I

The Story of Abelard

Peter Abelard, now forgotten, was once the most famous man in the world. Or so Heloise said: 'What king or philosopher could equal your fame? What kingdom or city or village did not long to see you? Who did not rush to set eyes on you when you appeared in public and crane their necks after you? What married woman, what young girl did not desire you in absence and was not on fire in your presence? What queen, what great and powerful lady did not envy me my joys and my bed?'[1] These questions are translated from Heloise's passionate and accomplished Latin. By the time she wrote them, at least ten years after she had first met Abelard when he was a master and she was his student in Paris, no lady any longer envied Heloise her bed. She was by then an abbess and he an abbot. They were separated by a journey of 350 miles, as she was enclosed in the convent of the Paraclete east of Paris while he was abbot of St Gildas-de-Rhuys on the Atlantic coast of Brittany. To a medieval person this was the world's end; here the boundless Ocean Sea began from which no voyager returned. For Abelard himself, St Gildas meant exile from his beloved Paris and the end of everything he had striven for. Brittany was his homeland, but he had not wished to return there. Like Heloise, he dramatized his predicament: 'There, by the waves of the horrifying Ocean where the last point of land afforded me no further flight, I used to go over and over again in my prayers the words of the Psalmist: "To thee have I cried from the ends of the earth when my heart was in anguish!" . . . There is nobody now, I think, who does not know of the overwhelming torment which my heart has suffered day and night.'[2] Like Heloise too, Abelard took it for granted that he was so famous that everybody knew of his misfortunes.

The year was 1132 or a little earlier (Abelard does not give precise dates). He was fifty or more and engaged in writing his autobiography, the 'history of my calamities' as he described it. This is one of the great works of literature of the Middle Ages. Whether it is a factual history is

a different matter; autobiographers aim at something more complex than simple truths and Abelard was no exception. Autobiography was rare in the Middle Ages and those who engaged in it were mostly monks more concerned with describing the state of their souls than recording mundane facts. Although Abelard wrote as a monk, ostensibly to show others how to avoid the 'calamities' he had suffered, he was unusual in linking his inner life and feelings with actual events and real people. He could do this because his experience had not been that of a monk isolated from the world, but of a secular cleric involved in the politics of France – and of Paris in particular – for the past thirty years.

What gives zest to Abelard's 'history of calamities' is the way he writes as a great hater as much as a great lover. He presents himself as a complete egoist: everything he does is of the utmost importance and interest, in his own opinion, and everyone he meets – including Heloise – exists only in the light of his own brilliance. Events move fast on a big stage in Abelard's account of his 'calamities', as he is relentlessly pursued by the furies he has brought to life and he only just avoids being lynched as a heretic and imprisoned for treason, to say nothing of other escapades. In the period after the writing of his autobiography, his 'calamities' accelerated as the accusations of heresy and disloyalty were renewed, led this time by St Bernard abbot of Clairvaux. Abelard was now up against the most powerful voice in Christendom. St Bernard spoke out against what he saw as corruption and moral decay in high places, castigating princes, prelates and even the pope himself. When St Bernard warned that Abelard was an acolyte of Antichrist, the cardinals in Rome had to heed him and Abelard was condemned as a heretic in 1140.

But Abelard attracted influential and devoted supporters as much as fanatical opponents and he had a way of popping up again even after the most serious setbacks. He was defended from St Bernard by Peter the Venerable, an equally formidable and eloquent abbot. His brand new abbey church of Cluny in Burgundy was bigger than St Peter's in Rome. The abbot of Cluny was called 'the king' by satirists because he was the overlord of hundreds of monasteries extending from Spain to Germany. Evoking the Old Testament prophets (as he often did), St Bernard likened Peter the Venerable's power to that of the priests of Baal.[3] But not even St Bernard could blow down the walls of Cluny. Once Abelard was safe inside, no one could touch him – neither pope, bishop nor king – without Peter the Venerable's permission. Abelard died as a Cluniac monk (probably in 1142) and to show how wrong the accusations of heresy against him had been, Peter the Venerable assured Heloise that he had been truly 'Christ's philosopher'.[4] Between these extremes of vilification

and praise, each reader has to decide for himself which abbot understood Abelard better.

Earlier in his life Abelard had found a more dubious defender and counsellor in another monk, Fulk prior of Deuil. He confirms the romantic effect Abelard had on women, as he describes the ladies of Paris sighing for their tragic 'knight'; but Fulk was more interested in the young men who had flocked to Abelard's school from all over Europe. What follows is abbreviated from Fulk's fulsome prose:

> Rome sent you her pupils to teach; she who had once been mistress of all the arts acknowledged your learning to be greater than hers. No distance over land, no mountain ranges, no deep gorges, no difficult road or danger from robbers, prevented the students from rushing to you. The tempestuous sea did not deter the crowd of young men from England. Once they had heard your name, they came streaming towards you, contemptuous of every danger: Bretons, Angevins, Poitevins, Gascons, Iberians. Normandy and Flanders, the German and the Slav enthused about your genius, to say nothing of the inhabitants of Paris itself and those of the nearest and remotest parts of France who thirsted to be taught by you.[5]

Fulk's style is inflated though his facts are not. Future cardinals came from the papal curia in Rome, and Arnold of Brescia and other clerics made their way from elsewhere in Italy. John of Salisbury was the most distinguished student from England, as Otto of Freising was from Germany. These are only the famous names; most have disappeared without trace or survive in manuscripts which are now anonymous. Books of Abelard's were brought back by his students to the libraries of the new cathedral at Durham, on the northernmost frontier of England, and to Prüfening south of the Danube near Regensburg.[6] These places are nearly 500 miles from Paris, though it was not so much the distance which presented difficulties (Prüfening was only a month's walk from Paris for a fit young man) as the terrain and the human dangers of robbery and murder. Understandably enough, Abelard wrote of this triumphant time: 'I thought myself then to be the only philosopher in the world.'[7]

Otto of Freising thought Abelard so important that he included an account of his career in the introductory book of his history of Frederick Barbarossa, the great German Emperor, although Abelard had had nothing to do with the Empire other than teaching German and Italian students. Following the practice of the best medieval chroniclers and Roman historians, Otto sketched in Abelard's character. He had been 'quite stupid' at anything which was not academic, in Otto's opinion, and he was 'so arrogant and confident of his own genius that he could

scarcely descend from the heights of his exalted mind to listen to his masters'.[8] The greatest of these were Anselm of Laon and William of Champeaux, both 'very serious men' whom Abelard could not stand because he enjoyed making jokes. This brings Otto's narrative to the triumphant time when Abelard became the master at the cathedral school of Notre-Dame in Paris (probably in 1114 when he was thirty-five). But there then occurred 'a certain well enough known event when he was not well treated'.[9] By this innuendo Otto referred to the notorious occasion when Abelard had been ambushed within the precinct of Notre-Dame and castrated.

The explanation for this went back a year or more, when Abelard had accepted the hospitality of Fulbert, who was a canon of Notre-Dame like himself and the uncle and guardian of Heloise. Abelard took up residence in Fulbert's house, very close to his school, in exchange for giving Heloise personal tuition. *Quid plura?*, Abelard asks, 'Need I say more?'[10] He abducted Heloise and she gave birth to a son at Abelard's home in Brittany.[11] At Fulbert's insistence, Abelard brought Heloise back to Paris and married her. But Fulbert and his family soon came to believe that he had repudiated the marriage, as Heloise insistently denied that it had taken place and Abelard had then removed her again, this time to the convent where she had been brought up as a girl. To put a wife into a convent was tantamount to divorcing her. Abelard admitted that he had had a religious habit made for Heloise, apart from the veil which signified final vows, and that he had vested her in it himself.[12] From her family's point of view, he had first robbed them of Heloise's virginity in Fulbert's own house and then he had had the effrontery to make her a nun, as if she were still a virgin and not his responsibility. Punishment in personal disputes was the duty of the family. Vengeance and counter-vengeance, the bloodfeud, was the rule and Fulbert persuaded his kinsmen to exact the appropriate penalty and castrate Abelard.

Two of the men responsible were caught and a further penalty was exacted from them: they were blinded as well as being castrated.[13] This put Abelard in mortal danger, as his family in Brittany were incapable of defending him from an escalation of the feud. Nor could he rely on the Chapter of the cathedral of Notre-Dame, as Fulbert was one of its members. So Abelard was 'compelled by confusion and shame, rather than religious devotion, to take cover in a monastery' and he insisted on Heloise taking the veil at the same time.[14] As on other occasions, however, Abelard landed on his feet, as the monastery which took him in was the abbey of St Denis, the mother house of the French kingdom. Later on, he preached a sermon on how monks were spiritual eunuchs; a

monastery was therefore an appropriate sanctuary for a castrated fugitive like himself.[15] But a convent was no such haven for Heloise, who had been forced to abandon first her son and then her husband. She insisted to Abelard that she remained absolutely and unconditionally in love with him, spiritually and physically. She had no love left for God. She only became a nun because he had ordered her to do so. 'I would not have had the least hesitation', she wrote, 'in following you to Hell, if that was your command; indeed I would have gone in front.'[16]

Otto of Freising probably knew nothing of Heloise's deeper feelings, as the letters of Abelard and Heloise were not published until the 1270s when Jean de Meun, the author of the *Romance of the Rose*, translated them into French. Probably Otto's only source of information on the subject was Abelard's love songs (now lost), which were still being sung in the early 1130s when Otto was a student in France.[17] Taking a male point of view, he was mainly interested in how Abelard's castration affected his career. In this light, Otto welcomed it because it had made Abelard into a serious person. At St Denis he 'devoted himself day and night to reading and thinking; from being clever, he became even cleverer, and from being learned he grew doubly learned'.[18] In other words, becoming a monk made Abelard turn his formidable energies to religion and within three years of joining the abbey of St Denis he had produced one of the most original books of his time. He described it as 'a treatise on theology'.[19] Abelard was the first modern 'theologian', in the sense that he was the first teacher to promote the word 'theology' and to use it to mean the reconciliation of human reason with Christian revelation. 'Theology' became Abelard's new mission and his passion. As a young man he had won fame as a master of logic, explaining Aristotle and the structure of language; now, as a monk and a 'religious', he would explain the logic of God and the structure of the Trinity.

Abelard was convinced that Christianity was the most reasonable of all religions and that its truths must be demonstrable by reasoning. Christ was the *logos*, the epitome of logic. Once Christianity had been proved by the theorems of logic, everyone would accept it, just as they accepted that $2 + 2 = 4$. As 'Christ's philosopher', Abelard was to be the saviour of mankind – once he had found the answers to all the questions. His programme was not novel, although he gave the impression that it was. St Anselm had proceeded in a similar way in the generation before Abelard's with his ontological proof of the existence of God. Because Abelard was 'the only philosopher in the world' and logic had been his profession for the last twenty-five years, he believed that he could easily do better than St Anselm. His admirers shared his confidence. For Peter the Venerable he was 'our Aristotle'.[20] Praise as unstinted was lavished

on 'that marvellous work of theology'. But the speaker in this instance was Abelard himself, in the literary persona he had created of a classical Philosopher who debates with a Christian and a Jew about the truth of their beliefs. The Philosopher asks Abelard to judge between the world's religions because 'that marvellous work' is 'the acme of your genius'.[21]

St Bernard

Abelard had resorted to puffing his own work probably because it had received such a buffeting at his trial at Soissons in 1121. Again, at the time of his trial at Sens in 1140, St Bernard had taken the name *Theologia*, which Abelard was so proud to have contributed to scientific discourse, and ridiculed it: it was 'stupid-ology', not 'the-ology'.[22] As well as being abusive, St Bernard homed in on Abelard's vanity. 'Tell us, tell us, whatever it is that has been revealed to you and to no one else....[23] I listen to the Prophets and the Apostles; I obey the Gospel, but not the Gospel according to Peter Abelard. Are you writing a new Gospel for us? The Church has no place for a fifth Evangelist.'[24] Bernard described Abelard as 'altogether ambiguous'.[25] How could Abelard have produced such passionate and yet contradictory reactions in the people he met? There is no record of anyone being indifferent to him.

One explanation is that contradiction was Abelard's profession as a logician. He lived for and delighted in contradiction and argument. Medieval logic proceeded through dialectic. Conflicting statements were put alongside each other and a series of logical tests were applied to them: distinguishing between affirmation and negation, genus and species, property and accident, and so on. Contrary to simplistic views of the Middle Ages, the scholastic philosophers and theologians were not naive and uncritical believers in religious faith. Scholastics like Abelard aimed to question everything – and anything – in order to test and demonstrate its validity. They were confident that God had created an ordered and rational universe and that He had made mankind in His own image, as was stated in the Book of Genesis. This meant that the most brilliant individuals of the species mankind, like Aristotle and Abelard, might comprehend the universe by asking questions about it in an orderly way. In the book he called *Sic et Non* ('Yes and No') Abelard collected hundreds of apparently contradictory statements from the Church Fathers for students to sort out. He saw no scandal nor any overwhelming difficulty in the existence of these contradictions, for 'by doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth'.[26] Scientific research was as simple as that.

It was in their optimistic confidence in human reason, and not in their rejection of it, that scholastics like Abelard were simplistic. He was no more nor less naive than all the other intellectuals down the centuries who have championed the primacy of reason and believed in progress. In this respect, he was right to claim that he was not an innovator, but a continuator of Christian thought in the mainstream Graeco-Roman tradition. His most distinguished predecessors were those mediators between the ancient and the medieval worlds, St Augustine (who died in 430 AD) and Boethius (who died in 524). These are the authors whom Abelard quotes most frequently and with whose writings he was most familiar. He could build on them with confidence, as they stood as pillars of authority in the Roman Church and in Latin culture throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, as Abelard's title *Sic et Non* made clear, the Church Fathers including Augustine were so rich and profound because they said such different things 'and they even appear to contradict themselves'.[27]

St Bernard's attack on Abelard, which culminated in the council of Sens in 1140, appealed with equal conviction to St Augustine and the Church Fathers. It was absurd, St Bernard argued, to believe that mere 'human ingenuity' could solve everything.[28] 'What is more contrary to reason than to try by reason to transcend reason? And what is more contrary to faith than to refuse to believe anything that reason cannot reach?'[29] In the Old Testament, St Bernard reminded Abelard's opponents, Moses had approached the dark cloud surrounding God's presence all alone, not with a crowd of students.[30] It was indeed true that Abelard had explicitly proposed in *Sic et Non* to provoke students to the maximum effort in seeking out the truth by sharpening their wits on the contradictions in the Church Fathers which he had collected.[31] *Sic et Non* used the most sacred texts and mysteries of the Christian religion as exercises in comprehension. Abelard was exposing mysteries which had been closed and sealed, St Bernard declared. 'The faith of the simple is being ridiculed, God's secrets are being torn out by the guts, questions about the highest things are being recklessly aired.'[32] St Bernard's language, 'torn out by the guts' (*eviscerantur*), could be as strong and explicitly crude as the carvings of monsters and devils on the Romanesque churches built in his time.

Abelard was asking too many questions, St Bernard argued. He was insulting the Church Fathers, who had judged that difficult problems 'are much better quietly buried than solved'.[33] Although St Bernard exaggerated, he was right about the methods of scholasticism. Inevitably, divinity was treated in the schools as an abstract idea for analysis and not as the living presence of God. When St Bernard talked about

sacred mysteries which had been closed and sealed, he was evoking a sense of the divine which was best expressed not in the clarity of the schoolmen's logic, but in the half-lit interiors of the great Romanesque and Gothic churches and in their massive jewel-encrusted liturgical books, whose illuminated pages were opened only on the altar for the priests to see. The 'faith of the simple' was preserved as a mystery by preventing lay people getting too close to the altars or seeing the miraculous shrines of the saints other than in the flickering light of candles. Even when sunlight was let into churches through stained glass windows, a technique developed on a large scale only in Abelard's lifetime, the new light did not make everything clear. It was even more ethereal than candles, as it dimmed and brightened with the seasons and the time of day, as if God Himself was ringing the changes. This awesome and yet intimate effect is best experienced today at Chartres cathedral or in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, though both these buildings date from after Aberlard's lifetime.

The feeling of awe and otherness which strikes anyone entering a great medieval church, particularly if it retains its glass and the organ is playing or the choir chanting, is something which academic theologians could not replicate. Neither did they wish to. The medieval schoolmen were scientists, who were determined not to be overawed by God or mystified by anything in His creation. They intended to study divinity by dissecting it, or tearing it apart by the guts if St Bernard was right. According to him, Abelard's book *Theologia* depersonalized God's Trinity and this made it a deadly threat to every Christian soul. It must therefore be destroyed and its perpetrator silenced for ever as a heretic and a blasphemer. In 1140 the *Theologia* was ceremonially burned in Rome and 'Peter Abelard, perverse fabricator of dogma and impugner of the Catholic faith', was sentenced by Pope Innocent II to imprisonment.[34]

Abelard had replied to St Bernard with dignity and reasonableness that the accusations against him stemmed from malice or ignorance; St Bernard was misquoting him.[35] His philosophy was certainly more complex and varied than Bernard had allowed for. He was indeed mistaken – or malicious – to portray Abelard as a crude rationalist with no feelings or moral sense. Abelard had addressed problems of right and wrong at length, not in *Theologia* where they were out of place, but in his treatise on self-knowledge which he described as *Ethica* ('Ethics'), and in the various exhortatory and didactic works which he wrote for Heloise and her nuns. Although Abelard's love songs for Heloise have been lost, many of his hymns survive and these show that he had not depersonalized God nor ignored the Bible. On the con-

trary, he was at the forefront of the movement in the twelfth century to bring God closer to people by concentrating on the suffering humanity of Christ. *Nostra sunt, Domine* – 'They are ours, O Lord!', Abelard wrote, *nostra sunt crimina* – 'the crimes are ours. Why were You made to suffer tortures for our crimes? Now make our hearts suffer for all of those things, so that our compassion may be worthy of Your forgiveness'.[36] This is as personal and passionate an appeal as John Donne's

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend.[37]

St Bernard and Abelard had many ideas – and ideals – in common. Both were monks, both were reformers, both were extraordinarily clever with words, and both expressed a passionate commitment to Christ crucified. The vehemence of St Bernard's attack on Abelard suggests that he was confronting something like his *alter ego*: he too could have been a great master, fascinating to women and idolized by young men. His attack was so personal – and therefore so effective – because he had convinced himself that Abelard was saying that there was no Redemption; if this were true, his own sacrifice in joining the Cistercian order more than twenty-five years before was worthless. Like a husband and wife who suffer a painful and public divorce, St Bernard and Abelard turned on each other rather unexpectedly and possibly against their better judgement. They were swept along by their supporters and their own rhetoric. Each of them summoned their partisans to the debate between them which was to be held at the council of Sens in 1140.[38] This was not to be a quiet or exclusively clerical meeting but a big show, like a tournament, held in the presence of King Louis VII, Thibaud the count palatine, and numerous other nobility and lay people.[39] In the event Abelard refused, or was unable, to answer St Bernard when he stood before him face to face in the cathedral at Sens. Abelard appealed to Rome and he was never seen in public again; this is when he was protected from the vengeance of St Bernard by Peter the Venerable at Cluny.

Heloise

Heloise, who was ten or twenty years younger than Abelard, lived until 1163 or 1164, though she insisted that she had died in her heart forty or fifty years earlier: on that fatal day following Abelard's castration, when he had ordered her to become a nun and had personally witnessed her making her final vows sobbing at the altar. 'At the moment of her

profession she offered herself to death so that Abelard might live.' Sir Richard Southern (whose words these are) adds: 'Abelard killed Heloise and she willingly made the sacrifice of her life.'[40] He killed her in the sense that he terminated their life together; his castration by itself did not necessarily invalidate their marriage, nor did it prevent them from living together in a spiritual marriage. As Heloise had been so unwilling to enter the religious life, it seems surprising that she won such a golden reputation as a nun, being admired by Peter the Venerable and also by the numerous clerics and lay people who made donations to her convent of the Paraclete. The answer may be that she could play the part in public of the perfect nun precisely because her heart was dead; she was dead to the world, as every religious person should be. Abelard, on the other hand, who retained all his worldly ambitions despite becoming a monk, had a disastrously unstable monastic career, quarrelling with one monastery after another until he returned in the 1130s to his former life as a master in the Paris schools.

In the private correspondence of Abelard and Heloise, as distinct from their public lives in France in the 1130s, their roles as bad monk and good nun are reversed. He repeatedly presents himself as a wise monk, while she insists that her life in the convent is a sham because in her heart she is still his irreligious and physical lover: 'People who call me chaste do not know what a hypocrite I am.'[41] In his self-appointed role as her spiritual counsellor, Abelard distanced himself from her. He becomes patriarchal and patronizing: 'I beg you, sister, do not vex the Father Who is correcting us in so fatherly fashion, but attend to what is written: "For whom the Lord loveth, He chastiseth".'[42] But it was not as a surrogate brother or father that Heloise most wanted Abelard; she wanted him still as her lover. She could not accept that his castration was a loving God's providential chastisement: 'I charge Him always with the utmost cruelty for that injustice. As I oppose His dispensation, I offend Him more by my indignation than by anything I do in mitigation as penance or satisfaction.'[43] Presumably deliberately, for she was very good at Latin, Heloise chose legalistic terms to describe her case against God: 'I charge Him' (*arguo*) with an 'injustice' (*injuria*); 'I oppose' (*contraria*) Him. Overwhelmed by the cruelty of life, Heloise is one of those people who say: 'If God exists, I have no wish to know Him or to be on His side.' If God is good, He may forgive such an attitude; but it was His goodness which Heloise questioned.

Abelard realized that he had to replace her love for him at the least by love for Christ's suffering humanity, if not for God the all-powerful Father Whom Heloise opposed and charged with injustice. Abelard brought before her eyes the image of the crucifixion: 'Are you not

moved to tears and remorse by the only begotten son of God in His innocence being scourged, blindfolded, mocked, buffeted, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and finally hanged between thieves on that shameful gallows of the cross?'[44] Heloise replied that her feelings were not within her control. The only sufferings that moved her were those of her beloved Abelard. Henceforward though, she assured him, she would avoid writing about her own feelings; they could conduct instead an impersonal correspondence as monk and nun, just as he wanted.[45] They could at least be penfriends, showing off their erudition, which is how their affair had begun all those years ago.

To start them off, she asked him to tell her about nuns and she wittily pointed out how unsuitable the Rule of St Benedict was for women. Abelard entered into this task with a will, in the hope perhaps that Heloise would change character later on in the correspondence. Throughout the 1130s he worked very hard to convert her, sending her not only the letters in their famous correspondence, but prayers, hymns, sermons, solutions to difficulties raised by Biblical texts, a remarkable disquisition on the origin of nuns, an even longer treatise to serve as a rule for her convent, and finally the confession of faith that he had refused to make to St Bernard. Whether she responded to all, or any, of this by withdrawing her charges against God is unrecorded.

At the beginning of her first letter to Abelard (the first letter, that is, which still exists) Heloise drew attention to her doubts about what she had become and what either of them stood for. How should she address him, now that he was a monk and she a nun? It was different from the old days when they had written many letters to each other as lovers, and different too from the later time when they had been man and wife. Did he remain her 'Lord', or should she now call him 'Father'? (She was writing this when Abelard was abbot of St Gildas and an ordained priest.) Was he still her husband, or should she now call him 'Brother'? (In subsequent letters she refused to respond to his addressing her as 'Sister'.) Did she remain his faithful 'servant' and lady, or was she now his spiritual 'daughter'? In rehearsing these variations on their status in society, Heloise emphasized how in the Church's dispensation names meant the reverse of what they did in real life, a point which would interest Abelard, as the significance of names was his specialism in philosophy. Priests were called 'Father' and yet the Church refused to recognize their children as legitimate. (Heloise herself was perhaps the daughter of such a 'Father'.) Monks and clergy called each other 'Brother' or 'Sister' and yet they shared no kinship. All this could be seen either as the height of hypocrisy and absurdity, or as a way of bringing God's heavenly dispensation to earth.

For Heloise, putting together these diversities of status was her *Sic et Non*, her way of coming to inquiry by doubting. She concluded them with their own names: 'To Abelard from Heloise'.[46] As they had not adopted new names on entering the religious life, here at last was something secure. And yet even these personal names raise doubts about identity. 'Abelard' was not his baptismal name; that was 'Peter', which Heloise never uses. Roscelin, who was Abelard's first teacher of philosophy, knew him only as 'Peter'; though he told him after he had been castrated that he could not call him 'Peter' any more because it was a masculine name. Like Heloise, but more sardonically, Roscelin questioned Abelard's status in society: 'What name should I give you now, if you are neither a cleric nor a layman nor a monk?'[47] The name 'Abelard' was presumably given him at a later date than Roscelin had known him. What it meant is unclear. (The problem is discussed in chapter 9.) Possibly it was intended to have no meaning, and in that case it was another philosophical reference to Abelard's interest in naming. Some of the troubadours adopted performance or stage names, like Abelard's contemporary 'Marcabru'. Perhaps 'Abelard' was a stage name for use in the lecture room. Heloise may always have called him 'Abelard' because it was as 'Abelard' that she had first encountered him, lecturing to awed students in the precinct of Notre-Dame in Paris which was her home.

As for Heloise, a person who had the confidence to oppose God – and to oppose Abelard as well, without forfeiting his support – who was she? Her mother was called Hersindis, but there is no record of who her father was. Possibly both her parents had died when she was a child. Abelard describes her as Fulbert's 'niece' and there is no suggestion that this was a euphemism for illegitimate daughter.[48] Heloise's childhood had not been spent with Fulbert at Notre-Dame, but at the prestigious convent of Argenteuil (now a suburb of Paris). Her presence at Notre-Dame, in the period which Abelard describes as her 'adolescence', seems to be connected with furthering her education beyond what the nuns of Argenteuil could teach her.[49] Even before Abelard taught her, she was reputed to be the most learned lady in France. Fulbert seems to have delighted in her precocity and to have encouraged her to pursue learning for its own sake. Her knowledge of the classical philosophers would not have made her a more attractive match for a lay husband and clerics were no longer permitted female companions, however learned they might be. There is no example from Heloise's time of a learned laywoman being able to lead an independent life; indeed, her own story suggests that it was impossible. She was more like a cleric than a lady, and yet she apparently had had no wish to be a nun or an abbess. Nor

could she have stayed in Fulbert's house indefinitely, as pressure mounted in the 1120s and 1130s to expel women from ecclesiastical precincts.

In their elusive identities, as much as in the conduct of their lives, Abelard and Heloise raise all sorts of questions about themselves and the times in which they lived. Roscelin had chided Abelard with the 'unheard of novelty of your life'.[50] It was wrong for a monk or a Christian to do anything new, as he should conform to the way of life of all the others. But was Abelard really so novel? Or did he simply present familiar ideas in new ways? He certainly exaggerated his originality, both in his 'history of calamities' and in his *Theologia* and *Ethica*. Nor was Heloise necessarily so novel, not even in confessing to Abelard that she opposed God. Monks and nuns were meant to confess their innermost thoughts. In the previous generation Otloh of St Emmeram recorded that he had been tempted to doubt 'whether there was any truth in the Holy Scriptures and whether an almighty God exists'.[51] Although Abelard lectured Heloise on the need for faith, he admitted in his *Ethics* that he did not see why innocent children, who had never learned about Christ, should be condemned to eternal death as the consequence of Original Sin. Yet he was prepared to acknowledge that this was 'not absurd', considering the Psalmist's words: 'Thy judgements are a great deep, O Lord.'[52]

Where Heloise differed from Abelard was in her refusal to acknowledge that the judgements of God were too deep to comprehend. When it came to judging what was right and wrong, she had the blasphemous impertinence – or the blind courage – depending on one's point of view, to charge God with injustice and to persist in opposing Him. Whether she thought that God should be on the side of all victims, or only of her beloved Abelard is not clear. Her attitude has more in common with the poets of the *Carmina Burana* than with monks making their confessions. The Archpoet, who was her contemporary, 'seething inwardly with vehement indignation', declares that 'in bitterness I will speak my mind':

> Estuans intrinsecus ira vehementi,
> In amaritudine loquar mee menti.[53]

This is the beginning of his 'Confession', made famous today in the music of Carl Orff, and it is the reverse of a religious confession. The Archpoet claims to be much greedier for sex than for salvation because, like Heloise, he is 'dead in the soul'. Interestingly, though, neither Heloise nor the Archpoet totally disbelieves in the afterlife and neither

of them thinks that they will be damned. Heloise says that she will be satisfied with whatever corner of Heaven God allocates to her, while the Archpoet trusts that when he drops dead in a tavern, the angelic choir will joyfully sing 'God be propitious to this drunkard'.[54] Neither Heloise nor the Archpoet are atheists, as they assume that God is going to give them His personal attention.

It may be objected that this is not comparing like with like. Heloise was a real person confiding her innermost thoughts to her real lover, whereas the 'Archpoet' is a pseudonym for a professional entertainer who wrote his 'Confession' for publication. Heloise wrote facts, the Archpoet fiction. But this dividing line is not so clear cut. Every writer produces fiction to the extent that every piece of writing is contrived. In medieval culture this was certainly so, as no writer could casually take up a pen and set down his thoughts. She (as we are talking of Heloise) had either to incise rudimentary notes with a stylus on to a portable writing-tablet, or she had to go to the scriptorium (the special place for doing writing which monasteries provided) and prepare quill-pens, ink and parchment. Medieval writing techniques produced wonderful end-products; illuminated books are among the greatest works of art in the world, but they could not be casually produced. Most authors had to dictate their work to scribes; they did not undertake to write themselves. Letters produced in these circumstances could not be completely confidential or personal. No less a person than St Bernard believed that his most trusted secretary, Nicholas of Clairvaux, had sent out misleading letters in his name. Nuns had more modest facilities than monks and it may be that Heloise wrote her own letters. Even so, she would still have had to go to the scriptorium for the final stage of writing up her draft and sealing and addressing the letter.

For a medieval writer the difficulties of getting the text on to parchment were relatively simple compared with the initial problem of converting one's thoughts into Latin. This required years of training. Because it was nobody's mother tongue and its rules of style and construction had been established more than a thousand years earlier, Latin tended to take over anyone who began to write it. To the rhetoric of the classical authors (Virgil, Cicero, Ovid and so on) had been added the even more powerful models of the Latin Bible and the Latin liturgy, with which every monk and nun was in daily contact through chanting and hearing readings. A writer like Heloise was doubly bound, by classical training and liturgical experience, to think in terms of texts when she composed Latin. Although she might have thoughts of her own, Latin demanded that they be expressed in phrases or whole sentences from classical or sacred authors or in learned references to them.

Latin used the same word, *litterae*, to describe three different sorts of 'letters': there were the simple 'letters' of the ABC, the advanced 'letters' of classical literature, and 'letters' in the sense of correspondence. The 'letters' of Heloise and Abelard are not preserved in the form of individual signed missives. They exist only as fair copies in manuscripts dating from 1280 or so; this is a century and a half after they were composed. So it cannot be proved that any letters ever were actually exchanged between Abelard and Heloise, or that they are the authors of the letters in the fair copies. Someone may have forged them in the thirteenth century, or even in the twelfth. But the modern scholars who have argued that the letters are forgeries have not been able to explain satisfactorily who might have forged them or why they should have done so. Abelard's 'history of calamities' contains numerous points of detail, which a forger would have found very difficult to get right, unless he was a contemporary who knew Abelard personally. A number of works of medieval literature, the *Song of Roland* and the *Poem of the Cid* most notably, exist only in copies made later than their original composition. Twelfth-century letters have usually survived only when they have been copied into registers as precedents or models for future generations. The letters of St Bernard and Peter the Venerable are preserved in this form for example; they do not exist as originals.

Books and documents in manuscript were repeatedly renewed and old or worn out copies were discarded; the originals were not often reverently preserved like the first editions of printed books. The earliest existing manuscript of the letters of Abelard and Heloise belonged to the cathedral Chapter of Notre-Dame, who sold it in 1346 to Roberto de Bardi. He was a friend of the poet Petrarch, who also owned (and annotated) a copy of the letters which still exists. This and other information about the manuscripts suggests that the letters of Abelard and Heloise were published in Paris at the end of the thirteenth century, when a renewed interest was being taken in works of romantic love.[55] What we possess today are the publishers' copies and not the master copy from which they were made. Hazarding a guess, the latter was a register (like the letter registers of St Bernard and Peter the Venerable) which had been compiled by Heloise at the convent of the Paraclete, perhaps with Abelard's full knowledge. A century and a half later some interested outsider saw the literary potential of the letters and brought Heloise's register from the Paraclete to a commercial scriptorium in Paris, where multiple copies were made for publication. Judging from the provenance of the earliest extant copies of the letters of Abelard and Heloise, intellectuals and aesthetes in France and Italy appreciated them in a way the nuns of the Paraclete had never done. They revered Abelard

and Heloise as the founders of their convent; they did not necessarily want to know that they had written some of the greatest love letters of all time.

The letters of Abelard and Heloise are typical of twelfth-century letters in existing only in fair copies. It is of course true of any fair copy that we cannot be certain that it reproduces the original in every detail. To that extent medieval letters contain elements of fiction. Furthermore, for those trained like Abelard and Heloise in Latin rhetoric, writing anything down made the author adopt a particular literary stance and speak with an artificial voice. An author was obliged to write 'literature' as well as 'letters'. Every piece of writing had to fit a recognized genre; otherwise it would not be effective or even comprehensible. In his 'history of calamities', for example, Abelard spoke as a person who has suffered misfortune. Did he really think his life had been a series of calamities, or was this merely the voice or persona he adopted for this particular work? He explained in its conclusion that he adopted this tone in order to console a friend and fellow monk, though Abelard does not name him and he may not have been a real person. The 'history of calamities' may have been written in the form of a letter to an anonymous friend because fictitious correspondence was a well-understood convention, as the rhetoric of letter-writing (the *ars dictaminis* or 'art of dictation') was taught along with Latin in the classroom.

Writing allows a person to speak with different voices and even to pretend to be someone else. This is what Heloise was announcing in her first letter, when she rehearsed whether she was Abelard's 'servant', or 'daughter', or 'wife' or 'sister'. All societies stereotype people and expect them to perform fixed roles and, conversely, each individual searches for the role which will win him most esteem. Medieval society sometimes stereotyped men into three orders: clergy who pray, knights who fight and peasants who labour. In art it distinguished each order by its appearance: the clergy by their tonsures and vestments, knights by their armour, and peasants by their poverty and uncouthness. Ideally, everyone played these roles to the full and avoided overlapping. The cleric or the monk, who had dedicated his life to Christ, should be humble and poor, and yet he must not be so poor as to be mistaken for a peasant. The knight must be good and strong, without being scrupulous like a cleric or rough like a peasant. These roles inevitably contained contradictory or subversive elements. Although the cleric should be humble, he had also to be conscious of his superior calling as a man of God. The knight was to be a gentleman and yet his business was killing people. The peasant was to be uncouth and yet he too had been created in the image of God and was superior to any animal.

Generalizing about the Middle Ages

Our assumptions about the Middle Ages derive from these medieval stereotypes, though they are further distorted and removed from reality by the thousand years that separate us. We tend to think either of pious angels on a Christmas card or of barbaric torturers in some castle dungeon. The stereotyped angels (and the Christmas cards) derive from the Victorian Gothic Revival, while we get the reverse image of the Middle Ages as a time of irredeemable barbarity from the humanists of the Italian Renaissance. Of course, there is some truth in these stereotypes. Barbaric things were done in the Middle Ages, not least the castration and persecution of Abelard. But whether Europe was more barbaric in the twelfth century than in the twentieth is very hard to say, partly because of the difference in scale. The crusaders' atrocities in Jerusalem in 1099 were limited in scope, and perhaps also in intention, compared with Auschwitz. Nevertheless, it may be true that medieval anti-Semitism is the foundation of modern anti-Semitism. Abelard is one of the few medieval churchmen who shows any understanding of what the Jews suffered at the hands of Christians. 'We are confined and oppressed, as if the whole world had conspired against us alone. It's a wonder we are allowed to live', he has a Jew say.[56]

Abelard and Heloise did not know that they were 'medieval' and that they would therefore be classified as peculiar and primitive 900 years later. Medieval people did not think their predecessors to be of no importance, as we do. Abelard and Heloise would have been astonished to be told that they had lived in the Dark Ages, when the Latin classics were no longer understood and the Roman Empire had ceased to exist. They would have found this unrecognizable. Abelard's generation invented the word 'modern' and he thought of himself as modern. But he and his fellow 'moderns' in the schools did not aim to destroy the legacy of their predecessors but to surpass it, just as the Romanesque architects surpassed the ancient Romans in the construction of arches and vaults. The abbey of Cluny in its third and final enlargement, which had been begun in the 1080s when Abelard was a little boy and was complete by the time he became a monk there in 1140, was the largest church in Latin Christendom, longer and taller than St Peter's in Rome (this was the basilica built by the Emperor Constantine, not the present church by Michelangelo). In Abelard's time the Roman Emperor *semper Augustus* ('Augustus as always') was still the most important ruler in the West, even though he was elected in Germany and was often opposed by the Papacy. As for the ancient classics, Abelard and Heloise and their

fellow writers were living proof that Latin learning flourished. They did not think, as later humanists did, that the only true Latin had been written in ancient Rome and the best they could do was imitate it, as that could only be the death of Latin and the end of Roman power.

Far more damaging for understanding the Middle Ages than the distortions of Renaissance humanists has been the belief in the inevitable march of progress from century to century, as this means that only recent events are considered important and people who lived a long time ago are bypassed as irrelevant. Abelard and Heloise were better off with nineteenth-century Romanticism, which gave them a Gothic Revival tomb at the cemetery of Père-Lachaise among the heroes of France. This became such an object of devotion for American visitors to Paris that one commented: 'The grave of Abelard and Heloise has been more revered, more widely known, more written and sung about and wept over than any other in Christendom, save only that of the Saviour. Go when you will, you will find somebody snuffling over that tomb.'[57] Today their tomb still stands, but it is mostly deserted. Visitors to Père-Lachaise have so many more recent martyrs to remember: the communards of 1870, Oscar Wilde, the dead of two World Wars.

Despite modern priorities, Abelard's story remains significant because he wrote so brilliantly, though not necessarily truthfully, about his own chequered life; and as a philosopher, a theologian and a poet, he commented on life in general. He articulated all sorts of recurrent human dilemmas: about individual integrity, teaching and learning, the mismatch of love and marriage, the effects of intimidation whether mental or physical, the need for solitude, the difference between public and personal religious devotion. Not least he was a jester who knew, as another of his contemporaries wrote, that

> Fas et nefas ambulant pene passu pari.
> Right and wrong they go about cheek by jowl together.[58]

This is Helen Waddell's idiomatic translation from the *Carmina Burana*. A literal translation underlines the point: 'Right and wrong walk along almost perfectly in step.' In other words, they go so close together that one can look like the other. Abelard had shown how right and wrong walk 'almost perfectly in step' in the hundreds of apparently contradictory statements he collected in *Sic et Non*. His fascination with contradiction exposed him to St Bernard's charge that he was altogether ambiguous: a dangerously split personality. *Homo sibi dissimilis est*, St Bernard hissed, 'he is a man dissimilar even from himself'.[59] Another contemporary said he acted more like a jester (*joculator*) than a

professor.[60] He was perceived to be an actor because he played so many roles. As a musician and a poet, Abelard was well qualified to be a *joculator* in the sense of a jongleur or minstrel. As for his being a jester in a wider sense, Otto of Freising said he excelled 'in moving men's minds to jokes'.[61] Like a Shakespearean jester, Abelard was also a moralist who naively told unpalatable truths. It was logic that had made him hateful to the world, he concluded in his final confession of faith to Heloise.[62]

The schoolmen believed that harmony would emerge from the tension of opposites (*Sic et Non*) which they created in their disputations. Abelard and Heloise, or Abelard and St Bernard, dispute as if they were irreconcilable opposites and yet they seem to flourish and gain strength from their discord. Abelard's contemporary, the ecclesiastical lawyer, Gratian, called his encyclopedic collection of contradictory rulings from Church councils a 'Concord of Discordant Canons' (*Concordia Discordantium Canonum*). This title evoked medieval ideas about the fundamental harmony which exists in things and which is made manifest in the structures of music, mathematics and the universe itself. To accord with scholastic ways of thinking and to take account of his enemies' strictures that he was a contradictory personality, this study of Abelard aims to bring harmony out of dissonance by focusing on the discordant and dissimilar elements in his life. Medieval society required consistent presentations of the self, whereas he – whether consciously or unconsciously – performed a diversity of roles, clerical and lay, pagan and Christian, rational and emotional.

The Structure of this Book

This book discusses Abelard's roles one by one in successive chapters ('Literate', 'Master', 'Logician', and so on) in order to build up a composite portrait of him. The sequence of chapters accords very roughly with the chronology of Abelard's life: from his precocious success in the schools (chapters 3–5), through his affair with Heloise (chapters 8–9), to his controversial career as a monk and theologian (chapters 11–13). Two chapters are devoted to his affair with Heloise because this was the turning point of his life, even though the events it comprised were concentrated in not much more than a single year (1117 or 1118). The concluding chapter (14), entitled 'Himself', centres on the Delphic subtitle he chose for his book on ethics: 'Know Thyself'. Overarching the fourteen chapters are the three parts, with their Latin titles, into which the book is divided: *Scientia* ('knowledge' or 'science'),

Experimentum ('experience' or 'experiment') and *Religio* ('religion' or 'monasticism'). These three parts characterize Abelard's successive approaches to life and they function at the same time as an introduction to medieval culture in the period of the twelfth-century Renaissance. In Part I, Abelard expounds the 'science' which the Middle Ages had inherited from classical antiquity. In his native Loire valley he had begun his road to knowledge as a 'Literate' (chapter 3), that is, as a *literatus* and Latinist; then in Paris he had been acknowledged as a 'Master' (chapter 4) of students. He 'who alone knew whatever was known' was a 'master' also in the sense of *magus*. His wisdom and magic comprehended all the knowledge of the ancient Greeks in philosophy and logic (chapter 5), the queen of the sciences.

Contrasting with this theoretical and scholastic knowledge is *Experimentum* (Part II): learning not from books, but from experiencing life in the raw. Theory and fact, reflection and action, contrast – and often conflict – in Abelard's life, as they do in medieval culture as a whole. In his book on ethics, he had argued that actions in themselves are indifferent; only the intention of the actor makes them right or wrong. Abelard 'experimented' with sex and violence. He compared himself to a knight (chapter 7), conducting feuds and mock battles in the schools, and then suddenly he found himself up against Fulbert and Heloise's other kinsmen in a real feud. In castrating Abelard, they took no account of his good intentions, but only of his action in putting Heloise into a convent. Because the Church put such value on celibacy, Abelard's castration had the peculiar effect of converting him to 'religion' (Part III), in the sense that it made him become a monk. Such was the attraction of monasticism in the twelfth century that the adjective *religiosus* (chapter 10) was synonymous with 'monastic', as if there was no religion outside the cloister. Abelard made repeated efforts to be a good monk (chapter 11), but he never could reconcile the exclusiveness of monasticism with his broad vision of theology (chapter 12), in which good pagans worshipped the true God and acknowledged the Trinity. He was not only a failed 'religious', St Bernard taunted, he was a blasphemer and a heretic (chapter 13).

To write a biography of Abelard giving equal weight to each stage of his life is not possible, as we have too little personal information about him, despite his 'history of calamities' and his massive academic works. We have no certain date for his birth or death, no portraits of him at any stage of his life, and none of his writings are explicitly dated or definitely in his own hand. This lack of what a twentieth-century biographer thinks of as essential basic information is not due to deliberate secrecy on Abelard's part, nor to his writings having been censored because he

was a heretic, and neither is it accidental. A lack of chronological and biographical information is a characteristic of medieval culture. It is primarily due to more emphasis being put on divine revelation, the life of God as recorded in Holy Scripture, than on the relatively insignificant lives of individual human beings. Without paper or electronic equipment, making any sort of record necessitated writing on parchment. In one way or another all medieval writing was associated with Scripture because that is what 'writing' (*scriptura*) meant. The majesty of medieval writing, particularly in illuminated manuscripts, inhibited authors and scribes from recording much about their own lives, despite producing huge books.

Abelard tells us at the beginning of his 'history of calamities' where he was born (at Le Pallet near Nantes), but he does not say when. Perhaps he did not know, though this is unlikely, as birthdates were significant for devotion to particular saints' days and they were also essential for astrology. A more likely explanation is that Abelard was reluctant to specify the year of his birth because this meant deciding where his loyalties lay. He could have said for example that he had been born in the thirteenth year of the reign of Hoel, duke of Brittany (1079 AD). But, as Abelard was writing his 'history of calamities' at St Gildas in the 1130s when he was miserable in Brittany, he may not have wished to associate his own birth with the duke. An alternative was to say that he had been born in the nineteenth year of the reign of King Philip I of France. But Abelard may have felt that this was presumptuous, as he was not a Frenchman, despite his love of Paris and his ambition to return there. Even more presumptuous would have been to specify the year *Anno Domini* (1079 or whatever it was), as that would have suggested that Abelard's birth had a special place in God's providential plan of Christian salvation. Even he may not have been egoistical enough to claim that. The easiest solution was to give no dates for anything and this is what Abelard does.

Abelard's writings fill a whole volume (no. 178) of Migne's *Patrologiae: Series Latina* comprising about 800,000 words. His *Theologia* in its various versions (Abelard kept revising it over the decades 1120–40) contains more than 200,000 words; *Sic et Non* has 130,000, his sermons 115,000, the commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans 90,000; for Heloise he wrote another 70,000 words. Migne's volume does not include Abelard's writings on logic: one big book, *Dialectica*, survives (though it is not complete) in addition to other commentaries and lectures. It is certain that some works have been lost, like the commentary on the Prophet Ezechiel which Abelard says he wrote in Paris and the love songs which he reminded Heloise were still being sung in the

1130s. As his surviving writings amount to about 1 million words, his total output must have considerably exceeded that.

Once he started writing for publication and posterity, which may not have been until after he became a monk in 1117 or 1118, Abelard must have spent much of his working life in the scriptorium pen in hand, or dictating to a monastic or a hired scribe. Cold, bad light and failing eyesight would have been greater obstacles to his career as a writer than castration. Even more painful (Abelard said) was adverse criticism, which took the extreme form of putting him on trial and burning his books. Writers turn their lives upside down; they make themselves and those they love or hate into a public spectacle. In St Bernard's opinion Abelard turned God into a public spectacle as well. It is because Abelard was such a successful writer that he can still reach us today. His books have survived the vitriol of St Bernard and the bonfires ordered by the pope and the bishops of France, as well as the wear and tear of nine centuries. What Auden wrote in memory of Yeats is an appropriate coda, as it takes one great writer to understand another:

> Time that is intolerant
> Of the brave and innocent,
> And indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique,
>
> Worships language and forgives
> Everyone by whom it lives.[63]