

The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism

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Abstract

This article discusses Abelard's Historia Calamitatum in connection with the debate on 'the individual' or 'individualism' in the Middle Ages, which has been going on between adherents of 'the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century' and scholars placing the emergence of the modern individual in more recent periods. The conclusion largely supports the latter point of view. Abelard does not tell a continuous story of his life, he does not describe a conversion or a new understanding of his own self as the result of his tragic experience and, as an intellectual, he does not emphasize his own independent thinking in opposition to his surroundings. By contrast, he understands his own life through models derived from sacred history, according to the contemporary idea of typology. However, his vivid description of the tragic events of his life and of his own reactions to them contains a strong element of subjectivity and his emphasis on merit rather than status when competing with other intellectuals is in a certain sense individualistic. In this respect Abelard may also be regarded as representative of more widespread attitudes in contemporary scholarly milieux. Finally, it must be noted that similar objections can be raised against renaissance or early modern individualism as the ones adduced here against regarding Historia Calamitatum as an expression of medieval individualism.

The Problem

The 'discovery of the individual' is considered one of the most important aspects of the 'Renaissance of the Twelfth Century', which during the last 60 years has become a well-established concept in medieval

historiography, at times even threatening to abolish the ‘real’ Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ According to a widespread opinion, Abelard’s autobiography (*Historia Calamitatum*) is one of the clearest expressions of this discovery of the individual, both in its intimate revelations of the sufferings and struggling of a great mind and in its attempt to create a unity of one individual’s life. However, there has also been a ‘Renaissance of the Renaissance’, which in this field has received a powerful expression in Karl J. Weintraub’s analysis in his book on the development of the modern, ‘individualistic’ autobiography, from Augustine to Goethe.² In my opinion, Weintraub’s book shows the importance of the comparative approach and the long-term historical perspective for discussing the problem of medieval individualism.³ By contrast, medievalists, by focusing exclusively on medieval texts, often run the danger of exaggerating their ‘modernity’ and tend to give a too loose definition of individualism.⁴ Weintraub’s contribution, however, is in his own words only a sketch. By contrasting Abelard’s work with later autobiographies he may also have underestimated its novelty against a contemporary background. The question of individualism in *Historia Calamitatum* thus needs further analysis. The following article is intended as a contribution to this.

To Mary McLaughlin, whose contribution seems to me the best example of the ‘individualistic’ interpretation of *Historia Calamitatum*, the essential feature of autobiography is neither self-reflection or self-revelation nor the interest in the external world surrounding the autobiographer, but “the dynamic interplay between the individual and his world, the collusion between past and present”. *Historia Calamitatum* excels in this respect,

¹ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual* (London, 1972); Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1963); *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable ed. (Oxford, 1982).

² *The Value of the Individual. Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago, 1978, repr. 1982), 72–92. For a similar approach see also Evelyn Birge Vitz, ‘Type et individu dans l’autoportrait médiéval’, *Poétique*, 24 (1975), 426–45.

³ I use ‘individualism’ in a very general sense, despite Weintraub’s distinction between ‘individualism’ and ‘individuality’. See Weintraub, *The Value*, xvii, with reference to *Oxford English Dictionary*: Individualism = “the social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual”. Individuality “had best be restricted to a personality conception, the form of self that an individual may seek”. As will appear more clearly later, I feel the need for a term uniting the two, while on the other hand I intend to distinguish between different aspects of this wide concept.

⁴ For a recent contribution from a medievalist, taking an intermediate position and carefully defining the various aspects of individualism, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘La “découverte de l’individu”: une fiction historiographique?’, in: *La Fabrique, la Figure et la Feinte*, ed. Paul Mengal and Françoise Parot (Paris, 1989), 213–35. See also John F. Benton, ‘Consciousness of self and perceptions of individuality,’ in: *Culture, Power and Personality in Medieval France*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (London, 1991), 327–56.

together with Augustine's *Confessiones*, and the autobiographies of Cellini, Rousseau and St. Teresa.⁵ McLaughlin then gives a vivid and detailed analysis of *Historia Calamitatum* as a history, showing Abelard struggling with the problems of love, philosophy, theology and monasticism and how the self-reflection of this work leads him to his intellectually most fruitful period in the last decade of his life. In this way, Abelard is able to give unity and coherence to his life.⁶

By contrast, Weintraub points to Abelard's extensive use of models to understand his own life and his general conformity to the traditional values of his society, which prevents him from asserting his admittedly very strong personality. This applies both to the conflict between his love to Heloise and the norms demanding the theologian and philosopher to be celibate, and to his excessive concern with honour. In this context Weintraub distinguishes between Abelard the author and Abelard the person. While the latter was no doubt a strong and original character, the author's point is not to assert this. If Abelard's autobiography is to be used as evidence of medieval individualism, it must be because the work reveals interest in describing the individual personality, not because Abelard was an unique personality.

Two crucial questions emerge from this discussion: first, to what extent did Abelard actually tell the *history* of his life? This had to do with genre, but also with the more fundamental concept of the personality, which, according to nineteenth and twentieth-century notions, expresses itself through an individual history. Second, what picture does Abelard give of himself? How much does he reveal of his inner self, how does he understand his relationship to society, and to what extent can his attitude to himself, his life and his personality be characterized as 'individualistic'?

Historia Calamitatum as history

To start with the first of our two questions, it is generally recognized that Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* does not correspond to the modern genre

⁵ Mary McLaughlin, 'Abelard as autobiographer,' *Speculum*, 52 (1967), 472, cf. reference to R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 12–18 and 185–7. For a similar approach, see Norman F. Cantor, *The Meaning of the Middle Ages* (Boston, 1973), 203 and Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth Century Romance* (New Haven, 1977), 17–34. However, not all medievalists are equally strong believers in the Twelfth Century Renaissance. D.W. Robertson, *Abelard and Heloise* (New York, 1972), 102ff. rejects all notions of individualism or personal revelations in *Historia Calamitatum*. Georg Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie* III.1 (Frankfurt, 1959), 523–627 takes an intermediate position, pointing to Abelard's conflict between asserting himself in opposition to the current theological interpretation, which, however, is ultimately victorious. Misch's contribution is first and foremost a very detailed commentary on Abelard's text.

⁶ McLaughlin, 'Abelard,' 481–8.

of autobiography. It is formed as a letter of consolation to a friend and thus belongs to a common genre in the Middle Ages. By telling of his own sufferings, the writer seeks to convince the recipient that his own sufferings at the moment are less terrible, so as to enable him to bear them patiently.⁷ Thus, Abelard does not describe his life in general but his misfortunes. It is open to discussion how far this is his real motive for writing. Did Abelard use this well-established genre as a pretext for something else? Was his actual purpose to write an apology?⁸ And was the friend really himself, whom he wanted to console during a period of bitter suffering?⁹ If so, the borderline between the letter of consolation and the modern autobiography should not be too sharply drawn: Abelard converts the old genre into a new one, telling the story of his own miserable life to understand himself and gain strength in his present difficulties. However, other scholars have maintained that the whole correspondence between Abelard and Heloise, including *Historia Calamitatum*, was intended as documents concerning the foundation of Heloise's monastery, the Paraclete, and was arranged accordingly, which means that it cannot be regarded as a personal testimony.¹⁰ The 'personal' correspondence actually changes into a monastic rule and a history of Heloise's community. According to this interpretation, the friend may have been the monastic community for which the correspondence was intended. A possible consequence of this interpretation is further that the letters were not actually exchanged or at least were considerably arranged before publi-

⁷ 'Abelard's letter of consolation to a friend,' (*Historia Calamitatum*), ed. J. T. Muckle, *Medieval Studies*, 12 (1950) (= HC), 175, 211; R. W. Southern, 'The letters of Abelard and Heloise,' in: *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), 89f.

⁸ McLaughlin, 'Abelard,' 464–8.

⁹ McLaughlin, 'Abelard,' 468.

¹⁰ Robertson, *Abelard and Heloise*, 119–35; Peter von Moos, 'Die Bekehrung Heloises,' *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch*, 11 (1976), 95–102; Jacques Verger, 'Abelard et les milieux sociaux de son temps,' *Abelard en son temps* (Actes du colloque international organisé à l'occasion du 9e centenaire de la naissance de Pierre Abélard, 14–19 mai 1979, Paris, 1981), 109f. Even if one does not accept this theory, there is general agreement that the distinction between private and public, and even between fact and fiction, was far less pronounced in medieval letters and letter collections than in modern ones. See for instance Misch, *Geschichte*, 530f.; Southern, 'The letters,' 86–8; Peter von Moos, 'Post Festum,' in: *Petrus Abelandus (1079–1142). Person, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Rudolf Thomas (Trierer theologische Studien, Trier, 1980), vol. 38, 82, 85f.

cation. An even more radical view is that the correspondence is a later fabrication.¹¹

There is little external evidence to support or refute these suggestions, we have to draw our conclusions from the *Historia Calamitatum* itself. This also means, however, that even if the work was not at all intended as an autobiography, and even if it was not written by Abelard himself, we may still use it for analysing medieval attitudes to the individual. The aim of this article is not to analyse Abelard's real personality, but what the author of the text tells about the 'I' who is its protagonist. Genre does not determine the whole contents of a work. Abelard may well give a fairly subjective account of his life, even if his aim was to edify a community of nuns or to express general truths about human misfortunes. As in other, similar works of the twelfth century, we should expect to find a mixture of traditional genres and attitudes and new ideas in *Historia Calamitatum*. The question is which of these elements is the more important.

Historia Calamitatum is a story in the sense that it is arranged chronologically. Abelard starts with a short sketch of his childhood, similar to what is found in modern autobiographies. His finds intellectual talent among his ancestors and in the nature of his home country and points to the fact that his father had some intellectual training and saw to that Abelard received the same. Despite the fact that as the eldest son he was entitled to his father's fief, Abelard had such a fervour for learning that he chose to

¹¹ Doubt in the authenticity of the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise goes a long way back. There are no manuscripts older than the late thirteenth century (Muckle, 'Abelard's Letter,' 163–74. After Etienne Gilson's arguments in *Héloïse et Abélard*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1964), most scholars believed the correspondence to be genuine. A new, vivid debate was stimulated in 1972 by John F. Benton, 'Fraud, fiction and borrowing in the correspondence of Abelard and Héloïse,' *Culture, Power and Personality*, 417–54, who introduced new arguments against authenticity. For references to the discussion, see David Luscombe, 'The letters of Abelard and Heloise since "Cluny 1972",' in: *Petrus Abelardus (1079–1142). Person, Werk, Wirkung* ed. Rudolf Thomas (Trierer theologische Studien, Trier, 1980) vol. 38, 19–39; von Moos, 'Post Festum,' *ibid.*, 75–100. Benton later changed his opinion, ending by suggesting that the whole correspondence had been written by Abelard. See 'A reconsideration of the authenticity of the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise,' *Culture, Power and Personality*, 475–86 and 'The correspondence of Abelard and Heloise,' *ibid.*, 487–512. The main arguments against the authenticity of the correspondence have been derived from the subsequent letters rather than from *Historia Calamitatum*. Thus, there seems to be fairly good reasons for regarding this work as written by Abelard.

follow this inclination.¹² Abelard thus gives an explanation of his particular gifts and presents his ‘profession’ as the result of his own choice, as is often done in modern autobiographies.

Choice has a key role in modern ideas of the personality. In Christian thought, both medieval and modern, there is one great choice, the one between salvation and damnation. In Abelard’s autobiography this choice is in the background of numerous situations in which he is put to the test.¹³ Apart from that, his life is only to a slight degree the result of deliberate choices. He chooses his career in the beginning, and he later chooses to enter the monastery. The latter choice is mostly determined by external circumstances, i.e. the disastrous affair with Heloise and Abelard’s subsequent castration, which led him to seek shelter from the world. The main pattern of Abelard’s life, as it appears in the autobiography, accords with this. He reacts to situations that occur; he does not create his own life.

Historia Calamitatum consists of seven episodes, each beginning with increasing success, which then turns to failure, either through the intrigues of evil men or through Abelard’s own arrogance or sin, or both. The first two episodes are conflicts with teachers, who become rivals through Abelard’s success, first Guillaume de Champeaux, then Anselm of Laon. Then follows the story of Heloise, the condemnation of Abelard’s book at the council of Soissons, his persecution by the monks of St. Denis because of his refusal to accept their belief that their patron saint was identical with the Dionysius with whom St. Paul discussed at the Areopagus, his foundation of the monastic community of the Paraclete and the new persecutions because of this, and finally his present persecutions and sufferings at St. Gildas.

This pattern suggests a fundamental difference from modern autobiographies. Abelard’s purpose is not to show what is unique in his own life but to use it as an example of something general, which the real or imagined friend and then other readers may apply to their own lives. This general aspect is further underlined by the numerous quotations, from the Bible and the Fathers, and even from classical literature.¹⁴ In the beginning of *Historia Calamitatum* Abelard quotes Ovid to illustrate his ambition and his battles against intellectual adversaries.¹⁵ He applies, maliciously, Lucan’s

¹² *HC*, 175f.

¹³ For instance, *HC*, 204: if he tried to make the monks live according to their vows, they would kill him, if he did not he would be damned.

¹⁴ For the following see Weintraub, *The Value*, 87ff.

¹⁵ *HC*, 179, cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIII, 89f.

words on the old Pompey, approaching his defeat, “the shadow of a great name”, to his old teacher and enemy Anselm of Laon.¹⁶ When Heloise’s uncle discovers the love affair between her and Abelard, Abelard points to the love affair between Mars and Venus, who were caught *in flagranti* by Venus’ husband Vulcanus.¹⁷ When Abelard suggests that he and Heloise should marry after her uncle has discovered their love affair, he lets Heloise give a long speech, full of quotations from the Fathers and classical authorities, demonstrating the evils of the married state for a learned man.¹⁸ When Abelard after his conflict with the monks of St. Denis withdraws to solitude, he includes a long quotation from Jerome, recommending escape from the cities and the temptations of this world.¹⁹ He often compares himself with the great men of the past, his main example being Jerome, the most learned of the Fathers, who like Abelard was always engaged in polemics and who had to suffer slander and persecutions because of his close relationship to women. Jerome is particularly prominent in the long passage devoted to refuting the slander caused by Abelard’s new, spiritual friendship with Heloise. Towards the end of *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard explicitly points to his similarity to Jerome, being the “heir to his suffering from the slander of evil men”.²⁰

To some extent, such references belonged to the rhetoric of the day. They were a way of demonstrating one’s learning, which in Abelard’s case was considerable, and served to give the text beauty and elegance. Some of Abelard’s quotations and allusions may have no further purpose. Compared to the hagiographic literature of the day, Abelard uses this device with considerable moderation and takes care that the references are really relevant. But the more important references, particularly those to the Bible and the Fathers, are of far greater significance. They are related to the fundamental pattern of thought of the age, the typological. Things are understood through analogies. While a modern biographer would try to understand Abelard through the internal and external influences that formed him, medieval man tries to understand by relating each action or event to an example. The world is a great schema, in which everything has its right place. To understand means to locate the object at its proper

¹⁶ HC, 180, cf. Lucan, *Pharsalia* I, 135f.

¹⁷ HC, 184, cf. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* II, 561ff. and *Metamorphoses* IV, 169ff.

¹⁸ HC, 185–9.

¹⁹ HC, 199f., cf. Jerome, *Contra Iovinianum*, ch. 8ff.

²⁰ beatus ... Hieronymus cuius me praecipue in contumeliis detractionum heredem conspicio, HC, 211; see also HC, 203 and 206 and Southern, ‘The letters,’ 92f. See also Donald K. Frank, ‘Abelard as imitator of Christ,’ *Viator*, 1 (1970), 107–13.

place in the schema. Persons, actions and events from distant periods and places may therefore serve to explain what happens here and now.²¹ Abelard's life and fate become meaningful through the comparison with Jerome, who lived 700 years before and suffered similar misfortunes. In the same way, other contemporaries and future generations may receive consolation and insight by referring to Abelard. By connecting the events of his own life to those depicted in the Bible and sacred literature, Abelard expresses the general truth which *Historia Calamitatum* is meant to illustrate.

This general truth is set forth explicitly at the end of *Historia Calamitatum*: Suffering is the Christian's lot in this world, the world hates the just. Christ was persecuted and so will his disciples be. This suffering happens according to God's will, and ultimately will benefit the believer. To doubt this is a sin, because it means to distrust God's providence.²² Success is the real danger. Too much success makes the weak human nature grow arrogant and leads to its fall, which can only be remedied by God's grace. This second aspect of the general truth is explicitly invoked in the passages introducing the story of Abelard and Heloise, which is its direct and drastic illustration.²³ This indicates that Abelard's explicit purpose with *Historia Calamitatum* may well be taken seriously. Not only can the, real or invented, 'friend' console himself by comparing his suffering to the far more serious ones of Abelard but he receives a concrete illustration of the fundamental truth about the Christian's lot in this world.

This also means that the organizing principle in *Historia Calamitatum* is not the chronology or the *Story* of Abelard, but the general and comparative purpose of the work. That is to say, the thematic unity of *Historia Calamitatum* is not Abelard's life as a whole but the general lessons to be drawn from each of the seven episodes. Thus, Abelard's autobiography differs from the modern ones in its description of development, or rather, in its lack of such a description. Abelard's life is cyclical, similar events recurring all the time. Abelard's life would have been 'incomplete' if it had been cut off in the middle of the first cycle. Thereafter, it could have ended at any time, without really changing the outcome; that is: without

²¹ Jean Daniélou, *Sacramentum Futuri. Étude sur les Origine de la Typologie Biblique* (Paris, 1950); Erich Auerbach, 'Figura,' *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1967), 55–92 and 'Typological symbolism in medieval literature,' *ibid*, 109–15; Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur Mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt, 1977), 1–31; Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (New York, 1982), 78–101.

²² HC, 210f.

²³ HC, 181f.

making the total impression of the person Abelard any different. It is probably significant that Abelard selects just seven episodes from his life. Seven is a well-known sacred number, and particularly appropriate in a narrative, as it may allude to both the seven ages of the world and the seven ages of man. This periodization is a schema that is superimposed on the events. During the first six periods of the history of the world some necessary events have to happen, such as the exodus from Egypt or the birth of Christ, but then Christ may return at any time and stop history.²⁴ There is no organic evolution in the history of man which makes this more likely to happen at a certain time rather than another, which means that these changing periods, in contrast to modern historicist thought, do not imply the idea of an evolution.²⁵ There is a similar difference between medieval and modern ideas of the life of the individual, which in the case of the former can be illustrated by the idea of the seven ages of man.²⁶

However, it would be too much to expect that Abelard should have anticipated modern historicist thought. What is more surprising, is the way *Historia Calamitatum* differs from the conversion story, of which Augustine's *Confessiones* is the great example. Augustine is not interested in his life for its own sake or in giving a 'historicist' account of his unique experience. Like Abelard, his main interest is the general aspect of his story, the soul's eternal longing for God. Augustine's conversion story is, however, very long and complex, actually a story of a transition from one world, that of pagan antiquity, to another, that of the Christian Church, and it develops through a number of stages. It therefore becomes a description of a development and bears some resemblance to the modern historicist biography or autobiography.²⁷

Abelard lived in a Christian world and evidently never experienced a conversion in the same sense. Still, his life would seem a very promising material for a somewhat different kind of conversion story. There is a turning-point in his life, the disastrous episode with Heloise, which permanently changes him, and brings him more directly into God's service. This is the only calamity he describes as the result of his own fault. Admittedly, the next one, the burning of his book on the Trinity, is also interpreted as God's punishment for his sin with Heloise and for his

²⁴ See Arno Borst, 'Historical time in the writings of Abelard,' in: *Medieval Worlds* (Cambridge, 1991), 77–9 for such ideas in Abelard's *Dialectica*.

²⁵ Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley, 1991), 192f. with references.

²⁶ Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1973); Karl J. Weintraub 'Autobiography and historical consciousness,' *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1975), 821–48; Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 174f., 181–90.

²⁷ Weintraub, *The Value*, 45–48.

arrogance, but not as just in itself. The episode with Heloise, however, leads to a drastic correspondence between sin and punishment in that Abelard loses the instruments of his sins, the genitals. This episode also changes his situation permanently. Until then, the curve of his life has been rising, and before he meets Heloise, he is at the height of his career and of his intellectual and physical strength. He also points out in his introduction to the event that God intervened and humiliated him as he was now growing arrogant (see above). In the latter part of the biography, the curve turns downwards. Despite the fact that he always manages to recover from his misfortunes, he is afflicted by increasing persecutions and adversities. A modern reader will tend to interpret this as a story of development, Abelard pointing to the turning-point in his life and reflecting on how it has changed him from the arrogant intellectual to the afflicted abbot, who, cleansed through sufferings, has come closer to God and grown in humility and self-knowledge. Abelard, however, does not draw this conclusion but regards his life as an illustration of the general truth that God chastens the pious to keep them on the narrow path. The story of Heloise is only one of a number of episodes illustrating this.

A striking example of this attitude is the fact that Abelard, when telling about his entering the monastery after his castration, confesses that shame more than piety led him to take this step.²⁸ In emphasizing his motives, he conforms to important ‘individualistic’ trends in his age, which he also served to promote, particularly in his *Ethics*.²⁹ However, he confines himself to this remark. Indirectly he gives the impression of having turned away from the world to God after entering the monastery and consequently that the religious motives which were lacking in the beginning eventually made their way into his mind. There may be a conversion in the sense that Abelard the author demonstrates his correct Christian attitude in the moment of writing and interprets the events of his life accordingly, but there is no explicit description of the change from one attitude to another. This omission is of crucial importance from the point of view of individuality. Instead of describing his personal experience and development from one state of mind to another, Abelard depicts the general contrast between a sinner and a man in the state of grace. Further, Abelard hardly intends a general contrast between his sinful past and his pious present. He may have some objections to his haughtiness and arrogance in the past, and he evidently regards the affair with Heloise as

²⁸ In tam misera me contritione positum confusio, fateor, pudoris potius quam devotio conversionis ad monasticorum latibula claustrorum compulit (*HC*, 190).

²⁹ See among others Marie-Dominic Chenu, *L'éveil de la Conscience dans la Civilisation Médiévale* (Montreal, Paris, 1969), 17–32.

sinful. But he describes his life more as a series of ups and downs than as the contrast between the past state of sinfulness and the present state of grace.

Thus, we not only have to reject McLaughlin's interpretation of Abelard's autobiography as a 'life history' in the modern sense but even that of Weintraub, who regards it as a conversion story, modelled on contemporary hagiography.³⁰ 'Conversion stories' in the real sense actually appear to be fairly rare, at least in this phase of the Middle Ages. Traditionally, saints were either holy from the moment of birth or baptism or they were converted all of a sudden, through God's intervention, without any psychological preparation. The *First Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano from the first half of the thirteenth century is an early example of an attempt to describe a conversion 'from within', following the struggles and doubts of the future saint until the final breakthrough. Later versions of the story, including Thomas's own *Second Life*, play down these psychological elements, however.³¹ One reason for this absence of development may be the 'existential' element in Christianity. There is a strong tendency in Christianity to present every moment in the life of a human being as equally important. After all, what is decisive for salvation is one's condition at the moment of death. Despite his sinful life, the robber on the cross goes directly to Paradise, because of his repentance, while a person who had led a holy life from childhood may go to hell because of a lapse at the last moment. Further evidence of this attitude in the Middle Ages is the lack of interest in Augustine's story of his own development in eleventh and twelfth-century adaptations of *Confessiones*.³²

There is the same absence of development in the intellectual field. In his 'intellectual autobiography', which has often been discussed and which is considered one of the most important sources for French intellectual history in the period, Abelard describes his various teachers and his own progress, the latter in military metaphors as a campaign in which he starts in the periphery and then progressively moves closer to Paris until he finally conquers the city. On the other hand, he gives little information on

³⁰ Weintraub, *The Value*, 80ff. See also von Moos, 'Post Festum,' 88ff. My picture of Abelard's conversion as 'implicit' to some extent corresponds to that of von Moos, 'Die Bekehrung,' 102ff. on the conversion of Heloise.

³¹ Thomas of Celano, 'Vita prima S. Francisci,' *Legendae S. Francisci Assisiensis saeculis XIII et XIV conscriptae* (Analecta Franciscana, Quaracchi, 1926–41), vol. 10, 127–268, cf. 'Vita secunda,' *ibid.*, 127–268. On the different biographies of St. Francis, see Rosalind Brooke, 'The lives of St. Francis of Assisi,' *Latin Biography*, ed. T. Dorey (New York, 1967), 177–98.

³² Pierre Courcelle, *Les confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris, 1963), 224–72 and *ibid.*, 272–8 on medieval authors using Augustine as a model for writing their own lives, rather than imitating his way of describing his life.

his intellectual development. Starting with dialectics and philosophy of nature, he wins his first great victory when forcing Guillaume de Champeaux to change his opinion on the problem of universals.³³ He later turns to theology by coincidence, when being challenged during a humorous conversation to comment on a text from the Bible, which proves to be an obscure passage in Ezechiel. His adversaries believe that the lecture will be a failure and Abelard be made ridiculous, but he overcomes the difficulty and is soon as famous in theology as in philosophy.³⁴ When entering the monastery after the disastrous affair with Heloise, Abelard devotes himself even more to theology, trying to develop the foundation of belief through analogies drawn from human reasoning, which leads to his condemnation at the council of Soissons.³⁵ These events are vividly told and together they make it easy to trace the various stages of Abelard's career. But there is nothing to suggest that Abelard himself regards them as anything near a development in the modern sense. Most of the people he meets are adversaries, and Abelard never indicates that he has learned from other people, that he has changed his opinions or field of inquiry, or that he has achieved a deeper understanding during his years of struggle with theological and philosophical problems.

Abelard's understanding of himself as an intellectual

My analysis of *Historia Calamitatum* as history has largely confirmed the point of view of Weintraub and Vitz and underlined the distance between this work and modern autobiographies. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that Abelard expresses his own individuality in various episodes during his narrative. When looking for such expressions, I shall distinguish between two aspects. First, to what extent does Abelard depict himself as an original and independent person in opposition to his surroundings, and second, to what extent does he look into his own inner self and describe his emotions and the events of his life in a personal way?

The most important and controversial issue in this context is Abelard's description of himself as an intellectual. Despite the fact that he underestimates some of his teachers and contemporaries and that his intellectual arrogance may seem intolerable, there can be no doubt of his actual originality and importance. According to Hanning, this is also Abelard's understanding of himself when he contrasts his own *ingenium* and *memoria*

³³ HC, 178.

³⁴ HC, 181f.

³⁵ HC, 191–6.

and the *usus* of his adversaries. He not only regards himself as intellectually superior, but struggles against a hostile environment to “confirm personal autonomy or attain personal fulfilment”.³⁶ Contrary to Hanning, Weintraub and Vitz refer to the competitive aspect of Abelard’s narrative: he has changed the sword for the pen, but he has essentially the same attitude as the members of the feudal aristocracy to which he once belonged. This means that he is not seeking the truth for its own sake or developing his own personal approach to the intellectual problems of his age. He is taking part in a competition, where the aims and criteria are already set and clearly defined.³⁷

In classical Latin *ingenium* means qualities, dispositions, talents and so forth, that belong to the nature of a thing or a person.³⁸ In medieval Latin the word occurs in a different meaning, as ‘device, trick, invention’, usually in a negative sense.³⁹ The passage cited above corresponds fairly well with the classical sense: Abelard has a natural talent which his adversaries lack, and which they have to compensate for by long training or practice. Another passage, however, seems to suggest a different interpretation. In the story of Heloise, Abelard describes his own teaching as similar to that of his rivals, because of his long nights and his passion for his mistress:

nihil ex ingenio sed ex usu cuncta preferrem, nec iam nisi recitator pristinorum essem inventorum, et, si qua invenire licet carmina, essent amatoria, non philosophorum secreta.⁴⁰

Here *ingenium* cannot simply mean natural talent or the like. Abelard must be using the word more in its specifically medieval sense of trick or device, except for the fact that he gives it a positive and not a negative interpretation. This means that in some way or other he must contrast

³⁶ Accessi igitur ad hunc senem [Anselm of Laon] cui magis longaevis usus quam ingenium vel memoria nomen comparaverat (*HC*, 180); respondi non esse meae consuetudinis per usum proficere, sed per ingenium (*ibid*). See Hanning, *The Individual*, 22.

³⁷ Weintraub, *The Value*, 82–6 on Abelard’s ‘agonistic’ attitude. According to Vitz, ‘Type et individu,’ Abelard consistently depicts himself as the best in each field in which he takes part, as a philosopher, theologian, monk or lover. This corresponds to a general medieval tendency to distinguish between people quantitatively rather than qualitatively. For Abelard’s aristocratic background and expression of ‘feudal’ or aristocratic attitudes, see Verger, ‘Abélard,’ 112–14.

³⁸ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1958) lists among other meanings “innate or natural quality, nature, natural disposition, ability or talent”.

³⁹ Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et Infimae Latinitatis* (Graz, 1954); J. F. Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden, 1976).

⁴⁰ *HC*, 184.

routine and originality. However, Abelard's ideas of originality may well differ considerably from ours. There is nothing in these passages to contradict the assumption that Abelard, like his contemporaries, believed that there was one truth, which could be discovered by contemplation and by reading the authorities. Characteristically, he rejects the offer of long time to prepare himself for his lecture on Ezechiel, volunteering to speak already the next day: the meaning of the text is clear to the one with the right talent. Abelard's advantage over his opponents consists in his quick intelligence, which allows him to find the correct interpretation at once. In the struggle about the Trinity at the council of Soissons, he points to his perfect orthodoxy and the fact that his doctrine is in accordance with that of the Fathers. In his discussion with the monks of St. Denis on whether their patron saint had been bishop of Athens or Corinth, Abelard prefers the opinion of Bede, who had a high reputation in the whole Church, against that of Hilduin, a former abbot of the monastery, who had travelled through Greece to investigate the matter.⁴¹ If we are to draw general conclusions on Abelard's attitude to authority from this episode (which we probably should not) the monks of St Denis emerge as the more modern.

Abelard thus does not describe himself as the unique genius who is misunderstood by his contemporaries and maintains his own opinions in opposition to them, as has become almost commonplace in modern intellectual biographies and autobiographies. On the contrary, he is the top pupil in the class, who finds the solution when others fail. His criterion is always external success. And when other people fail to recognize him, the reason is not that they think differently but that they are led by wickedness and envy. Although Abelard was actually an original thinker, he does not present himself as such. As Weintraub points out, he was not a modern rationalist and his attitude to truth and intellectual originality was different from ours.

A consequence of Abelard's 'agonistic' attitude and his search for honour, is his concern with shame. McLaughlin regards this as evidence of Abelard's ability to describe his inner self and its relationship with the world.⁴² This is no doubt a significant fact. In my opinion, however, it is more important to note that Abelard is, to us, overtly and extremely concerned with what other people think about him. The shame of the castration is worse than the physical pain and the loss. The burning of his

⁴¹ *HC*, 197.

⁴² McLaughlin, 'Abelard,' 474f.

books fills him with shame. He finds no consolation in the fact that he is right and does not, as a modern counterpart of his would have done, console himself by thinking that such external condemnation cannot really affect the value of his work. At least, this is what a modern intellectual would have done if given some time to think. Abelard had 15 years to think, but the idea apparently did not strike him. By contrast, in the story he is dissolved in tears and despair, but finds comfort in thinking that his honour will soon be restored.⁴³ The strong emphasis on shame and honour in medieval society, as in other traditional societies, indicates how far a man's evaluation of himself depended on that of his surroundings, in contrast to the modern ideal of the independent 'character' who feels secured of his own worth.⁴⁴

However, though there appears to be nothing particularly original in Abelard's attitude to knowledge and intellectual investigation seen against a modern background, this might be the case according to twelfth-century conditions. In traditional society, age, high position, dignity and so forth are often important criteria for intellectual authority. This largely applies to medieval society as well. Truth had to be discovered, not by reasoning but by learning by heart and meditating on the sacred texts.⁴⁵ The attitude of Abelard's adversaries at the council of Soissons may serve as an example. Against this background, Abelard's 'schoolboy' belief in his own intellect may appear fairly revolutionary, although he was not the first to think in this way. Rather he is an example of new attitudes in the twelfth century, or at least attitudes that were considerably more important at the time than in the centuries before. The belief in a universal reason interpreting the dogmas and authorities as opposed to simply repeating them or listening to the teacher who has the highest prestige or the greatest authority is a step in the direction of individualism, even if it is very different from attitudes on the subject in our own culture. Even the 'schoolboy attitude' might be dangerous for the contemporary intellectual establishment. Abelard's superior intelligence, which enabled him to find the correct interpretation, was a challenge to older teachers with a well established reputation.

⁴³ HC, 196f.

⁴⁴ See the, admittedly controversial, distinction between 'shame culture' and 'guilt culture,' in Ruth F. Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston, 1946) and the comments of Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Tokyo, 1976), 48ff. and Benton, 'Consciousness of self,' 335.

⁴⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Plow, Sword and Book* (London, 1988), 84–90.

The author and the protagonist

Although there is nothing really revolutionary in Abelard's understanding of himself as an intellectual, he may thus represent some new tendencies. However, a more important claim for individualism in *Historia Calamitatum* lies in its strongly subjective elements. One expression of this is the fact that the work is written from the point of view of one particular person, unlike for example the autobiography of Guilbert de Nogent, who mixes personal experiences and events occurring in his life-time. Admittedly, Abelard's work has an ulterior, non-biographical purpose, but in a direct sense it is the story of his life and of events in which he is the protagonist. Consequently, despite its larger, 'objective' framework, its actual contents is highly subjective. This subjectivity is also prominent in his narrating the individual episodes. The reader of *Historia Calamitatum* encounters Abelard as a living, suffering and quarelling human being and even as a passionate lover. We have a feeling of knowing him far better than most other medieval men who in some way or other have written about their lives. Weintraub is of course correct in stating that the real personality of Abelard does not concern our inquiry. However, the Abelard we meet in the individual episodes cannot simply be the 'real' Abelard of the time of the action raising his head without the author's will or awareness. After all, Abelard is as much the author of these episodes as of the story as a whole. In the episodes, Abelard expresses what may be called an 'existential individualism'. According to the principles of his ethics, he is concerned with his motives. He is constantly aware of the great choice between the right and the wrong path, eternal damnation and salvation, and of his personal responsibility in this context. He describes his emotions in great detail. These emotions differ to a considerable extent from those of modern men, particularly intellectuals, but the fact that he is so concerned with them is nevertheless significant for a new interest in the individual self.

In discussing this aspect of the autobiography, I shall distinguish between Abelard the narrator and Abelard the protagonist. The narrator represents the religious-philosophical perspective described above, while the point of view of the protagonist can occasionally be detected through the narrative. I believe that this distinction is the clue to understanding the love story with Heloise. Abelard begins the story by pointing out that too much success easily leads to disaster, and that he was now at an age in which a man is exceptionally exposed to sexual temptations, being old enough to have obtained success and a good reputation and young enough to possess bodily beauty and sexual appetites. He then describes

himself as a cool, calculating seducer. Through his own machinations and the naivety of Heloise's uncle, who let his beautiful and learned niece live in Abelard's house, he succeeded in having the object of his lust under his complete control, "like a frail lamb being delivered to a starving wolf."⁴⁶ Scholars have often taken this description at face value, regarding his relationship to Heloise as solely governed by sexual desire.⁴⁷

However, this is Abelard's perspective 15 years later. We cannot exclude the possibility that it may also have been his original sentiment, though the passage may equally well be understood in terms of Abelard's general schema, intended to warn his readers against similar temptations.⁴⁸ In any case, when Abelard gets further into the story, he gives a different impression. He describes the passion arising between him and Heloise and how they satisfied it, in a short, rhetorical passage, which differs from similar ones in modern literature in two ways. First, it gives no details regarding the external circumstances, such as the first meeting, or how the relationship changed from that of a teacher and his student to that of two lovers. Second, the passage is almost entirely impersonal. A few times Abelard refers to the lovers as 'we', but for the rest, the passage could equally well have been a description of love between two other people. The same applies to the passage dealing with the discovery of the affair by Heloise's uncle. Abelard fails, as usual, to describe the direct circumstances of the event, but the reference to the story of Venus and Mars may indicate that the lovers were discovered in the same way, in bed. He then describes their emotions in the same impersonal way as in the previous episode: each of them lamented the sufferings of the other, and the bodily separation lead to an even stronger attachment between their souls. Nevertheless, the contrast between this passage and Abelard's initial description of himself as a lustful and cynical seducer is striking. He now describes not only sexual passion but real love. Whether this description corresponds to Abelard's actual feelings at the time, which he is still able

⁴⁶ HC, 182f.

⁴⁷ Southern, 'The letters,' 90f. Robertson, *Abelard*, 110f., 114f. goes much further in this direction, finding no trace of romantic love in the correspondence as a whole and regarding the apparent expressions of this as humorous. Robertson's view does not seem to have won acceptance. Peter Dronke, *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies* (University of Glasgow, 26th W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture, Glasgow, 1976) has shown that a romantic attitude to love is perfectly plausible in Abelard's and Heloise's milieu. For further discussion of the matter, see also Luscombe, 'The letters,' 25 and von Moos, 'Post Festum,' 89f.

⁴⁸ It may also be inspired by Ovid and contemporary Goliardic poetry. See Misch, *Geschichte*, 569ff. and Michel Zink, *La subjectivité littéraire autour du siècle du Saint Louis* (Paris, 1985), 246.

to revive, despite his castration and the 15 years that have passed, or it is derived from literary models of love and passion, is more difficult to tell.

In a number of other episodes, we are on a somewhat firmer ground. Admittedly, Abelard is usually vague regarding external circumstances, rarely describing concrete events or 'scenes'. In describing the castration, however, he gives a vivid expression of pain, repentance and above all shame at the punishment and the loss of dignity, and despair at the thought of his future as a eunuch, emphasizing that the shame was even worse than the bodily pain.⁴⁹ He returns to these emotions later on.⁵⁰ He also gives a vivid description of his anger, shame and despair, when he was condemned and his book burnt at the council of Soissons. In this case, he is more direct and concrete, even giving some indication of the external situation. He quotes some of the speeches. He describes how he read the Athanasian creed with tears and sobs, and invokes God as a witness to his anger and sorrow at this unjust treatment, adding that this was a far worse betrayal than the one he had suffered when he was castrated.⁵¹ A little later he describes his tears and repentance during his present troubles at St. Gildas when thinking of the community at the Paraclete, which he had left.⁵²

There seems to be far less reason to doubt the authenticity of Abelard's emotions in these cases than in that of the love story. And even if their authenticity is open to doubt, this is hardly very important, as there is nothing particularly modern and individualistic about the emotions in themselves. Anger, shame, despair and love have existed as long as humanity, though there may have been considerable cultural variation regarding the expression of such emotions. The central point is that Abelard chooses to tell about them in his text. The difference between medieval and modern rhetoric in such description is no doubt significant. Like his contemporaries, Abelard is usually vague regarding concrete scenes and situations, and he is far less concerned than we are with emphasizing the personal character of his emotions. This no doubt suggests the difference between a culture that is intensely concerned with the personal and the individual and one that is not. Nevertheless, at least partly, Abelard describes his emotions so that they are easily identified as his own, and in a way which does not connect them to the general, religious purpose of his book.

⁴⁹ *HC*, 190.

⁵⁰ *HC*, 206.

⁵¹ *Legi inter suspiria. singultus et lacrimas, prout potui*, *HC*, 196, see also 192–6.

⁵² *HC* 204f.

At some points, there are even tensions between these descriptions and the general message of the work. Admittedly, there is not doubt that Abelard the writer, in his explicit comments to his love story with Heloise, is in perfect accordance with contemporary orthodoxy and strongly condemns his behaviour. On the other hand, a considerable tension exists between this official attitude and Abelard's description of himself in his narrative, or in other words, between the author and the protagonist. There is a similar tension between Abelard's 'agonistic attitude' and the overall message of the work, stressing humility and submission to God's will.⁵³ I do not think that the former reveals more of the 'real' Abelard than the latter or that Abelard the writer indirectly tries to express some opposition to the prevailing ideology of the day. The significant fact is his vivid description of the tension in itself, which means that he not only assert general truths, but also gives an impression of his difficulties in applying them to his own life.

***Historia Calamitatum* – Individualistic or not?**

To what extent then, can Abelard's autobiography be taken as evidence of medieval individualism? My analysis so far has largely confirmed Weintraub's interpretation and on certain points directly opposed that of McLaughlin and other adherents of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. However, the problem cannot be solved simply by an analysis of *Historia Calamitatum*. It is largely a question of definitions and standards by which we measure the amount of individualism in Abelard and other twelfth-century authors. Should we compare him to the Renaissance, the period of the Enlightenment or to contemporary conditions?

The lack of a coherent, individual life story is probably the most important argument for rejecting the 'individualist' interpretation of *Historia Calamitatum*. It is by developing one's personality in constant interaction with other people that the modern individual becomes truly unique, and it is by understanding this process that he or she creates a genuine autobiography. However, this 'historicism' in general history, as well as in the life of the individual, is most probably a product of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. If Abelard 'fails' according to this standard, so do also the great 'individualists' of the Renaissance, whom Weintraub discusses later in his book. Neither Cellini nor Cardano

⁵³ Misch, *Geschichte*, 550–4, who regards the former as the expression of Abelard's strong personality, his individuality, and the latter as conventional piety.

describe their life as a development or seek to understand how they have become what they are at the moment of writing.⁵⁴

Generally, however, I think that there is some difference between medieval and renaissance narrative, which is significant in this context. In its episodic structure, Abelard's autobiography resembles other medieval narratives, in art as well as in writing. One may think of the numerous stories of the lives of Christ and the saints on stained glass, mosaics and book illuminations, where the particular episodes are depicted in great detail and often vividly, but where they are not subordinated to any greater narrative structure. In medieval historiography there is usually a fairly loose connection between the episodes. If there is a higher unity, this is mostly, as in Abelard's case, of a typological or allegorical nature, parallels between the Old and the New Testament, or between the life of a saint and that of Christ. By contrast, a continuous narrative is more often to be found in the Renaissance, both in art and historiography. Here individual episodes tend to merge and less important events are subordinated to more important ones.⁵⁵

Another essential feature of modern individualism is equality of conditions, or at least formal equality, which make individual choice and individual careers possible.⁵⁶ Abelard was of course deeply integrated in the hierarchical society of his age, but so were most other autobiographers before the eighteenth or nineteenth century. There are even reasons to believe that twelfth-century society was less hierarchical than that of later ages, notably the Early Modern Period. While there was of course a gulf between the higher clergy and the aristocracy and the rest of society, the ranks within the elite were less fixed and the Church and the state less centralized. This meant considerable competition, and thus some kind of 'primitive individualism', in which individuals were fairly free to assert themselves, though without regarding themselves as unique, all wanting to excel in the same way.⁵⁷ Abelard's 'agonistic' attitude, which may partly be a result of his aristocratic background (see above note 37), and the

⁵⁴ Weintraub, *The Value*, 147.

⁵⁵ Mark Phillips, 'Representation and argument in Florentine historiography,' *Storia della Storiografia*, 10 (1986), 48–63 on the difference between medieval and renaissance historiography, as exemplified by Giovanni Villani and Leonardo Bruni. See also Donald J. Wilcox, 'The sense of time in Western historical narratives from Eusebius to Machiavelli,' *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography*, ed. E. Breisach (Michigan, 1985), 167–235.

⁵⁶ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London, 1970), 17f., with reference to Tocqueville's classical statement of the contrast between the egalitarian and individualist society of America and the traditional hierarchy of Europe.

⁵⁷ Sverre Bagge, 'The individual in medieval historiography,' in: *The State and the Individual*, ed. Janet Coleman (The Origin of the Modern State in Europe, vol 6) (forthcoming).

competitive character of his milieu may serve as examples of this (see below).

A third criterium of modern individualism is the ‘independence of the self’, the assertion of one’s own opinions, convictions and emotions against social conventions and the ideas of the majority. At this point interpretations of modern individualism vary. There are analyses of contemporary society which regard our individualist culture as a more subtle way of making the individual adapt to the norms of society: individual choice and some kind of free and independent thinking are necessary to make modern society work. In practice people’s thinking and choices are largely determined by more or less implicit norms and categorizations common to society as a whole.⁵⁸ To take Weintraub’s example of the lover and the philosopher, the fact that Abelard, conforming to the norms of his milieu, chooses the latter rather than the former does not necessarily make him less of an individual than modern men, who make the opposite choice. Both roles are equally social or equally individual. In our society, the norm will tend to encourage the lover to assert himself at the cost of the philosopher, in that of Abelard, it was the other way round.

Even if we accept this analysis of modern individualism, however, there is a significant difference on the explicit level between Abelard’s society, to which he generally adapts himself, despite his conflicts and sufferings, and our own. Our ideas of independent reasoning and personal choice are closely linked to empiricism and relativism: the truth has to be found through empirical investigation rather than through abstract reasoning, which makes it more dependent on one’s particular approach, and in a number of fields, and perhaps ultimately, there is no single truth, only a personal choice which every one must make for himself. Once more, however, we have to go far beyond Abelard’s age to encounter such ideas, probably to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁹

Further, the anti-individualist culture of the Middle Ages did not necessarily have the disastrous consequences for individuality that Weintraub implies. Paradoxically, the concern with suppressing one’s individual self may lead to increased awareness of one’s individuality or subjectivity.⁶⁰ This is what happened in the Christian tradition of mysticism and asceticism and later in the Reformation.⁶¹ And this seems to some extent to be the case with Abelard. Applying the general, anti-individualist ideology

⁵⁸ Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (London, 1987), 98ff.

⁵⁹ Gellner, *Plough*, 116–44.

⁶⁰ Schmitt, ‘La découverte,’ 230f.

⁶¹ Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l’individualisme* (Paris, 1983), 33ff.; cf. also Weintraub, *The Value*, 196–51.

of his day to his own life and fighting his own will when it opposes this ideology, makes him increasingly aware of his own self. Despite its 'objective' purpose and general outline, the *Historia Calamitatum* contains strong subjective elements.

The main claim for individualism in Abelard's autobiography lies in this somewhat vaguer concept of subjectivity. *Historia Calamitatum* is to a considerable extent subjective, both in its selection of events and in describing Abelard's personal reactions to them. While this subjectivity clearly falls short of modern standards, it seems to compare fairly well with Weintraub's own description of the Renaissance. Thus, Cellini shows the same 'agonistic' features as Abelard, and his autobiography consists of condensed episodes in which the whole man appears on the stage.⁶² This seems fairly similar to what Abelard does in the narrative of his autobiography, as opposed to its general structure and purpose. In lacking this general structure Cellini more directly comes forward as an individual person, but the difference between him and Abelard seems to be one of degree rather than of kind. Though the exact relationship between the Twelfth-Century Renaissance and the 'real' one remains open to discussion, there is no reason to simply dismiss the former.

Nor was Abelard's 'individualism' or 'subjectivity' a unique phenomenon at the time. The individual becomes more prominent in the twelfth century, in the new ethics, developed by Abelard and others, which valued human actions according to their intentions rather than their results, and its practical consequences in penitential discipline and public law, in the search for personal salvation, the mystical love of God, the identification with Christ's passion and the self-examination in confession and in letters and autobiographical literature.⁶³ One may also point to the new attitude towards death in the High Middle Ages. Individual responsibility was emphasized and the individual's sorrow and anxiety at parting from this life was expressed in the death memorials, while in the Early Middle Ages life, death and salvation were largely regarded as collective enterprises.⁶⁴ In addition, the secular romance is often regarded as an expression of this individualism, both because of its concern with personal feelings, its insistence that only one person can be the object of love, and its attempt to create a consistent story, based on one particular individual's experience.⁶⁵

⁶² Weintraub, *The Value*, 115–41, 147.

⁶³ See, for instance, Morris, *The Discovery*; Charles M. Radding, *A world made by men* (Chapel Hill, 1985); Schmitt, 'La découverte': Benton, 'Individualism and conformity in medieval Western Europe,' *Culture, Power and Personality*, 313–26 and 'Consciousness of self.'

⁶⁴ From 'la mort apprivoisée' to 'la mort de soi,' see Philippe Ariès, *L'homme Devant la Mort* (Paris, 1977), 13ff., 97ff.

⁶⁵ Morris, *The Discovery*, 96ff.; Hanning, *The Individual*.

These changes are probably related to various kinds of social change, urbanization, social and occupational differentiation and so forth, which cannot be traced further in this context. However, it may be of some interest to point to some particular conditions in Abelard's own milieu.

From a social point of view, Abelard and his milieu are an example of early professionalization. He and his colleagues lived by their studies and teaching, in contrast to earlier generations of intellectuals, who had been monks or canons with teaching as only one of their tasks. Further, the number of people living in this way was sufficient for a milieu to be formed. This kind of living meant that one depended on attracting as many pupils as possible. Consequently, there was an intense competition between the teachers, which is well expressed in Abelard's work. Admittedly, the aim of these intellectuals was to obtain ecclesiastical benefice. With the establishment of the universities in the thirteenth century it probably became more usual for academics to have some kind of salaried positions, though hardly in a way that suppressed competition. It was still necessary to attract pupils, both to gain money and prestige. And though patronage was no doubt important, one depended far more on personal performance than on status, wealth or family.⁶⁶

Second, Abelard lived in an age of intellectual upheaval. Admittedly, the official ideology was that there was one truth, which could be found, partly through revelation and partly through logical reasoning, which in practice meant by studying the authorities who had made these deductions for the first time. But the flood of new knowledge, arriving in Europe through the contact with the Arab world and the revival of Aristotle, created difficult problems concerning the relationship between the two sources of knowledge. The problem of reconciling reason and revelation was a major challenge, which forced upon intellectuals new choices and new ideas.

These phenomena were likely to lead to growing individualism, in the sense of self-assertion as well as in the sense of self-reflection, both of which are present in Abelard's autobiography. For these reasons, the twelfth century may also be considered more individualistic than the thirteenth, when both the organization and the teaching at the universities became more fixed and rigid.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ On this individualism among intellectuals, see Jacques Verger, 'A la naissance de l'individualisme et de la pensée individuelle: la contribution des universités médiévales. Étude de mentalité,' in: *The State and the Individual*, ed Janet Coleman (The Origin of the Modern State in Europe, vol 6) (forthcoming).

⁶⁷ Johan Huizinga, 'Abelard,' in: *Men and Ideas* (Princeton, 1959), 193–5. See also Peter Dronke, 'New approaches to the School of Chartres,' *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 6 (1969/71), 118–49 and Tina Stiefel, 'The heresy of science: a twelfth-century conceptual revolution,' *ISIS*, 68 (1977), 347–62.

If we are seeking the origin of the present-day Western individualism, however, we may nevertheless wonder whether these features are specifically Western, or whether there is a similar concern about subjective feelings, close friendships between individuals and so forth within the elites even in other cultures, despite the collectivist attitude of traditional, hierarchically organized societies. Thus, Byzantine historiography, notably Michael Psellos' *Chronographia*, gives remarkably nuanced descriptions of individual character and reveals more about the author's own feelings and personality than the historiography of the West.⁶⁸ There are also examples of 'reform movements', reacting against the formalism of the official religion and stressing personal devotion and intention rather than external actions in other religions than Christianity, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Both in Christianity and other religions periods of such movements alternate with periods distinguished by orthodoxy and ritualism. The question may be posed: Is some kind of individualism or subjectivity within the elite a normal result of the 'division of labour',⁶⁹ leading to increasing stratification and the creation of a leisured class with plenty of time to reflect on religion, love and the inner soul? Such problems lie outside the scope of this short contribution. But they need to be considered if we want a full understanding of the contribution of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance to the specifically individualistic culture of the West.

⁶⁸ Michael Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, transl. by E.R.A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1966). See also Benton, 'Consciousness of Self,' 352f. on Muslim and Jewish attitudes.

⁶⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (London, 1984), 238–45. See also Charles M. Radding, 'The evolution of medieval mentalities,' *The American Historical Review*, 83.3 (1978), 577–97 and Benton, 'Consciousness of self,' 351f.