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978-0-521-09426-9 - Alan of Lille: The Frontiers of Theology in the Later Twelfth Century

G. R. Evans

Excerpt

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Introduction

'DOCTOR UNIVERSALIS'

Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* made a considerable impact. One of his pupils, Ralph of Longchamps, wrote a commentary on it, to bring out its usefulness to students of the liberal arts. Adam de la Bassée, who was a canon of St Peter, Lille, passed his time during a period of illness, between 1278 and his death in 1296, in composing a *Ludus super Anticlaudianum*. This light musical version of the piece, with songs at intervals, has a serious moral purpose, but it is a popular entertainment, too. During the thirteenth century, Ellebaut turned the *Anticlaudianus* into French, making what changes he thought fit to the details of the plot.¹ There can be no doubt of Alan's popularity as an author. The number of surviving manuscripts, particularly of the *Art of Preaching* and the sermons, demonstrates clearly enough how widely his works were diffused. The *Regulae Theologicae* was one of the first of his works to be printed, at Basle in the 1490s; the *Distinctiones Dictionum Theologicalium* preceded it (Strasbourg, 1475) and the *Parabola* and *De Sex Alis Cherubim*, too, were in print before 1500. There were fresh editions of several of Alan's works in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. C. de Visch printed his *Opera* in 1654, but P. Leyser in 1721 and J. A. Mingarellius in 1756 produced independent versions of single works. He never went entirely out of fashion.

He was evidently memorable as a teacher, too. Ralph of Longchamps says that when he thought of his master he was moved to tears. Nevertheless, remarkably little information about his life and personality has come down to us. His was not an age when a Dr Johnson was likely to find a Boswell, unless perhaps his life was singular in its holiness. Eadmer's *Life of St Anselm* is

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both biography and hagiography; but it is a rare achievement. The miscellaneous pieces of evidence assembled by M. T. d'Alverny² and recently reconsidered by J. J. Sheridan³ give an account of his life which is perhaps as close to a biography of Alan of Lille as we can hope to come.

In old age, Alan entered the Cistercian Order, as a number of twelfth-century masters had done before him, including Thierry of Chartres. He died at Cîteaux in 1202 or 3. This is the only date about which we can be reasonably confident. If we work backwards from it, it seems, on the face of it, unlikely that Alan could have been in the schools, even as a student, before the late 1140s. John of Salisbury, who was born *c.* 1115–20, does not mention him in his account of his own student days in the *Metalogicon*, although he names many masters.⁴ John's period in the schools between 1136 and 1147 was certainly too early for him to have encountered Alan as a teacher. But there is another possibility: that Alan was a fellow-student, an almost exact contemporary of John of Salisbury. This possibility was strongly supported by the results of the exhumation of Alan's body from its grave at Cîteaux in 1960. It appeared that he had been in his late eighties at least when he died.⁵

If that is the case, then Alan, who certainly studied at Paris and Chartres, would have heard the masters of whom John of Salisbury speaks, Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers and Thierry of Chartres, and the other great teachers of the Paris and Chartres of the late 1130s and 40s whom John describes. Master Thierry, he says, was a most assiduous investigator of the arts;⁶ William of Conches was, after Bernard of Chartres, the *grammaticus opulentissimus*.⁷ John found Peter Abelard a *clarus doctor et admirabilis*, outstanding above all others. He learned the first rudiments of the arts from him. When he departed, he attached himself to Master Alberic (of Rheims?), who was very thorough and found questions everywhere in the text.⁸ Afterwards he became the pupil of Robert of Melun, Abelard's successor at Paris in the chair of theology. Robert had not yet become a theologian, and as a master of the *artes* John found him always ready with an answer to his questions, perspicacious, brief and comprehensive in his replies. When Robert turned to theology and Alberic went to Bologna to 'unlearn' much of what he knew

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and, on his return, to 'unteach it',⁹ John went to Richard l'Evêque. He was a man who 'knew everything'. From him, John learned a good deal more about the mathematical subjects which he had previously studied under Harduin the German. This pursuit of the best masters went on. John became a pupil of Peter Helias, the famous grammarian, so that he could learn more about rhetoric; he heard Adam of the Petit Pont. He himself took a pupil, William of Soissons, and, when he had taught him the first principles of logic, he sent him to Adam to learn more. When he found himself short of money, John reluctantly gave up his studies for three years and did some teaching. As soon as he could afford to, he returned to Paris, heard Gilbert of Poitiers' *in logicis et divinis*, Simon of Poissy, dependable but dull,¹⁰ Robert Pullen the theologian.¹¹

If Alan's experiences were anything like John's, we may read the *Metalogicon* as an account of Alan's schooldays too, with the difference that Alan was clearly a great deal more interested in Boethius' theological tractates and the *Timaeus*, and in the newly popular works he uses in his own writings, than John of Salisbury, who enjoyed grammar and logic most. This is an attractive picture, not least because it brings Alan's time in the schools alive at a stroke. But there is a difficulty. Alan was still active as a scholar and preacher in the 1190s. It is likely enough that the possessor of so active a mind should have continued to work in his seventies and eighties, but it is remarkable that he should have produced so many substantial works so late. Anselm of Canterbury's output after the age of sixty was, however, at least equivalent in quantity and quality to all that he had written in middle age, and his curiosity was still very much alive on his death bed. (He wanted to live long enough to solve the problem of the origin of the soul.) Alan of Lille seems to have been made of the same stuff.

If, then, we may place Alan of Lille with John of Salisbury in the Paris and Chartres of the 1130s and 40s, what of his studies there? The principal subjects were normally those of the *trivium*. Alan would have heard Peter Helias on grammar and rhetoric. He was certainly familiar with his commentaries. He may, too, have encountered lectures on Quintilian, as John seems to have done – not the whole of Quintilian, but those parts known before

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the fifteenth century, which deal principally with the teaching of elementary grammar. For logic, there were evidently many masters to be had. Teaching on the *quadrivium* was rather harder to come by. Peter Abelard remarks in his *Dialectica* that he found it hard to understand William of Champeaux's comments on the arithmetical aspects of the Aristotelian category of 'quantity', and this was no doubt because he had not been instructed in Boethius' *Arithmetica* with the same thoroughness as he had been taught grammar and logic – if indeed he had read it at all. In the decades since Abelard had been a student the *Arithmetica* had become better known, and progress had been made with the study of Boethius' *Musica*. Adelard of Bath had made several versions of a translation of Euclid's *Elements*. Astronomy had made great strides as Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* and Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* were brought together with the study of Calcidius' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, and a search was put in hand for Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Hermann of Carinthia dedicated his translation of Ptolemy's *Almagest* to Thierry in 1143. Nevertheless, the *quadrivium* was still neglected, in comparison with the arts of the *trivium*, and Alan's mastery of these textbooks was unusually thorough. It may indicate – like his familiarity with Boethius' theological tractates – that he spent some time at Chartres; both Thierry of Chartres and Gilbert of Poitiers lectured on the tractates.

For the rest, Alan heard lectures on the Bible and read what he could for himself. The organisation of instruction in the schools was still almost non-existent. A student attached himself to a master as he pleased, made up his own syllabus, beginning with the *artes* and working his way towards the higher study of the Sacred Page if and when he chose, as John of Salisbury did. He spent as long as he was inclined to spend on each subject, changed masters when he wished, and his only qualification for setting up as a master himself was his power to hold the respect of his own students. The result was a certain organisational untidiness, but no lowering of standards. On the contrary, competition for pupils made for enthusiastic teaching. The profession Alan entered was one in which a man got on by hard work and merit.

It was not a career which appealed to John of Salisbury, it

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seems. After his ordination to the priesthood, about 1148, he was frequently at the Papal Court, in the hope, perhaps of advancing his ecclesiastical career. He was not disappointed. Alan appears to have remained in the schools, as a master. John of Garland, writing in the mid-thirteenth century, claims that Alan added to the glories of the learning available at Paris,¹² and no doubt he did. An anonymous monk of Affligem confirms the report,¹³ and there are testimonies to his presence at Chartres,¹⁴ and at Orleans and Tours.¹⁵

He did not remain at Paris, certainly, although he seems to have continued to teach there for a long time after John of Salisbury left the schools. Traces of Alan are to be found at Montpellier.¹⁶ Ralph of Longchamps studied there, and it may have been there that he became Alan's pupil. The school at Montpellier was famous for the study of medicine, second only to Salerno. It also had, by virtue of its position, the advantage of receiving early some of the new books which were being discovered by Christian scholars in Spain, works of Arabic science and translations of Aristotle and much besides. Alan would have had every reason to find Montpellier an exciting place to teach.

MASTER AT PARIS

Thirty or forty years elapsed between the writing of the early *Summa Quoniam Homines* and the composition of Alan's last works. These were years of rapid development in the schools. A vast amount of schoolmasterly effort went into the devising of teaching and study-aids, reference-books, dictionaries, collections of extracts. Peter of Poitiers, for example, wrote, in addition to his *Sentences*, a compendium on the genealogy of Christ, an *Allegorical Interpretation of the Tabernacle of Moses*, a *Historia* of the Acts of the Apostles, and sermons.¹⁷ Commentaries were composed on the Creeds, on the liturgy,¹⁸ on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a reference-book to the opinions of the Fathers which was to be a standard work for centuries – on textbooks of every sort. Some of these were quite new in the purpose they were intended to serve, and they reflect new requirements in the schools. The most notable in its consequences for the future of scholastic method was the development, out of the *lectio*, or

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reading of the glossed text,¹⁹ of the *disputatio*. This was designed to deal with the questions which arose in the course of the reading. John of Salisbury commends his master Alberic for finding questions everywhere. Questions began to be so numerous that it became necessary to set aside a regular afternoon or evening session for *disputatio*. Peter the Chanter remarks in his *Verbum Abbreviatum* that 'if a question arises in the text' it should be noted 'and deferred until the hour of disputation'.²⁰ Simon of Tournai organised his *Disputationes* on a day-by-day basis, referring to 'today's disputation'.²¹ Arguments which rested on reason or authority were assembled, for and against, and a determination reached, by a process already well on the way to that which Aquinas polished to perfection in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Alan was one of the first to write a manual for preachers, a handbook for priests to use in the confessional, a theological *summa*, a dictionary of theological terms; perhaps his most original attempt at a new *genre* is the *Regulae Theologicae*, by whose system of theological axioms he hoped to demonstrate the self-evident truth of all Christian doctrine, and in which he anticipates by half a millennium the work of the seventeenth century. Alan wrote liturgical and Scriptural commentaries, in particular expositions of the Creeds and a commentary on the Song of Songs, a treatise on angels, and much else besides. Otto of St Blaise composed a catalogue of Alan's works soon after his death, in which he credits him with the authorship of 'many sound and catholic works'. It is clear, then, that Alan of Lille contributed his share of writings to this industrious beaver. He was often one of the first in the field, or the author of the most noteworthy example of the new *genre*. His *Distinctiones Dictionum Theologicalium* has more entries than any of the other early dictionaries of Biblical terms, and it covers not only Scriptural usages of certain terms, but sometimes their meanings in secular authors, too. Other masters were glad to make use of his work. Simon of Tournai borrowed from Alan in his *Disputationes* as Peter of Poitiers did in his *Sentences*.²²

Yet Alan's work proved in many respects inimitable. If he adopts another man's opinion he makes it his own. Idiosyncratic and independent, his teaching, like his writing, must have given

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the impression that here was a master with a distinctive approach, something more than a pedagogue, the opposite of a Simon de Poissy as John of Salisbury describes him.

Alan never found himself in trouble for unorthodoxy, as far as we know, although some of his teachings were highly eccentric. He is often obscure, and obscurity had helped bring Gilbert of Poitiers to trial at Rheims in 1148. Geoffrey of Auxerre says that Gilbert's gloss was 'more obscure than the text'.²³ But Gilbert was impatient with the slow, and he made enemies. Alan could write when occasion demanded with great plainness and simplicity, and there is every indication that he was a patient and enthusiastic teacher and that he had friends among the other masters. If that is so, his obscurities and eccentricities were likely to win him admiration rather than condemnation, perhaps. He was held to be enormously learned, truly a *doctor universalis*.

It is, to say the least of it, remarkable that no ecclesiastical preferment came the way of so outstanding a scholar, no post in the civil service, nothing by way of worldly reward for his years of teaching in Paris. There can be no 'itinerary' for Alan of Lille like that which can be reconstructed for at least two years of Robert de Courson's life.²⁴ But Alan may have avoided entering upon a career of the sort John of Salisbury thought so desirable. John was no teacher; only when he was in reduced circumstances did he become a pedagogue. Alan's enjoyment of his chosen profession is amply demonstrated by his continuing to teach into old age.

J. W. Baldwin has brought together what we know of the lives and careers of some of Alan's contemporaries in his time as a master at Paris, in his study of Peter the Chanter.²⁵ Alan himself makes only a brief appearance there.²⁶ Baldwin suggests two broad groupings of scholars: those masters upon whom the strongest influence was that of Peter Lombard: Peter of Poitiers, Peter of Capua, Praepositinus, Stephen Langton; and those who may loosely be called *Porretani* because of their debt to Gilbert of Poitiers: Alan of Lille, Simon of Tournai, Master Martin and Peter the Chanter himself. To these we may add the pupils who formed the next generation, such as Robert de Courson.

Of the second group, Simon of Tournai was close enough to

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Alan in sympathy to borrow from his *Summa*, and familiar enough to do so almost as soon as the *Summa* was ready. He was teaching at Paris from the early 1170s at least, and perhaps from 1165, when he may have taken Odo of Ourscamp's place in the chair of theology at Notre Dame,²⁷ so that there is every likelihood that he came into contact with Alan personally. He is recorded as a master again in 1181.²⁸ Matthew Paris says he died in 1202,²⁹ the same year as Alan.

We should be wary of seeing these groups too distinctly as separate entities. Simon's *Disputationes* and the *Summa* both borrow freely from other masters' works,³⁰ not only from Alan of Lille, but also from Peter of Poitiers' *Sentences*, for example. In Disputation XIII, Question I, Simon asks whether it is possible for a man to descend from perfect charity to imperfect charity. Authority has it, he says, that charity either progresses or fails. Here the 'authority' is Peter of Poitiers. Authority also has it that if a man has charity he deserves that it should be increased, and if it is increased charity deserves to be perfected. This 'authority' is Peter Lombard. So it seems that no one can descend from perfect charity to imperfect. On the other hand (*econtra oppositur*), authority has it that when we sin, grace is diminished in us and recedes from us. This time the 'authority' is Alan of Lille. Simon's solution involves a threefold distinction of the ways in which charity may be said to increase (*habitu, diurnitate, intensione*), which is worthy of Aquinas.³¹ The community of interest here, the exchange of views, is more important than the classification of a man's opinions as predominantly those of the Lombard or those of Gilbert of Poitiers. Master Martin (Martin of Fougères),³² author of a *Summa* of the late 1190s, makes use in his turn not only of Simon of Tournai but also of Peter of Poitiers and Odo of Ourscamp.³³ If we look at the range of questions with which Simon was obliged to deal in his *Disputationes* we can see how questions were being raised and discussed on all sides: is the sacrament of the altar greater than the sacrament of baptism (XC.I)? Can the elect be damned (LXVI.I)? Must every prophecy be fulfilled (LXVI.2)? Ought Abraham to have wanted to sacrifice his son (LII.I)? Is perseverance a virtue or a work of virtue (XCIII.2)? It is hardly to be supposed that each master would not make use of all the help he could find, or that

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his pupils would fail to inform him if he left out a currently fashionable view.

Of the masters of the first group, Peter of Poitiers³⁴ was a pupil of Peter the Lombard before 1159. By 1167 he was himself a master. In 1169 he took the chair which was left vacant by Peter Comestor. His *Sentences*, in five books, modelled on the *Sentences* of his master but rather differently conceived, were written between 1168 and 1170, at the peak of his academic career. From 1193 to his death in 1205, he was Chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame. Administration probably ate up his time increasingly in later years, to judge from the frequency with which he appears in the charters of Paris.³⁵

A colleague of his in the running of the cathedral was Peter the Chanter (of whom we shall hear a good deal more as we go on). Peter became precentor of Notre Dame in 1183 and continued there until his death in 1197. J. W. Baldwin finds little evidence that the two Peters shared common academic interests.³⁶ When Peter of Poitiers died he was succeeded as Chancellor by Praepositinus of Cremona, a Lombard, and another admirer of Peter Lombard, his fellow-countryman. He was a master by 1185, and had been teaching at Paris at least since 1193. He makes use of Peter of Poitiers' work. Peter of Capua is a less conspicuous figure, author of a *Summa* of theological questions,³⁷ which again owes a great deal to Peter Lombard.

By patient scholarly effort a number of resemblances between passages in the writings of these scholars have been traced in recent years; yet their relationship to one another, as colleagues, or master and pupil, often remains obscure. It is possible to show, in some cases, that direct borrowing has taken place. But it is not easy to say exactly in what sense they can be said to be even loosely grouped together as 'followers' of Peter Lombard or Gilbert of Poitiers. It is likely that rivalry was stronger than community of interest among these masters, as they competed for students.

Perhaps the most important result of these efforts to piece the evidence together is the picture which emerges of the work of the schools of Paris in these decades. Whereas in the first half of the century a master such as Peter Abelard or Gilbert of Poitiers could stand out as a leader of opinion, unchallenged in his

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supremacy in the schools even if he was not universally approved of, the masters of the second half of the century included no startling figure, unless we propose Alan himself. They were able men, conscientious men, hard-working teachers, but not intellectually ambitious on an Abelardian scale.

There was an air of optimism abroad in the first half of the century, when the possibilities of resolving problems with the aid of grammar and dialectic were still largely untried, and it still seemed possible that human reason might answer all the great problems of theology. It was, in this respect, *mutatis mutandis*, an age of reason comparable with the eighteenth century. We find the scholars of the next generation taking smaller sections of their subject, subordinate questions, giving their energies to the dozens of problems which began to proliferate as grammar and dialectic proved to yield more questions than they resolved. The tendency was for scholarly effort to shift from the writing on major questions of the previous generation, to the organisation into a proper order of a vast number of lesser questions.

Alan is no exception in his preference for making vast compilations of relatively small units, in each of which he deals with a question of a manageable size, or the meanings of a single term, or collects topical material suitable for use in a single sermon. But even amongst the *minutiae* there is a grandness of vision in his work, a sense of the magnitude of the philosophical and theological questions which lie behind. Alan took his habits of thought and work with him to the south. The dictionary which he completed there must have been many years in the making, and he perhaps began it in Paris. But he clearly thought it would be useful to his pupils at Montpellier, and there is no reason to suppose that these features of the theological work of the late twelfth century were peculiar to Paris.

ALAN IN THE SOUTH

Alan did not attain high office in the Church. It may be that he did not seek it, preferring the life of a master. But it is not impossible that it was partly disillusionment over his prospects in the north of France which led him to look elsewhere.⁸⁸ Certainly, during his time in Paris developments were taking place in the