Abelard on the First Six Days

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Abelard wrote the *Expositio in Hexaemeron* in answer to a request from Heloise and the nuns of the Paraclete, along with the book of hymns edited by Joseph Szövérffy under the title of the *Hymnarius paraclitensis*, the adaptation of the Rule of Benedict in Letter 8 of the correspondence, and other texts.¹ This *Exposition on the Six-Day Work* deals with the text of Genesis down to 2,25, just after the second account of the creation of man and the fashioning of Eve from Adam’s rib, and just before the entry of the serpent and the eating of the fruit. It has been dated to the mid-1130s by its editors Mary Romig and David Luscombe: after the foundation of the Paraclete in 1129 and before the completion of the *Theologia ‘Scholarium’*.²

Belonging as it does, in a broad sense, to the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise, this book of Abelard’s poses to the historian some of the questions that have arisen from the letters themselves. Might the *Exposition on the Six-Day Work* be best understood, as the letters have been understood, as a debate related to the emergent tradition of the schools, which here, in the commentary, latches onto a number of *quaestiones disputatae* implied in the story told by the Bible, and then, at a more general level across the text as a whole, stages a colloquy between the two genres of philosophy and the science of revealed truth?³ To read the commentary with these other texts in a corner of the eye brings an enlargement of possible sense. It suggests a shared idiom across the different pieces which increases the intensity of each one of them. Should we, for example, be reading Abelard’s thoughts on the *Hexaemeron* in parallel with the hymns for night and day office in the book of hymns written for the Paraclete and Heloise’s nuns? Eileen Kearney, who published a

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finely-tuned study of the *Expositio* in 1980, makes a remark that brings one up short: “... the complete resolution [of the commentary] is not confined to terms that imply the solution to a problem. In this instance, the meaning of the Word is not so much uncovered or disclosed as encountered. The question raised by the fact of sin is ultimately satisfied by a song.” And the problem—the heart of Abelard’s problem as he reads—is the productive dissonance of Genesis, juxtaposing a perfect creation, the world as God’s mind enacted, with the fall into sin and into history or time. The song which seems to sharpen this problem—and leave it unsolved—is the Exultet hymn for the blessing of the newly-lit Easter candle at the moment of resurrection. “O happy blame, to have deserved such and so great a redeemer.” (O felix culpa que talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem.) The idea that a song points to an encounter with the Word, delineates it and so puts it at a greater distance, the instinct of *Noli me tangere* recurrent in the visual art of Christendom, is a clue with which to read Abelard’s hymns for the nuns of the Paraclete. Again and again, these songs have a way of turning the dark paradoxes within redemption into brief, spare and exquisite dances of delight:

Let the night of tears go on, and the three-day span persist, long dusk of weeping, till when the Lord rises, the thankful morning of joy repays grief.

The search for what is problematic is never far away in Abelard. In his letter preface to the *Commentary*, written to Heloise, he stresses the difficulty offered by the report in Genesis of the first six days. The text ranks with Ezechiel and

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5 *Hex.*, 455.2730–455.2731, 102. The use of the hymn here is part of the drama of Abelard’s argument. He begins by explaining the Fall as the occasion of a greater love of humankind for the God who sacrifices himself, a love that turns a bad into a good; but then refers to the ‘happy blame’ of the *Exultet* as if to illuminate what is problematic in this idea. It seems a reflex of Abelard’s thought that explanation defines the contour of mystery, while mystery provokes to the unfolding of problems.