Nominalism and Theology before Abaelard:
New Light on Roscelin of Compiègne

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Roscelin of Compiègne is commonly remembered as one of those modern "heretics of dialectic" who, according to St Anselm, "do not think universal substances to be anything but the puff of an utterance (flatum vocis), who cannot understand colour to be other than a body, or the wisdom of man different from the soul."1 Anselm accused Roscelin of blindly applying to the Trinity an inane logic that denied the real existence of universals. Roscelin reportedly argued that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had to be three separate things in God if one was not to argue that the Father had become incarnate with the Son. Anselm considered such speculation both logically absurd and spiritually dangerous.

Anselm's savage summary, delivered c.1093, has been instrumental in moulding subsequent perception of Roscelin as an unspiritual logician—a "maverick" in the words of Richard Southern.2 A more positive angle on his achievement was presented almost seventy years later by Otto of Freising, who remarked that Roscelin was the first person to establish the sententia vocum in logic.3 Otto was comparing Abaelard's rash application of this doctrine to theology with the prudent reflection of Gilbert of Poitiers on the voces of trinitarian belief. Far from criticizing Roscelin's thought, Otto supported precisely that definition of the three divine persons as three things which Anselm

1 Anselm, De incarnacione verbi [henceforward DIV], ed. F.S. Schmitt, Anselmi Opera Omnia VI, Rome-Edinburgh 1938-68, II 9.20-10.1. For a full discussion of Anselm's writing about Roscelin, see Mews 1991, 55-97. Fuller treatment of contemporary testimony about Roscelin, as well as arguments for his authorship of various writings mentioned in this paper will be put forward in a forthcoming study.
2 Cf. Richard Southern, in Saint Anselm. A Portrait in a Landscape, Cambridge 1990, 176: "Roscelin made enemies wherever he went, but he was irrepressible, and he touched nothing that he did not exacerbate. Far more than either Berengar or Abelard, who—though they both brought excommunication and condemnation on their heads—were essentially sober and well-versed theologians, Roscelin was always a cause of dissension wherever he went."
had abhorred. In Otto’s mind, Abaelard had blurred the substantial distinction between persons which he considered Gilbert to uphold. Unlike Anselm, Otto thought that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the new emphasis on *voces* in logic.

Although John of Salisbury considered Roscelin a logician whose opinions on *voces* had fallen into oblivion, Otto’s judgement has tended to prevail. His comments about Roscelin and the *sententia vocum* inspired Aventinus in the early sixteenth century to identify Roscelin as founder of ‘a new way of philosophizing’ that came to include Abaelard, Ockham, Buridan, and Marsilius of Inghen. Aventinus considered medieval philosophy to have been an inane civil war between realists and nominalists, initially instigated by Roscelin. The mythology which subsequently developed around Roscelin as nominalist “hero and rebel” has shown no sign of abating, notwithstanding François Picavet’s dissection of the legend. In focussing on nominalism as a cohesive school of medieval thought prefiguring ‘modern philosophy’, we are heir not only to Aventinus’ reading of the history of philosophy, but perhaps to his misreading as well.

Anselm never claimed that Roscelin had established a new school of dialectic, only that he was just one of a new breed of ‘modern’ dialecticians. The author of the *Historia Francica*, writing in the early twelfth century, noted in a less polemical vein that Roscelin, like Robert of Paris and Arnulf of Laon, was a follower of a certain John who taught dialectic to be an *ars vocalis*. Robert of Paris may be the

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4 *Metalogicon* II 17 (ed. Webb 93).

