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9 Heloise's Echo

The Anthropology of a Twelfth-Century Horizontal Knowledge Landscape

Babette Hellemans

Abstract

This chapter presents Heloise of Argenteuil's quest for an intellectual voice through her correspondences with Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Peter the Venerable. The relationships between these four characters are deeply intellectual yet at the same time they are negotiated not only through intimate conversations, but also through collaborative monastic projects, through which the characters seek to transform the world around them. These performances open up a space that is at once aestheticized and intellectualized, in which interpersonal connections can develop. This is particularly true of vocal performances such as in the letters, in which the act of listening offers a moment of connection with the unmistakable individuality of Heloise as a performer.

Keywords: Medieval/Middle Ages, gender, orality, vocality, letter-writing, knowledge

Only her bones and the sound of her voice are left.
Her voice remains, her bones, they say, were changed to shapes of stone.
Myth of Echo and Narcissus (Ovid, Metamorphosis, book 3)

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Introduction

Heloise's place in scholarship is connected with the famous revival in twelfth-century monastic culture, often described in historiography as a Renaissance.¹ Around this time, the countryside of Northern France was dotted with Benedictine monasteries; together these buildings created a new landscape of knowledge exchange. The lives in the monastery of monks and nuns were defined by the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. This Rule of conduct, in which men and women ought to live separately, became therefore part of how knowledge was constructed. How these two worlds lived together within a religious context is the topic of C. Stephen Jaeger's essay in this volume. The practice of living according to a Rule, apart and together, for better and for worse, is part of the historiographical debate on the rise of the twelfth-century individual. Heloise takes a particular role in this debate – and so does her so-called 'silence'.² Inspired by the theme of this volume on the horizontal structure of medieval learning, this essay seeks to take the question of living spaces and knowledge exchange between men and women a step further. The anthropological approach to my understanding of horizontal learning is marked by the spatial setting of medieval knowledge exchange to artefacts representing them: letters.³ The lived experience of monks and nuns was, in fact, concentrated on the nexus where horizontal and vertical learning collide: on the one hand, they followed a strict Rule of obedience; on the other hand, they were people who created an entirely new system of knowledge that would influence intellectual history for hundreds of years. The medium of letters would be central to this newly developed spatial setting of a monastic network. During Heloise's life, most monasteries followed the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. Yet, there was criticism too. It was the time that Bernard of Clairvaux developed his Cistercian Reform and Peter the Venerable was abbot of the powerful monastery of Cluny. This Benedictine variety in a period of great change did not prevent monks and nuns from keeping in touch, despite their different views on the Rule that bound them all. Spatial and remote monastic arrangements 'in the wilderness' reflected the unworldly connections with God and the afterlife. The degree of interaction that took place in the outside world, between the monasteries

1 I would like to thank Ineke van 't Spijker for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2 Von Moos, *Mittelalterforschung und Ideologiekritik*.

3 By putting the emphasis on the anthropological, I would like to stress the holistic approach of analyzing the individual within his/her culture as a whole. For a general overview of the debates on voice in anthropology: Weidman, 'Anthropology and Voice', 37-51.

themselves or with bishops and clerics living in cities, varied tremendously. From the stones with which these monasteries were built arises a spatial utopia, reminiscences of a culture in search of one single truth (the Rule and a life dedicated to God, a religious truth). The network of monasteries might add a new dimension and definition to what Foucault wrote about the heterotopic character of unreal places: 'As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live'.⁴ As I shall argue, the twelfth-century epistolary outburst goes in hand with the dotted patchwork structure of the monasteries and their utopian knowledge landscape.

Letters represented a flexible medium for knowledge exchange. This patchwork structure is what I consider 'horizontal knowledge', by which I intend to stress the suppleness in the communication between men and women. The monastic epistolary culture is not self-evident as a field of study: the meaning of individual letters to others is also part of their own reference, that is, what a letter means to itself, and to their collection. Even if individual letters seem a suitable vehicle for personal expression and communication, letters represented also more or less public documents. This underlying notion of letters belonging to a public corpus is the reason why we cannot take the notion of an individual self in them, marked with a distinctive 'voice', as a distinctive feature.

In order to grasp the characteristics of the monastic culture in this horizontal knowledge landscape, I'll discuss the dynamics of a *vocality* functioning between the private and the public realm in the letters. The term *vocality* might need some further explanation. In order to grasp the multiple dimensions of voice, Paul Zumthor coined the term *vocality* (*vocalité*), by which he wanted to stress the historicity and usage of voice in medieval letters. That is, the thought of orality and spoken language to express ideas is suggested by written letters rather than the emphasis on a mere sound.⁵ Since monastic culture was very concerned with keeping its honour within the codes of the Rule, and tried to keep conflict at bay by creating alliances with other monastic communities, letters played an important part. Letter collections created a monastic, and utopic, *vocality* that would fill the spatial gaps between isolated buildings. The figure of Heloise fits into this creation of a horizontal learning system since she represented the topos of female scholarship by excellence. The authority of the Rule and its daily practice implies the dominance of male presence over female life. Heloise's learnedness should therefore be understood through the interaction between

4 Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 4

5 Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix*, 19.

genders; it is on the nexus of this horizontality and verticality that we will be able to understand how both structures work together, rather than as opposites. In suggesting this, I do not want to deny medieval learnedness a certain female voice of its own. Rather, I would like to suggest new historical perspectives on understanding female authority as it functioned in a patriarchal society. Our understanding of universal associations defined by the Rule, and of abbots and abbesses dealing with bishops and popes, can certainly be challenged when horizontal learnedness is applied, which is the aim of this volume.

Veiled Voices

For a modern reader, one of the most striking aspects about the letters, written by both men and women, is their radically affective speech and the sentiments expressed in them; sentiments of vulnerability and modesty, a self deeply moved by longing and feelings of love, not the sentiments of pride or autonomy, nor those of chaste individuals. What is it about their 'voices' that allowed them to express sentiments that run counter to the ideal of honour without jeopardizing the reputations of the individuals writing them? If we recognize that the utopic monastic network functioned on the nexus of both the verticality of the Rule and the horizontality of the letters, what does the discrepancy between the two modes of discourse tell us? Is there a difference in how men and women expressed sentiment?

Heloise of Argenteuil was a well-known abbess and scholar from the twelfth century.⁶ She was probably born in 1101 somewhere in the north of France. Trained in classics, with a good knowledge of Latin and rhetoric, she also knew some Greek and Hebrew. Her uncle Fulbert was responsible for her education, and up to the present day, scholars speculate about Fulbert's motivation concerning Heloise's education; probably he hoped she would have a brilliant career as an abbess. Heloise's life would forever be connected with the life of Peter Abelard, who became her tutor around 1113. They had a love affair out of which their son Astrolabe was born. For the sake of Abelard's career – and perhaps Heloise's too – both took the monastic vow and became prominent intellectuals in their own time, creating the twelfth-century Renaissance, together with abbots such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable. Heloise ultimately became abbess of the

6 For an up-to-date overview of scholarship see: Hellemans, *Rethinking Abelard*, and Peter Abelard and Heloise, *Epistulae*.

monastery of the Paraclete founded by Abelard himself, and the five priories that were attached to it. Their letter collection has been the subject of much scholarly argument and will probably continue to provoke debate.⁷ After a personal exchange in the first letters, they settled into a relationship in which Heloise asked Abelard to provide her with material for reading at her convent, to which he replied extensively, as indeed much of Abelard's writing became focused on her. Scholarship has taken the moment of Heloise's silence as a point of departure for a paradigmatic shift in understanding the voices in the letters, the nature of composition in letter collections, and the difference between a rhetorical silence (*aposiopesis*) and an intentional silence. I have written about this elsewhere, and we will come back to it later.⁸ Although we have only two letters from Heloise asking for advice concerning monastic matters, Abelard's replies to her other requests in the guise of hymns and a monastic Rule designed for women give us some idea of the ongoing exchange between them.

Scholars specialized in the intellectual culture of the twelfth century have long debated the presence of Heloise as one of the authors in the letter correspondence. The oldest manuscript containing these letters is from the early thirteenth century; it ends with a monastic Rule created by Abelard for Heloise and her nuns at the monastery of the Paraclete. By taking the fact of Heloise falling silent in her letter correspondence with Abelard to be an anthropological moment, rather than a political or rhetorical example, I take Heloise's next writings as variations of that initial moment. I stress with this point of view how the anthropological approach can help us to understand some of the most fascinating *aporia* in medieval intellectual culture, namely how notions of unworldly ideals functioned within the human condition of these men and women. Since they adopted the attitude of *contemptus mundi*, they were living in the world, while at the same time accepting a state of *being* without any worldly frame to fall back on. I think that this fundamental impossibility has been lifted by the human nature resonating in the written words as these twelfth century voices were materialized on parchment. It is on the brink of an entirely new knowledge structure in the cities, on the eve of the rise of the universities, that this profoundly human polyphony is most beautifully voiced.

In the history of European intellectual culture, voice has always been associated with individuality, authorship, agency, authority, and power. *We have a voice, or give voice* to our beliefs, and we discover an *inner voice*.

7 See *infra*.

8 See also my article 'Abelard and Heloise between Voice and Silence'.

However, the voice is also a broader human category prominent in non-Western cultures, often related to anti-colonial movements and the discourse of human rights, the rise of the indigenous, with promises of choice and agency. With the *linguistic turn* and the emergence of French feminism, one of the major critiques of the political views on the suppressed voice within the realm of power structures was that this kind of voice, connected to the lack of agency and hidden censorship, represents an excessively disruptive capacity within the social order.⁹ But what about voice that resists any representation? What about the musicality of the voice? Roland Barthes, for one, introduced the materiality of the body as having a voice, and this physicality being the source of all thoughts. The 'grain of the voice' (*le grain de la voix*), as Barthes has it, points towards the materiality of the body that is speaking its mother tongue in a dual production – of language and of music.¹⁰ As a bodily instrument being essentially 'something to think with', the voice represents an epistemological tool that constitutes subjectivity. Therefore, the voice can be considered the hermeneutical tool *par excellence* for describing the 'horizontal' exchange that aims at shaping and reshaping thought expressed in the uttering of words rather than seeking a 'vertical' exchange of the written word connected to power, authority, control and imposition.

This pre-cultural significance of the voice that has been particularly prominent in the field of anthropology – with an emphasis on the voice's primordiality like a child learning to speak by imitating sound – has shown the multifaceted contrasts that exist in the representation of a signifying voice. It refers to the 'grain of the voice' in Barthes's example, rethinking the kind of vocality that lies outside a referential meaning, presenting the inarticulate vocality. The voice represents in musical terms the polyphonic nature of a composition that functions in an alternating sense of individual voice and collective harmony.¹¹ As will be shown, there is a specific kind of 'horizontal learning' in the notion of vocality. The presence of multiple voices will reveal an alternating effect of knowledge exchange in letter collections since these documents seem to be flexible enough to adapt to the desires of the public reader as well. This extraordinary suppleness and adaptation of voices, mirroring desires and expectations of the reader, is characteristic of the rhetorical quality in twelfth century epistolary culture. It is in this moment of recognition, listening to voices of such a

9 Hellemans, *Understanding Culture*.

10 Barthes, 'Music's Body', 245–312.

11 *Infra*, n. 9.

remote past, that we search for words such as Renaissance, that cover this 'humanistic' undertone.¹² However, what is the kind of knowledge embedded in the vocality of the letters? The monastic context requires in the end a disciplined, horizontal voice that instructs, for instance, Heloise and her nuns of the monastery of the Paraclete. On this nexus of vertical and horizontal knowledge the meanings of moral constraint and personal expressiveness are exposed and reveal a culture that seeks to transcend itself. Indeed, the very meaning of the monastic community in the utopic landscape is spiritual in order to transcend its worldly nature. Probably the monks and nuns that shaped this culture would consider any distinction between 'spirituality' and 'knowledge' artificial.

As such, the notion of the voice becomes more than a 'vehicle' of expression in the exchange of horizontal knowledge. Connected to their female bodies with immediate notions of honour and shame, voice is often the only tool women have to express their ideology and to counter the official male pride and decorum. The physical past of a woman directly affects her social status and this immediacy between body and expressiveness is why the musical grain in the woman's voice has such power. In history, Heloise's voice is especially discernable in her letters.¹³ Her voice thus becomes poetic as it rises within the epistemological margins of sound and silence. Female vocality is marginal, subversive, and subjected. Like the gospels and the blues, they represent the voice of the suppressed away from the ears of power and learnedness. The nuns of the Paraclete, in which each woman had a history of her own, were mothers, widows, virgins, and divorcees, who were forced to voice their knowledge of the world – one of childbirth or childlessness, virginity, often with vulnerability – against the hierarchical structure of pride and power. This horizontal character of female knowledge is opposed to the verticality of a top-down authority, just as it is opposed to the hegemonic presence of normativity and morality. As a result, horizontal voicing invites us to listen to a half-hidden dialogue, like the shape of an echo, revealing an interiorized critique of the vanities of honour.

Echo's Mimicking Knowledge

The echo as a figure of voice serves to reveal the poetics of female expression. The monastic landscape of horizontal knowledge exchange – reflecting a

¹² See Otten, *From Paradise to Paradigm*.

¹³ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister*.

learning that is responsive rather than imposing – relates to the conceptualization of Renaissance in the twelfth century. In the same way, the metapoetic configuration in this culture of letter-writing can be considered as an echo of its horizontal nature. What is characteristic of the echo is that it represents a figure of sound separated from its original. The written word, however, represents that which does not emerge into sound but is confined to silence. The lively antiphonal character of letter-writing, however, seems to defy the muteness in relation to the written text. Hence several attempts have been made to ‘listen to the text’ – and its voice – rather than to read in silence.¹⁴ Though this claiming of voice from a text is methodologically problematic, it is also interesting and therefore worth exploring, not the least because the reader becomes an active participant in giving meaning to the polyphony of voices. We, modern scholars, sometimes forget how this very practice of reading only became epistemologically visible in the technical change of writing manuscripts from the eleventh century onwards. In the words of Paul Saenger: ‘As reading became a silent and solitary activity, constraints imposed by the group were no longer efficacious, and explicit injunctions against private abuse were required.’¹⁵ The absorption of knowledge through reading goes along with the idea that the text, in fact, represents authority. However, with an increasing number of individual readers in the monasteries, the practice of reading itself became, from the eleventh century onwards, more and more autonomous and horizontal. In addition, past studies on medieval intellectual culture have shown how knowledge exchange in the High Middle Ages operated from inside the cloister and classroom into the outside world, up to the point of the emergence of universities in European cities in the course of the thirteenth century. The monastic letter collections show how silent intramural knowledge becomes ‘audible’ to other monasteries in the outside world through the medium of letters; a world that responds not as a repetition of the cloistered mind but as the awakening of an echo out of its passive state. The voice in the letter’s reply, we might say some kind of a mimetic answer, is never verbally precise because the notion of privacy in reading these epistolary collections is lacking. The original voice has become distorted and changed. Before turning to this process of mimicking and distortion as a way of exploring the challenges of understanding voice as a tool for knowledge exchange, giving access to a

14 Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise*.

15 Saenger, *Space between Words*, 204. For an anthropological analysis of Anselm of Canterbury’s emphasis on the reading of the gaps between words, see the article of Burcht Pranger, ‘*Dimidia horae*’.

written mimicry rather than a spoken dialogue, it might be helpful to recall the deeper meaning of Ovid's myth about the figure of Echo. We will see how this ancient myth has been adapted during the history of its reception in Western culture, so fundamentally shaped by Sigmund Freud.

With Freud, the story of the myth has been placed within the context of a psycho-pathological disorder that describes an unbalanced self-esteem in relation to uses of power and boundaries, leading to exhibitionism or its opposite, a lack of identity. The emphasis is, more generally, put on a struggle with the Ego. In the monastic culture of the twelfth century, these post-Freudian notions cannot be applied without taking the differences between modern and medieval culture into account. We will come back to this. The story of the myth and the use of the Echo as a cultural figure might help us, however, to understand articulations of monastic ideas about the self and their strong disapproval of (self-) absorption, what we would call today 'psychological projection'.¹⁶ In addition, the figure of the Echo is helpful to stress the passive nature of voice especially within knowledge communities that are not clearly defined, such as female knowledge. The process of projection as part of knowledge acquisition, therefore, cannot function according to a simple system of mirroring, because the original model has not been clearly framed. The mirroring process as part of the myth is symbolized by Narcissus, who is numbed by his own image. My introduction of the figure of Echo seeks to overcome such a numbness, using a term from the field of social psychology, called verbal mimicry. Verbal mimicry stresses the connecting and deeply social character of language and how meaning depends on a 'branched' system of semiotics. Hence, verbal mimicry – when voices are connected through imitation, rapport, and cohesion – seems to have a stronger impact than the clear-cut rational design of mirroring dialogue, which would be the case of *disputatio* in the monastic context.

The myth of Echo goes as follows. Ovid's Echo is a loquacious nymph 'of the echoing voice, who cannot be silent when others have spoken, nor learn how to speak first herself'. The nymph still had a body when she first saw Narcissus; she was not merely a voice. As in an echo, she made use of counter play, repeating sound in order to create meaning. Her phonetic playing became a rupture in words, laying bare the discrepancy between

¹⁶ The differences between modern and ancient notions on the self, and the way dialogues in letters serve a free exchange of ideas, are well explained in Peter von Moos' article 'Dialogue et monologue', 327-342. A similar thought on the notion of dialogue as part of philosophical self-knowledge and the ethics of ipsiety can be found in Ricoeur, *Soi-même*.

sound and meaning. Talkative though she was, she had no other trick of speech than this: she could only repeat the last words out of many. It was Juno who brought about this state of affairs after Echo held her in long conversations on purpose, while the other nymphs fled from her husband, the god Jupiter. Echo was left with little power over her deluding tongue, as she only had the briefest ability to speak, repeating the last of what is spoken and returning the words she hears.

The conceptual meaning of the echo is profoundly semiotic, since it represents a separation between meaning and sound, like an incision cutting through the pair of signifier and signified, creating a rupture that is beyond repair. In his essay ‘The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy’, Walter Benjamin cites this counter play of the echo as follows: ‘The interplay between sound and meaning remains a terrifying phantom for the mourning play.’ It is, according to Benjamin, an example of the satanic meaning that always foreshadows death – like a lament that will never become a sound.¹⁷ Hence the epigraph of this article: ‘Her voice remains, her bones, they say, were changed to shapes of stone. She hides in the woods, no longer to be seen on the hills, but to be heard by everyone’. It is sound that lives in her. The story of the nymph Echo dramatizes the profoundly communicative and connecting nature of voice as an intellectual device. Echo’s mechanical repetition of words is perceived as alienating from the social realm. Her punishment is tantamount to the death of her communicative, intellectual self, and it illustrates how soul, body, and sound are dependent on successful and harmonic communication in the social realm of a community. This was, of course, the point Barthes wanted to stress when he described the individualized ‘grain of the voice’ within the polyphonic sound of community. It is also Benjamin’s description of voice, body, and the abyss of death in which feelings are endlessly lost because the acceptance of what is given (or not) is lacking.

Heloise’s Voice as a Case of Women’s History

Let us now use these conceptual images to rethink the historiography of horizontal learning. What if voices of the past are not audible because

17 Walter Benjamin’s ideas about translation as part of analyzing the figure of Echo is part of this process of the verbal mimicry of knowledge, in *Selected Writings* 1:60: ‘Nature, according to the mourning play, and the nature of the mourning play [*die Natur der Trauerspiels*] [...] is obsessed by language, the victim of an endless feeling’.

they are 'written out of the canon of history'? This is the case of female voices and the voices of the suppressed, often called 'marginal cultures' in historiography. We pick up the case of Heloise again. Medieval scholarship has often focused on her presence in terms of 'voices' and 'silences'.¹⁸ One thinks especially of the important academic discussion dealing with *Letter 6* in the letter collection of Abelard and Heloise, the moment where she falls silent about their common past, and Abelard's voice takes over. We have to be careful not to jump to conclusions too quickly, because it is only in this specific work that she falls silent, not in her life as the abbess of the Paraclete. However, in the horizontal knowledge structure, in which Heloise communicated with Abelard, *Letter 6* reveals a definitive shift from the one state to the other, from letters about their past as lovers to a monastic future in accordance with the Rule. The historiography of Heloise seems to follow what Simone de Beauvoir described in her chapter on History in the two-volume *The Second Sex*:

The action of women was never more than a symbolic agitation, [women] have gained only what men were happy to allow them; they have taken nothing, they have received [...] they don't have a history.

All history has been created by men [...] they always had the destiny of women in their hands [...] the male human being models the face of the world (1:114), at the reverse of women who do not represent art or thought. Men have all ties of the plot in hands, including the movements of emancipation.

Similar to historical reality, nature is not an inert given. Man is not a natural species: it is a historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming (1:73). [The body] is a situation [that has nothing intangible]. Biology cannot be able to command destiny. One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.¹⁹

18 'En ce qui concerne la forme énoncé dialogique, il faut se souvenir de la théorie de certains stoïciens pour qui la concision (*brevitas*) est à la fois une sorte d'ascèse verbale digne de l'innommable et l'un des raffinements les plus subtiles de la tyrannie du secret' ('Concerning the spoken form of the dialogue, it is necessary to remember the theory of certain Stoics, for whom brevity is a form of verbal asceticism worthy of the unspeakable while representing at the same time one of the most subtle refinements of the tyranny of secrecy'), in von Moos, 'Dialogue et monologue', *infra*, n. 13, here: 336.

19 'L'action des femmes n'a jamais été qu'une agitation symbolique, elles n'ont gagné que ce que les hommes ont bien voulu leur concéder ; elles n'ont rien pris : elles ont reçu [...] Elles n'ont pas de passé'. 'Toute l'histoire des femmes a été faite par les hommes [...] Ce sont eux qui ont toujours tenu le sort de la femme entre leurs mains. Le mâle humain modèle la face du monde (114), au rebours des femmes qui n'illustrent ni l'art ni la pensée. Les hommes tirent toutes les

De Beauvoir's book caused a paradigm shift in the historiographical debate and the increasing awareness that, in order to make women enter into the realm of history, one had to become aware that history is constructed as a narrative. In other words, history itself has become an academic discourse in which women's voices have been mostly absent. When dealing with the Christian culture of Europe in the Middle Ages, one should also, in a more general sense, think of biblical references suggesting that women *ought* to be silent in terms of authority of knowledge: 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent' (1 Timothy 2:11-12). To participate in this culture of absence, passiveness or a negation of women's role in the past (for instance, as scholars) implies that one is taking part in their dependence – and muteness. Our commitment to access the cultural history of silence towards women means acknowledging a profound aspect in the process of understanding knowledge acquisition and its horizontal structure. It also requires rethinking the biological nature of women as an *a priori* category, in which not all is perhaps given, and how different social structures respond to this, as Simone de Beauvoir has tried to express. If scholars make claims on the iconic letters of Abelard and Heloise regarding, for instance, the status of truthfulness and accuracy in representing the twelfth-century monastic context in which they were written, they make a historical or literary statement. But when the question comes from historical anthropology, the text represents an artifact of a specific intellectual approach of the utopic epistolary culture described earlier in this chapter. This implies that the question of Heloise's historical voice falling silent should also be challenged, since her correspondence was in fact never finished. She continued writing to other monasteries as an abbess and maintained a correspondence with no one less than Peter the Venerable, who wrote back a beautiful letter of consolation describing Abelard's death at Cluny. But also outside the monastic network she kept her voice: her first letter written as abbess and to be kept in the archives was addressed to Pope Innocent II.²⁰

ficelles de l'intrigue, y compris celles des mouvements d'émancipation. [...] (222). 'Pas plus que la réalité historique, la nature n'est une donnée immuable. L'homme n'est pas une espèce naturelle: c'est une idée historique. La femme n'est pas une réalité figée, mais un devenir (73). [Le corps] est une situation [qui n'a rien d'intangible. La biologie ne saurait commander le destin.] On ne naît pas femme : on le devient.' Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, vol. 1.

20 The letter is dated 28 November 1131 and the original charter (pièce 31) is kept in the *Bibliothèque municipale* of Chalons-sur-Marne; see Mc Laughlin, 'Heloise the Abbess', 3. The forthcoming book by Bonnie Wheeler and the late Mary McLaughlin, *Heloise and the Paraclete: A Twelfth Century Quest*, will prove to be invaluable to gain further insight into the political side of Heloise's work as an abbess.

So why is scholarship so interested in Heloise's silence as a hermeneutical question? It seems that, with the paradigmatic change of seeing history as narrative and especially the place of women within this narrative, the question of fiction and factuality became also more challenged. While the historian seems to look for *what is factually missing* in the text considering its place within a historical context and how to solve this from a forensic point of view, literary scholars look for *what is there or what is lacking*. Where are the gaps? Where does the voice speak out again after a silent interval? Indeed, a letter correspondence is not a dialogue, but takes part in the verbal mimicry of a community. The framing of letter collections, therefore, goes along with constructing spiritual guidance, and its themes are eminently topical for constructing a horizontal knowledge community.²¹ Letters are vehicles for expressing affiliating thoughts through individualized voices in such a way that only the frame of letter collections is socially acceptable within the monastic culture, and any other frame would be considered to damage self-image and self-presentation. The form of single letters as part of a bigger collection creates a patchwork of individualized voices that enables author(s) to be flexible in creating a rapport, allowing for contradictions and divergent expressions of honour and vulnerability, while giving room to contradictory emotions in individual letters, which can coexist at the same time within a collection. This delineation between the individual voice and the polyphony of many voices is what makes letter collections so fascinating to study. The historical anthropological approach requires rethinking the multifaceted nature of the letter correspondence within their 'utopic' monastic setting. Taking Western culture as the sole rational model of knowledge would thus not be acceptable. Falling back on *disputatio* as the rational model of horizontal knowledge *par excellence* by which the female voice echoes the male voice, would also not suffice. As Bruno Latour has convincingly stressed, anthropology considers the notion of 'error' as part of what defines knowledge as a cultural system: 'It uses the same terms [of symmetry] to explain truths and errors.'²² Considering Heloise's silence as an anthropological moment, therefore, gives room for understanding variations of truth within this culture.

21 For a profound analysis of the poetic implications of letter collections, see Verbaal, 'Voicing your Voice', 103-124 and Haseldine, 'Affectionate Terms of Address', 201-254.

22 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 103.

The Poetics of Horizontal Knowledge

Why do individuals in a monastic culture appear to be able to express in letters, through vocality and tropes, sentiments of learnedness that violate the vertical code of authoritative scholarship, and employ affectionate language that sometimes even seems to violate the modesty code? What is the significance of two culturally sanctioned types of knowledge – vertical and horizontal – available to the monks and nuns who relied on both of them to express their views? One key to this puzzle of horizontal lines and vertical lines in knowledge communities would be to ask why individuals can express certain meanings according to one line and not the other. The suppleness of epistolary rhetoric and its humanistic appeal is transformed into various conditions, both public and private. It exists between close friends, social peers belonging to the same community, between popes and emperors, and between lovers. Therefore, to consider letter collections as horizontal tropes of learning teaches us, modern scholars, about the poetic message they seem to convey. In the early twelfth century, the poetic force by which the epistolary genre made it possible to express political-theological messages can be best illustrated by the example of Heloise's 'brother in Christ', Bernard of Clairvaux. We know that Bernard visited Heloise at the Paraclete on one occasion.²³ In the words of Wim Verbaal:

Bernard [of Clairvaux] organized his letter collection to give an account of a man attempting to bring order into the world, to give a direction to worldly affairs from within the spiritual core that is the monastery. [...] The image Bernard fashioned of himself in his letters [...] is the image of a man who realizes that he has spent much energy on a lost cause. And that the events he had to confront are not present to offer a view of early 12th-century history, but in order to show us the tragic story of being a tool of God, of being the Voice of God, gives way to a realization in the end that the world has never been and will never be ready to hear and accept the Word of God. And that God never spares his prophets.²⁴

This example of Bernard's self-fashioning, even in letters that were actually never sent, confirms the flexibility of these kinds of documents, allowing contradictions to flourish and giving room to the poetics of tacit knowledge,

23 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 162. The article of Julie Ann Smith gives us a very illuminating account of the way monasteries were directed; see Smith, *Debitum Obedientie*, 1-23.

24 Verbaal, 'Voicing your Voice', *infra*, n. 18.

of things that can be left unsaid.²⁵ Within the horizontal structure of letter collections, we get an inkling of an individual voice constructed through loose patches of texts. Within the exclusively male setting of the letter collections of Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter the Venerable, and Abelard, Heloise is part of the process. She is silent about her own past with Abelard and audible about her future in the utopic network of monasteries.

But there is a deeper methodological concern than the one I just described regarding silence and voice as concepts of power and social construct. There is also knowledge which we will not be able to access if we acknowledge the rational attitude of searching beyond Western culture as the only form of anthropology. Every culture has a kind of *tacit knowledge* too; this is often the knowledge that deals with codes, taboos, and censorship. The strongly moral component in this kind of implicit knowledge is what interests anthropologists most, since they represent the reverse side of articulated and explicit forms of expression and therefore give a deeper meaning to culture. The patchwork-like structure of tacit knowledge is 'horizontal' by definition, since it can only be understood within a community of peers. This kind of knowledge weaves an understanding between spirits on an equal level, without any need of articulation. If we recall the epistemological concerns of lost voices, or the embodied voice of Roland Barthes, we have an ever more difficult nut to crack here. How can we grasp this kind of knowledge as part of the 'thick description' of an intellectual culture, to borrow the term from Clifford Geertz, a culture whose voices evaporated into thin air?²⁶ Through the 'thick representations' of vocality in letter collections and the misty historical muteness surrounding it, we also need to acknowledge the deeply social nature of listening. This seems especially crucial for the horizontality of knowledge communities with its shaping of letter collections and special claims on the authority of the written word. It also means that the process of creating a new vocabulary through voice and vocal mimicry sheds an entirely new light on what knowledge is

25 For instance, *Epistola* 119 addressed to Abelard was never sent by Bernard, as far as we know.

26 The notion of 'thick description' refers to a famous theoretical issue introduced by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. It raises the general question of what, as Gilbert Ryle has put it, *Le Penseur*, the famous sculpture by Rodin, is doing. In taking the wink as an example of communication, he thus raises the almost impossible notion of analyzing culture as a fixed epistemological category. The wink can be a coincidence (a piece of dust), a playful sign of mutual understanding, or one can imitate the latter as a parody. And one should not forget the 'zero-form twitches', in Geertz' words, 'which are in fact as much non-winks as winks are non-twitches'. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.

through the function of *politics* in language. It is not the verticality of master-pupil that creates poetical knowledge; rather, it is the suppleness of horizontality because of its patchwork-like structure by which a social verbal community is constituted. This fact, of course, has an impact on the specific concepts we use in this volume, such as horizontal learning, community, voice, silence, religion, or culture.

The famous culture critic and scholar Raymond Williams, who was a pioneer in dealing with the interaction between language, culture, and society, underscores the active notion of understanding and knowledge, as opposed to authoritative vertical knowledge:

In a social history in which many crucial meanings have been shaped by a dominant class, and by particular professions operating to a large extent within its terms, the sense of edge is accurate. This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as to continuity – if the millions of people in which it is active are to see it as active: not a *tradition* to be learned, not a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is ‘our language’, has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view.²⁷

Looking at the prismatic aspect of culture and its language, Raymond Williams understood that it was only by *returning to modulations* of a given word through history that one could even understand a term in and of itself. Against the use of tradition based on a common ground that is *a priori* defined, this mimetic knowledge can be reconstructed by an approach that takes into account performances that surround a particular cultural setting, from which the texts arise. In the case of Heloise, we have her monastery of the Paraclete, the hymns, the monastic Rule written for Heloise by Abelard, the burial of Abelard’s body in the Paraclete, and other ‘performances’, such as the aforementioned visit of Bernard of Clairvaux to Heloise. These performances open up a space that is at once aestheticized, often by rituals, as well as sociable, in which interpersonal connections and intellectual exchanges can develop through non-verbal media. The letter collection of Abelard and

27 Williams, *Keywords*, 24.

Heloise shows the unfolding mimicry of dialogue modulating towards the sole authority of the monastic Rule. Clashes of voices or their silences suggest new possibilities of interpretation. To reduce everything to the absoluteness of silence and obedience to the Rule, however, would mean a denial of the history that is written before the Rule came into being, the troubled history of their own lives, that is. It would also deny the voices that created the document as a whole, and its liveliness. And it would underestimate the poetic expressiveness of tacit knowledge. To illustrate the danger of reducing the anthropological understanding of monasticism to mere silence as void (whether intentional or not), we recall the danger of apophatic silence as a paralysis of voice – illustrated by the myth of Echo and Narcissus.

The central question that arises from social life (in our case, the example of monastic life) and social transformation (in our case the debates about monastic reform and, as its sequel, the debates on heretical views about monastic life versus orthodox views) can be expressed through the prism of vocality: how are individual and group identities established in the performative realm? What are the consequences of suppressing voice? There is something at once deeply poetic yet also unsettling about Heloise's silence in *Letter 6*, which seems to echo against the monastic walls towards her male counterparts. In this letter to Abelard, she seems tormented by inner conflict over her task of embodying the iconic Christian image of female purity: her complex, intellectually shaped inner life runs counter to a static and authoritative image of femininity she is forced to embody. She had to deny her son, motherhood even, if she wants to adopt the monastic vow and her intellectual self. Heloise's complex relationship to speaking/writing and silence/paralysis reflects both the direct impact of the female body when she also wants to be part of a knowledge community, as well as contemporary twelfth-century values and ways of existing within the reforms of the Benedictine Rule. Viewing the destruction of the intellectual community 'bond' in the monastic realm as a kind of social death, Heloise uses silence as metaphorical death and thus as a means to escape the past she had with Abelard. Her rejection of her own vocality within the letter correspondence is a way of rejecting her 'history of calamities', which means a rejection of her female self, while at the same time regaining the intellectual bonds that tied her to the other characters. Heloise's silence as a figure of mimicry thus offers a way of understanding the place of voice in the social realm of kindred souls, and while she seems to understand the catastrophic implications of this decision, it seems too late to turn back;

she has nothing more to say. 'Speak to us then, and we shall hear', she concludes at the end of *Letter 6*.

The Vocality of Kindred Souls

Yet a deeper answer to Heloise's silence, which would connect to what Barthes is saying about voice – body and soul – may present itself in her letter exchange with Peter the Venerable, and especially the latter's letter of consolation sent after Peter Abelard's death in 1142, after Abelard had spent the last years of his life in a priory of the monastery of Cluny. More than supporting the claim that Heloise fell silent because of her abandoned motherhood, to make her entrance within the monastery and regain her vocal authority, all of this part of her situation as a woman, the letter correspondence with Peter the Venerable shows how the horizontal and 'patchwork' knowledge structure is able to regain form. Heloise mentions a previous visit from Peter the Venerable when he brought Abelard's body back to the Paraclete. She also requested a written confirmation of Abelard's absolution and of Masses promised for his soul, and for her son some prebend, which was a stipend or a portion of the revenues, either from the bishop of Paris or from some other diocese. One of the most remarkable themes is the combination of pride and humility, voiced by Heloise:

To Peter, most reverend lord and father and venerable abbot of Cluny, Heloise, God's and his humble servant: the spirit of grace and salvation. The mercy of God came down to us in the grace of a visit from your Reverence. We are filled with pride and rejoicing, gracious father, because your greatness has descended to our lowliness, for a visitation from you is a matter for great rejoicing even for the great. [...] To me too, whom (unworthy as I am to be called your servant) your sublime humility has not disdained to address as sister in writing and speech, you granted a rare privilege in token of your love and sincerity: a trental of masses to be said on my behalf by the abbey of Cluny after my death. You also said that you would confirm this gift in a letter under seal. Fulfil then, my brother or rather, my lord, what you promised to your sister, or I should say, to your servant.²⁸

28 Heloise, *Epistola ad Petrum Venerabilem* (ep. 167, 400-401); trans. Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 286-7; electronic source: <https://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/190.html> (accessed May 5 2018).

Humility refers to a state of honour and the corresponding acts of modesty or deference. Traditional historical scholarship that stops at Heloise's silence would interpret this example as being typical of the vertical authority in male and female relationships.²⁹ The cloaking of an inborn 'weakness' within the text through a language of formality would in such an interpretation correlate with required social distance between the two sexes. But epistolary voices also embody the poetic vulnerability of sharing the same language of intellectual rapport. So, to stop at Heloise's silence is to ignore her intellectual influence as abbess of the monastery that goes well beyond the closed boundaries of monastic walls. Even more, when we read Peter the Venerable's response to Heloise, we notice how the vocal mimicry of humility is shared within an intimate language:

To our venerable and dearest sister and God's servant, to the leader and teacher of God's handmaidens, from brother Peter, the humble abbot of Cluny, greetings in God and the fullness of love from us in Christ.

I have been greatly pleased to read your letter, from which I have learned that my visit to you was not merely a transitory one, in which I am assured not only that I was with you, but that I have never left you. That visit of mine was not, I realize, like the memory of a passing guest for the night and I have not become for you 'a stranger and a pilgrim' (Gen. 23:4), but, please God, 'a citizen of the holy places and a member of the household' (Ephes. 2:19). All that I said and did in that swift and fleeting visit of mine has been embraced so firmly in your pious memory, so deeply impressed on your gracious spirit, that not only what I said very carefully, but even words perhaps carelessly spoken, have not fallen to the ground. You have paid such careful attention to everything; you have entrusted all I said and did to that tenacious memory which springs from love of truth, as if mine were great, celestial and sacrosanct utterances, as if they were the very words and works of Jesus Christ!³⁰

From the context-bound nature of the monastic epistolary genre, it seems that these two examples reveal an awareness between the social and the private, which corresponds to self-representation in the utopic monastic landscape. Given our own modern and Western assumptions

29 See for instance Newman, 'Authority, Authenticity', 121-157.

30 Peter the Venerable, *Epistola ad Heloisam* (ep. 168, 401-02); trans. Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 286-7; see also the electronic source: <https://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/190.html> (accessed May 5 2018).

of the 'real self' as expressed in a dynamic and spontaneous urge, shaped in heterogeneous voices in individual letters, we might think that this vocality is opposed to more vertical understanding of the institutionalized self, which considers the self as real only if embedded within explicitly expressed social ideals. Thus notions such as honour or humility, couched in the modest language of topical 'masks' worn within the community, seem to clash with the emotional and poetical language, and which is part of the affective vocal mimicry. However, this dramaturgical view of self-representation within knowledge communities in which every voice seems to carry its own self, underestimates the underlying desire to be universally moral and good. This is the tacit knowledge that ties all the voices together. Within the monastic culture of a shared 'utopia', moral standards were set high and perceived as values (rather than norms) and as a matter of self-respect. It was not an obligation pushed upon the individual by his or her peers, but rather should be seen as part of a common spiritual motivation. Hence moral virtue also means standing within the horizontal structure of the community. Belonging to the spiritual community was essential for monks and nuns as there was no alternative social life available outside the monastic walls for them. The belonging to this learned culture was therefore not a matter of merely a *mise-en-scène* of honour and authority. By framing the affective language between these 'brothers and sisters in Christ' in terms of honour, modesty, and vulnerability, it was possible to share a spiritual life while avoiding individual oppression or the open application of violence, leading to exclusion and shaming.

I would like to turn back to the epigraph of this chapter, which I chose as a leading thought throughout this text. The symbolic meaning of Ovid's myth and this phrase in particular struck me by its profundity. It challenges the grip on what knowledge is in history by showing the ephemeral status of what it is to know, because there will always be new readers with new questions. The fate of the historian working with ideas, concepts, and symbolic meaning lies in the acceptance that, in the end, vocality through the written word, some stones, and bones is really all we have.

About the author

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Hellemans has a French PhD in historical anthropology and a Dutch PhD in the Humanities (co-tutelle de thèse). She has been a visitor at CNRS laboratories, at the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University, and at Oxford University, and taught at the universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam. She has published on many different topics, including on Peter Abelard.

