Eloisa and the Scene of Writing in Pope’s

“Eloisa to Abelard”

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In Of Grammatology, Derrida famously argues that in the west, speech has always been privileged over writing, because “phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence,” that is, “presence of the thing to the sight, presence as substance/essence/existence . . . [and] temporal presence as the point of the now or of the moment.”¹ Conversely, “writing is the dissimulation of the . . . presence of sense to the soul within the logos” and has not only been equated with absence but has become a name for absence.² Derrida’s account of the way in which the binary oppositions presence/absence and speech/writing have become entwined may accurately describe a dominant trend in western thought, but his account does not allow the whole story to be told. There is, as Derrida admits, another writing, “a natural, eternal, and universal writing . . . . There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul.”³ Derrida’s project obliges him to relegate this “good” writing to the margins, and literary critics have chosen to pass these margins by on their journey toward the center of the Derridean text. The present paper is an attempt to centralize the content of these margins through an analysis of Alexander Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard.”

² Derrida, p. 41
³ Derrida, see pp. 15 and 17.
The concerns of Pope’s poem are closely tied to the relationship between speech/writing and presence/absence. Not only is Eloisa articulating “the lover’s discourse,” a discourse which invariably involves “utter[ing] the other’s absence,” as she writes, but Abelard’s absence gives rise to the act of writing. He is, however, not the only one absent from the scene. God, too, is absent or, perhaps I should say, is made absent, for the letter, besides telling the story of her romance, narrates and produces the theological crisis that Eloisa experiences. Indeed, the act of writing takes the place of the romance being written about: it is the process through which the other replaces God as the object of devotion. Eloisa’s writing would thus seem to function as Derrida argues writing functions in western philosophy in that it articulates one absence and generates another. Yet writing has an alternative function in the poem. Because it becomes a surrogate for romance, it produces the other’s presence, since there can be no romance without the other. How then are we to understand the relationship between presence or absence and writing in “Eloisa to Abelard”? Answering this question will involve revisiting the principal disagreement dividing those who have written about the poem.

Following Pope’s own description of Eloisa’s conflict as one between “grace and nature, virtue and pleasure” virtually every commentator who discusses “Eloisa to Abelard” argues that the poem is about whether or not Eloisa achieves grace. David Morris, it is true, has attempted to reduce the issue of her salvation to the status of an insignificant enigma. The poem, he argues, “seems more deeply concerned with Eloisa’s mind than with her soul,” so “interpretations of [her] final state do not significantly affect the main concerns of the poem.” Morris’s critique of interpretations overly concerned with the condition of Eloisa’s soul is directed against readings organized around the damned/saved opposition, which oversimplify Pope’s representation of Eloisa’s life by reducing it to a movement from a fallen state to a struggle to transcend it in the deathbed fantasy with which

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7 Morris, p. 264.
the poem concludes. Marylin Francus's reading is typical in this respect. Eloisa’s “pre-occupation with Abelard as she takes the veil,” Francus claims, “underscores her lack of commitment to the church.” Eloisa's love for Abelard, according to this view, has persisted since she took up her vocation, and her recent correspondence with him, rather than reigniting a forgotten passion, has compelled her to admit that she still desires him.

Analyses beginning with this assumption ignore Pope’s “Argument” proceeding the poem—which explicitly states “that a letter of Abelard’s to a friend, which contain’d the history of his misfortunes, fell into the hands of Eloisa . . . awaking all her tenderness”—and Eloisa’s own description of her love as that “long forgotten heat” (6). Such analyses also ignore the process Eloisa’s mind goes through as she writes her letter. Morris is therefore correct when he urges us to turn our attention to Eloisa’s mind, but he is wrong to conclude that doing so obliges us to preclude considerations of her soul. Appreciating Eloisa’s problem requires us to take into account the conflict between nature and grace, without allowing the binary structure of this conflict to simplify the poem’s complexity, which can be more accurately discussed with reference to the tripartite division of the poem proposed by Henry Pettit. The basis on which Pettit makes the division, however, needs to be reassessed. Pettit’s argument that the parts “divid[e] the poem into a time sequence of past, present, and future” has not been helpful, because those relying on it continue to posit a continuity between the past and the present and claim that Eloisa has lacked grace since she was Abelard’s mistress.

The division of the poem, I want to argue, marks a change of Abelard’s position in relation to God’s in Eloisa’s mind. As the poem begins, Eloisa is confused because “mix’d with God’s, [Abelard’s] lov’d Idea lies” (12). In the first part of the poem (ending at line 128), the Idea of Abelard is separated from the Idea of God; in the second part (ending at line 276), Eloisa struggles with the consequences of privileging Abelard’s Idea, and in the conclusion, she fixes her eye

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on the cross.\textsuperscript{11} This division also marks Eloisa’s progress from an obsession with writing and reading, to an obsession with procuring Abelard’s physical presence, to a transcendence of both obsessions. Clearly there is a significant relationship between the position Abelard’s Idea assumes in Eloisa’s mind and Eloisa’s change of obsessions.

The letter begins with a series of questions, all of which basically ask the same thing: “Why feels my heart its long forgotten heat?” (6). The answer to the questions is obviously related to the discovery of Abelard’s letter to a friend and so to the effects of reading, but Eloisa’s inability to forsake her love and avoid damnation cannot simply be explained by the fact that a letter reminded Eloisa of her affair. The complexity of the problem can be seen immediately after the opening questions, when Eloisa, offering a preliminary answer to them, writes: “Yet, yet I love—from Abelard it came,/ And Eloisa yet must kiss the name” (7-8). Because of the uncertainty over the referent of the pronoun it in these lines, the answer is not really clear. The pronoun can refer neither to Abelard’s letter to a friend, which some have argued is the case,\textsuperscript{12} nor to one of his other letters. Eloisa, we soon learn, opens “thy letters” (29). She has several and has been brooding over a number of them. The pronoun would have to be plural if it referred to Abelard’s correspondence.

\textit{It} appears to refer to love, the pronoun’s grammatical antecedent. Such an interpretation is substantiated later, when Eloisa remarks that her love came with “truths divine . . . from” (66) Abelard, but the sentence’s end makes this reading awkward—which is perhaps why some argue that the pronoun’s referent is Abelard’s letter. The sentence would make more sense if the pronoun referred to Abelard’s name. The uncertainty about the source of Eloisa’s love, created by the two possible meanings of it, should not simply be regarded as a source of undecidability, however. In the following lines, Pope takes advantage of the ambiguity to give the reader a better sense of why Eloisa’s love has re-emerged.

\textsuperscript{11} According to Pettit, the first part of the poem ends at line 128 and the second at 257.

\textsuperscript{12} See \textit{The Norton Anthology of English Literature 5th ed. vol. 1}, M. H Abrams, et. al., eds. (New York: Norton, 1986): p. 2,255.n5. The note has been removed from later editions of this anthology.
Dear fatal name! Rest ever unreveal’d,
Nor pass these lips in holy silence seal’d
Hide it, my heart, within that close disguise,
Where mixed with God’s, his lov’d Idea lies. (9-12)

The importance of Abelard’s name to Eloisa is paramount here, and while it in line eleven clearly refers to the name, this name has become entwined with the concept of love. The name, after all, is hid in the heart, the traditional seat of love. Further, hidden in her heart, the name is more than a name; it is an Idea that has become, because it is mixed with the Idea of God, analogous to the Idea of God, which is also synthesized with the concept of love in the biblical equation “God is love.” Abelard’s name is, in effect, analogous to the Word.

That the word Idea has been capitalized needs to be emphasized, for while one commentator has noted that this word “can have either or both the Platonic sense of ‘higher form’ and Locke’s sense of ‘retained sens’al’ image,” Pope is generally believed to be borrowing the term from John Locke. Murray Krieger, for instance, places the word in quotation marks throughout his article on the poem, and regardless of whether or not he is discussing the one place where Pope does not use a capital letter, he writes “idea” and defines it as “that fine Lockean term.” Pope, by contrast, differentiates an Idea from an idea by capitalizing the word all but once, when he calls “Fair eyes, and tempting looks . . . adored ideas!” (295-6), a phrase which clearly brings to mind “retained sensual” images.

The orthographic difference that creates the distinction between an Idea and an idea suggests that Pope’s use of the concept Idea ought to be situated within the Neoplatonic tradition. In this tradition, as Macrobius, the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher, writes, God is “the highest and first of all things, whom

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13 Some modern editors, such as those who prepared the text for The Norton Anthology of English Literature 7th ed. Vol. I, M. H Abrams, et. al., eds. (New York: Norton, 2000), have chosen to use lower case i’s throughout the poem.
the Greeks call the Good and the First Cause... wherein dwell the archetypal Forms of things which are called Ideas." Eloisa alludes to this tradition when she situates the Ideas in heaven and mentions Abelard's ability to "Blot out each bright Idea of the skies" (284). Yet Pope has also drawn on another element of Neoplatonism, the theory of correspondences as O. B. Hardison calls it. According to the principles of this theory, the Ideas originate with God but are capable of being implanted in our minds so that we can understand the world as it is. This theory, which remained influential throughout the seventeenth century, despite the emergence of more modern views of the cosmos, "postulated a reciprocal relationship between the microcosm of the mind, the macrocosm of nature and society," and the Ideas in the divine mind.

A mind containing God's Idea can read God's presence in the macrocosm, and having this ability is a sign that one has attained grace. In other words, as one

18 Hardison, 117.
19 I am not, it should be pointed out, trying to treat Pope as a Neoplatonic thinker. I am claiming that he is attempting to contextualize Eloisa's thought within medieval thought, at least as such thought would have been perceived in the eighteenth century.
20 The following poem by Edward Taylor (ca. 1642-1729), whose poems were discovered in 1937, expounds this theory of Ideas.

Meditation 6
Am I Thy gold? Or purse, Lord, for Thy wealth,
Whether in mine or mint refined for Thee?
I'm counted so, but count me o'er Thyself,
Lest gold washed face, and brass in heart I be.
I fear my touchstone touches when I try
Me and my counted gold too overly.

Am I new minted by Thy stamp indeed?
My eyes are dim; I cannot clearly see.
Be thou my spectacles that I may read
Thine Image and inscription stamped on me.
If Thy bright Image do upon me stand,
I am a golden angel in Thy hand.

Lord, make my soul Thy plate, Thine Image bright
Within the circle of the same enfile.
And on its brims in golden letters write
Thy superscription in an holy style.
grows more devout in the religious life, the Ideas are imprinted in the mind of the worshiper, and the universe comes to be perceived as an image of God. This process is reversed in the poem. As Eloisa begins her letter, God's Idea is present in her mind; if it were not, it could not be mixed with Abelard's, but later, Eloisa recognizes that "each bright Idea" (284) has returned to the heavens and that Abelard has the ability to blot them out and "take back that grace" (285). The location of God's Idea, as the poem opens, is therefore significant: the brief allusion to the theory of correspondences reveals the authenticity of Eloisa's commitment to the church. Having achieved grace, Eloisa was, until she discovered Abelard's letter to a friend, steadily progressing toward a union with God. The act of reading disrupts her progress.

We will return to this aspect of Eloisa's problem below. For now, we need to examine further Pope's use of Neoplatonism, which will allow us to dispel some of the confusion that has led critics to ignore it. If Idea is understood in its Platonic sense, Abelard's Idea must be nothing less than his essence. God, however, has not imprinted this Idea in Eloisa, for while Abelard's Idea has undoubtedly been

Then I should be Thy money, Thou my horde:
Let me Thy angel be, be Thou my Lord.
In The Poems of Edward Taylor, Donald E. Stanford, ed., (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968). Although Taylor is treated as an American poet, he was born and educated in England and only traveled to America in 1668. Pope certainly never read Taylor's poem, but I am not trying to establish that Pope was influenced by Taylor. I am only pointing out that the particular theory I am discussing would have been available to an educated reader. Further, the need to recall the theory of correspondences is unwittingly made apparent in a commentary on Taylor's poem by Barbara Johnson contained in a book meant to introduce students to current critical terms. Johnson's reading begins with Derrida's argument about the function of speech and writing, and since the poem is about becoming closer to God, Johnson claims that it should not "end up talking about writing" (43). Because of the emergence of writing in the poem—she goes on to argue—"the speaker seems to be farther away from coincidence with God at the end than he was at the beginning" (44). "The speaker," Johnson concludes, "cannot write his way into immediacy that would eliminate writing" (44-45). If writing signifies absence as Derrida claims, Johnson is right, but if the appearance of God's writing on the speaker's soul is a sign that the speaker has achieved grace, as an expounder of the theory of correspondences would argue, then Johnson is simply missing the point, not discovering yet more evidence for the deconstruction of the speech/writing opposition in the western tradition. The speaker is not attempting to "eliminate writing" to find God's presence; he is attempting to discover or verify God's writing to assure himself of God's presence. See “Writing” in Critical Terms for Literary Study. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1990: 39-49).
imprinted in Eloisa’s mind, it cannot have come from God. If it had, its presence
could not undermine Eloisa’s state of grace. Abelard’s Idea must have been
transmitted without divine assistance, and the only medium available to transmit it
is the written word. The letters contain the name that imprints Abelard’s presence
as Idea in her mind. Profane writing, it is therefore suggested, can generate
presence as essence. If any strand of Platonic thought contains such a notion,
contemporary commentators have not written about it. Nonetheless, this notion is
the one the poem asserts.

One more modification to Neoplatonic thought needs to be recognized. In
the poem, the Ideas come from two sources—God and Abelard—and the Idea
of each source has been imprinted in Eloisa’s mind. This contingency has led, Pope
seems to assume, to the mixture of the two Ideas and caused Eloisa’s perception
to become skewed. The primary Idea—traditionally God—influences the way in
which all others are perceived, so the presence of another Idea functioning in the
same way as the primary one would cause each of them to determine the way its
counterpart is perceived and would make it impossible to distinguish one from the
other. Eloisa’s love has re-emerged because Abelard, granted not intentionally, has
succeeded in imprinting his Idea in Eloisa’s mind, and consequently, his Idea has
become mixed with God’s. Eloisa is, for this reason, unable to privilege the Love
that is God over sensual love.

If reading Abelard’s letter causes Abelard’s essence to be imprinted in
Eloisa’s mind, the letter Eloisa is writing should at least have the potential to
function in a similar fashion, and that is what she, if only reflexively, hopes, as
becomes apparent when Eloisa asks Abelard to continue writing. Letters, Eloisa
tells him, “live. . . speak. . . , breathe what love inspires/. . . And waft a sigh from
Indus to the Pole” (53 and 58). This conceit explicitly calls attention to the power of
writing to make the writer present to the reader. The letter, like the writer, lives,

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21 This aspect of Eloisa’s problem further accounts for the tendency of critics to turn
to Locke’s theory to explain Pope’s poem. As Michael Deporte puts it, Locke’s Essay
Concerning Human Understanding (1689) contains “an important chapter . . .
dealing with ‘mixed’ ideas” (226), and Pope has certainly drawn on this chapter to
alter the theory of correspondences for his purposes.

22 John Dee defines God as “the Form of Forms” (B4 recto). See “Mathematicall
Preface” (1570), Euclide’s Elements of Geometry: The First VI Books. Trans. Thomas
speaks and breathes, and the distance between Indus and the Pole is contracted to the distance between two persons in which a sigh can travel and still be heard. The conceit also reveals that Eloisa is dwelling on something other than her request. If her purpose is to convince Abelard to continue his correspondence and insure that his presence remains in her life, Eloisa has chosen an odd way to go about it. Abelard is trying to cure her of her desire; asking him to write to help her to foster it is not a very effective way to get him to keep writing. What is even more problematic is Eloisa’s rhetoric, especially the Indus-to-the-Pole metaphor. The trope turns the logic of the message on its head, belying Eloisa’s expressed intention.

If Indus and the Pole are meant to be metaphors for the two different sites in which Abelard and Eloisa live, and if she is asking Abelard to write, then he, it follows, must be hot (in Indus) and Eloisa, cold (at the Pole). The comparison between the pole and the Paraclete is not inappropriate. Earlier, while addressing the statues, Eloisa had written, “Tho’ cold like you, unmov’d, and silent grown” (23). The place to which Abelard’s letters come can be correctly compared to the pole, but Abelard is also cold. Castrated, “the torch of Venus burns not for the dead” (258). In fact, “both Abelard and the Paraclete” are, as Morris notes, “linked imagistically throughout the poem.”23 The metaphor would make more sense if Eloisa had written “from Pole to Pole,” but if she had, she would have contradicted herself in another sense. The point of writing, as she describes it, is to inspire the recipient of the letter with what love inspires—heat. The place from which the letter comes must be hot if the metaphor is to make sense. Eloisa is the one whose heart feels a “long-forgotten heat,” so the contradictions underlying her rhetoric reveal her desire to make herself present to Abelard and heat him up.

Her writing, however, has a much different function: it makes Abelard present to her in another sense. Employing a technique more commonly associated with typological poems such as John Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel (1681), Pope implies that as Eloisa writes, the boundaries differentiating the past from the present are being dismantled. The technique appropriated by Pope is the defining characteristic of typological texts, the finding of structural correlations between Old Testament stories and contemporary history. As is well known, certain writers up

23 Morris, p. 262.
until the end of the seventeenth century posited the notion that Old Testament stories and recent events participate in the same structures, or partake in an “eternal pattern,”24 to which all history is bound. Behind the belief that there is an eternal pattern structuring history lies the assumption that in the mind of an omniscient God, all events take place simultaneously, so the boundaries separating the past, present, and future are blurred, something William Blake demonstrates when he uses typology, granted not in as traditional a manner as Dryden, to create a sense of simultaneity in his epic Milton (1804).25

“Eloisa to Abelard” is obviously not a typological poem. But the relationship in the poem between Eloisa’s past experience and her present one is reminiscent of the relationship between Old Testament stories and contemporary history in typological texts. As Eloisa recounts the circumstances of her affair with Abelard, she concentrates on three moments: her meeting and falling in love with Abelard, the castration scene, and her taking of vows. In each of these moments, Abelard’s position in relation to God, as perceived by Eloisa, corresponds to the position Abelard’s Idea has in relation to God’s in the present. Her reflection on the past is therefore simultaneously a reflection on her present. Her past, in other words, participates in her present, and her present participates in her past, which is, as Steven Zwicker demonstrates, the relationship between the past and present posited in typological thought.26 Reading Abelard’s letter to a friend inaugurates a virtual repetition of her affair, undoing the linearity of her life. The past and Abelard thereby become present in temporality.

Eloisa’s original meeting of Abelard corresponds to her discovery of his letter to a friend. Both events lead to a love that obliges Eloisa to abandon God’s Law. In and of itself, this correspondence is inconsequential, but when Eloisa turns to Abelard’s seduction of her, the correlation between the past and the present becomes quite evident. Falling in love, then as now, requires Eloisa to abandon an achieved grace and return to a fallen condition. That she was in a state of grace before meeting Abelard is indicated by her ability to see him, from the very start, as

26 Zwicker see p. 27.
an “emanation of th’all beauteous Mind” (62), for only with God’s Idea in her mind could she see beyond the fallen condition of the man Abelard and see in him the image of God. This state, however, is not an innate one. To become Abelard’s mistress, Eloisa must travel “Back thro’ the paths of pleasing sense” (69). In the context, the phrase “pleasing sense” connotes bodily pleasure, while the word “back” signifies that she was once again placing such pleasures above virtue, rediscovering, not discovering, sin.

Eloisa’s life story, in both periods, participates in a structural pattern that involves returning from a state of grace to a fallen condition. The significance of this structural correlation is clarified as Eloisa recalls the beginning of her affair (see 59-72). At this point in her letter, Eloisa is focusing on the past, but as she concludes her account of her seduction, she exchanges the past with the present tense and avers “Dim and remote the joys of saints I see,/ Nor envy them, that heaven I lose for thee” (71-72). The change of tense signals the erasure of the difference between the two periods and calls attention to the repetitive quality of Eloisa’s story, or to the emergence of something analogous to the “eternal pattern” in history posited by typology in Eloisa’s personal life. In the next verse paragraph, Eloisa continues to write about the past as if it were present. Remembering her resistance to Abelard’s desire to marry, she writes as if Abelard is still bent on getting married, reviewing her past arguments and asking him to “make me mistress to the man I love” (88)—again present(ing) the past by using the present tense.27

Eloisa’s conflation of the two periods continues in the castration scene. As Brendan O’Herir points out, “her visualization of the attack on Abelard (which Eloisa did not witness) is at the same time a lively representation of the horrid change in her own life.”28 O’Herir is discussing Eloisa’s transformation into a nun—the episode Eloisa turns to in the verse paragraph following the description of the castration—and he goes on to argue that during the initiation rite, the images of

27 It does not matter that footnotes in modern editions point out that Eloisa did marry Abelard, for neither in the poem nor in his footnotes does Pope call his reader’s attention to this fact, and since Pope has taken the trouble to provide notes to aid with interpretation, it is significant that he left this information out.

Abelard’s being castrated and “the naked lover [Christ] bound and bleeding upon the Cross” had become, like the two Ideas in the present, mixed. To understand what is going on here, we need to recognize that the Cross functions as images function in the Catholic Church, especially in the medieval Church, so the concept image must be treated as something that is more than simply a representation.

Eamon Duffy, discussing the images of saints, gives us a sense of the relationship between the figure represented and his/her image in the traditional church. “The saint,” Duffy writes, “was believed to be in a very direct relationship with his or her image,” and while few people would have been likely to make a simple identification of the saint with the image, the identification of homage to the image with homage to the saint might be taken to mean that possession of the image gave one some sort of leverage over the person represented. One of the best-known stories from the miracles of the Virgin was that of the woman who took the wooden bambino from the arms of a statue of the Madonna and held it to ransom for the release of her own child.

The child in this story was, of course, recovered, so even though the image may not be the figure it represents, in the same sense as the Eucharist is the body of Christ, the image does present the saint to the worshiper in a very real sense. The image reproduces, it would not be wrong to say, the Idea or essence of the sacred character given form. If images are being treated in Pope’s poem in the traditional sense and if the image of Abelard being castrated is superimposed with the image of Christ on the cross as Eloisa takes her vows, Eloisa’s participation in the rite both reflects and puts into concrete terms the dilemma Eloisa faces while she writes her letter. During each event, Eloisa is incapable of differentiating the Ideas of the two lovers—Christ and Abelard.

Although the images of the two are mixed at the beginning of her description of the rite, they do not remain in this condition. As Eloisa concludes her account, she recalls, “to those dread altars as I drew,/ Not on the Cross my eyes

29 O’Herir p. 318.
were fixed, but you” (114-15). Eloisa was looking at Abelard, not Christ. No longer were the two images indistinguishable. Abelard’s had gained precedence. A similar change occurs while Eloisa writes: near the end of the second part of her letter, she notes that Abelard’s “image steals between my God and me” (268). Her taking of vows corresponds to her writing of the letter, since the word image is practically a synonym for Idea or essence. As she does each, the compound image of Abelard-God is transformed into two distinct images, and Eloisa is compelled to gaze at Abelard’s. Abelard’s Idea has become present to the sight.

The import of this development is at least twofold and needs to be examined carefully. According to Francus, Abelard’s Idea has surpassed God’s, having been “raised” above His. Although Francus is correct about Abelard’s dominant status, she ignores the spatial metaphor. In order for Abelard to come between Eloisa and God, God’s Idea, which was within Eloisa’s mind as the poem began, must have re-ascended. Writing the letter completes Eloisa’s fall from grace. More interestingly, the way in which the presence of God’s Idea was maintained while Eloisa lived in grace is markedly different from the way in which Abelard’s Idea is made present. In both the Paraclete and the place where Eloisa took her vows, God’s Idea is physically present in the form of Christ’s image but ignored, something that becomes particularly evident once we realize that the images of Christ in the Paraclete are never mentioned. Abelard, who was once physically present in Eloisa’s life, is, by contrast, an Idea projected into all that Eloisa experiences with her senses: he not only can be viewed, but his voice is “in every hymn” (269) heard. The contrast is striking. God’s image remains, without being seen, whereas Abelard is technically absent but seen everywhere. Indeed, Abelard’s physical absence is inconsequential to his more profound existence in Eloisa’s life.

31 The relationship between Christ’s image and God’s essence, I should point out, is particularly important, for if the cross were merely a trinket, there would be no great need for Eloisa to fix her eye on it. Looking at a man, who is also an image of God, albeit a fallen one, would be sufficient.
32 Francus, p. 487.
33 Eloisa does mention, I should add, the statues of saints, whose images adorn the nunnery because during their lives, “they became,” in the words of Donald Attwater, “Christ-like” (11) in the most profound sense. The saints might even be described as temporal images of God, but they, unlike Christ, will always be secondary images of Him. Eloisa’s reference to these images may mean that Eloisa withdraws from God by degrees. For a discussion of what it means to be a saint according to the Catholic Church see Donald Attwater’s “Introduction” to The Penguin Dictionary of Saints (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).
His Idea has fully assumed the function that God’s is meant to serve. His presence as thing to the sight is analogous to the way one sees God in the macrocosm of the universe in the state of grace.

By the end of the poem’s first part, Eloisa has demonstrated that through reading and writing, she has produced Abelard’s presence as essence, in temporality, and as thing to the sight. Thus, if we replace *speech* with *writing* in the quotation from Derrida with which I began, we will have a fairly accurate summary of the significance of writing in “Eloisa to Abelard.” The effects of Eloisa’s writing remain until the third section of the poem, for at the conclusion to the second one, Eloisa continues to see Abelard’s image, indicating that his Idea is still in her mind and that God’s, because not seen, remains in heaven. Nevertheless, at the close of the first section and throughout the middle section, Eloisa implores Abelard to come to the Paraclete. The nominal purpose of this request is to get him to teach her to subdue nature, but her desire to return to God’s graces remains ambivalent. She continues to “solicit new” (186) pleasures and to “curse her innocence” (189), so although her first plea for Abelard to come is the only one in which she attempts to equate his arrival with physical contact, her suppression of this fantasy seems as weak as her attempt to stop writing Abelard’s name at the beginning of the letter.

The impossibility of actualizing the physical contact that Eloisa desires is not the only aspect of her request that should strike us as odd. It would seem to be almost superfluous, because Abelard’s presence has already, at least on the poem’s terms, been acquired in a more real sense. Yet the idea of Abelard’s coming is important in the larger context of the poem. Because this idea is coupled with the sexual fantasy, it eventually compels Eloisa to shake off the bonds of her desire. Obtaining Abelard in a physical, as opposed to a metaphysical, sense will, she comes to understand, make him absent. The persistent need of Eloisa to fantasize, even in Abelard’s presence, demonstrates the defining contradiction of the idea (but not the *idea*) that is Abelard. His physical presence is tantamount to absence. This aspect of the problem becomes clear as Eloisa fantasizes about the possibilities that are open to her: “Give all thou canst—and let me dream the rest” (126), she asks. Dreaming the rest, however, is exactly what she has already been doing: “at the close of each, sad, sorrowing day,/ Fancy restores what vengeance snatched away” (225-26).
In Abelard’s absence, Eloisa’s only recourse has been to dream or create shadows of the man to replace him, but his arrival will also oblige her to dream. Procuring Abelard’s physical presence will reproduce his absence, undoing the effects of her writing. Castrated, he is nothing but a voice generating his own absence, and this absence will enable Eloisa to “quit Abelard for God” (128), allowing God’s presence to “Fill [her] fond heart” (205) and bringing “all the bright abode” (127) into view. Through realizing the contradiction created by the impossibility of enjoying Abelard physically, even more than through knowing that she must forsake her desire in order to achieve grace—something she resists doing until the end—Eloisa will resolve the conflict between desire and knowledge or nature and grace disrupting her life.

In the last section of the poem, Eloisa begins to understand that Abelard’s castration makes his physical presence signify absence, but the significance of this realization is not immediately clear to her. Initially, she misreads Abelard’s absence as Absence, that is, as satanic. His physical presence, she imagines, will transform him into the Absence that will “Assist the fiends and tear [her] from [her] God” (289). She thus tells him to “fly [from her]! Far as Pole from Pole” (289), rewriting the “from-Indus-to-the-Pole” metaphor that she had used earlier. By reconfiguring the terms of this metaphor, Eloisa implies that she has given up her desire to heat Abelard. She is once again on the path toward grace. Moreover, since the site in which each character is located is now characterized as a “Pole” rather than just the one which contains Abelard, his presence as Idea seems to have diminished from the Platonic to the Lockean sense. Abelard’s Idea was, after all, the source of Eloisa’s heat. No longer in possession of his Idea, Eloisa only retains Abelard’s “ador’d ideas” (296).

Still, the risk of damnation remains. Earlier, I noted that Pope alludes to the theory of correspondences by inverting its trajectory. God’s Idea, at the beginning of the letter, is in Eloisa’s mind, but it returns to the heavens as the poem progresses: the more usual sequence would be the other way around. Similarly, the exchange of Abelard’s Idea with his idea in the last section of the letter points to another inverted sequence. The first letter that Eloisa had read presumably brought into her mind Abelard’s sensual idea, for she laments not being able to
forget. Memory, it is suggested, creates the conditions that allow her to receive Abelard’s Idea, so the continued presence of his idea in the final section of the letter leaves open the possibility that his Idea will again become present. Eloisa seems to understand the risk, and as if she cannot find grace without Abelard’s physical presence, she implores Abelard to come one last time, but again, confuses his absence for Absence. Asking him to “Suck my last breath, and catch my flying soul” (324), she nearly abandons God forever, just as Doctor Faustus, in Christopher Marlowe’s play, renounces God in the embrace of Helen’s satanic shadow, who “suck[s] forth [Faustus’s] soul.”

Eloisa, however, finally accepts what the reader already knows. Abelard’s physical presence only absents him as lover, and experiencing this absence will allow her to see above the image that is between her and God. The image of Abelard “Present[ing] the Cross before [her] uplifted eye” (327) thus contains an orthographic pun, and we must see the noun “present” in the verb “to present” and accept that Eloisa has written herself back into grace. She once again sees God’s presence. But she does more than simply achieved grace; she also achieves, or will achieve, in a chaste manner what she desires of Abelard. If Abelard’s Idea has been between Eloisa and God, her ability to see God implies that she has risen to the place where Abelard is, so when Eloisa writes, “May one kind grave unite each hapless name/ And graft my love immortal on thy fame”—a desire which was, Pope notes, fulfilled—she is contrasting this grave to “th’unfruitful urn” (262) that she had earlier contemplated in sadness. The grave, because it is “kind,” must be fruitful or heavenly; in it, each name—a synonym for Idea in the opening lines of the poem—is united. In death Eloisa’s Idea will become mixed with Abelard’s, and the two lovers will be joined like Milton’s angels, who when they “embrace,/ Total they mix, [in a] union of pure with pure/ Desiring.”

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