Abelard and the Poetics of Ingenium

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Although the Word is common to all,
most men live as if each had a private wisdom of his own.

HERACLITUS

For Abelard, everything depended on the instant power of the intellect.\(^1\) This is as true of his philosophy as it is of his personal relationships. What distinguished his rejection of a certain model of knowledge from that of other thinkers was, above all else, the spirit or intention (\textit{intentio}) in which it was done. Apart from his instant feeling of understanding, Abelard’s intellectual spirit was deeply infused with the notion of being-in-time (\textit{infra ambitum temporis}), that is, the recognition of how achingly open the desire for truth must remain in the context of human life. The link between the knowledge of a limited and organized reality and the not-knowing of a conceptualized reality is delicate.\(^2\)

In beginning to characterize styles of reasoning, then, the comfort zone of an unbroken \textit{ratio} is alluring. But skepticism was no option for twelfth-century intellectuals either, as they had to deal with the pale state of a higher Truth. The semantic state of humanity (\textit{in hoc statu}) is basically compositional in nature, says Abelard.\(^3\) Similar to Adam, who gave names to the animals in Genesis, the designation of things in the world can be either individually or severally. Hence something more than mere cognition was needed to be able to cope with the open wound of knowledge. Certainly, imagination (\textit{imaginatio}) could help a great deal. It was even a requirement in order to fulfil the poetic expres-

\(^1\) I am grateful to Peter Cramer who helped me clarify some of the difficulties in the writing of this article.

\(^2\) Arnold Davidson’s captivating essays (especially chapter 5, including Paul Veyne on Foucault and Wölfflin, and chapter 6 on Carlo Ginzburg) show some significant similarities concerning the paradigmatic issues that modern epistemologists share with our twelfth-century intellectuals, for example, the meaning of \textit{energeia}. See Arnold Davidson, \textit{The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

sion of this sacramental world, like the naming of a child in baptism. However, too much fantasy could lead to delusion. A twelfth-century theory of thought, however elegant and economical, suspended between knowing and not-knowing, is fragile. A quick reading of the relevant literature reveals that ideas about genius, quicksilver talent, or insight, are used more or less interchangeably. The particular meaning of each of these epistemological terms can be different, but the power of wit, where rationality and imagination work in tandem, comes close to what was generally considered a specifically innate talent (*ingenium*). There is not one single definition, however, that would cover the multifaceted nature of this epistemological concept. John of Salisbury says, quite bluntly, that there are three kinds of *ingenium*: “the first flies, the second creeps, and the third takes the immediate course of walking.” This third kind has a distinctive talent for philosophizing, it “provides prospect and walks right to the summit of true knowledge.”

Abelard too, was interested in the ‘immediacy of walking’ couched in the concept of *ingenium*. The natural capacity to recognize that ‘being-in-time’ represents an open wound, however, means that the effect of this recognition cannot be rewound. For if a second chance were possible, allowing memory to function as a compound, the achingly open desire for truth would be (re)stored. No desire or imagination, only the cleaving power of rationality would be profitable. But the pale state of humankind (*in hoc situ*) has no road back to Eden. In other words, if we were simply to honor the supremacy of *ratio*, the whole concept of a human condition *infra ambitum temporis* would implode, and innate talent would be nothing more than a cul-de-sac.

Instead, the paradigmatic aspect of Abelard’s *ingenium* envelops a desire for what has yet to be possessed. While time thickens and becomes viscous, how can man’s talent for creation operate as he walks, step-by-step, to the apex of creation? In the post-lapsarian human situation, where divinity sparkles but never rests, genius can be inflamed only momentarily; and this limitation is most palpable in language and human speech. Some have twelfth-century intellectuals recognizing illusion in Platonist claims of knowing: the illusion that they have managed more than a ‘gifted guess’ at understanding higher things. They get appropriately frustrated by Abelard’s acknowledgment of the

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4 For an overview of the various ways in which *ingenium* is used, see Kathryn Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 34–45. Lynch emphasizes in her discussion of *ingenium* the poetical aspect, the symbiotic capacity of intellectual power and instantly seeing higher truth in matter and form.

5 Ibid., 36.