

A STUDY IN THE SOURCES OF ELOISA TO ABELARD

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Bachelor of Arts

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1929

Submitted to the Department of English
Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

1937

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CONTENTS

I. The Problem	1
A. Autobiographical interpretation	1
(1) Hazlitt's view	1
(2) Phelps' criticism	1
(3) Sherburn's observations	2
B. Impersonal phases	3
(1) Taine's view	3
(2) Stephen's comments	4
II. The Personal Basis	6
A. Pope's letters to Lady Mary Montagu	8
B. Restraints which Pope experienced	9
C. Eloisa's tirade against matrimony	13
D. Concluding lines of the poem	15
III. The Impersonal Aspect	17
A. Poem based on definite literary source	17
B. Translation of original letter of Heloisa to Abelard examined and compared with passages from the poem	19
C. Impersonal characteristics of the neo-classical age	23
IV. Conclusion	27

A STUDY IN THE SOURCES OF ELOISA TO ABELARD

As early as 1818 Mr. William Hazlitt said that, while Alexander Pope's Eloisa to Abelard was based on a literary source, it may have been partly influenced by Pope's personal experience. He wrote in part:

Besides the richness of the historical materials, the high gusto of the original sentiments which Pope had to work upon, there were perhaps circumstances in his own situation which made him enter into the subject with even more than a poet's feeling.¹

Others have likewise pointed to the similarity between Eloisa's and Pope's feelings. In 1893, Mr. William Lyon Phelps wrote that

...the warmth of Eloisa may be largely explained on purely personal grounds, which fact, of course, robs it of much of its significance as an index to Pope's general taste in poetry.²

And he added:

No one who reads Pope's correspondence with Lady Mary can avoid the conclusion that the poet embodied in this Epistle much of his own sentimental longings; for Pope's attitude toward the brilliant society woman was certainly more than that of conventional gallantry.³

¹Lectures on the English Poets, Lecture IV, 1818, quoted in The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, edited by Charles Wells Moulton (Buffalo, The Moulton Publishing Company, 1902), III, 168.

²The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement (Boston, Ginn & Company, 1893), p. 24.

³William Lyon Phelps, op. cit., p. 24. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was an English poet, satirist, and wit of the eighteenth century. As a brilliant English woman of letters, Mrs. Montagu held a recognized place among the writers of

Mr. Phelps supports his interpretation with the following information:

He (Pope) himself realized that Eloisa was different from the general nature of his literary production. Writing to Mrs. Martha Blount in 1716, he says, "The Epistle of Eloisa grows warm, and begins to have some breathings of the heart in it, which may make posterity think I was in love."¹

Mr. George Sherburn in his recent book The Early Career of Alexander Pope similarly finds that "Lady Mary inspired fervour in the words of Eloisa."² He points out that Pope, while he was composing the poem, about Easter time 1716, wrote to Martha Blount "in a fashion to imply that love for her inspired him."³ He adds that later Pope paid the same compliment to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.⁴ In the opinion of Mr. Sherburn "Pope got pleasure from imagining that he was in love with both these ladies; but so far as 'Eloisa' is concerned, the romantic reviling of marriage and the theme of love in absence ... indicate that

the period. Her correspondence with Pope is noted for its clarity of style and its force of wit. Pope seems to have been moved by her charm and wit; for there are references to her 'beauty and wit' in his poem To Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

¹Op. cit., p. 24. Martha Blount, occasionally referred to as "Patty" Blount, was the lifelong friend of Pope. Much criticism resulted from her reputed residence in the home of Pope and rumors of their strange relationship were widespread. Pope indicated his respect and revealed his affection for her by willing to her the bulk of his estate.

²Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1934, p. 208.

³George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope, p. 203.

⁴Ibid., p. 203.

Lady Mary had the greater influence."¹

And Mr. Sherburn further observes:

There is little doubt but that Pope was more genuinely in love with "Patty" Blount than with Lady Mary; but Lady Mary was the more dazzling and alluring, and his passion for her probably inspired Pope to motivate the Epistle of Eloisa ...²

On the other hand, other commentators have seen the poem as a product of the head rather than of the heart. In 1871 Mr. H. A. Taine in his History of English Literature prefaced his remarks about the poem with a statement which stresses the absence of feeling. Commenting on Pope's general literary attitude and noticing its effect, he says: "It is a great misfortune for a poet to know his business too well; his poetry then shows the man of business, and not the poet."³ Taine suggests that the poem adheres closely to the original letters of Eloisa and is therefore pedantic. He writes in part:

I read it again and am bored; this is not as it ought to be; but, in spite of myself, I yawn, and I open the original letters of Eloisa to find the cause of my weariness.⁴

Aside from thus adhering closely to the original letters, Pope, he thinks, invests Eloisa with his own greater intelligence.⁵ She "becomes an academician, and her letter

¹George Sherburn, op. cit., p. 203.

²George Sherburn, The Best of Pope (New York, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1931), p. 403.

³Translated from the French by H. Van Laun (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1896), II, 237.

⁴Ibid., p. 237.

⁵Ibid., p. 238.

is a repertory of literary effects; portraits and descriptions; declamation and commonplace."¹ And he continues:

Eloisa is worse than a singer, she is an author: we look at the back of her epistle to Abelard to see if she has not written on it "For Press."²

He finally concludes by characterizing Pope's taste in poetry, and, incidentally, revealing something of his own. "This kind of poetry," he says, "resembles cookery; neither heart nor genius is necessary to produce it, but a light hand, an attentive eye, and a cultivated taste."³

In 1887, Augustine Birrell was likewise impressed with the impersonal tone of the poem. He said, "a poem about love it may be-- a love poem it is not."⁴

At the beginning of this century Mr. Leslie Stephen, who sometimes is harsh in his criticism of Pope, adds his bit to the interpretation of the poem as essentially impersonal. While he is aware of the effective use of the romantic scenery of the convent, and of the "force with which Pope has given the revulsions of feelings of his unfortunate heroine from earthly to heavenly love, and from keen remorse to renewed gusts of overpowering passion,"⁵ he seems

¹H. A. Taine, op. cit., p. 238.

²Ibid., p. 240.

³Ibid., p. 240.

⁴Obiter Dicta, Second series (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 106.

⁵Alexander Pope (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1901), pp. 36-37.

to be unmoved by the passion and pathos in the poem because Pope simply "never crosses the undefinable, but yet inef- faceable, line which separates true poetry from rhetoric."¹

Then as he points to the manner in which Pope develops the poem, Mr. Stephen becomes more specific in his judgment of the work. There seems to be little doubt in his mind that the poem is chiefly impersonal:

The worker in moral aphorisms cannot forget him- self even in the full swing of his fervid declama- tion. I have no doubt that Pope so far exemplified his own doctrine that he truly felt whilst he was writing. His feelings make him eloquent, but they do not enable him to "snatch a grace beyond the reach of art," to blind us for a moment to the presence of the consummate workman, judiciously blending his colours, heightening his effects, and skilfully managing his transitions or consciously introducing an abrupt outburst of a new mood. Pope always resembles an orator whose gestures are studied, and who thinks, while he is speaking, of the fall of his robes and the attitude of his hands. He is throughout academical ...²

These two conflicting views (1) that Eloisa's feelings have their basis partly in Pope's own emotional experience, and (2) that, on the contrary, they have their origin mere- ly in the learned mind of a conscious, impersonal poet, have led me to reexamine their foundations with a view to deter- mining through them not so much the sources but rather the sincerity of the feeling in the poem. The conflicting views, it seems to me, converge finally on that fundamental ques- tion.

¹Leslie Stephen, op. cit., p. 37.

²Ibid., pp. 37-38.

II

The poem has its foundation in an incident of frustrated love. From the gloom of a convent Eloisa writes to Abelard of her yearning for him despite her vestal vows. Her longing for him is awakened by the memory of their former relations, a memory both sad and dear. In conflict with her passion for Abelard, Eloisa aspires to the virtues of a faithful nun. At the same time she assures him that his name is the dearest thing in the world, and that the memory of his name brightens the gloom of the convent.

Thus instead of facing the reality of her surroundings, she seeks solace in the dreams of the past. Eloisa requests Abelard to write her concerning all his sorrows, and thereby allow her to share them. She recalls the beauty of his singing, his smiling eyes, the truths which he spoke, and how their friendship flowered into love. She feels these joys so deeply that the future joys of saints pale into insignificance.

Paradoxically, Eloisa yearns for the state where love is liberty and human nature the only law. She asks Abelard to remember the day she took the veil, and tells him that even at such a holy moment his presence came between herself and God. Her troubled soul, torn between earthly passion and religious devotion, constantly seeks peace. She seems to long for the advent of death, the power which can free her from unrequited longing and at last reunite them.

Eloisa prays to heaven for help in conquering her passion for Abelard; but no sooner is the prayer uttered than she questions whether it truly emanates from her heart. She then reflects upon the well-balanced and peaceful life of a guiltless nun only to have her very soul confronted with profane desires. Even her sleep is disturbed by visions of Abelard beckoning her to join him in Heaven, but she awakens to all the familiar sorrows of her lonely life. Eloisa no sooner asks Abelard to tear her away from God than she requests him to renounce and hate her.

In answer to a spirit's call to come where grief is requited, where peace reigns, where love no longer weeps, Eloisa invokes the guidance of Abelard's spirit. The poem ends with the thought that the one who feels Eloisa's woes most can best present them.

This incident of frustrated love is strikingly similar to experiences in the poet's own life. Both Eloisa and Pope longed for what they could not have.

When Eloisa became a nun she had to forsake Abelard. This separation increased her longing for him and resulted in a passionate yearning for his love which lasted even longer than his life. She assures Abelard of the ardor of her affection:

Should at my feet the world's great master fall,
Himself, his throne, his world, I'd scorn 'em all:
Not Caesar's empress would I deign to prove;
No, make me mistress to the man I love;
If there be yet another name more free,
More fond than mistress, make me that to thee!¹

¹Alexander Pope, Eloisa to Abelard, II. 85-90. All selec-

When he was writing Eloisa to Abelard, in 1716, Pope longed for Lady Mary, who was then in Constantinople with her husband.¹ Mr. W. J. Courthope, in his The Life of Alexander Pope, enlightens us concerning Pope's reason for choosing a theme of frustrated love. He writes in part:

When Lady Mary in 1716 accompanied her husband on his embassy to Constantinople, Pope thought of what dramatic situation describing the separation of lovers would suit him to express the excitement of his own feelings. The supposed authentic letters of Heloise to Abelard furnished him with exactly the subject he required ...²

Pope's passion for Lady Mary, as Mr. Sherburn suggests, likely stimulated him "to motivate the Epistle of Eloisa by the themes of devotion persisting in absence (Lady Mary was in Constantinople) and by the need of struggling against forbidden love (Lady Mary was married!)." ³ In November 1716, the same year in which he was writing the poem, Pope wrote lines to Lady Mary which reveal his longing for her:

...when you write to me, talk of yourself; there is nothing I so much desire to hear of: talk a great deal of yourself, that she who I always thought talked best may speak upon the best subject. ... I had ten times rather go on a pilgrimage to see your face, than St. John Baptist's head.⁴

In this connection it is interesting to note that upon pub-

tions quoted from the poem are taken from The Best of Pope, edited by George Sherburn.

¹George Sherburn, The Best of Pope, pp. 402-403.

²Jordan, John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1889, p. 135.

³George Sherburn, The Best of Pope, p. 403.

⁴The letter is quoted by Courthope, op. cit., p. 139.

lication of his Works in 1717, Pope sent a copy to Lady Mary, then in Constantinople, with the message:

There are few things in them but what you have seen, except the Epistle of Eloisa to Abelard; in which you will find one passage¹ that I cannot tell whether to wish you should understand, or not.²

When one recalls that Pope endured restraints from his childhood throughout his life, one can more readily understand why he chose to write of unrequited longings. He was familiar with the depressing depths to which continual restraint could submerge one.

Among these restraints, and one which was deeply felt by Pope, was his physical deformity. Mr. Sherburn tells us that, "Too much study was the usual explanation of the increasing fragility, recurrent headaches, and final curvature of the spine that ruined the poet's physique."³ His deformity, caused by a tubercular infection, excluded him from the normal pursuits of childhood, and gave rise to adolescent melancholy.⁴ Later in his life many allusions to his physical deformity were made by some of his contemporary critics.⁵ His deformity was also the subject of cari-

¹Mr. Sherburn in The Best of Pope, p. 403, suggests that the passage Pope refers to is "probably the conclusion."

²Ibid., p. 403.

³George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope, p. 42.

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵William Makepeace Thackeray, The Four Georges: The English Humorists: Sketches and Travels in London (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), p. 259.

catuists. "Any stupid hand could draw a hunchback and write Pope underneath. ... A libel was published against Pope, with such a frontispiece."¹ One of the chief results of Pope's physical deformity was that it made his admiration for women, so far as love was concerned, almost ineffectual, and it caused him to feel acutely the condition of thwarted love which he so effectively presented in the poem.²

The Roman Catholic faith of the Pope family resulted in another restraint which left its mark on Pope's personality. Not only were Catholics prohibited from holding public office but they were also burdened with excessive taxation. A more direct result of this restraint was that it excluded Pope from the ordinary schools.³ Thus Pope, in the formative years of his life, was denied the ordinary educational advantages as well as the companionship with children of his own age.

In later life, as in his youth, the poet felt the ostracism from society. His political affiliation, as well as his Catholic beliefs, resulted in much criticism. Pope tried for a time to be impersonal in politics by associating himself with friends of both the Tories and the Whigs. In the spring of 1713 he was criticized by the Whigs for his praise in Windsor Forest of the approaching Tory peace.⁴ The poem

¹Thackeray, op. cit., p. 259.

²George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope, p. 203.

³Leslie Stephen, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope, pp. 66-67.

was also dedicated to Lord Lansdowne, one of Queen Anne's staunch supporters. Later in the same year he wrote the "Prologue" for Mr. Addison's Cato, a play which contained Whig propaganda.¹ Pope wrote several essays for the Guardian, Steele's Whig journal, and thus incurred the ill will of some of his Tory and Catholic friends.²

The attendant pangs of ostracism resulting from all these restraints no doubt affected Pope's sensitive nature and acquainted him with continuous longing. It is possible that these factors may have influenced Pope in presenting so effectively the gloom in the poem. Certainly the gloom of the convent and the solitude of Eloisa's life are pathetically presented. They form a fitting atmosphere for the struggle between passion and religion in the mind of the nun. Eloisa at once ushers in this atmosphere when she says:

Relentless walls! whose darksome round contains
Repentant sighs, and voluntary pains:
Ye rugged rocks! which holy knees have worn;
Ye grotts and caverns shagged with horrid thorn!
Shrines! where their vigils pale-eyed virgins keep,
And pitying saints, whose statues learn to weep!
Though cold like you, unmoved and silent grown,
I have not yet forgot myself to stone.³

We find that Eloisa is yet in love with Abelard, although they have been separated for some time. To her inquiry:

Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?

¹George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope, p. 67.

²Ibid., p. 66.

³Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 17-24.

she answers:

Yet, yet I love!--From Abelard it came,
And Eloisa yet must kiss the name.¹

Pope, even after the bitter quarrel which severed his relations with Lady Mary,² until his death kept portraits of Mrs. Montagu in the important rooms of his home at Twickenham.³

There is another significant similarity in this parallel. The amorous language in Eloisa to Abelard has been referred to as "genuine passion and pathos."⁴ When the nun asks Abelard to remember the day and the manner in which she took the veil, she reveals herself torn between passion for him and love for God as she writes:

As with cold lips I kissed the sacred veil,
The shrines all trembled, and the lamps grew pale:
Heaven scarce believed the Conquest it surveyed
And Saints with wonder heard the vows I made.
Yet then, to those dread altars as I drew,
Not on the Cross my eyes were fixed, but you:
Not grace, or zeal, love only was my call,
And if I lose thy love, I lose my all.⁵

Although I have not been able to find in Pope's correspondence with Lady Mary what Mr. Thackeray labels "flames and raptures,"⁶ I have found expressions of warmth, as in the

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 6-8.

²Mr. Sherburn in his The Early Career of Alexander Pope, p. 205, says that "the change from intimacy to hot enmity, which took place before 1727, has never been explained, though there are several plausible hypotheses."

³George Sherburn, The Best of Pope, p. 403.

⁴William Lyon Phelps, op. cit., p. 24.

⁵Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 111-118.

⁶Thackeray, op. cit., p. 240.

following excerpt from a letter written in 1716, the year in which he wrote Eloisa to Abelard. Pope was evidently glad that Lady Mary seriously received his letters; for he assures her that

...it would be the most vexatious of all tyranny if you should pretend to take for raillery, what is the mere disguise of a discontented heart, that is unwilling to make you as melancholy as itself; and for wit what is really only the natural overflowing and warmth of the same heart, as it is improved and awakened by an esteem for you...¹

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Mr. Sherburn thinks that Pope voices, through the medium of Eloisa, something of his own feeling concerning conventional matrimony. At least he points to evidence of a personal nature in Eloisa's violent speech against marriage:

Eloisa's tirade against matrimony ... is not purely romantic; it is in effect a tirade against Lady Mary's married state, and is the sort of utterance Pope longed to hear from her.²

It will prove helpful, in our study of what appear to be personal phases of the poem, to analyze this speech point by point. Eloisa, in answer to her inquiry:

How oft, when pressed to marriage, have I said,
Curse on all laws but those which love has made?³

replies after a fashion that indicates an implicit belief in unrestrained love:

Love, free as air, at sight of human ties,
Spreads his light wings, and in a moment flies.⁴

¹The letter is quoted by Courthope, op. cit., p. 140.

²George Sherburn, The Best of Pope, p. 403.

³Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 73-74.

⁴Ibid., ll. 75-76.

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Eloisa then reflects on the noble deeds, the honor, the wealth, the inviolable renown of the married lady, and questions their abiding worth when confronted with true ardor:

Let wealth, let honour, wait the wedded dame,
August her deed, and sacred be her fame;
Before true passion all those views remove,
Fame, wealth, and honour! what are you to Love?¹

The nun assures us that the jealous God imparts a burden of unrequited desires to beings who seek worldly rather than heavenly love. Eloisa implies that she is the victim of such a burden and suggests the nature and the effect of the continuous struggle within her, as she observes:

The jealous God, when we profane his fires,
Those restless passions in revenge inspires,
And bids them make mistaken mortals groan,
Who seek in love for aught but love alone.²

Eloisa temporarily puts aside her aspirations to divine happiness when she tells Abelard that she had rather be known as his mistress than to be the wife of an emperor. She requests Abelard to call her by any other name, and to make her more than mistress; if it is possible to find a name more dear, or a state more free. She fervently exclaims:

Should at my feet the world's great master fall,
Himself, his throne, his world, I'd scorn 'em all:
Not Caesar's empress would I deign to prove;
No, make me mistress to the man I love;
If there be yet another name more free,
More fond than mistress, make me that to thee!³

The nun yearns for that perfect state where love is restrained only by human nature, for it is in such a situation

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 77-80.

²Ibid., ll. 81-84.

³Ibid., ll. 85-90.

that all desires are fulfilled, and the lover finds nothing lacking in the beloved. Then each knows the other's thought, even when it is formed, and their hearts simultaneously discern mutual desires.

Oh! happy state! when souls each other draw,
When love is liberty, and nature law:
All then is full, possessing, and possessed,
No craving void left aking in the breast:
Even thought meets thought, ere from the lips it part,
And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart.¹

She conceives such a situation as being the highest degree of earthly happiness and owns that she and Abelard once enjoyed a fortune of that nature:

This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)
And once the lot of Abelard and me.²

Critics have pointed to the personal sentiment in the concluding lines of the poem.³ No doubt such an interpretation was somewhat influenced by Pope's references to those lines. He wrote Martha Blount, in 1716, that "I can scarce find in my heart to leave out the conclusion I once intended for it."⁴ In the next year he wrote Lady Mary that there is "one passage that I cannot tell whether to wish you should understand, or not."⁵ Mr. Sherburn suggests that the pas-

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 91-96.

²Ibid., ll. 97-98.

³Phelps, op. cit., p. 24.
Sherburn, The Best of Pope, p. 403.

⁴Sherburn, op. cit., p. 403.

⁵Ibid., p. 403.

sage Pope referred to was "probably the conclusion."¹

In the concluding passage Eloisa states that if destiny causes some future poet to be the victim of such griefs as she now suffers, sentenced for years to lament the absence of charms which she can recall only in memory; if there is any such poet who loves so long and so deeply, then let him tell the gentle and sorrowful story of Eloisa and Abelard. She confesses that the well-written poem telling of her sorrows will console her spirit; and admits that the person who understands best her woes can present them best. Pope's subtle confession is apparent, as he causes Eloisa to say:

And sure, if fate some future bard shall join
 In sad similitude of griefs to mine,
 Condemned whole years in absence to deplore,
 And image charms he must behold no more;
 Such if there be, who loves so long, so well;
 Let him our sad, our tender story tell;
 The well-sung woes will soothe my pensive ghost;
 He best can paint 'em who shall feel 'em most.²

¹ Sherburn, The Best of Pope, p. 403.

² Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 359-366.

III

The case for interpreting the poem as an achievement that is impersonal rather than personal rests on two main propositions: (1) that it was based on a definite source and (2) that it was written in "an age which by principle eschewed personal confessions ..."¹

In the "Argument"² which precedes the poem Pope said that his version was "partly extracted" from the "celebrated letters" which Eloisa wrote to Abelard. "The version of the letters upon which Pope drew for numerous phrases was not the original, in Latin, but a translation made by John Hughes in 1714 from a romanticized French version which had appeared anonymously at Amsterdam and the Hague in 1693. Most of the ideas which Pope borrowed from the Hughes translation are not to be found in the original Latin."³ Thus we are certain that Pope used a definite literary source for the foundation of his poem.

While I have unfortunately not been able to compare the poem with this source, I have examined a version containing

¹Ronald S. Crane in the "Preface" to A Collection of English Poems 1660-1800, edited by R. S. Crane (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1932), p. v.

²The Best of Pope, edited by George Sherburn, p. 103.

³H. W. Taylor and R. S. Crane, "Notes For a Collection of English Poems 1660-1800" (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1937), p. 1214. Mr. Sherburn gives 1713 as the date of the Hughes translation. I have not been able to obtain a copy of the book.

one letter that bears striking similarities to parts of the poem. It is found in The Library of The World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern, edited by Charles Dudley Warner.¹ I point to these similarities merely to suggest rather than to define the extent and the degree to which Pope appears to have relied on source material. A brief résumé of this letter shows at once its general similarity to parts of the poem.

Heloise obtains by chance a letter written by Abelard to a friend for the purpose of consoling him. In it Abelard has written much of his own past sorrows and thus, by contrast, hopes to diminish the woes of his friend. This letter awakens the nun's tenderness for Abelard and causes her to write to him.

The nun is anxious for Abelard's welfare and prays him to write to her about his dangers and persecutions. She tells Abelard that while he comforts his friend's sorrows by writing to him, he increases hers by his failure to write. She further reproaches him for his neglect of her, and as his wife appeals to him to remember his duties as a husband and a servant of God. The nun assures him of her great loss when he forsook her; she tells him that she has obeyed all his commands, and that if he wished it she would even sacrifice her soul.

¹New York, R. S. Peale and J. A. Hill Publishers, 1896, I, 27-31. The translation bears no date nor is the translator's name given, but I have written the editors of the late edition of The Warner's Library requesting this information.

Heloise explains that there is no limit to the things she would do for him because of her great love. As evidence of the truth of this statement she reminds him that she gave up the most important thing in her life in order not to interfere with his career. She assures Abelard that she would rather be known as his mistress than to be an empress.

The nun reminds Abelard that she has known with him that happiness which others only imagine. She remembers his great fame, his delightful voice, his beautiful singing, and his many gifts of mind and person, and she repeatedly requests that he write to her and thus lighten the burden produced by his neglect.

Heloise asks her lover to remember that she took the veil because he requested her to do so; but she tells him her soul belongs to him and ever shall. She prays Abelard that he be more anxious concerning her love for him, and not merely take her affection for granted. The nun repeats that she asks but little from him, just a written word of consolation. She wants Abelard to persuade her to God even as he persuaded her to be his. The brief ending consists of a warm "farewell darling."

A comparison of some excerpts from the prose translation with passages from the poem reveals how closely Pope adheres to the original story.

Heloise prays Abelard to relieve her burden, as well as alleviate his own, by writing her of his perils. A tone of sympathy mingles with the discord of reproof as she writes:

For Christ's sake ... write to us ... every circumstance of your present dangers. Sympathy brings some relief, and a load laid on my shoulders is lighter. You can write to comfort your friend: while you soothe his wounds, you inflame mine.¹

Pope creates a similar note of understanding sympathy when he causes Eloisa to plead:

Yet write, oh write me all, that I may join
Griefs to thy griefs, and echo sighs to thine.²

And again:

Then share thy pain, allow that sad relief;
Ah, more than share it, give me all thy grief.³

Heloise assures Abelard of the fervor of her affection when she says, "if you bade me, I would sacrifice my soul."⁴ Then the nun tells him that she would rather be called his mistress than be an empress and the ruler of the world. She writes in part:

I call God to witness that if Augustus, ruler of the world, should think me worthy the honor of marriage, and settle the whole globe on me to rule forever, it would seem dearer and prouder to me to be called your mistress than his empress.⁵

Much of Eloisa's famed lines on the same point; in fact all except the last couplet of the following passage,⁶ is in the

¹Heloise to Abelard, op. cit., I, 29.

²Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 41-42.

³Ibid., 49-50.

⁴Heloise to Abelard, op. cit., I, 29.

⁵Ibid., I, 29.

⁶George Sherburn, op. cit., p. 105, says in a note, "These lines cannot be justified by anything in the letters of Eloisa, where she merely prays Abelard to write her."

same vein, and reveals an ardor similar to that of the prose Heloise. Eloisa exclaims:

Should at my feet the world's great master fall,
Himself, his throne, his world, I'd scorn 'em all:
Not Caesar's empress would I deign to prove;
No, make me mistress to the man I love;
If there be yet another name more free,
More fond than mistress, make me that to thee!¹

It seems that this passage, sometimes referred to as containing an expression of Pope's own feelings,² is chiefly the result of his close adherence to the original source.

Heloise desires to be a faithful nun, despite her love for Abelard, and implores him

In the name of God, to whom you are dedicate,
send me some lines of consolation. Help me to learn
obedience!³

When she remembers how Abelard's love turned her from God, she exclaims:

How much more ought you now to persuade to God her
whom then you turned from Him!⁴

And she requests him to:

Heed what I ask; think what you owe.⁴

Eloisa likewise desires to become a more faithful nun even when she loves Abelard. She pleads to him:

Oh come! oh teach me nature to subdue,
Renounce my love, my life, myself--and you.
Fill my fond heart with God alone, for he
Alone can rival, can succeed to thee.⁵

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 85-90.

²George Sherburn, op. cit., p. 403. (In his discussion of Eloisa's tirade against marriage, of which these lines are a part.)

³Heloise to Abelard, op. cit., I, 31.

⁴Ibid., I, 31.

⁵Eloisa to Abelard, op. cit., ll. 203-206.

Or again, in the same mood:

Ah no! instruct me other joys to prize,
With other beauties charm my partial eyes,
Full in my view set all the bright abode,
And make my soul quit Abelard for God.¹

Heloise recounts those affecting qualities of Abelard's personality which attracted and bound her to him. She asserts her innocence and laments her loss, as she recalls:

Two gifts you had to lead captive the proudest
soul, your voice that made all your teaching a de-
light, and your singing, which was like no other....
What gifts of mind, what gifts of person glorified
you! Oh, my loss! ... And you know, Abelard, that
though I am the great cause of your misfortunes, I
am most innocent. And how pure was my intention
toward you, you alone can judge. Judge me! I will
submit.²

Eloisa voices a similar sentiment:

Thou know'st how guiltless first I met thy flame,
When Love approached me under Friendship's name;
My fancy formed thee of angelic kind,
Some emanation of th' all-beauteous Mind.
Those smiling eyes, attemp'ring every ray,
Shone sweetly lambent with celestial day.
Guiltless I gazed; heaven listened while you sung;
And truths divine came mended from that tongue.
From lips like those what precept failed to move?
Too soon they taught me 'twas no sin to love.³

Eloisa to Abelard was written in an age in which personal confessions were shunned.⁴ It was an age which "drew the substance of its verse from such ... prosaic things as the scorn of Tory for Whig or of wit for pedant and dunce, as the

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll, 125-128.

²Heloise to Abelard, op. cit., I, 30.

³Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 59-68.

⁴Ronald S. Crane, op. cit., p. v.

coming of a city shower, or as the optimistic theory of the world,"¹ or as the deathless story of Heloise and Abelard. It is said that one of the chief difficulties encountered today in a study of the literature of the classical age "is found in what may be called its impersonality."² "The typical writer of the period was less concerned with 'self-expression' than with the communication of ideas considered binding upon all rational creatures, according to the laws of reason."³ It seems but natural that the chief poet of the time would avoid the expression of his personal experiences.

The source of Pope's inspiration which motivated Eloisa to Abelard evidently changed from Lady Mary to the nun, as Mr. Courthope pointed out, because the "absent goddess"⁴ in whose honor he began to write passed out of his mind, leaving there only the image of the lonely votaress in the 'deep solitude and awful cells' of the Paraclete. ..."⁵ It may well be that Pope, moved by his sympathy for Eloisa's sorrows, presented the woes of the nun from the detached point of view of a literary artist, rather than from the inspiration of his own longings. "As his imagination dwelt upon the figure of Heloise in her devotion and despair, as he pictured

¹Ronald S. Crane, op. cit., p. v.

²Odell Shepard and Paul Spencer Wood in the "General Introduction" to English Prose and Poetry 1660-1800 (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1934), p. xxix.

³Ibid., p. xxix.

⁴The reference is to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

⁵Courthope, op. cit., p. 135.

to himself the conflict in her soul between religious feeling and the memory of earthly passion, he forgot himself and poured his own soul into his dramatic creation."¹

It is not unnatural that Pope's sympathy would be aroused by the pathos of the nun's longings; for, as Mr. Ward recorded, Pope was at various times intensely excited by sad passages from other literature:

Upon Pope's sensitive nature every spoken or written word, and every event in which he was interested, operated with thrilling effect. Martha Blount often saw him weep, in reading very tender and melancholy passages; he told Spence that he could never peruse Priam's lament for Hector without tears.²

Pope aptly uses the convent's gloomy atmosphere, heightened by the effective contrast of light and shade, to intensify the nun's longing for Abelard's presence:

In these lone walls (their days eternal bound)
 These moss-grown domes with spiry turrets crowned,
 Where awful arches make a noon-day night,
 And the dim windows shed a solemn light;
 Thy eyes diffused a reconciling ray,
 And gleams of glory brightened all the day.
 But now no face divine contentment wears,
 'Tis all blank sadness, or continual tears.³

It seems that the blend of the background with the nun's emotions serves to make the above passage something more than an example of the "portraits and descriptions" which Mr. Taine labels it.⁴ It serves rather to form, in part, an ar-

¹Courthope, op. cit., p. 135.

²"Introductory Memoir" to The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope, edited by Adolphus William Ward (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell & Co, 1896), p. xlv.

³Eloise to Abelard, ll. 141-148.

⁴Op. cit., ll, 238.

tistic unity of the setting and tone.

Another passage which reveals Pope's treatment of Eloisa's longings is the one in which she aspires to the graces of a devout nun. He presents a sympathetic tone of pathos, as he causes her to muse:

How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot:
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each prayer accepted, and each wish resigned;
Labour and rest, that equal periods keep;
"Obedient slumbers that can wake and weep;"
Desires composed, affections ever even;
Tears that delight, and sighs that waft to heaven.
Grace shines around her with serenest beams,
And whisp'ring Angels prompt her golden dreams.¹

Another example of the way Pope invests Eloisa with his intelligence, as Mr. Taine points out,² is the speech where she addresses grace and virtue, characterizes hope and faith, and asks them to grant eternal peace:

Oh Grace serene! oh virtue heavenly fair!
Divine oblivion of low-thoughted care!
Fresh blooming Hope, gay daughter of the sky!
And Faith, our early immortality!
Enter, each mild, each amicable guest;
Receive, and wrap me in eternal rest!³

It is true that Pope, in this poem, makes vivid use of imagery from nature, as Mr. Sherburn points out.⁴ The following passage is a typical illustration of his method of drawing images from nature to create an atmosphere of gloom

¹Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 207-216.

²Op. cit., ll. 238-239.

³Eloisa to Abelard, ll. 297-302.

⁴The Best of Pope, p. 403.

about the convent and the nun. Peaceful nature, such as he describes in the opening lines, is shrouded with the cloak of dark gloom which veils the nun's monotonous life. The sound seems an echo to the sense as Pope pictures:

The darksome pines that o'er yon rocks reclined
Wave high, and murmur to the hollow wind,
The wandering streams that shine between the hills,
The grotts that echo to the tinkling rills,
The dying gales that pant upon the trees,
The lakes that quiver to the curling breeze;
No more these scenes my meditation aid,
Or lull to rest the visionary maid.
But o'er the twilight groves and dusky caves,
Long-sounding aisles, and intermingled graves,
Black Melancholy sits, and round her throws
A death-like silence, and a dead repose:
Her gloomy presence saddens all the scene,
Shades every flower, and darkens every green,
Deepens the murmur of the falling floods,
And breathes a browner horror on the woods.¹

¹Eloise to Abelard, ll. 155-170.

CONCLUSION

The result of reexamining these two conflicting views is implied in the preceding discussion. The autobiographical interpretation has clearly been overemphasized. It is based partly on an inference seldom mentioned but doubtless present in the minds of the critics that Eloisa to Abelard has a romantic quality apparent in only one other of his poems.¹ A more evident and more arguable reason is that Pope himself, in letters and in the concluding lines of the poem, implied a relationship between the sentiment of the poem and his own situation. Without these pointed allusions it is improbable that commentators would have observed or at any rate emphasized a personal element in the work.

The autobiographical interpretation of the poem is weakened by the fact that Pope wrote the same message to Martha Blount and Lady Mary Montagu assuring each that affection for her inspired him to write the poem. These gestures may largely be attributed to a type of gallantry not unknown to the eighteenth century. While it is true that passion and pathos are voiced in the poem, it is probable that these emotional qualities were produced by his sympathy for the nun, and intensified by the personal frustrations he had experienced.

¹Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady.

The apparently close adherence to the sources and the then prevailing taste for the impersonal, which Pope, as shown in most of his works, shared with his age, forcefully attest the poet's detachment in Eloisa to Abelard. The fact, however, that there has been room for another view is in itself a wholesome criticism of the kind of academical detachment which Taine, for instance, observes. It appears that the young poet managed the old story with the aloofness of a neo-classical artist who at the same time was moved by a genuine sympathy for the nun and by the repressions in his own life. The rhetoric to which Mr. Taine and Mr. Stephen object we may ascribe to the age, to which, according to Housman, "high and impassioned poetry did not come spontaneously."¹

¹A. E. Housman, The Name and Nature of Poetry (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1933), p. 18.

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