

PETER ABÉLARD*

(1079-1142)

HISTORY will record, when the present strife has passed, that this period in which we live has no counterpart, not even in the darkest age. Today we struggle without hope, and there is no help in us. Despair is the daily lot of millions of creatures scattered all over the earth. A person has become a number, and means of subsistence are to be allotted in strict accordance with the measures upon the ration card. Such a condition was not known at any other time in the Christian era.

In moments of reflection, the mind turns once more to the ages that were called dark, the period between Boethius and the coming of Erigena. Those of us who are fortunate enough to leave, for a time, the arena of strife can meditate upon the work of those thinkers to whom we owe the palm and laurel of Christian faith.

Turning the pages of the authentic records of the long past we fail to find a time of any length when there was not some one man who kept the light of knowledge burning. Today we live on threadbare slogans, and the world is destitute of a thinker. The reason for this is that the individual has ceased to be a person. He has fallen a victim to the press bureau which formulates a scheme of life for him so cramped that he cannot now feel that he is even a cog in the working of the machinery of the state.

The pattern of life is designed by government, and government has become an aggregation of mere politicians. We have reached this stage after a long and weary pilgrimage to the shrine of Mammon. It began with the Nominalists and reached its zenith at the time of William of Occam. Since then we have witnessed the rising power of states to shape the destinies of men. And perhaps this is the last of all the defeats inflicted upon the individual.

It is well-nigh impossible for us to contemplate seriously the appalling change that has taken place unless we have the courage to turn back the pages of our history to the days when Christian well-being and culture were the single aim of thinkers. Neither is it easy for anyone educated under what is called the modern system to resort

to the efficacy of finding the complete contrast to our present state. One must have a tradition, a feeling for the hinterland in which the story is set forth, which provides the contrast that is necessary. Our days are without reverence and respect; we have been taught to treat the essentials of conduct lightly. Therefore, we quail at our own ignorance and tremble at the thought of daring to open the pages that reveal to us the Elysium we have lost.

How strange it is that the greatest strife of all should come at a time when the finer servants of knowledge have devoted themselves to a reconsideration of the thought and action of men who lived in the Middle Ages! Many of the scholars of this day, turning aside from the superficial controversies of life, have discovered a world so foreign to our ideas that it does not seem to belong to the globe we inhabit. They have found giants of wisdom in the Dark Ages—men whose thought influenced the schools for hundreds of years. These scholars find that the perplexities which harass us today were anticipated by the philosophers of long ago. There is scarcely one important question that disturbs the thoughtful man of our time which was overlooked by the controversialists of the Middle Ages.

Eight hundred years ago Peter Abélard died at the Priory of St. Marcel, near Châlons-sur-Saône. When journeying to Rome to make his plea for restoration, he was stricken at the Abbey of Cluny. Given shelter by Peter the Venerable, he found a hospice in which to end his days. Until 1836, when Victor Cousin published a volume of the works of Abélard,¹ the latter was known to the generality of men only as the lover of Héloïse, and, I daresay, in the more than one hundred years since Cousin introduced him anew to the thought of Europe, there have been but few who know that the romance of learning in the life of Abélard is a story quite as wonderful as the one which has linked his name to that of Héloïse.

Abélard was born near Nantes in 1079. He came from a stock of Breton nobles. When not yet twenty he became a student under William of Champeaux at the cathedral school of Notre Dame, Paris. After many intellectual vicissitudes, he was nominated Canon and elected to the chair at Notre Dame. Then came the great romance in his life. Perhaps there was never such a complete union of heart, mind, and soul as that of these two fated beings. The story of their love, before she entered the convent of Argenteuil,

has been told so often that it is not necessary to deal at length with it here.

As for Abélard, the tragedy of their separation and the shameful attack upon him by his wife's uncle left him a man of despair and remorse. All seemed lost, the effect of his labors dissipated, and his victories turned to bitter defeat. He entered the Abbey of St. Denis but found no repose there. Soon he received many appeals from the outer world to issue forth again and lecture to the people. Crowds of students flocked to hear him. After a period of controversy with the authorities, when he was charged with historical heresy, he suffered great persecution. Then he sought a place in the solitary country (near Nogent-sur-Seine); there he put up a rude cabin made of wattle, and became a hermit. However, Abélard did not find seclusion; the place of his retreat became known in Paris, and the students went in such numbers that it is said they built hundreds of huts about his cabin.

In one short chapter, Egon Friedell in his book, *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*,² throws a flood of light upon what he calls "the medieval soul." At the head of this chapter he quotes a passage from Johann Nestroy: "When the world was still in darkness, the heavens were bright,

and now that the world has become clear, the heavens are darkened."³

Friedell follows Émile Mâle, in revealing that the ages were not dark but full of light. Friedell says the people of that day

believed in *themselves*. They saw realities everywhere, even where there were none; everything was real. And everywhere they saw the supreme reality, God: everything was of God. And over everything they succeeded in drawing the magic veil of their own dreams and deliriums: everything was beautiful. Hence the splendid optimism which neutralized their disregard of this world, their poverty, and their narrowness. He who believes in things is always full of joy and confidence. The Middle Ages were not gloomy, they were bright. . . .⁴

Long before Locke, Hume, and Paine, there were ages of reason and, if we desire to know to what heights reason aspired, we must have the courage to start in our era with Erigena, then pass on to Abélard, and thence to Aquinas. There is a greater exercise of reason in the first book of Erigena's *The Division of Nature*⁵ than is to be found in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Indeed, it may be said that all controversy in the Middle Ages was an unceasing exercise of the reason. Small wonder that the few earnest scholars of our day who are pursuing their studies of the

great figures of the long past confess their amazement at the vastness of the schemes and systems, in philosophy and theology, which were the daily tasks of the men of the Middle Ages. Moreover, they find that within the church itself there was a ferment created by the spirit of controversy which many times brooked all authority to curb it. At the centers of learning all over Europe masters and students took sides, while threats of bulls of excommunication came from Pope and legate.

One of the most thorough students of the period with which we are dealing realized the value of the work performed by the Schoolmen. John Richard Green says:

. . . It was by this critical tendency, by the new clearness and precision which scholasticism gave to enquiry, that in spite of the trivial questions with which it often concerned itself, it trained the human mind through the next two centuries to a temper which fitted it to profit by the great disclosure of knowledge that brought about the Renascence. . . .⁶

The long-drawn-out battle waged over many centuries between the Platonists and Aristotelians, in which Abélard took part and thereby prepared the way for the ascendancy of Aristotle, was fought in vain. Yet, out of the philosophical and theological conflict, there remains much

that served the post-Reformation philosophers with texts for their most profound reflections upon the place of the individual in the universe. Abélard's assertion that the individual exists in his own right and that he is a complete entity—a world within himself—is the fundamental that has stirred the greatest minds of the modern age. The bridge from Abélard to Locke is not so wide as the intervening centuries make it appear. Man is Realist, Idealist, and Nominalist. In him lies the source of all conceptions; he is the birth-giver of all ideas. It is his mind that sees God, the Creator of his being, and it is his mind that attempts to explain the world created by his Maker. As all things derive from the Creator, so all natural phenomena are translated by man as tributes to the high endowment bequeathed to him.

Abélard was a torch of inquiry lighting up the dark passages of pagan thought. He gave us no complete system, but he passed on to his followers the methods by which they achieved the highest philosophic work of the later Middle Ages. Cousin set forth the doctrine of Abélard in a crystal: "Only individuals exist, and in the individual nothing but the individual."

Following the great work of Albertus Magnus and Aquinas came that of Occam. And as it is

in all extremes, there follows a reversion to the first state, so it was that the mystics came again and began anew the search of the individual to be united to his Maker, and they exemplified not only in their lives but in their work and sermons that the definition of Lactantius—"Religion is that which binds man to an invisible Creator"—is not only true but the fervent hope of all souls that seek justice, peace, and love.

In a short essay on such a figure in the history of philosophy, it is unnecessary to dwell for long upon the achievements of his mind, for the time is out of joint, and the lectures that stirred the youth of France in Abélard's day would now fall upon deaf ears and closed minds. Let us turn, then, to the closing days of our hero's life, for he was one of the world's greatest heroes. When he sought refuge at Cluny, he was broken in health, and his soul was seared and wearied. Placing himself under the protection of the abbot, Peter the Venerable, he passed two years in peace and was restored to his brethren. How strange it was that he should make his way to Cluny and there find repose he had not known for forty years!

Here a word or two should be given to the man who received him. Under Peter the Venerable a great revival of literature began and at

that time the library of the monastery was one of the most comprehensive in Europe. Peter himself devoted to writing what time he could spare from the administration of the abbey. In a letter to Brother Gislebert he wrote:

If indeed it is true, as Scripture says, that "the wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure, and he that hath little business shall become wise," then how shall I ever attain to writing anything near wisdom, who have no leisure, whose whole life is one endless and most tiresome business?"

Yet somehow he found time, and it is recorded that, on a visit to Spain, he had the Koran translated in order that he might attempt to refute it. Such was the man who became the mediator between Abélard and his unmerciful critic, Bernard of Clairvaux. In his letter to the Pope, pleading for the ban of excommunication to be lifted, so that Abélard might pass in peace his last years within the abbey, Peter wrote to Innocent II saying: "Let no man be permitted to drive him from this house where he rejoices to have found, like a swallow, a roof to shelter him, and like a dove, a nest where he may hide."⁸

In Dr. Joan Evans' beautiful work, *Monastic Life at Cluny*, there is a letter written by Peter

and sent to Héloïse, describing the last days of Abélard:

I do not remember to have known a man whose appearance and bearing manifested such humility. Saint Germain cannot have seemed humbler or Saint Martin poorer. I set him among the first of this great flock of brethren; but by the carelessness of his apparel he seemed the least of all. When in our processions he walked before me with the community I have often marvelled and been amazed that a man of so great and so famous a name should be able thus to despise himself and thus to abase himself. There are some who profess religion, who when they don the religious habit, do not find it splendid enough; but instead he was so sparing in his wants that, contented with a plain habit, he demanded nothing further. He maintained the same simplicity in his food and drink, and in every need of his body; and by word and deed condemned in himself and all men, I do not say only superfluities, but everything not absolutely necessary. He was continually reading, frequently at his prayers, and almost always silent; unless obliged to speak by friendly conversation with his brethren or by some discourse on holy things to the community. . . . For the sake of rest—for he was more than usually troubled with the itch and other weaknesses of the body—I sent him to Châlon, for the mildness of the climate, which is the best in our part of Burgundy; and to a home well fitted for him, near the town, but yet with the Saône flowing between. There, as much as his in-

firmities permitted, returning to his former studies, he was ever bent over his books, nor—as we read of Gregory the Great—did he ever allow a moment to pass in which he was not either praying or reading, or writing or dictating. In the midst of such labours Death, the bearer of good tidings, found him: not, like so many, asleep, but awake. . . . Venerable and beloved sister in Christ, he to whom you were first united by the bonds of the flesh and then by the stronger and more sacred bonds of divine love, he with whom and under whose guidance you have long served the Lord is now cherished in His bosom. . . . God keeps him for you, and when the day comes that He shall descend from Heaven to the voice of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet, He will restore him to you for ever.⁹

The end of the tragedy was the completion of the union of Abélard and Héloïse. He died and was buried at St. Marcel and but a few months later,

at Héloïse's request, Peter had the body removed and brought it himself to her nunnery of the Paraclete. There he celebrated Mass for Abélard's soul, preached to the nuns, comforted Héloïse as best he could, and gave her the parchment with his seal to hang above Abélard's tomb:

"I Peter, Abbot of Cluny, who have received Peter Abélard into the monastic life, and have granted to Héloïse, Abbess, and the nuns of the Paraclete, his body, which has been secretly brought

here, by the authority of Almighty God and all the saints I absolve him from his sins."¹⁰

There may be some who, remembering the romance of these two famous souls, will spare a moment in these days of sorrow to think of the achievements of one whose thought and influence inspired much of the work of his greatest followers.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

* *Amer. Jour. Econ. Sociol.*, I, No. 4 (July, 1942), 449-54.

¹ The collection was entitled *Ouvrages inédits d'Abélard*. Cousin's work gave extracts from the theological work *Sic et Non* and also included the *Dialectica* and a fragment, *De Generibus et Speciebus*.

² Three vols., trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931.

³ *Ibid.*, I, Bk. I, chap. II, 71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

⁵ Johannes Scotus Erigena, c. 800-c. 877. *De divisione naturae* was published by Thomas Gale (Oxford, 1681); C. B. Schlüter (Munster, 1838); and in Floss's *Opera omnia*; there is also a German trans. by Ludwig Noack, *Johannes Scotus Erigena über die Einteilung der Natur*, 3 vols. (1874-76).

⁶ *A Short History of the English People*, rev. by Alice Stopford Green (New York: American Book Company, 1916), p. 151.

⁷ Joan Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny, 910-1157* (Oxford University Press; London: Humphrey Milford, 1931), p. 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*