

THE LETTERS OF ABELARD AND HELOISE

Peter Abelard Trans. by Betty Radice and revised by M.T.Clanchy

WOMAN: To the sweetest protector of her soul, planted at the root of her caring love, she in whose love you are firmly established and in whose honeyed taste of love you are well founded: whatever is far from anger and hate.

Although I wanted to write to you, the magnitude of the task, being beyond my powers, drove me back. Indeed I wanted to but could not, I began then grew weak, I persisted but collapsed, my shoulders buckling under my weight. The burning feeling of my spirit longed to do so but the weakness of my talent refused. I endured the numerous disputes and litigious arguments of both, and after weighing up rationally to which of the two I would rather yield, I was unable to decide. For the feeling of my spirit said: 'What are you doing, ungrateful woman? For how long do you keep me in suspense with long and surely undeserved silence? Does not the generous kindness and kind generosity of your beloved stir you? Compose a letter full of thanks, give the thanks which you owe for his abounding integrity. For a kind act does not seem pleasing and welcome when many thanks are not received.'

I thought that I ought to heed these arguments, and certainly I wanted to heed them, but the dryness of my talent resisted, rebuking the attempts of my temerity with the harsh whip of reproach saying: 'Where are you rushing, you foolish and feeble woman? Where does the unthinking intention of your hasty spirit throw you? Do you begin to speak mighty words, though you are unskilled and have unrefined lips? Surely you are no match for such matter so distinguished. For anyone who assumes to praise anything at all must in the end divide it into parts and with the utmost care weigh the qualities of each individual part, honouring each one according to its merit with a suitable tribute of praise; otherwise he who diminishes its brilliance by < . . > description, its elegance with outrageous description, harms the object to be praised.

Suspended between this alternating encouragement and discouragement, I have until now deferred the due act of thanks, yielding to the advice of a mental capacity ashamed of its own ineptitude. I pray that the excellence of divine amiability abundant in you will not blame me for this, but rather, since you are the son of true sweetness, may the virtue of mildness familiar to you flow over me even more. Indeed I know and admit that from the treasures of your philosophy the greatest amount of joys have flown and still flow over me, but, if I may speak freely, still less than what would make me perfectly happy in this regard. For I often come with parched throat longing to be refreshed by the nectar of your delightful mouth and to drink thirstily the riches scattered in your heart. What need is there for more words? With God as my witness I declare that there is no one in this world breathing life-giving air whom I desire to love more than you . . . May this farewell, my beloved, sweetly penetrate your inner marrow.

MAN: To a soul brighter and dearer to me than anything the earth has produced, the flesh which that same soul causes to breathe and move: whatever I owe her through whom I breathe and move.

The abundant and yet insufficient richness of your letter provides me with the evidence of two things, namely, your overflowing faith and love; hence the saying: 'From fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.' . . . And yet I receive your letters so eagerly that for me they are always too brief,

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since they both satisfy and stimulate my desire: like someone who is suffering from fever - the more the drink relieves him, the hotter he feels. God is my witness that I am stirred in a new way when I look at them more carefully; in a new way, I say, because my spirit itself is shaken by a joyful trembling, and my body is transformed into a new manner and posture. So praiseworthy are your letters that they direct my sense of hearing to whatever place they wish.

You often ask me, my sweet soul, what love is - and I cannot excuse myself on grounds of ignorance, as if I had been asked about a subject unfamiliar to me. For that very love has brought me under its own command in such a way that it seems not to be external but very familiar and personal, even visceral. Love is therefore a particular force of the soul, existing not for itself nor content by itself, but always pouring itself into another with a certain hunger and desire, wanting to become one with the other, so that from two diverse wills one is produced without difference..

Know that although love may be a universal thing, it has nevertheless been condensed into so confined a place that I would boldly assert that it reigns in us alone - that is, it has made its very home in me and you. For the two of us have a love that is pure, nurtured, and sincere, since nothing is sweet or carefree for the other unless it has mutual benefit. We say yes equally, we say no equally, we feel the same about everything. This can be easily shown by the way you write first, and as I remember well, you have said the same thing about yourself. Farewell, and regard with unfading love just as I do you.