Conflict and Correspondence. Inner and Outer in Abelard and Hugh of Saint Victor

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Peter Abelard is well known for his place in twelfth-century philosophy and theology. He is also associated with a re-emergence of an emphasis on inwardness in the twelfth century. In the work of Hugh of Saint Victor (d. 1141) we also find a strong emphasis on the ‘inner man’. Though for different reasons, both Abelard and Hugh figure in the history of the twelfth-century’s turn towards an emphasis on inwardness. Notions of inwardness are found elsewhere in Western history, for example in the Psalms and the Letters of Paul in the Bible, as well as in Greek philosophy, and up to the modern day. Inwardness, however, can mean different things at different times and to different interpreters. The modern emphasis is very much on the private aspects of inwardness. Stephen Toulmin sums them up as: “The personal, the private, the unspoken, the secret, the thought uttered only to oneself, the wish unacknowledged in the breast, the image in the mind’s eye.”

These aspects were not lacking in the twelfth century, yet were not what most characterized inwardness. What resonates in medieval notions is Paul’s ‘inner man’, as it came to be seen as the site of the imago Dei. This image may be lost but man can, and must, strive to recover it. Also important are the ways in which in the Bible (as in other ancient literature) there are expressions involving heart and other body parts which are placed metaphorically for the inner. To get some purchase on this somewhat elusive notion, in this article I shall examine how both Abelard and Hugh consider the relation between inner and outer. Inner indeed implies the outer, and how the relation between the two

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1 Stephen Toulmin, “The Inwardness of Mental Life,” Critical Inquiry 6 (Autumn 1979), 1–16, here 3. I would like to thank Michael Clanchy and Paul Strohm for reading this article and making some helpful suggestions.

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is seen, may clarify what is meant by inner.\(^3\) In the twelfth century, inner and outer are opposites that sometimes, though perhaps only partially, overlap with others pairs such as the visible and the invisible, or the corporeal and the spiritual.\(^4\) By analysing how the relation between inner and outer functions in the two writers, perhaps we can bring into focus the differences between them and thus better understand their notions of inwardness. I hope to show that for Hugh inner and outer function within a comprehensive worldview in which their correspondence is ultimately dominant, in the world as a whole as in man, whereas for Abelard they articulate an inevitable tension at the heart of the search for a true moral life.

Although Abelard and Hugh were contemporaries, there is no evidence that they met. There is evidence that Hugh refers to and criticizes the teachings of Abelard sometimes.\(^5\) David Luscombe has analysed the instances where Hugh and Abelard discuss the same issues, and their different opinions on these matters.\(^6\) Ralf Stammberger also highlights the topics they both debated.\(^7\) Dominique Poirel has compared Hugh and Abelard as somewhat different intellectuals, and contrasted Abelard’s analytical, dialectical, individual and polemic method with Hugh’s more synthetic, erudite, collective and pastoral one.\(^8\) One of the well-known differences between Abelard and Hugh is in their

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\(^6\) Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard*, 183–197.


\(^8\) Dominique Poirel, “Deux maîtres, deux methodes et deux destinées dans la première moitié du XIIe siècle: Pierre Abélard et Hugues de Saint-Victor,” in *Les intellectuels dans la cité: Intellectuels, sociabilités et fonctions intellectuelles de l’antiquité à nos jours*. Saint-Aignan,