little of Abelard, it took up his method, and with fearlessness equal to his, though without any of his flippancy or irreverence, gave full scope to reason in the effort to expound and defend the mysteries of the Christian Faith. St. Bernard sums up the charges against Abelard when he writes (Ep. cxcii) “Cum de Trinitate loquitur, sapit Arium; cum de gratia, sapit Pelagium; cum de persona Christi, sapit Nestorium”, and there is no doubt that on these several heads Abelard wrote and said many things which were open to objection from the point of view of orthodoxy. That is to say, while combating the opposite errors, he fell inadvertently into mistakes which he himself did not recognize as Arianism, Pelagianism, and Nestorianism, and which even his enemies could characterize merely as savoring of Arianism, Pelagianism, and Nestorianism. Abelard’s influence on his immediate successors was not very great, owing partly to his conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities, and partly to his personal defects, more especially his vanity and pride, which must have given the impression that he valued truth less than victory. His influence on the philosophers and theologians of the thirteenth century was, however, very great. It was exercised chiefly through Peter Lombard, his pupil, and other framers of the “Sentences.” Indeed, while one must be careful to discount the exaggerated encomiums of Compayre, Cousin, and others, who represent Abelard as the first modern, the founder of the University of Paris, etc., one is justified in regarding him, in spite of his faults of character and mistakes of judgment, as an important contributor to scholastic method, an enlightened opponent of obscurantism, and a continuator of that revival of learning which occurred in the Carolingian age, and of which whatever there is of science, literature, and speculation in the early Middle Ages is the historical development.

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