

Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs:  
A Contemporary Encounter with Contemplative Aspirations

A Thesis Submitted to  
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Master of Arts in Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

Recent scholarship in biblical interpretation has remained suspicious of the “allegorical” approach to scripture, presumed as common to Medieval Christianity, and Bernard of Clairvaux is often acknowledged as paradigmatic of contemplative exegesis. Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs is often alleged to be an ultimate example of the dangers of monastic “allegorizing,” in that such an approach lacks any consistency of method and maintains an ideological stance that is suspicious of and ultimately rejects the nature of bodily existence. This thesis counters these claims by utilizing the work of contemporary medievalists, instead of contemporary biblical exegetes, as a lens in a close reading of Bernard’s *Sermones Super Cantica*, as well as his textual interaction with Peter Abelard and Peter the Venerable. This thesis suggests that Bernard is consistent in his method of performative reading and holds bodily existence as vital to the monastic and broader Christian way of life.



## **ABBREVIATIONS**

SBO	<i>Sancti Bernardi Opera</i>
SS 1	<i>On the Song of Songs 1</i>
SS 2	<i>On the Song of Songs 2</i>
SS 3	<i>On the Song of Songs 3</i>
SS 4	<i>On the Song of Songs 4</i>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	iii
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	iv
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	v
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	7
<b>Introduction</b> .....	7
<b>Scholarship</b> .....	14
<b>Rejection</b> .....	21
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	26
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	30
<b>Introduction</b> .....	30
<b>Dismissal or Deepening</b> .....	33
<b>Departure</b> .....	45
<b>Return</b> .....	51
<b>Conclusion: One</b> .....	54
<b>Continuing the Conclusion: Two</b> .....	54
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> .....	57
<b>Location</b> .....	57
<b>Current Conflict</b> .....	58
<b>Bernard's Spiritual Words and Bodies: First Reading</b> .....	63
<b>Bernard's Words and Spiritual Bodies: Further Meditation</b> .....	70
<b>Analogies and Images</b> .....	73
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	79
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	80
<b>Introduction to the Conclusion</b> .....	80
<b>A Persistent Problem</b> .....	82
<b>Continuation</b> .....	87
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	90

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## INTRODUCTION

In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, four young men and women pass a night in the enchanted landscape of a forest populated by fairies, who wield a variety of magical powers and have a penchant for changing the rules of relationships on the protagonists. But the transgression and alteration of the laws that govern the realm of the city where Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, Helena, and even the rude mechanical Bottom is far from anarchy; the "antagonists" Puck and Oberon simply follow a different set of rules native to their green world. Following their tryst in the green world, in act IV, scene I, the four reflect on the wonders of the previous night, and the altered perspectives they have now acquired. Hermia and Helena, the two women, provide the most succinct understanding of their adventures. Hermia muses, "Methinks I see these things with parted eye, // When everything else seems double."<sup>1</sup> Helena responds, "So Methinks; // And I have found my Demetrius like a jewel, // Mine own, and not mine own." Lysander and Demetrius dismiss or explain away the powers of the green world once they reenter the world of Athens; their perspectives altered by the external power of magic alone. But the two women have been transformed more profoundly, realizing that an entirely different perception of reality lies in the unexplored forest immediately next to their home in the city, a understanding preserved even after they leave the woodland behind.

I bring up this passage in Shakespeare because it provides an alluring analogy to my own experience in exploring Bernard of Clairvaux's thoroughly monastic commentary on the Song of Songs. Like the four Shakespearean protagonists in the otherworldly forest outside the familiar and predictable city of Athens, it is easy to assume that there are no rules to the madness that seems to ensue once we enter Bernard's contemplative commentary on the Song. The worlds are different. As readers, we are entering an ancient and richly nuanced forest of thought where

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking Penguin, 1969), 168.

Bernard is as comfortable as Puck navigating his way through the foggy trees and textual possibilities entirely unfamiliar to outsiders. But if our four had been able to momentarily look beyond their own pressing concerns, they may have acquired a broad sketch of how things work in this unfamiliar landscape (for example, don't fall asleep or follow disembodied voices). The same rule applies to reading Bernard's masterpiece. Often, those with modern dispositions and expectations enter Bernard's world unaware that there could be a different set of rules operating in his work because they are preoccupied with chasing their own interests. We who are not of Bernard's time dash into and out of his thicket without pausing to look behind a few trees and catch sight of the rules that govern the place.

This is a particular temptation to those, like myself, who are at home in the Protestant Christian world. We assume the contemplative tradition is a threatening, overgrown wasteland and spend only what time is necessary for us to dismiss what we find there. In doing so, we miss out on the rich benefits of realizing that this place is our own, and not our own—it is a crucial part of who we are as a community even though we have in many ways left it behind. We forego the possibility of viewing our history with a parted eye, which gives us the double vision to see clearly how Bernard is the same and different from us, our own and not our own.

When I reflect on how I was led to undertake this journey into unfamiliar territory I remember one instance in particular. In 2004, the recording artists Jars of Clay announced that their next project, *Redemption Songs*, was to consist of their performing ancient songs from the early church, intending it to be an album that recognized the rich history of Christianity and the role the historic church plays in the church today. I was interested, since the undertaking seemed to promise an interesting contemporary use and reinvention of the historical church for modern Christians. However, I was disappointed when the track listing was revealed to the public:

almost every song was composed during one of the Anglo-American Great Awakenings, while a few were traditional African-American spirituals, the whole project extending to the truly ancient, “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” None predated the year 1700 and all were originally written in English. I was shocked to realize that the “ancient and early church” for some in my community might not even reach as far as the relatively familiar terrain of 17<sup>th</sup> century continental Europe.<sup>2</sup>

This encounter embedded in me a rhetorical question of identity: did the Christian tradition of evangelical North America—my tradition—begin with Jonathan Edwards? Or with the emigration of the Puritans? Or with the Reformers? I had never been introduced to any positive aspects of the pre-Wycliffe church aside from a cursory understanding of the Roman persecutions and the conversion of Constantine. What began as mere curiosity concerning what appeared to be an obscure thousand year span of Church history developed into a persistent enigma. Snooping into esoteric areas of the past quickly led to my bewilderment when I engaged myself in reading primary sources. Browsing medieval legends of saints, ancient bestiaries, and monastic sermons in fragmentary manner with the hope of understanding their significance is impossible without earnest preparation and patient study, as I soon realized. I could not follow the logic, could not make the connections, could not fill in the gaps or recognize the assumptions working in the background of the medievals I encountered. I had wandered into an enchanted forest without a Puck to guide me, and quickly discovered that the rules of the “ancient” church as portrayed by the evangelically rooted Jars of Clay did not apply here. I am of course singling out these fine contemporary artists quite unfairly, for most of us who are a part

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<sup>2</sup> For an admittedly non-scholarly analysis of the subject of this anecdote, see the Christianity Today review of the album, by Russ Breimeier, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/music/reviews/2005/redemptionsongs.html>. “Jars of Clay: Redemption Songs.” In *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com>. March 2005. Accessed August 2007.

of their community similarly fail to have the perspective required for a vigorous engagement with the more astonishing aspects of Christian history.

It is failure that motivates me to examine the medieval period, Bernard especially. This failure does not necessarily concern our lack of familiarity with historical events—that would be remedied appropriately with textbook style recitation of facts and general summaries. The failure I face—one shared by the contemporary church—is a disconnect of thought in relation to our predecessors. The ancient and medieval world *is* all but a fairy enchanted forest to our Athenian (read: contemporary American) mindset. The problem is not simply our failure to recognize ancient and medieval Christianity's relationship to the present, as in the glaring pre-American omissions of *Redemption Songs*, but our inability and unwillingness to recognize their thinking and practice as Christian at all. Perhaps we can press the charge further: it is a failure to recognize that these historic communities thought or practiced in a faithful way. The way that Bernard and his age operated is so divorced from what we can know that we need to see things as double, with parted eye, for we are of two different realities but share the same plane of existence as members of the universal body of Christ. It is no longer possible to pretend we moderns are of the same mind as our predecessors. However, it is boorish to believe there is no connection between us. We need to keep a firm eye on both worlds for understanding to be possible.

But is there any compelling reason for contemporary Christianity to truly know their historical counterparts except as an idle avocation? I cannot answer this question conclusively. I can only place a wager, one resting on the recognition that something has been lost and is possible to recover, something which can nurture an inclination that remains from before we divorced ourselves from our heritage. The break was not complete, for we maintained the

scholastic stance which has proven itself so useful in formulating ever finer divisions in our theology and biblical studies and apologetics writers. The mind of the schoolmasters, while still atypical to us, retains the respect for linguistic and historical analysis, the question and answer, the veneer of control and predictability so admired by contemporary Christian writers. What has been misplaced, and often outright rejected, is the earlier monastic practice requiring the engagement of mind, body and soul: the unpredictable and dangerous methods requiring great personal investment. It is this type of reading that I hope to re-discover in Bernard's writings, and further hope that it has something to say to Christians my age, and of my age.

I was pushed further toward this interest on another front, for the week I began my graduate studies I happened to attend in Grand Rapids, Michigan a performance of Cal Seerveld's *The Greatest Song*, an oratorio interpretation of the Song. Further, I developed an interest in the work of Paul Ricoeur, especially his essays on biblical interpretation, the most interesting of which was published in *Thinking Biblically*, titled "The Nuptial Metaphor," which was his take on the historical development of Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Song of Songs. These contemporary voices, combined with my interest in the contemplative strand of medieval monasticism, led me to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones*, one of the last distinguished meditations on the Song before the scholastic approach began to conceal the contemplative approach from the eyes of a wider audience.

This project unfolds in what could be called five acts. The first is this introduction, my apology for the project and an explanation of where I'm coming from and where I hope to head. The second is an introduction into Bernard's contemplative world and the rejection it often faces in our own time. The third and fourth are close readings of Bernard's *Sermones*, the first examining his practice in general and the second examining his attitude toward bodies. While

time and space do not allow for the fifth to be a thorough assessment of Ricoeur's understanding of biblical interpretation, it does provide the opportunity for pointing out how Seerveld's rendering of the Song offers a unique connection between contemporary minds and contemplative methods. Even if this thesis offers but a dream of how things might be to a few in my community, then my labors shall not have been in vain.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

Within my larger project, the goal of this first chapter is twofold. First, I will present a broad sketch of Bernard's place in his world as a contemplative monastic reader, primarily through his encounter with and exposition of the scriptures. I will do this by means of a contemporary contrast to be seen in his conflict with Peter Abelard. This conflict reveals opposing methods of reading and interpretation which proved to be more decisive and divisive than the propositional results of such practices. Following this introduction, the essay will move to introduce two contemporary medievalists into the conversation, Robert Sweetman and Mary Carruthers, by incorporating their research into medieval modes of thinking and reading. Specifically, I will examine Sweetman's reflection on the concept of performative reading as it may apply to the contemplative monastic style of commentary, which will eventually focus on the remarkable example of the Song of Songs. I will also incorporate Carruthers' insights into the role of mnemonics in medieval intellectual and spiritual formation as it relates to the reader interacting with a text to the extent that it is made the reader's own. The work of these and other scholars will enable us to deepen the image of Bernard's reading and literary practice already raised by contrast with Abelard's contemporary practice.

The second task will be to present contemporary arguments that firmly reject the method and results of Bernard's reading. Because I will later concentrate on his explication and commentary on the Song of Songs, the contemporary detractors that I will examine will also be taken up with this section of scripture. Although their work as commentators does not belong to the specific genre of the sermon, these detractors are, like Bernard, interested in the implications of the text to the faithful who hold it as an inspired word, one which demands to be taken

seriously in thought and action. For these commentators, Bernard acts as a foil, an example of what happens when scriptural exegesis goes wrong and results in a broadly termed “allegorical” interpretation. Unfortunately, many contemporary readers stop at Bernard’s exegesis without examining closely his understanding of a proper posture toward scripture, and the results are neither sympathetic nor are they developed in a careful manner, a pitfall we will attempt to avoid by taking seriously what has become a unfamiliar approach to scriptural exegesis. With this directive the essay will conclude, having introduced the gist of Bernard’s literary technique and two succinct points of contemporary suspicion toward this approach. What we make of Bernard’s technique, and the suspicions it has provoked, will constitute the heart of our analysis in subsequent chapters.

### **Mode of Investigation**

Contemporary readers should not expect a medieval writer or reader to offer a clear exposition of their strategies and methods, and Bernard is an exemplary medieval writer. When Bernard wrote, he wrote for the purpose of edifying his community, one well versed in a language that was acquired by observing and imitating the teachers who would pass not only knowledge to their students, but also the *moralitas* or proper character and manner not available through either solitary or communal reading alone.<sup>3</sup> The monk was trained to emulate the

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Jaeger, in *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 3, provides an illuminating exposition of how the process of the medieval teacher imparting his *mores*, his character or morals in relation to the text, to students was the vital component of education. “The discipline of *mores* turned [medieval students] into living works of art by teaching them conduct.” This is difficult for moderns to accept, for, “given this orientation of studies an inventory of the books read and the intellectual goals pursued has only a secondary value. We have to put aside the conception of school learning as primarily the transmission of knowledge: lecturing, note-taking, book-learning, the generation of understanding, the cultivation of critical thought.” This is illustrated beautifully on page 62, where Jaeger includes a delightful poem by Adelman of Liège praising the most important aspects of the education he received from Fulbert of Chartres.

patterns of their masters and the posture of the community long before he would have the opportunity to engage in unique composition; if Bernard were to explain his method, it would be roughly analogous to our contemporaries providing an exhaustive commentary on the history of western civilization before any public communication. While feasibly necessary in the most extreme circumstances where speaker and audience are unfamiliar to each other or attempt to radically redefine cultural terms, the thoroughness of monastic education combined with the relatively insular community rendered such a preamble unnecessary. This training, while deeply textual and reflective to the minutest detail, results in a practice that is distinctly foreign to contemporary modes of textuality. We are left searching for footholds in the written edifice of this unfamiliar ancestor. As Mary Carruthers concludes in the context of her own examination of monastic methods of thinking and rhetoric: “the monks never themselves produced any textbooks of rhetoric by which we might now recognize, as we can for antiquity, an orthodoxy of written principles and rules.”<sup>4</sup> This medieval monastic mindset is, as any way of thinking, more complex than the language in which it exists, and, like a language, is difficult to master. Because it is methodologically implicit, this approach demands a great deal of tacit knowledge before one can comprehend its rationale. The question is how we are to gain the “tacit knowledge” necessary to enter into Bernard's mindset.

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“Ah, with what dignity and diligence in questions of *mores*,  
With what gravity of subject matter,  
What sweetness in words

He explained the mysteries of higher knowledge.” We note that dignity, diligence, gravity, and sweetness of Fulbert are praised higher than the effectiveness of explanation.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2. Also, Robert Sweetman in, “Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care,” in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*. Ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Zeigler, 133-67. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) reflects that the delicate process of fully understanding how readers are, “capable of constructing ourselves in relation to texts,” especially medieval ones, is, “particularly delicate [because] the past often comes to us reticent and shy, bruised by much mishandling”(150).

Does Bernard himself offer any keyhole through which we can glimpse him and his milieu? Although the original image is no longer available, some reflection of him and his world remains available in the writings that survive. As such, I propose to illustrate Bernard's intellectual and spiritual approach to sacred texts in a two-pronged fashion, both indirectly through primary sources and directly through secondary scholarship. We cannot delve immediately into his *Sermones Super Cantica*, even though it will eventually function as the example *sine qua non* of monastic literary culture in the scriptural exegesis of the High Middle Ages. This series, as Leclercq explained, is Bernard's most advanced work, and as Bernard himself advises, it "may be delivered only to well prepared ears and minds."<sup>5</sup> We must pass through a truncated novitiate before proceeding to that point.

Although Bernard offers no direct explication of his technique, he does defend it against perceived threats, and we will examine two passages that disclose a center of the dispute between Bernard and his (in)famous opponent Peter Abelard. The issue that crucially divides Bernard and Abelard concerns different methods of reading and explicating scripture. From this indirect description provided by Bernard we will be able to glance at this chimera<sup>6</sup> out of the corner of our historiographical eye, provided we utilize the lenses provided by two scholars of our own period.

Both Mary Carruthers and Robert Sweetman focus their studies on the way medievals think, specifically how they cognitively operate in relation to texts. Through Carruthers' work on contemplative *memoria* and the *machina memorialis*, which she claims to be the foundation

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS I*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, Paris, 1844-1864, 221v, vol. 182, column 451.

of the monastic community's conceptual scheme<sup>7</sup>, and Sweetman's exploration of performative reading, a manner of approaching sacred texts that is customarily not foremost in the minds of scholars<sup>8</sup>, contemporary readers can adjust their vision to see the subject in a manner appropriate to it.

### Example

The conflict between Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux requires little introduction. Much attention has been paid to the titanic struggle between the so-termed "scholastic" and "monastic" positions that each, respectively, has been appointed to paradigmatically represent. A number of studies, however, challenge this conception of a neat division between Bernard as defender of conservative orthodox faith and Abelard as champion of philosophical reflection and reason.<sup>9</sup> If, as Brian Stock claims, recent scholarship now recognizes, "that the doctrinal differences between them are not as great as they themselves thought,"<sup>10</sup> their differences rest in the manner of their study rather than the substance of it. We may proceed with the assumption

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<sup>7</sup> "Memoria refers not to how something is communicated, but to what happens once one has received it, to the interactive process of familiarizing—or textualizing—which occurs between oneself and others' words in memory." Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>8</sup> "In general, scholars have given most thought to the structure and character of scholarly reading, and each scholarly discipline has developed its own descriptions and traditions." Robert Sweetman, "Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care," 135.

<sup>9</sup> Etienne Gilson has published several influential studies on both sides of this topic. In *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, Trans. A. H. C. Downes (London & New York: Sheed and Ward, 1940), Gilson challenges a simplistic classification of the academic ability of the Abbot of Clairvaux, claiming that, "St. Bernard was in no wise a metaphysician, but he must remain in our eyes a theologian whose speculative vigor and power of synthesis puts him among the greatest" (viii). D. E. Luscomb in *The School of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) also observes that the, "monastic opposition to Abelard has recently been, to misappropriate a word which once tended to be used of Abelard himself, rehabilitated and it is now quite common to find writers who underline the positive doctrinal and methodological contributions which Bernard himself made to, and did not merely borrow from, scholastic thought" (111). Gilson attempts to balance this emerging portrait in *Heloise and Abelard*, trans. L. K. Shook (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), especially in his chapter on the conversion of Abelard, pp.66-86, where he evaluates Abelard's monastic vocation, noting, "Shame before the world was a stronger motive for entering religion than the desire to consecrate himself before God. Nevertheless, the one motive did not exclude the other; and his total submission to God's judgment, in contrast with Heloise's stubborn rebellion, seems to have been the germ of his whole religious life, the starting point and support of his soul's spiritual growth" (67).

<sup>10</sup> Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 404. In this passage Stock also provides several examples of the reevaluation of the dogmatic opposition between Bernard and Abelard, or lack thereof.

that both are intelligent and learned, and they both possess a keen interest in reading scriptures. To understand the distinctions between the two, we will examine a paragraph from one of Bernard's epistles, where he expresses his opposition to Abelard's methodology.

We have in France a new theologian, a student of the old master, who since his childhood has played around in logic and now babbles studying Holy Writ. Doctrines which had been condemned in the past and silenced, both his and others', are brought back to life by him. Moreover, he adds new ones to them. He claims not to be ignorant of whatever is to be found in heaven above or on earth below, except of the phrase, 'I do not know'. He puts his mouth into the heavens and examines the divine heights, and, returning to us, he utters words inexpressible. Being prepared to use reason in order to account for everything, even for that which surpasses reason, he proudly sins against reason, and against faith.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the polemical tone of this passage, a post-Enlightenment reading may yield to an initial perception of the disagreement as simply a clash between unhindered rational thought and faithful adherence to doctrine. The offence, it would seem, is not so much Abelard's "play[ing] around in logic," so much as his expansion into the realm of, "study[ing] Holy Writ." Indeed, on the surface it would seem that his "doctrine" is of more concern than his, "claims not to be ignorant of whatever is to be found in heaven above or on earth below." The latter complaint seems merely to register Bernard's exception to Abelard's notorious arrogance. So one can ask how one avoids speaking of Bernard's sense here of a choice between faith and reason in a context in which faith and reason are opposed.

Abelard himself, however, provides clarification of this aspect in a passage from his *Historia Calamitatum*, where he describes his method and attitude when a colleague asked him, "what [he] thought of reading the Holy Scriptures,"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistolae* 190, I, 1; *SBO* VIII: 17-8, as quoted in and translated by M. B. Pranger, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought: Broken Dreams* (Leiden, New York, Koln: Brill, 1994), 30.

<sup>12</sup>*The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 7.

I replied that concentration on such reading was most beneficial for the salvation of the soul, but that I found it most surprising that for educated men the writing or glosses of the fathers themselves were not sufficient... I was asked by many of those present if I could or would venture to tackle this myself. I said I was ready... They then pressed unwanted advice on me, telling me not to hurry on something so important but to remember my inexperience and give longer thought to working out and confirming my exposition. I replied indignantly that it was not my custom to benefit from practice, but I relied on my own intelligence...<sup>13</sup>

Abelard declares outright that he utilizes the church's sanctioned glosses on scripture and the essential commentaries of the Fathers. His ability to understand the official doctrine of the church for his purposes, as contemporary scholars claim, is unquestioned. But in the protest to his prosecution, the persecuted Abelard makes us aware of the elephant in the courtroom: simply put, what more is there? "Education" and the "glosses of the fathers," he remarks with disdain, are not sufficient for certain of his contemporaries. The advice he received to not hurry, to devote "longer thought" to his task, "working out" and "confirming" his interpretation through practice, are all "indignantly" rejected. Instead, Abelard opposed the application of reason through intelligence. He firmly believed that the latter was sufficient to the task without the use of the former.

By collating Bernard's and Abelard's descriptions we can infer that Bernard is in fact disturbed by Abelard's rejection of a contemplative practice of "*fides*," in reading and interpreting Scripture in favor of his own "*intelligentia*." Bernard depicts Abelard's confidence in the efficacy of his own intellectual acts uncoupled from a contemplative practice of *fides* as "*contra rationem*" and "*contra fidem*," i.e., first against reason and only then against faith. In other words, faith and reason are viewed as distinct moments of readerly and hermeneutical practice, not as existential stances with respect to the world (as in Enlightenment perspective).

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<sup>13</sup>*The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*, 7-8.

Abelard, not Bernard, seems to oppose *fides* and *ratio* as unrelated to each other and further claims that *ratio* is the only necessary faculty required in order to read the Holy Scriptures.

### Scholarship

This project consequently will not focus on Bernard or Abelard's understanding of the relationship between *ratio* and *fides* as existential stances but on the textual suppositions within which *ratio* and *fides* operate as readerly and hermeneutical principles. To cast Bernard as champion of *fides* and Abelard of *ratio* would be to misunderstand the question, for Abelard exercises his intelligence for the benefit of salvation and Bernard attacks Abelard for his offence against reason. By grappling with these two passages we can conclude that this argument is not simply concerned with an opposition between scholastic reason and monastic faith; instead, it displays the conflict between a monastic and a scholastic approach to texts, both rooted in matters concerned with faith.

Leclercq, who has allowed modern scholars to see how medieval monastic readers approached texts, attempts to understand this difference in terms of the objective of each, insisting that, "instead of assimilating the inheritance from tradition as the monks do, and turning spontaneously toward the past, scholastic milieux are oriented toward the investigation of new problems and the search for new solutions. Clarity, rather than experience or mystery, is their concern, and it is attained through the 'distinctions.'"<sup>14</sup> The line Leclercq attempts to draw between the *telos* of these two expressions of Christianity seems awry. It would imply that a monastic such as Bernard did not strive for clarity, and that scholastics such as Abelard (or, later, scholastic friars such as Aquinas or Scotus) are uninterested in experience or mystery. Rather,

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<sup>14</sup>Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and The Desire For God*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 142.

the disagreement is better understood in terms of their distinct approaches to the scriptures, which is a crucial first step for understanding any exegetical result, whether it be clarity, experience, or any other concept which may include these two terms. Indeed, their different methods of reading require greater clarification. Sweetman provides us with an insight to the differing “postures” of Abelard and Bernard when he speaks to the scholars of his own age, observing that in reading practices, researchers, “never go, as scholars, to texts to be interrogated but to interrogate. Devotional readers of a sacred text, on the other hand, are self-consciously permeable.”<sup>15</sup> The difference between the two is that the scholastic Abelard comes to the text in order to do what he will to it, in this instance extracting the truth of it through exposition. Bernard, it may be observed in his attack on Abelard’s arrogance toward scripture, objects to the impenetrable nature of Abelard’s reading, which Sweetman describes in his own time as, “the act of a self essentially formed and stable.”<sup>16</sup> Crucially, such an act occurs in one direction. This stance can be noted in Abelard’s claim of self-sufficiency and personal agency: he relies on his intelligence to clarify the doctrinal and philosophical principles to be obtained from scripture.

This is in obvious contrast to Bernard who, as we will explore more fully in the following chapter, develops a much more intimate stance toward his text, one strikingly similar to what Sweetman, in examining a passage from Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, describes as “performative” reading, in that the reader submits to the personal formation of authoritative texts. He explains, “in and through his verbal effusion Adso re-collects liturgical reading of the sacred text performed in service of God. This reading, in turn, ‘performs’ him in the sense that it forms him as, in the educational jargon of the day, a ‘liberally formed’ (articulate) intellect ‘free’

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<sup>15</sup> Sweetman, “Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care,” 135.

<sup>16</sup> Sweetman, “Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care,” 135.

(able) to ‘invent’ (discover and represent) the sense of his experience.”<sup>17</sup> Such a submission requires a consistent posture of humility in yielding to the force of the text, even in the context of an exposition. Bernard’s unassuming nature in the vein of performative reading is illustrated by a sentence from his first sermon on the Song of Songs, which stands in stark contrast to Abelard’s panache. Upon imagining the task of elucidating the text before him for the sake of the monks under his charge, Bernard concludes that he would not dare to rely on his own authority<sup>18</sup> to explicate this text, enjoining his audience to, “look upon me as one from whom you look for nothing. For I myself am one of the seekers, one who begs along with you for the food of my soul, the nourishment of my spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Whether the passage is an example of *captatio benevolentiae* or not, such a statement establishes a remarkably different tone of inquiry than Abelard’s. From the light cast by these few texts, we can repeat with confidence that *how* to read is perhaps more important to Bernard as well as Abelard than the doctrinal conclusions drawn from such reading.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sweetman, “Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care,” 137.

<sup>18</sup> The use of this word is a conscious slip into contemporary idiomatic speech for lack of a better term. More fitting but equally verbose would be to say that Bernard would not ascribe the right or ability to fully allow the meanings and implications of the text to become comprehensible to his own intelligence or emotion. Carruthers provides a clear explication on the concept of authority in *Book of Memory*, reminding readers that there is much evidence to suggest that, in medieval terms, “‘authority’ is a property of the text, proven by its ability to generate other work,” (213) and it would be a misunderstanding to ascribe authority as such to the writer. It is interesting to note, however, that in a sense Abelard does attempt to wrest authority from the text in what would seem to be the opposite way a text was seen to gain it, for Carruthers claims, “a text achieves full authority not by closing debate but by opening it.” (213) Abelard suggests that his entrance into a focused reading of Holy Scripture was to provide a “sufficient” understanding of the text and thereby terminating discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS I*, 3. “Sic spectis ad me, ut ex me non exspectetis. Nam ego unus sum de exspectantibus, mendicans et ipse vobiscum cibum animae meae, alimoniam spiritus.” SBO I, Super Cantica Sermo 1, ii, 4.

<sup>20</sup> G. R. Evans, in what appears to be a moment of unintentional insight, intends to discredit Bernard’s attack against Abelard. “Arguably, he lost his good name without its ever being discovered whether he deserved to do so. Bernard, when he entered the lists against Abelard [...] seemed to take the view that man’s teaching was of less importance than his attitude, that a proud and contentious person ought to be condemned as a heretic in any case.” *Bernard of Clairvaux* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 117. By casting Bernard’s opposition as an *ad hominem* logical fallacy, she attempts to dismiss his attack as irrational, ironically providing an observation that Bernard recognized precisely that Abelard’s pride was central to his error, irrespective of the doctrine he taught.

We have a functional depiction of how Abelard as a scholastic logician approached texts, and why Bernard opposed it in the way he did. And, based on Sweetman's reflection on the scholarly mindset, we can begin our composite of Bernard's contemplative monastic attitude with the concept of permeability. This far, we have only eavesdropped on Sweetman as he meditates on an *exemplum* in the writings of a Dominican, Thomas of Cantimpré, and now we should focus on what Sweetman uncovers in his explication of this mendicant who straddles scholasticism and the contemplative tradition. Specifically, in Thomas' account of an exorcism, Sweetman notes a curious relationship Thomas establishes with respect to church rites of exorcism as well as certain passages of Scripture, a relationship Sweetman describes as an instance of performative reading. "As a performative reader," Sweetman notes, "Thomas approaches his text in such a way that his essential subjectivity is manifestly on the line. He enters into a reciprocal relationship with the text in the sense that the text forms his subjectivity even as he appropriates the text,"<sup>21</sup> a technique typically prohibited in a scholarly mode of reading. In the *exemplum* under investigation, Thomas, "can be understood only in terms of the texts he has taken into himself or ingested, to use the medieval metaphor, via the ruminative acts of memorization (*lectio*) and meditation (*meditatio*)."<sup>22</sup> In this example, the monastic utilizes the text, "to provide him words and sentences to be used subsequently to order his experience of life."<sup>23</sup> The reader's understanding of the text and the understanding of the self are inseparably bound in this method of interpretation. This conclusion finds resonance in the previous selections under examination, where Bernard posits in his prosecution of Abelard that the man and his method are inseparably bound. Sweetman's observation extends to the current

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<sup>21</sup>Sweetman, "Thomas of Cantimpré: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care," 148.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Sweetman, "Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpré, and the Performative Reading of Scripture," in *With Reverence for the Word* ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>23</sup>Sweetman, "Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpré, and the Performative Reading of Scripture," 261.

investigation as it serves to highlight the interwoven existence of the contemplative monastic community and their texts, where, “the scriptures maintained an authority that invited the reader’s submission, a submission whereby the text was to inscribe itself upon the reader’s subsequent understanding and practice of life.”<sup>24</sup> In the process, the line that separates interpreter from interpretation is blurred or even made irrelevant as both elements merge in the performative reading of a text.

Two important concepts Sweetman introduces to this conversation are the *lectio* and *meditatio* as components of the process of *ruminatio*, defined by Leclercq as a life-long process of, “repeated mastication of the divine words... described by use of the theme of spiritual nutrition,” a process which, “inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul.”<sup>25</sup> Mary Carruthers develops this concept further, specifically addressing the mode of biblical interpretation medievals called the *tropologia*, what many of our contemporaries would suspiciously (as we shall see) label as allegory, “it is what the text means to us when we turn its words, like a mirror, upon ourselves, how we understand it when we have domesticated it and made it our own, and that is the special activity of *meditation*, the “culmination” of *lectio* but bound by none of its rules, a free play of the recollecting mind.”<sup>26</sup> With this description of the monastic digestion of texts, we hear more clearly the advice Abelard rejects: to not hurry, to devote “longer thought” to his task, “working out” and “confirming” his interpretation through “practice.” The function of a monastic contemplation of the sacred text is, as Bernard offers a glimpse in Sermon thirty, a continued process of applying what is written directly to the reader:

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<sup>24</sup> Sweetman, “Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpre, and the Performative Reading of Scripture,” 269.

<sup>25</sup> Leclercq, *Love of Learning and Desire for God*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 168.

“on account of my imperfection then, I apply the present text in this way to myself.”<sup>27</sup> We should note that when Bernard uses the substantive *imperfectus* to describe his status, he implies an incomplete or unfinished situation rather than the flawed or faulty status the English “imperfection” may imply. To Bernard and the monastic community at large, lack of imperfection is actually the sign of a deficiency—at least, an awareness deficient of the insight that a reader requires a text to form his or her character.

This formation of the character of the self or “*homo interior*”<sup>28</sup> requires the attentive reader to “domesticate” their texts, as Carruthers concludes and as can be found in what we have read thus far from Bernard. What this requires is the ingestion of a text by means of memorization, not only word for word, *ad verba*, but further to achieve thorough knowledge of the “thing,” the very gist of the text, or *ad res*. This mnemonic practice established an amazing familiarity with both the form and content of what was read, but took a lifetime to attain, as, “such intimacy can be achieved only by long and thorough familiarity with a text as a whole, not just a few aphorisms,”<sup>29</sup> as would be the temptation for one who would dare to rush in. What is memorized and meditated upon becomes incorporated, “quite literally”<sup>30</sup> according to Carruthers, into the experience of the memorizing reader. The process of assimilating the text to oneself and oneself to the text in a “‘hermeneutical dialogue’ between two memories,”<sup>31</sup> one in the reader and one in the text, is the creation and organization of mental images to clearly retain both the *verba* and *res* of the passage. This is done by allowing the text to create a rich and

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<sup>27</sup>Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS II*, 118. “Et ego quidem sic pro imperfecto meo traho ad me capitulum praesens.” SBO I, Super Cantica Sermo 30, iv, 8. “Indeed, I thus apply the section at hand to me according to my unfinished [condition],” my translation.

<sup>28</sup>Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the individual?” in *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 87. In this essay she helpfully distinguishes the appropriate medieval idea of the self from the conflated term individual, and her insights on the relationship of the medieval self to literary types will bear heavily on future chapters.

<sup>29</sup>Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 88.

<sup>30</sup>Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 169.

<sup>31</sup>Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 169.

highly detailed, mentally visual illustration in the readers' imagination. "A textual picture," Carruthers remarks, "is as good as a painted one in addressing *memoria*, for it can be painted in memory without the constraints of paint and parchment."<sup>32</sup> Each detail carries a chain of associations that are established by each reader, for, "basic to the pedagogy of memory is the caution that each individual must make up his own set of associations."<sup>33</sup> Creating these unique mental images and the innovative associations in collaboration with the texts provided monastic memory with a painstakingly efficient method of literary indwelling, a concept in Bernard that we will explore further in the third chapter. These images, Carruthers maintains, "are not, 'wholly imaginary,' in our sense of that phrase. They exist as words in a text (the Bible) that can be 'revisited' often, and in this way made fully familiar and habitual through the power of the *phantasia* responding to the *energeia* of the original text."<sup>34</sup> Here, the familiarity with the text required in order for Bernard to apply it to himself by occupying and performing the text as well as the figurative language we will fully explore later gives us a sufficient example of monastic reading practices. It is a process cognitively imagined while bodily enacted, privately imagined and publicly preached, textually bound and creatively diverse; a method ingrained into the lives of its practitioners.

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<sup>32</sup> Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 230.

<sup>33</sup> Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 234.

<sup>34</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239. Carruthers' use of *phantasia*, which are the mental image or imagined situation that the reader formulates through repeated familiarization with the text, is balanced by her use of the Aristotelianesque *energeia*, rendered in most Latin translations as activity or actuality, which implies the wholeness of what is potentially existent. In medieval monastic terms, by encountering the durably integral *energeia* of the text and formulating one's own *phantasia*, the power of imaginativity and representation, in response, the interpretive result is not an arbitrary construct but rather an extension of the text.

## Rejection

What I have written above is less an objective summary than it is an argument in the form of a framework. I by no means claim an exhaustive, objective position. I have structured this summary particularly to compare these two medieval writers to the setting of modern biblical commentaries, especially on the Song. A major difference between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, at least in terms of this inquiry, is that the balance of power has shifted dramatically away from Bernard's contemplative interpretation toward Abelard's scholastic approach. In this section we will examine representative works from the modern community of biblical commentators and the prevailing attitude of suspicion to Bernard and those who share his point of view, but first we will examine certain assumptions of our time and how it may be analogous to the high medieval century, from which we just came. In the following paragraph we will see that the broadly dominant attitude in 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholarship utilizes almost exclusively the scholastic methods of linguistic and historical analysis. That is, most scholars will approach a text with the intent of discovering its meaning by means of a careful scrutiny beginning with the historical situation in which a text was produced through the transmission or transformations into its present form in the present day. The overriding presumption underneath these efforts is the presumption that the text is constituted by the single logical intention of the author, and that the utilization of these methods will lead to their apprehension of the truth of the document. A scholar relies on textual criticism, linguistic analysis, cultural anthropology, a plain reading of the text itself, and their own intelligence to uncover the meaning of the text, which is conspicuously reminiscent of the approach Abelard described in his *Historia Calamitatum*, where he relied on the commentaries of the fathers, a plain reading of the text itself, and his own intelligence in order to reap the benefits of the text. It is little surprise, then, that the

contemplative (or as it is frequently termed by modern scholars, “allegorical”) approach is viewed as an unacceptable mode of reading, for it is unpredictable according to a scholastic framework. It lacks the rigor, so critical to the scholastic attitude, which assures scholars that they maintain a disjunct between themselves and their work, thereby shielding their research from any form of external ideological inflection. According to scholastic eyes, the contemplative approach relies on the lack of rigor since it is an intensely personal action, the only antidote being strict adherence to historical-critical methodology.<sup>35</sup>

Both the evangelically-favored literary-historical and the mainline-favored historical-critical methods of interpretation have turned much attention to the history of the text that we read, bringing to light questions regarding original date, authorship, audience, and contemporary archaeological sources; they are both “historical-critical” in the way we are using the term. With increased importance placed on the physical development and transmission of texts, and most importantly the intense focus on the original intent of the author, the natural-literal method of receiving the Song has risen to prominence, since the historical-critical method claims to promote a more fundamental acceptance of the “obvious” sense of the text and rejects any form of interpretation that might be alien to its original writer's intent or audience's reception. Andre LaCocque, while maintaining the possibility that we need not completely reject the classical approach of an allegorical, second order interpretation of the metaphors in the Song in favor of the current attempt to uncover “authorial purpose,” does warn that, “[i]n order to keep away from the forbidden fruit of an interpretation gone awry, the modern exegete must by necessity return

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<sup>35</sup>In the remainder of this essay, I take for granted Paul Ricoeur's characterization of the broad category of the historical-critical method, which is any approach that primarily focuses on, “a history of the writing of the texts we now read” LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 266. To this approach, the unified locus of meaning in a text resides entirely in the situation of its creation, both intent and composition.

to the original intent of the text before its distortions.”<sup>36</sup> The historical intent is posited to be the locus of meaning, even though other interpretations may arise after this has been established. Tremper Longman states this even more strongly, emphatically claiming, “there is absolutely nothing in the Song of Songs itself that hints of a meaning different from the sexual meaning.”<sup>37</sup> Since, according to Longman, no other meaning besides the sexual is within the text itself, “the assignment of spiritual meaning to the text assumes an incredibly arbitrary character,”<sup>38</sup> which is an imposition of “a foreign meaning on the text,”<sup>39</sup> and “reveals more about us as commentators than it does about the Song.”<sup>40</sup> To both these authors, as paradigmatic yet differing proponents of the historical-critical method, the role of any exegesis of the Song is to explicate whatever meaning is within the text and condemn anything which might be foreign to the original intent of the author. LaCocque insists that the approach we must take is a reexamination of the Song in terms of its intertextual commentary and shuns any other referent, such as allegory, claiming such impositions are radical departures from the original intent of the poem, and that as a result the Song, “cannot be read that way.”<sup>41</sup> Longman also claims that, “the pressing concern of exegesis of the Song is unpacking the metaphors and explaining the effect that it has on us as readers,”<sup>42</sup> affirming with LaCocque, despite differences in their ultimate interpretive results, that the text contains within itself a singular meaning to be found within the structure of its discourse. The goal of a careful reading, then, is to extrapolate this pre-intended meaning and provide a framework in which the “truth” is to be contained, and each interpretation is to be sterilely examined and accepted or rejected. This rejection often includes not only spiritual

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<sup>36</sup> André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998) 210.

<sup>37</sup> Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 36.

<sup>38</sup> Longman, *Song of Songs*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Longman, *Song of Songs*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Longman, *Song of Songs*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> Longman, *Song of Songs*, 43.

allegorical interpretations but any semblance of plot or narration as well, since such a structure appears to be unsupported by the first-order reference of the overall structure in the Song.

The consequence of this focus on surface meaning is an indiscriminate dismissal of the reading practices of the monastic tradition based on what does not appear to be supported by a plain reading of the text as judged by modern readers. We find an unambiguous example of how the contemporary Evangelical community that subscribes to these methods views the contemplative, “allegorical” approach in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, where Duane Garrett introduces his own analysis of the Song by briefly summarizing and promptly dismissing the entire allegorical tradition, ranging from Origen to Luther, in seventeen pages. Mentioning Bernard's sermon series in particular, he warns, “one should not assume, however, that this mass of material is in any sense a commentary on the Song.”<sup>43</sup> Summarizing Bernard's approach, he argues that instead of treating the text sterilely as an autonomous entity under examination, the “passages in the Song are starting points for sermons on the love between the Christian soul and God.”<sup>44</sup> The most troubling aspect of the broad category of allegorical interpretation is that it contains outright and with intent an unhealthy dose of ideology that seems to be external to the passage under examination. The problem with Bernard, for Garrett and many of his colleagues, is that “his use of the Song is arbitrary, and his sermons are not grounded in the text of the Song, except as heavily by a theological model of divine Eros drawing the soul from the love of the carnal to the love of the spiritual.”<sup>45</sup> As a whole, the tradition stigmatized as allegorical is unacceptable because, “no single interpretation has any more claim to legitimacy or makes any more sense than any other. Allegorical interpretation is forced, subject only to the creative

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<sup>43</sup>Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs, Lamentations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004) 69.

<sup>44</sup>Garrett and House, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 69.

<sup>45</sup>Garrett and House, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 69.

imagination of the interpreter, and extraneous to the Song of Songs.”<sup>46</sup> Bernard's creativity, in the mind of modern readers, is his weakness, since the ideal of the contemporary exegete is to present the meaning of the text with minimal (if any) intrusion by the reader. Longman, in similar fashion, utilizes Bernard as an example of the movements between Jerome and Luther, and because he was a celibate monk, Bernard acts merely as, “a timely reminder that the unnatural suppression of sexual love can lead to frightful consequences.”<sup>47</sup> In a startling inversion of Bernard’s condemnation of Abelard, Bernard’s methods of interpretation are rejected because the results of are not in line with the desired message of their communities, which currently implore the embracing of sexuality, if qualified as within the bonds of “traditional” Christian marriage.

Capturing the flavor of his intellectual milieu, Garrett surmises, “that the allegorization of any text of the Song is of no theological or exegetical value,” favoring instead the, “natural, ordinary, and in my view self-evident meaning of the Song,”<sup>48</sup> inversely declaring the artificially enlarged category of the allegorical interpretation to be by nature unnatural, extraordinary, and erudite. When Bernard instructs his audience in sermon 31:6, “not to conclude that I see something corporeal or perceptible to the senses in this union between the Word and the soul,”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Garrett and House, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Longman, *Song of Songs*, 33.

<sup>48</sup>Garrett and House, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 76. Garrett does not define his use of the word “allegorization,” but if we look to an earlier study, it is noted that, “the “allegorizing” of a text occurs when an interpreter understands a given passage as allegory even though it was not intended as such by the author.” Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 303. It is in essence a violation of the text, since it disregards the 'plain' meaning intended by the writer. On the same page of the same work, the authors side squarely with the temperament of our interlocutors on their preference for the historical-critical approach, claiming that, “the literal-historical... seeks to balance the natural sense of the literary qualities of the poem with an appreciation for the historical setting or situation prompting its writing.” While Hill and Walton favor a reading that includes a “didactic” element with their literal-historical approach, which, “interprets the poem as a vehicle for instruction and simply discounts the circumstances surrounding the occasion of the book in favor of the moral and didactic purposes of the literature,” (302) they nonetheless base this didactic element on a historical-literal element: the original author intended the Song to be didactic.

<sup>49</sup>Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS II*, 128.

this is taken as evidence of his conservative Neo-Platonic denial of the flesh<sup>50</sup> that modern scholars must now work to rectify by allowing the historical meaning to proclaim its message unencumbered by intrusive ideology. The allegorical reading is superseded by the arrival of the historical-critical method, and the only question left is to determine the original genre and intent for a proper reading. Bernard's reading becomes little more than a historical oddity, an embarrassment to the history of Christianity because it is dangerously subject to the force of the interpreter. Further, the anti-sexual impulse of monastic readings of Song is proof of ideological contamination on the part of readers in the mold of Bernard. Because the scholastic approach to texts places strong emphasis on a mechanical method of reading, offering reproducible results impossible in contemplative reading, it leads its practitioners to suspect any hermeneutical approach that fails to intend this level and type of control as does the contemplative tradition. It would appear that there is simply no room for coexistence.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude this chapter by focusing our attention on two points from each position, those who research Bernard's monastic use of the text and those who reject it in their own exegetical approach. The two scholars who focused on sacred reading techniques bring us two claims. First, Sweetman notices the intriguing tendency of a mendicant reader, a century after Bernard, toward a style of understanding a text by submitting himself to what it has to offer in its demands on his subjectivity. Based on the necessities of a particular moment, the reader may approach a text either imperatively or subjunctively,<sup>51</sup> joining the text to the moment of life.

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<sup>50</sup>LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, 251; Garrett and House, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 75.

<sup>51</sup> Sweetman expands on the notion of scholarly, imperative reading in his examination of Thomas of Cantimpré, "Thomas the scholarly reader, because he prescind from all concerns outside of the logical horizon of present scientific need, cannot be subject to the text in this way. Indeed, by definition, such a reader can approach a text

Carruthers explains this intersection as applying, “a *res* or generalized content (most often expressed in a textual maxim) to a specific, present occasion.”<sup>52</sup> The text acts as a template for understanding and assimilating the present into public and private memory.

Second, Carruthers explores the central role memory played in the medieval, especially monastic culture. The community understood a “memory-centered pedagogy”<sup>53</sup> to be the basis of prayer, and prayer undergirded and constituted the entire life of the monk. “In all its situations,” Carruthers explains, “from individual reading and meditation in cloister or cell to the stationary and processional ways of liturgy, the monastic life of prayer incorporated fundamentally an art of memory,”<sup>54</sup> the way by which a text was made the reader’s own. The images of memory were structured visually as *loci* that were to be revisited whenever necessary, and entry into these places was through the rich descriptive detail the mental images contained. In this way, the visual representation of cognitive things was crucial to their place in the life of the community.

The reasons for the contemporary exegetical community abandoning Bernard’s interpretive results are oddly related to what many see undergirding monastic practices. A major obstacle is that such traditions, and the fruit they bear, seem erratic and arbitrary. It would seem that textual explication becomes less about the text than about the interpreter, who, without systematic direction, will simply utilize the sacred passage as a jumping off point to address what concerns him and avoid what does not, nearly irrespective of the text itself. The reader seems to take a more central position than what we may now be comfortable with, for in order to present

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only in the imperative mode.” Sweetman, “Beryl Smalley, Thomas of Cantimpre, and the Performative Reading of Scripture,” 265. A possible inference of identifying such an imperative mode of reading, where requests and commands are issued to the text, is to assume there might be a subjunctive one, where possible actions or conditions are explored of the same text.

<sup>52</sup> Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 180.

<sup>53</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 81.

an unadulterated book to an audience the reader must remain separate from the text. As a result of this technique, Bernard's results seem to portray the glaring prejudice against bodily existence. Even his well known hostile stance toward art and images seems to reinforce his opposition to considering the corporeal facet of humanity. Bernard's technique, certain of our contemporaries have claimed, is informed by a dualistic preference for a spiritual, heavenly, body-less reality while distaining the physical and especially sexual realities, here and now. He and his tradition are, to exploit a cliché, of too heavenly a mind to be of any real earthly good. Bernard's interpretation, especially of the lush imagery in the Song, has little to do with the text itself and more to do with his contemplative denial of bodily existence.

It is my contention that Bernard's elucidation of the Song, especially the reading techniques he utilizes in his commentary, has a great deal to offer to the community of the faithful who would approach scripture in order to seek insights applicable to their lives. To consider this claim, I suggest we compare the claim that Bernard's interpretation has no recognizable method with the mode of reading Sweetman calls performative, where the reader takes on a subjective risk by allowing the text to, "form his subjectivity even as he appropriates the text."<sup>55</sup> In the next chapter we will explore specifically his rules and results in a particularly crucial series of sermons in his Song commentary. We will follow this analysis by probing deeper into Bernard's complex relationship with images and physical depictions as exhibited in his sermons on the Song of Songs in light of the mnemonic core of monastic formation claimed by Carruthers. In the conclusion to the full project, we will work to establish a present-day foothold for the contemplative tradition of commentary on the Song, not only that it may find a valid place among other historical methods of interpretation, but that it might function as an approach which can be productively used in present scholarship.

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<sup>55</sup> Sweetman, "Thomas of Cantimpre: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care," 148.

We have thus far developed an introduction to the world of contemplative monastic commentary on scriptures by comparing the approaches of two individuals regarded as exemplars of their communities, Bernard the contemplative monastic and Abelard the scholastic logician. It was revealed that in order to appreciate the differences between the two, one must examine the methods rather than results of their reading. In doing so, the distinction is strongest in Abelard's refusal to rely on meditation, patient practice (in the sense of becoming a practitioner, rather than trial and error until one "gets it right"), and rhetorical invention based on memory, vital components to the monastic life of Bernard. By examining this nuance through the eyes of scholars, we established a twofold thrust to Bernard's reading technique as both an instance of performative reading and creating a series of enriched images that act as mnemonic tools for the purpose of fully experiencing and understanding the text. We then examined the contrast with this initial introduction to Bernard's method to many current biblical scholars' struggle to accept Bernard's approach as a careful way of reading the scriptures. Two concerns have proven themselves paramount in all criticism of Bernard. The first is that his interpretation yields results that are entirely unpredictable and without any recognizable systematic approach. The second is that Bernard maintains a demonstrable preference for disembodied existence, relegating physical human existence to the status of a barrier needing to be overcome; a preference that diverts him from the unavoidably sexual content of the Song of Songs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Introduction**

A survey of the scholars of monasticism presents a broad consensus that the life of a monk is intimately integrated with the Scriptures, especially those selections that are encountered in the liturgy. However, describing Bernard's works in broad strokes or approaching them by way of the vast amount of secondary literature available, especially concerning his *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*, cannot do justice to the art of his actual engagement with the Scriptures because he focuses on the smallest and sharpest particulars in order to reach the center of his subject. In other words, reading for breadth and general principles cannot provide an adequate framework for appreciating his approach to the Song of Songs because Bernard is an artist attentive to fine detail. His works do not aim for breadth, but work to expand the depth of meaning in and of the minutiae of language and life, an orientation that can be readily discerned in the fruits of his seventeen years explicating a small book of eight chapters. Indeed, he would pass away as he barely began to explore the third chapter of the Song, his eighty-six sermons a testament to his unrelenting and often tedious meditation on the multitude of possibilities contained in each word of divine revelation.

This chapter will examine Bernard's practice of spiritual reading at play in several especially arresting instances within his most famous sermon series, *On the Song of Songs*. Building on the themes established by contemporary scholars, we will explore the role reading occupies in the monastic spirituality Bernard is attempting to perform. Because the performance of the sermon is intended for a public audience, the cultural communicative aspect implicit in the format of his writing is illuminated by Carruthers' explication of the function of shared memory and Pranger's observation that Bernard is a master thespian who presents his audience with the

imagery lacking in the visual arts<sup>56</sup>. These perspectives are helpful. However, the focus of this essay will be to explore the way Bernard's reading shapes and is shaped by his personal monastic devotion, a stance indicative of the 12<sup>th</sup> century attention to the self that Bynum considers to have been a "keener awareness than in the immediately preceding centuries both of the complexity of the individual's inner life and of the boundary that separates the varied and fascinating inner being from other equally fascinating and complex selves."<sup>57</sup> Bernard reaches this attention to the self through reflection on the smallest fragments of the Word, and by weaving them together in an active reading he establishes the trajectory that will lead him to the telos of the monastic life, which is to make the person wholly available to God and prepare and hope for the gift of his coming. This monastic experience of God is complex, requiring the person to invest him or herself in the experience of, among other things, the sacred text, subjecting themselves to the failures and expectations of literary engagement.

To demonstrate this we will examine a powerfully moving yet enigmatic example of Bernard's rhetorical abilities in an extended passage of sermon twenty-six. This particular sermon continues the section of the *Sermones* that discuss the meaning of the blackness but beauty of the bride in verse 1:4. In examining the verse, "nigra sum sed formosa // filiae Hierusalem // sicut tabernacula Cedar // sicut pelles Solomonis,"<sup>58</sup> Bernard emphasizes the juxtapositions of blackness and beauty, of the tents of Kedar and the pelts of Solomon. A

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<sup>56</sup> Pranger claims that the Cistercian faced a unique challenge, to be fully addressed in the following chapter. "The monk who is praying and singing in that [empty Cistercian] space does not relate his inner thoughts to outer images. There simply are none. As a consequence he has to produce single-handedly a language, both liturgical and devotional that can stand up to the emptiness of the place. Even greater creativity is demanded from an author such as Bernard who takes it upon himself to give a literary account of what is going on inside that empty monastery. Because he has lost the support of visual images, the literary images he uses to fill up that space are bound to look like a performance on an empty stage. Thus forced to stand on their own feet, these images become intensely theatrical." M. B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 47. In a certain sense Pranger's declaration is spot on—by eliminating exterior images, Bernard is able to create more vividly affective internal, mental ones.

<sup>57</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 86.

<sup>58</sup> *Liber Cantica Cantorum in Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. R. Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1969, 1983) vol. 2, pp. 997-998.

general layout of this particular sermon consists of Bernard first quoting the passage under examination, then referring to the sermon immediately preceding this one and the discussion concerning blackness and beauty. After two paragraphs of exegetical material, the preacher abruptly ceases his exploration upon reaching an impasse. He declares, “one cannot dwell in a tent of Kedar,” which Bernard has just heuristically defined as a body,<sup>59</sup> “and lead a pure life, free of stain, a life without wrinkle, without some degree of blackness; so he longs to die and be divested of it.”<sup>60</sup> In light of this interpretation, bodily existence is a fatal impediment to spiritual purity, and the only way to escape the, “waging of wearisome war, a life of prolonged misery, the distress of bitter exile, in a word, a body that is both frail and burdensome,” is through its abandonment in death. Yet Bernard seems to have painted himself into a corner, for how can the Bride, “be beautiful like the curtains of Solomon,”<sup>61</sup> if she is at the same time identified with the blackness of the tents of Kedar? With identity divided against itself Bernard stops short, and instead of pressing this crisis further opts instead to defer: “I feel that something beyond imagining, something sublime and sacred, is so caught up in these curtains of Solomon, that I dare not approach them at all, except at the bidding of him who hid it there and sealed it.”<sup>62</sup> At this point, he declares that “the sorrow that oppresses me since my bereavement compels me to come to an end,” and he begins his emotionally turbulent and seemingly extemporaneous eulogy to Gerard, his recently deceased friend and cellarer of Clairvaux. He mourns, “Quid mihi et cantico huic, qui in amaritudine sum?”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>“This Body, I repeat, is a tent of Kedar, that now intervenes to deprive the soul for a while of the vision of the infinite light,” Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>60</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>61</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>62</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>63</sup>“What even is this song to me, whose existence is bitterness?” *SBO I*, *Sermones Super Cantica*, Sermo 26, II.3.

## **Dismissal or Deepening**

Bernard's declaration of despair and inadequacy in the midst of his reading of this text of ecstasy might certainly draw his audience up short, if only because he wrote sixty more treatises on this very book and may have written even more if he had lived longer. Upon reading such an interjection we, who are Bernard's distant audience, may attempt to smooth this disruption. The reader may explain this incongruous outburst by noting the situation in which it occurs; realizing this remark is part of a lamentation for a monk who had recently passed away. In light of this, to understand this emotional exclamation as a confession of his inadequacy in explicating the biblical text, or even as an exposition of his religious life in comparison with the ideal he believed was expressed in the text, might be to wrench the statement inappropriately out of its context. The reader may also assume that Bernard loses his composure, momentarily departing from his task of examining the biblical text, soon to regain his focus in the following sermons in line with his appeal: "these tears prevent me from speaking any further; impose a limit on them, O Lord, bring them to an end."<sup>64</sup> We may even assume that Bernard is exercising a literary device in order to conform to the genre of the sermon by inserting an interruption into the text that would portray an orator's interaction with their audience, such as his frequent comments on the restless, weariness, or even signs of possible disagreement from his audience, or his remarks on the arrival of guests in sermon three.

Lest we believe the passage of time alone is to blame for this unsure stance toward this text, we can see that this section of his sermon series was also scandalous to Bernard's contemporaries, especially his personal gadfly Berengar of Poitiers, an admirer and former student of Abelard's. His criticism of Bernard in this sermon specifically highlights the unique nature of the text in contrast to what Berengar believed to be the rhetorical standards appropriate

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<sup>64</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 73.

to the primary text, and his colorful response provides an assessment that will fuel a further exploration into Bernard's intentions in this passage:

After having commented on a part of the Song of Songs, he abruptly introduces the death of his brother, the description of whose funeral takes almost eight pages... That book by Solomon was composed in the workshop of the Holy Spirit and describes the marital embraces of Christ and the Church who are represented by the bride and groom. Joy is in harmony with the wedding feast. Bernard, however, either overcome by weariness because of the obscurity of the subject matter or ignoring the words of the Apostle who suggests that he 'rejoice with the joyful', brings his dead man to the wedding party, although it is written: 'God is not a God of the dead but of the living.' The bridegroom is lying at the bosom of the bride and the friends of the bride and groom are having their pleasure with one another when all of a sudden the sound of the trumpet announces a funeral. The dinner party is turned into gathering of mourners, the musical company into a funeral procession...<sup>65</sup>

Berengar paints a vivid mental picture that brings several of the incongruities that seem to underlie Bernard's technique into high relief. In his opening sermon he agrees with Berengar that this book of the Bible stands out among others, for, as Bernard claims, "because of its excellence, I consider this nuptial song to be well deserving of the title that so remarkably designates it, the Song of Songs, just as he in whose honor it is sung is uniquely proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords."<sup>66</sup> Rightly, then, is his audience surprised when in the midst of this "marriage song telling of chaste souls in loving embrace,"<sup>67</sup> amidst passages that Bernard interprets as moving inward toward greater intimacy, the warmth of love, and the culmination of joy, do they find a corpse; a monk coldly standing at a grave.<sup>68</sup> Evoking Berengar's image, a cowed figure crassly casts a cadaver onto the head table of this formerly festive nuptial feast.

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<sup>65</sup>Berengar of Poitiers, *Apologeticus*; PL 178: 1863D-1864A, as cited in Pranger, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought*, 177.

<sup>66</sup>Bernard, *SS I*, 5.

<sup>67</sup>Bernard, *SS I*, 7.

<sup>68</sup>"While others wept, I, as you could not but see, followed with dry eyes in the wake of the cruel bier, stood with dry eyes at the graveside till the last solemn funeral rite was performed." Bernard, *SS II*, 60.

Although I suggest a more charitable reading of Bernard than Berengar could offer, this does not mean that the shock of this passage should be downplayed; no doubt, Bernard had a clear intention when he introduced this twist into his sermon. Instead of viewing this as an incongruous deviation from his previous trajectory, we should return to the preceding sermons to find how this develops previous themes. The textual exegesis of sermon twenty-six builds upon the discussions and conclusions of the ones that came before, further part of a particular interconnected sequence of sermons twenty-one through twenty-six, followed by the brief apology that begins sermon twenty-seven to the conclusion of his commentary on “nigra sum sed formosa filae Hierusalem sicut tabernacula Cedar sicut pelles Solomonis,” in twenty-eight. Bernard signals in the opening words of twenty-six's commentary that the proper posture of his audience is one of, “waiting to hear what these words mean, and in what way they are connected with the text of our previous discourse in chapter, because they do bear a comparison.”<sup>69</sup> Although understanding the full eighty-six sermons of Bernard's series as a single, consistent work is by no means a consensus view of the *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*,<sup>70</sup> I propose that the sermons as a whole can be seen to contain series within the larger whole in their treatment of significant images or motifs. Bernard introduces such a theme in sermon twenty-

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<sup>69</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 58.

<sup>70</sup>In *The Artificiality of Christianity*, on pages 307-308 in notes 10 and 12, Pranger notes that Wim Verbaal argues that the sermons are complete as a literary work in his unfortunately un-translated article, “Les *Sermons sur le Canticle* de Saint Bernard: un chef-d'oeuvre inachevé?” *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 61, no. 3 (1999), 167-85. The question of whether the entire series of his *Sermones* constitutes a unified work aside from their shared locus of the biblical text does not seem to bear weight on my treatment of them in this essay. However, I do claim that sequences of sermons examine consistent themes, and that there is evidence for Bernard's continuity when meditating on a single subject over several individual sermons. This unity is in addition his frequent appeal at the beginning or end of sermons specifically to the one preceding or following, in examples leading to 21-28, whose continuity will be demonstrated in the body of my argument, sermons 4, “Yesterday our talk... you still remember...”; 6, “In order to connect this talk with my last, let me recall...”; 8, “As I promised yesterday...”; 11, “I said at the end of my last sermon...”; 12, “As I recall, I have been discussing...”; as well as a definitive self-explanation later in 39, “as usual I must show the sequence of the words, the connection between the present text and those we have already dealt with, and draw from them as well as I can some consoling doctrine to improve our lives.” It will be important to note that for the most part, the instruction to remember or recall occurs at the beginning of the sermon, rarely at the end.

one which is integral to his following sermons: the comparison of the bride to her companions, the maidens.

The textual focus of twenty-one is the verse, “*trahe me post te curremus.*” Bernard’s curiosity is piqued by the fact that *me*, the object of *trahe* (imperative of draw or drag) is singular instead of the plural *nos*, which would agree in number with the first person plural subject of *curremus* (will run). His treatment of this text is a classic example of Bernard’s technique of focusing on a small concept and expanding it into an encompassing theme. Based on the difference in number, Bernard argues that the singular *me* is the bride speaking to the bridegroom, while *curremus* is the bride speaking of herself as well as the *adulescentiae* of the previous line. Bernard imagines the bride to declare to the bridegroom that she will run, “in the odor of your ointments,” while the maidens will run together with her, “under the stimulus of my example and encouragement, and hence all of us running in the odor of your ointments.”<sup>71</sup> Why this distinction? Bernard stresses this bifurcation of those who follow Christ, the Bridegroom, into bride and maidens and the verbs associated with each. “Why did she say ‘draw me’ and not ‘draw us’? Does she have need to be drawn and the maidens do not? O beautiful, O happy, O blessed one, explain to us the meaning of this distinction.”<sup>72</sup> The invocation serves to heighten the importance and anticipation of the answer.

But Bernard himself does not provide the resolution; the Bride does. If Bernard is no longer the preacher, but has turned into the questioner, where is he located in the textual world? He asks, “*An hoc bonum invidet nobis?*”<sup>73</sup> Bernard, identifying with the *nobis*, the group of maidens, seeks an answer from the Bride. “She answers:” to Bernard and the other maidens,

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<sup>71</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 11.

<sup>72</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 11.

<sup>73</sup>*SBO I, Super Cantica*, Sermo 21, v., 10. “Can it be that you begrudge this good thing to us?” In the critical edition this is not quoted, but is Bernard’s direct statement.

“Charity demanded this. Learn from me by means of these words to expect a twofold help from above in the course of your spiritual life: correction and consolation. One controls the exterior, the other works within.”<sup>74</sup> The *bonum* of running after the Bride is shared with the maidens, but they do not share equally in the twofold action of interior and exterior. “We are drawn,” continues the Bride, “when we are tested by temptations and trials; we run when inwardly suffused by consolations, breathing in the ointment scented air.”<sup>75</sup> *Trahi*, to be drawn, is unpleasant and it is not fitting for the weaker maidens to partake, as the Bride explains, “Therefore when I encounter what is hard and austere I confine it to myself, being strong and healthy and perfect, and I speak in the singular 'draw me.’”<sup>76</sup> But *currere*, to run, is a pleasing infusion of *consolationes*, an experience well shared by the companions of the Bride, for, “what is pleasant and sweet I share with you, the weak one, and I say: 'we shall run.’” Here Bernard makes a crucial shift; the number changes yet again, and the Bride no longer addresses a group; “*Quod suave et dulce, tibi tamquam infirmo communico, et dico: CURREMUS.*”<sup>77</sup> Bernard has thinned the *nobis* into *tibi*, the many into the single. The Bride addresses herself to one person, to Bernard alone. He, the weak one, is unable to be drawn even though he is capable of running with the Bride. The interior suffusion of consolations is what Bernard shares with the Bride, but he specifically and singularly places himself in the position of being unable to endure the correction that controls the exterior.

This poignant revelation lasts only a moment, a phrase, and the Bride continues, expanding her subject to include the rest of the maidens once again, “I know quite well that girls are delicate and tender, ill equipped to endure temptations; so I want them to run in my company,

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<sup>74</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 11.

<sup>75</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>76</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>77</sup>*SBO Vol I, Super Cantica*, Sermo 21, vi., 11. “What is agreeable and pleasant, I impart to you [singular] as a weak one, and I say: 'we will run.’”

but not to be drawn in my company.”<sup>78</sup> The Bride will permit the maidens to accompany her in interior consolations, but corrections, tests, temptations and trials occur without them, for they are, “companions in hours of consolation, but not in times of trial.”<sup>79</sup> This exclusion is not ill-intended since the Bride shares what is sweet and protects the weaker ones, for “when I encounter what is hard and austere I confine it to myself, being strong and healthy and perfect, and I speak in the singular: ‘Draw me.’”<sup>80</sup> The division between the interior and exterior help, consolation and correction, are in a sense hierarchical. Both the maidens and the Bride run in the fragrance of the Bridegroom's ointment, which separate them from those who do not chase after him. Both are, “inwardly suffused by consolations, breathing in the ointment-centered air.”<sup>81</sup> However, only the Bride is strong enough to receive both spiritual aids, and due to her participation in both *trahi* and *currere*, she has appealed for and received, “the grace to follow the example of [the Bridegroom's] way of life, to emulate his virtue, to hold fast to a rule of life similar to his and achieve some degree of his self-control.”<sup>82</sup> In turn, the weaker ones dare not claim to emulate the Bridegroom himself, but content themselves to learn from the example of the Bride<sup>83</sup>, with whom they participate in a degree of her graces.

The final expansion outward is parallel to the initial constriction, for as Bernard suspended the discourse in his earlier invocation to the Bride on the distinction between *trahe* and *currimus*, he interjects again just as the Bride might have continued in her explanation of the Bridegroom's fragrance. This ubiquitous fragrance is the signal of both the Bridegroom's presence and absence; *trahi* and *currere* both occur, “in the order of [his] ointments,” which

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<sup>78</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>79</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>80</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>81</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>82</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 4.

<sup>83</sup>Especially, “We, however, must be more concerned to imitate the liberty and consistency of the bride...”(10) and “Learn from me...”(11). The Bridegroom is absent; the only direction the maidens and Bride receive from him in this particular image is his fragrance wafting through the air.

enable and direct the efforts of the faithful. Before the Bride can continue, abruptly the motion ceases, the scents are dispersed, and Bernard teases his audience with a contra-factual statement, “This should be the time to fulfill a promise about the ointments of the Bridegroom that I recall having made to you so long ago, but the length of this sermon forbids it.”<sup>84</sup> Both the audience and Bernard are prevented from reaching the scent that draws the Bride; but the limit of their contemplation is couched in a promise, and unfulfilled assurance. This glimpse of what they cannot attain, just as when the Bride when she assesses Bernard's weakness and inability to be drawn with trials that correct the exterior, establishes and suspends a hope that balances perilously close to the cliffs of despair. As Bernard does to scripture, expanding a simple shift in number to direct his meditation, so also we read Bernard in a Bernardine way, noting his subtle shift in identity from the first person subject that questions the Bride, to one who runs with the Bride, to one of the number addressed by the Bride, to his place as the single audience of the words of scripture, and eventually his role as facilitator and arrestor of hope for his audience and himself.

This theme emerges largely in sermon twenty-two. Bernard extols the powers of the Bridegroom's ointments in the opening line, then pauses, reflecting upon his audience, “some of you must want to say: 'Desist now from praising these gifts. When you begin to explain them we shall see clearly enough what they are.'”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, he once again prevents their hope from being fulfilled with a strange admonition: “But no. I make no such promise. For believe me, I have not as yet decided whether I ought to express all the thoughts that suggest themselves.”<sup>86</sup> After he reminds his audience of the promise he has made to them, he seems to deny that oath. Why? Because he cannot do it; he has encountered once again the limits of the self. He is not

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<sup>84</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>85</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 14.

<sup>86</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 14.

the Beloved of the Bridegroom, and, “In matters of this kind, understanding can follow only where experience leads, and I shall be the last to intrude rashly where the bride alone may enter.” He again dramatically separates himself from the Bride, bringing the discourse to a halt once again. The hopes of the audience, and by extension Bernard, fail.

In light of his despair at failing to enter where the Bride alone is permitted, Bernard offers an apology and a way forward. The reason he is unable to exert himself is for his duty to exhort his audience, for, “no small effort and fatigue are involved in going out day by day to draw water from the open streams of the Scriptures and provide for the needs of each of you, so that without exerting yourselves you may have at hand spiritual waters for every occasion.”<sup>87</sup> Bernard's identity as one of the maidens is beginning to unravel as he assumes a role that puts him through the external trials of the Bride. He, while not an example like the Bride, provides examples to his audience through his words on the Word. But his provision for his congregation places him in an unenviable position, for he participates in the *trahi* of the Bride but receives none of her privileges: “I must confess, not without tears, that I have no time to seek after God, much less to contemplate him.”<sup>88</sup> Instead of drawing from his own experiences with the Bridegroom, he must instead rely on what is *publicum* and *commune*, “every person, therefore, is free to pursue the thoughts and experiences, however sublime and exquisite, that are his by special insight, on the meaning of the bridegroom's ointments. For my part, I offer for the common good what I received from a common source.”<sup>89</sup> The body of his sermon then begins, which recounts numerous biblical examples of people who ran in the odors of the Bridegroom's ointments, and the virtues these fragrances represent. The audience receives their explanation of the ointments, but not without difficulty on Bernard's part. While possessing the strength of the

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<sup>87</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 15.

<sup>88</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 15.

<sup>89</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 16.

maidens, he bears the responsibility of the Bride. While receiving the exterior corrections associated with *trahi*, he is without the fragrance that enables him to *currere* with the endurance of his companions. He is the chimera who inverts the interior and exterior, receiving the external trials of the advanced without the internal consolations of the beginner, discussing what is an interior, private and foreign to all but the Bride while remaining at the exterior of the place from where the fragrance emerges.

The location of the place where the fragrance comes from is named in sermon twenty-three, where Bernard expands upon the storerooms of the king: “*introduxit me rex in cellaria sua.*” These *cellaria* are the goal for the Bride and the maidens; it is to this place that the fragrances direct the faithful. The Bride, of course, runs with more ardor and greater strength, surpassing the maidens and arriving first, where, “the door is promptly opened to her as to one of the family, one highly esteemed, loved with a special love, uniquely favored.”<sup>90</sup> The internal/external division remains in the case of the maidens, for due to their weakness in desire and ability, “they arrive late, and remain outside.”<sup>91</sup> But Bernard does not allow their failure to turn into despair, for immediately he notes that the Bride, “consoles them and exhorts them to be patient, to tolerate calmly the rebuff and her absence.” Although she alone has been *introducta*, she does not forget the maidens but provides instruction to them. Based on his previous textual interaction, Bernard's identity in this passage remains ambiguous. Is he a maiden waiting for instruction, or the Bride imparting wisdom to his companions? He suspends this anticipation, holding out hope for the first half of this unusually lengthy sermon as he expands upon the plurality of the Bridegroom's rooms, his *cellaria* that include the threefold division of storeroom,

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<sup>90</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 25.

<sup>91</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 26.

garden, and bedroom. Explaining and describing the first two, he again pauses when he reaches the most intimate *locus*, the bedroom into which only the Bride may enter.

Bernard begins timorously, declaring, “Let us at last enter the bedroom. What can be said of it? May I presume that I know all about it?” His answer is definite as the door to the bedroom slams shut, “Far be it from me the pretension that I have experienced so sublime a grace, nor shall I boast of a privilege reserved solely to the fortunate bride.” Bernard's hope is once again dashed, and instead of entering into the place of union, he finds himself alone. Strangely, for all Bernard's anticipation at the wonder of this room, after this disappointment he immediately declares that he is, “more concerned to know myself.”<sup>92</sup> The question of identity is once again prominent, which displays a circular motion of reading. Bernard began with the question of identify—Why does the Bride switch between singular and plural?—to the actions appropriate to each—Who runs in the ointments? Who is drawn?—then explored the physical layout of the world of the text, the *res* of the *mundus textus*. Now, at the door of the bedroom, action and identity are merged in Bernard's concern to know himself, and what appeared to be a journey into the text has turned inward.

But the despair of encountering oneself does not lead to a dead end. Instead of a single bedroom, Bernard discovers a vast array: “I feel that the King has not one bedroom only, but several.”<sup>93</sup> These anterooms are more intimate than the storeroom and the garden, and each maiden, depending on ability and ardor, “finds there the place and destination suited to her merits until the grace of contemplation allows her to advance further and share in the happiness of her Lord.”<sup>94</sup> This opportunity for the greater congregation to experience the mystery of divine contemplation is not a comfort, but is an instrument of dissatisfaction, for there is an elusive

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<sup>92</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 33.

<sup>93</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 34-35.

<sup>94</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 34.

room that remains concealed from the eyes of the audience. Again, after withholding his literary identity from the short passage describing the multiple apartments of the Bridegroom, he returns when the discourse returns to the secret charms of the private bedroom, and with him follow failure and frustration. 'Ready for the really good stuff?', he asks, 'where union is consummated?' "Relying on the light it may please him to give me," Bernard defers, "I shall try to demonstrate this more clearly in its proper place." Again, delay and inability halt the progress of the sermon. "For the moment it suffices to know that no maiden, or concubine, or even queen, may gain access to the mystery of that bedroom which the Bridegroom reserves solely for her who is his dove, beautiful, perfect and unique."<sup>95</sup> Again, frustration is only completed when coupled with the hope of fulfillment in the proper place, but Bernard's disappointment at his personal failure weighs the passage, "Hence it is not for me to take umbrage if I am not admitted there, especially since I can see that even the bride herself is at times unable to find fulfillment of her desire to know certain secrets."<sup>96</sup>

The imbalance does not last, for immediately Bernard offers a strange, vague promise, "*Sed audite quousque pervenerim, aut me pervenisse putaverim.*"<sup>97</sup> He will share with his audience how far he thinks or believes he has reached, a mysterious place that is a, "remote and secret place, but not a place of repose."<sup>98</sup> The uncertain state of contemplation is reflected in the style of the passage; just as Bernard's own spiritual progress is impeded by his inability and failure, so does the audience purposefully receive hints that more is just out of reach. The false starts and sudden stops become more frequent in this sermon with the intent of building suspense to heighten the anticipation for what may never come, as in a Hitchcock movie that places the

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<sup>95</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 35.

<sup>96</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 35.

<sup>97</sup>*SBO I*, 145, *Super Cantica*, Sermo 23, IV, 10.

<sup>98</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 35.

action outside the camera's view. The literary structure of the sermon reciprocates Bernard's practice, drawing the audience into his experience of the text, like his beguiling bedroom experience, "in a way that is wondrous yet delightful he teases the awe-struck seeker till he reduces him to restlessness."<sup>99</sup> To be restless in the face of his inadequacy is as far as Bernard can take his audience, and this place, "where complete repose is not attainable, is not the bedroom."<sup>100</sup> Literary and spiritual despair carry the day, for Bernard cannot preach or experience the rest of the bedroom in his failure.

Where, then, is he in the geography of the Bridegroom's rooms? Perhaps Bernard himself is uncertain. When providing a short review of the sermon to the audience, "for your memory's sake," he reinforces the division of meaning he has established. The order in which they are listed is vital. First, the order is, "*cellario, horto, cubiculo*," the same arrangement in which he first mentioned them in paragraph three. In his exposition, however, he preached briefly on the garden first, the cellar second, and conjecture on the bedroom third, a division he maintains when reminding the audience of the meaning of each, "times are connected with the garden, the merits with the storeroom, the reward with the threefold contemplation of one who seeks the bedroom."<sup>101</sup> The times of the garden are the divisions of salvation, the historical sense of scripture, while the merits contain the moral teaching of scripture. Why the explicit change in order, a detail that by no means escaped his attention? The answer rests in the closing sentences of the sermon, "I am satisfied that I have said enough about the storeroom. With regard to the garden and bedroom, if I discover new ideas or feel the need to modify what I have already said, I shall inform you in due course."<sup>102</sup> Bernard has said enough about the storeroom because this

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<sup>99</sup> Bernard, *SS II*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Bernard, *SS II*, 36.

<sup>101</sup> Bernard, *SS II*, 41.

<sup>102</sup> Bernard, *SS II*, 41.

is the *locus* he knows best; it is the place in which one is occupied with self-knowledge. His arrangement and alteration of it serves his intent—in one sense he remains at the first stage, ever a beginner, and in the other his failure to reach the bedroom is more poignant as it is just beyond his reach. Bernard does not know the Bridegroom in the bedroom, but is instead forced to know himself in the storeroom. His journey with the bride and the hope of peaceful contemplation is interrupted by his failure: internally in his inability to be at peace, externally in his inability to ultimately expound the scriptures in his sermons. Bernard, while still entering into the world of the text, does not assume the role of the bride who enters the peace of the true bedroom nor the maidens who receive a bedroom appropriate to their merits, but remains in the cellar. His knowledge of the storeroom is complete, offering hope for further progress, but the garden and bedroom remain unknown, hovering at the fringes of his consciousness in a way that sharpens his acute despair.

## Departure

Sermon-twenty four introduces a rupture into the sequence of the sermons both historically and literarily. Bernard begins by mentioning his return from Rome, a journey necessitated by schism in the church apparently caused by Anacletus II. At the request of his audience he proposes to, “continue the sermons I began a while back on the *Song of Songs*... thinking it better to resume where I broke off than to commence with something new.”<sup>103</sup> However, Bernard performs a slight of hand; he ended sermon twenty-three with, “*introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum,*” but states that, “we ought to begin, if I be not mistaken, with the words: “the righteous love you [*recti diligunt te*],”<sup>104</sup> bypassing the bridge between these two passages,

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<sup>103</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 42.

<sup>104</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 43.

*exultabimus et laetabimur in te, memores uberum tuorum super vinum.* The question a reader of the sermons in their literary incarnation is not to wonder why Bernard skips ahead in the sequence of the verse. His move elicits a simple, effective, and unambiguous result: sermons twenty four and twenty five are forward looking, repressing the result of the discourse that came before them. Bernard plays his hand a bit too forcefully; it is simply untenable to claim that an author of his caliber should lose his place in the text, should so obviously forget his train of thought.

The proper line of inquiry is to stress the continuity rather than discontinuity between the blocks twenty-one to twenty-three, twenty-four to the beginning of twenty-six, the eruption of the main text in twenty-six, and the following sixty sermons that emerge as light from a prism. To reiterate Bernard's injunction, although in a different context, "before we begin to explain what this means, let us take a look at its origin, see who spoke it. For we are expected to understand what the author omits to say."<sup>105</sup> Given the open-ended conclusion of the last sermon, "if I discover new ideas or feel the need to modify what I have already said, I shall inform you in due course,"<sup>106</sup> the historic specifics of his absence do not seem necessary to its literary function, for he utilizes his "rhetorical" absence to forget the result of his last sermon, his despair and failure, in glaring contrast to the specific admonition to remember the main points of the exposition that closed sermon twenty-three.<sup>107</sup> For these three sermons, we are no longer on an active trajectory to the locus of divine presence. We no longer encounter the stylistic and personal frustration of Bernard in the fruitless journey to the entrance of the bedchamber; these sermons lack the personal interjections and performative reading techniques that punctuated the

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<sup>105</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 43.

<sup>106</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 41.

<sup>107</sup>"... for your memory's sake I must summarize briefly what I have said... remember the three divisions..."(Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS II*, 40-41), this injunction to remember, placed at the end of the sermon, is occurs only this once in Bernard's sermon series.

earlier sermons. Now, interestingly, the theme is of the tense and often contradictory relationship between the interior and exterior, established by the opening paragraph of twenty four—schism.

The sequence begins with twenty-four and dissention within the ranks of the maidens, leading to twenty-five and the opposition between the blackness and beauty of the bride, and twenty-six begins with a meditation on the opposition between the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon. In sermon twenty-four, as mentioned, Bernard begins with the phrase, “the righteous love you.” To him, this indicates a prior conversation, one in which certain companions of the bride attempt to reassure her. “I think they may have said this,” Bernard conjectures, “because of the members of their party who were not of the same mind although they traveled in their company, who insisted on their own way, their lives being neither simple nor sincere.” While retaining the veneer of companionship, of exterior contentment, Bernard reveals their interior attitude to be in disharmony with their appearance and are actually resentful of the Bride, “filled with envy of their mother’s unique glory... took occasion to murmur against her on the grounds that she alone had entered the storehouses.”<sup>108</sup> The motif of the schism allows Bernard to shift the focus of the sermons from the metaphor of the race to the bedroom of the Bridegroom, roughly an external one, to the interior status of the Bride and her companions. Indeed, the journey through the rooms does involve the interior perfection of those who progress through the series of dwelling places, but the focus is on the external: the Bride is drawn, she and her companions are visited by the Bridegroom, they are drawn by his fragrances, and in the final estimation none can control when the Bridegroom comes or how one might obtain an entrance into the inner chambers. The tension is whether the individual is in or out, whether they are chosen and graced with the ability to proceed where others may not. Now, in twenty-four,

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<sup>108</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 45.

Bernard's focus is on the person, a focus that allows him to establish a microcosm in the division between the internal and external that brings a striking inversion into relief. The maidens, excluded from the entire *cellaria*, react with an internal sin that contrasts with their external beauty. This will, in sermon twenty-five, be exactly opposite to the status of the bride, who is, *nigra sed formosa*, black but beautiful: externally ugly, but internally beautiful.

The tensions between the interior and exterior life in sermons twenty-four, twenty-five, and twenty-six expand the difference between *trahi* and *currere*, between being drawn and running, or more importantly the two sorts of help that come from above. The Bride, who alone is *trahitur*, receiving the external correction that come from *trahens*, the action of whose drawing is the corrective to haughtiness, and begets humility, prudence, and the fear of God.<sup>109</sup> The participation of the maidens, which is *currere*, is in consolation through trust, strength, devotion and joy.<sup>110</sup> By receiving the gifts of consolation without the more difficult blessings of correction, the group of maidens undergoes a double division, for certain of the Bride's companions are divided internally, which further divides them from their companions. The intrinsic nature of this opposition is underscored by Bernard's assertion that, "Iniquity is a fault in the heart, not in the flesh."<sup>111</sup> *Cor*, not *carnis*, is responsible for the division of the person. Indeed, Bernard imagines *corpus* to rebuke *anima*, realizing that the latter should exceed the peace and beauty of the former, "The body says... All help due to you from me you have turned to your own disgrace, you abuse my service to you; a brutish and bestial spirit, you dwell unworthily in this human body."<sup>112</sup> Bernard's final injunction in twenty-four to his audience is a call to eliminate the divided self, to, "raise up both our hearts and hands to God, that our whole

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<sup>109</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 11; *SBO I*, Sermo 21, vi.

<sup>110</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 11; *SBO I*, Sermo 21, vi.

<sup>111</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 46; *SBO I*, Sermo 24, ii: "Porro iniquitas, cordis est, non carnis vitium."

<sup>112</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 47.

being may be righteous, our righteous faith being revealed in righteous actions.”<sup>113</sup> Harmony between the internal and the external, *cor* and *manus* united in the pursuit of righteous living, is the ideal toward which we must strive.

The pressing question for this chapter is again Bernard's self-identification in the text. In the context of the world projected by this short passage, where does Bernard find himself? Given the circumstances presented at the introduction, which so interrupted the prior discourse constructed through sermons twenty-one through twenty-three, we may expect that Bernard, having returned from combating schism in Rome, would identify with the embattled Bride and her victimization at the hands of false companions. This rhetorical mapping would be just as easy, if not more so, than what he has done in the previous sermons. Yet, Bernard remains conspicuously veiled, uncharacteristically removed from the text. Even a cursory examination of pronouns reveals a shift from the heavily first person narration of the previous sermons to a second person exhortation; a shift from the predominating “I” to “you.” In light of the characters in this drama, is he the Bride, a true companion, or a false companion? In the last lines he exhorts himself along with the audience, “Let us raise up... So we shall be lovers of the bride and loved by the Bridegroom Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God, blessed forever.”<sup>114</sup> His own status is not definitive; it is unclear whether he is a jealous companion or one who reassures the bride. In the reflection of his literary persona, Bernard is apparently in need of admonition to bring his interior and exterior into a harmonious exultation of God. This is especially necessary to differentiate himself from those who are excluded from the inner bedroom of the Bridegroom, successful in their efforts to appear at peace externally while failing to control the tumult of the interior.

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<sup>113</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 49.

<sup>114</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 49.

The thrust of sermon twenty-five acts as foil to sermon twenty-four. It treats the exact opposite of the false maiden who is externally pleasant but internally repulsive, the external success negated by the internal failure. Here Bernard comments on the blackness but beauty of the Bride and the implicit contrast between these two modifiers. Bernard explains to the audience that she is, “black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels. The blackness you observe is merely external,”<sup>115</sup> for God looks to the merits of the internal in the final estimation of the person. Who is this Bride? Bernard first finds St. Paul, Doctor of Nations, in this position of the text, for he is, “reputed abject, dishonorable, black, beneath notice, a scrap of the world's refuse.”<sup>116</sup> At the same time, he is, “the man who is rapt into paradise, who, traversing the first and second heavens, penetrates by his purity to the third,”<sup>117</sup> a description similar to the journey through the threefold division of the Bridegroom's rooms. This role is further expanded to the saints, whose glory is, “within, not without; not in the beauty of nature nor in the praises of the crowd, but in the Lord.”<sup>118</sup> Further, the unpleasantness of the external is accentuated, for, “the saints glory not only in their inward light but even in the unsightliness of their outward appearance,”<sup>119</sup> as they imitate the way of Christ's sufferings on Earth.

It is significant to note that Bernard entirely withholds his literary presence when discussing the blackness but beauty of the Bride. Unlike the previous sermon, he seems to have no place in the exemplar presented in twenty-five. The interruption of schism all but removed his presence in the text, here reaching a bodily balance between the beautiful and the ugly, the interior and exterior in a way that consistently focuses our attention on the innermost core of life

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<sup>115</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 53.

<sup>116</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 53.

<sup>117</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 53.

<sup>118</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 55.

<sup>119</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 55.

despite what is readily apparent. Bernard placed himself among those who would require a warning concerning the divided self, where external tranquility masks an unstable inner life. Now, in the presence of the Bridegroom as seen in the glory of the bride, Bernard is conspicuously absent. By this stylistic omission, he finds distance between himself and those who, while externally unpleasant, internally are illuminated by eternal light and life.

## **Return**

Bernard initially continues to explore the implicit contrasts that run through these passages in sermon twenty-six, which examines verse 1:4, “as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.” Bernard extends his anthropomorphic interpretation wherein the tent represents the humans’ physical existence, “this body, I repeat, is a tent, a tent of Kedar, that now intervenes to deprive the soul for a while of the infinite light, permitting it to be seen ‘in a mirror darkly,’ but not face to face.”<sup>120</sup> During this scriptural meditation on bodily existence Bernard suddenly, but not incongruously, incorporates his own experience of loss and frailty exemplified in the death of his brother Gerard. His own life becomes the indirect object of the meditation on scripture, validating Leclercq’s observation of the monastic understanding of scripture, “Each word it contains is thought of as a word addressed by God to each reader for his salvation. Everything then has a personal, immediate value for present life and for the obtaining of eternal life.”<sup>121</sup> Bernard’s literary presence returns in full force, suddenly entering the world of the text as himself without the mediating voice of another. He understands the tents of Kedar, but what of the curtains of Solomon? As at the end of sermon twenty three, interruption, frustration, and inability halt the discourse, for, as he declares, “I feel that something beyond imagining,

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<sup>120</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>121</sup>Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 79-80.

something sublime and sacred is so caught up in these curtains of Solomon, that I dare not approach them at all, except at the bidding of him who hid it there and sealed it.”<sup>122</sup> Bernard again is unworthy to enter the innermost *res* of the text, but now, the death of Gerard provides a physical example of the textual reality. The *sum* of Bernard's existence collides violently and contrasts painfully with the *est* of the text: *Quid mihi et cantico huic, qui in amaritudine sum?* When he asks, “what even is this Song to me, whose existence is bitterness?” it is a question of the entire being of Bernard. Confronted by his exclusion from the ecstasy of the Bedchamber, then tents of Solomon, and also the heavenly bliss of Gerard, the division between his internal sorrow and external calm, extending to the division between himself and the text, melts when, “all the time I have forced myself to refrain from much weeping, though inwardly much troubled and sad. I could control my tears but could not control my sadness.”<sup>123</sup> Through his tears Bernard reflects on the similarities between himself and, in the words of Christ, the dead who shed tears over the dead, “Can it be possible that I am one of them? My emotional outburst is certainly like theirs, but the cause, the intention differs.”<sup>124</sup> He explains that he mourns not because of any perceived injustice on the part of God, but due to the loss of a helper who allowed him more time and energy to contemplate God. “I continue to lament,” he claims, “but over my own plight, because reason forbids me to mourn for him.”<sup>125</sup> Bernard cannot mourn for Gerard since the latter is now enjoying the un-mediated presence of God.

This mourning for himself may actually be a way for Bernard to allow scripture to map itself onto his life in similar fashion to the method of performative reading we saw in the previous chapter, which Sweetman uncovered in an *exemplum* in the writings of Thomas of

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<sup>122</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 59.

<sup>123</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 61.

<sup>124</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 68.

<sup>125</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 71.

Cantimpré. If we examine Bernard's despair in light of Sweetman's observations on performative reading, this outburst in sermon twenty-six could be something slightly different than the submission to a literary genre<sup>126</sup> or literary exaggeration,<sup>127</sup> but is a symptom of ordering his life to what is presented in the text. Bernard is casting himself and Gerard in the framework of the Song—Gerard has become the bride, who has been taken into the chambers of mystical union with God, while Bernard is left behind, as he understood the maidens to remain outside to this experience. As noted earlier, in sermon twenty-one, Bernard observed the bride and her companions admire and chase after the bridegroom, but only the bride is brought into the chamber. This shift from a plural to a singular pronoun is because the, “girls are delicate and tender, ill-equipped to endure temptations; so I want them to run in my company, but not to be drawn into my company. I will have them as companions in hours of consolation, but not in times of trial.”<sup>128</sup> The situation of the maidens now corresponds to Bernard's as he is left in despair outside the bridal chamber, Gerard having left him. “I grieve for you, my dearest Gerard, not for the sake of grieving, but because you have been separated from me. Perhaps my grieving should be on my own account, because the cup I drink is bitter. And I grieve by myself because I drink by myself: for you cannot join me.”<sup>129</sup> In despair, Bernard assimilates the example of the weak maidens as a textual example of his own soul. The emotions of the text become him and, as in the case of Thomas, “he subjects himself to the text such that it “performs” him.”<sup>130</sup> His reaction could be nothing but the despair occurring due to the realization that he has fallen behind Gerard, and the door closes on him again.

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<sup>126</sup>Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 153 and forward.

<sup>127</sup>Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 131-132.

<sup>128</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 12.

<sup>129</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 70.

<sup>130</sup>Sweetman, “Thomas of Cantimpré: Performative Reading and Pastoral Care,” 149.

### **Conclusion: One**

Thus, Berengar's criticism is simultaneously correct and incorrect. A corpse and a funeral procession indeed interrupt the wedding feast, but the dead body is not Gerard. Nor is the interruption out of place and unnecessary. To believe this would be to dismiss Bernard's carefully constructed interruption, which provides the opportunity for Bernard to fully explicate the division between the internal and external person, and the reversal in this section of the Song. Bodily, Gerard is dead, but spiritually he is fully alive, while Bernard is externally alive while, in comparison to the life of those admitted to the Bedchamber, dead. The corpse that interrupts the wedding feast is Bernard's; the mourning for the abbot of Clairvaux.

### **Continuing the Conclusion: Two**

Opposing this despair is Bernard's faith that, despite our frailty, our inability to transcend our weaknesses despite our best efforts, God will grant grace to the humiliated, and the exercise of bringing the internal to the light of the external is the crucial move in his practice. In sermon twenty-seven, following his declaration that the recently passed Gerard is now enjoying the full love of God, Bernard extrapolates from the same biblical passage that the church, "possesses the promise of happiness to come," for while those on earth are obviously unable to, "participate in the vision that is theirs [those in heaven]," nonetheless the church, "strives to resemble them in the way she lives."<sup>131</sup> In the movement from sermon twenty-six to twenty-seven, we are assured of the promise of Christ revealing himself, not to the blackness of the tents of Kedar, but to the experience of the spirit. In this sermon, Bernard offers an extensive treatment on the spiritual senses and contradicts his earlier insistence on experience through the example of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Although she heard the word and the promise of resurrection, she did

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<sup>131</sup>Bernard., *SS II*, 77.

not recognize the risen Word until she saw him. Commending his readers to have faith in the promises of the word, Bernard declares, “she, who refused to be consoled by the word of the Lord, ceased her crying when she saw him, because she valued experience above faith. But experience is deceptive.”<sup>132</sup> This can easily be seen as a rebuke against himself, for just as he performed the grief of the maidens left outside the bedchamber, so now is he the woman at the tomb, encountering the death that is opposite of the life she expected. Bernard claims, “faith cannot be deceived. With the power to understand invisible truths, faith does not know the poverty of the senses; it transcends even the limits of human reason, the capacity of nature, the bounds of experience.”<sup>133</sup> This self-consolation and exhortation is reminiscent of Leclercq’s observation concerning monastic writing, where “mystical language constantly uses paradoxes like these to evoke, without exhausting their meaning, realities too complex to be contained within abstract definitions. It is always a question of the reconciliation on the level of spiritual experience, of ideas which, in appearance on the natural level, are contradictory.”<sup>134</sup> This span of Bernard’s sermons seems to be a mystical performative reading of the Song, where hope and despair are held in the balance in the light of his experience of the text.

Bernard’s experience in reading is not an exercise in chance even though it cannot guarantee a secure or predictable interpretive outcome in the specific sense. Bernard may not himself reach the same conclusion were he to return to the text in the sense that he does in these few sermons, because he would have changed, hopefully through the spiritual progress made possible during the journey through the text. Ever a traveler and beginner, Bernard’s scriptural road may be repeatedly retread, but the scenery and the self never remain the same. He does indeed experience a well-practiced way of reading, following a precise and intricate

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<sup>132</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 95.

<sup>133</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 95.

<sup>134</sup>Leclercq, *SS II*, 67.

methodology rooted in the contemplative tradition. Through his reading and preaching, Bernard interacts with the text by projecting himself into the world he finds in his beloved scripture, submitting himself to possibilities present in the word. In the sampling of *Sermones* twenty-one to twenty-six, we have just observed Bernard interacting with his sacred text the way a good actor might utilize a script; but the stage is life, and for Bernard there is no exit. He comprehends his monastic vocation as a lifetime performance of scripture, interpreting sacred writ and his life circumstances in light of each other as a guide to the proper way to live in a way that honors God. When he encounters a new situation in his life, such as the death of an intimate spiritual brother, it requires an altered entrance into the same passage that under different circumstances would result in an entirely different interpretive result. In this way, Bernard's life is submitted to the text in that it directs him how to respond to the reality he sees, but it is precisely the reality of his life that enables the text to speak.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Location**

There is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, an intricate method to Bernard's interpretation of scripture, a method that diverges widely from the characterization it has received.<sup>135</sup> The method of reading, however, was only one reason why our contemporary exegetes reject a monastic interpretation such as Bernard's. Indeed, it would seem that many have arrived at a critique of Bernard's methods indirectly, reacting to the austere ascetic ethos permeating his sermons. This perceived denial of the textual sexuality of the Song of Songs, then, functions as proof of the unreliably subjective nature of Bernard's reading.

Bernard's relationship with bodily existence in light of his *Sermones* will thus be explored in three stages. First, we will provide a brief overview of certain criticisms, specifically as articulated in an article by W.E. Phipps, directed at Bernard and the contemplative tradition's exegesis of the physical imagery in the Song. After identifying thereby why the contemplative tradition of exegesis is unsustainable to a modern scholarly audience, we will examine at some length Bernard's own comments regarding bodies, especially the *imagines* produced by bodies and the descriptions of them in the minds and memories of the monastic faithful. We will examine the dangers he ascribes to them, and further the use to which he puts them through the lens of Mary Carruthers' work on memory and the medieval tradition of rhetorical invention. Our last stage will be to determine in what way we are able to establish analogies between Bernard and his contemporaries.

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<sup>135</sup> See above, page 21, "Rejection," for a brief account of twentieth-century criticism of Bernard and his *Sermones Super Cantica*.

## Current Conflict

One objection that will act as the distilled point of opposition and thus funnel our discussion of Bernard's position on bodily existence is voiced loudly and brashly by William Phipps. Much like Longman's summary of Bernard's sermons,<sup>136</sup> Phipps claims that, "like the medieval alchemist, [Bernard] was obsessed with desire to transform material which he regarded as base into something precious. He had contempt for the flesh and females and was determined to show that the life of the spirit was unalloyed with sex."<sup>137</sup> The crux of Phipps argument is his use of the word "transform." Bernard transforms the physical into the spiritual; it is claimed by Phipps and others who strongly oppose this particular monastic exegesis, accusing it of remaking what is into what it is not.

As we have seen in the first chapter, the accusation of monastic repression is commonplace among contemporary exegetes; Bernard takes the erotic discourse of the Song and, due to his obsessive rejection of the body, entirely renovates the text into a pious affirmation of ethereal devotion with unwelcome effects. Phipps further suggests that Bernard's fervent attempts to stifle his latent erotic passions eventually erupted in other areas of his life, pointing out that, "Bernard's repressed erotic urges resulted in a destructive flood of dark passion in later life. By means of an inverted sublimation, he channeled his ardent desire for the opposite sex into a hatred of alleged heretics and infidels."<sup>138</sup> We might assume that the two aspects of Bernard's ambiguous "dark passions" are his preaching in support of the second crusade and his opposition to figures such as William of Conches, Gilbert of Poitiers, and above all Abelard, the

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<sup>136</sup> "Bernard becomes a timely reminder that the unnatural suppression of sexual love can lead to frightful consequences." Longman, *Song of Songs*, 33.

<sup>137</sup> W.E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974): 90.

<sup>138</sup> Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," 91.

last of whom provides a particularly attractive contrast to Bernard's monastic repression due to his amorous relationship with Heloise.

These examples of Bernard's public activity ostensibly illustrate the destructive status of Bernard's subconscious and the open results of his inner turmoil. However, the absolute certainty of this claim seems dubious, at least in the sense that such an interpretation completely resolves the enigma of what motivated Bernard to read and exhort the way he did. For example, we have already addressed the nature of Bernard's opposition to the schoolmen, particularly Abelard, in the first chapter where we investigated the often overlooked role of Abelard's posture and personality rather than the substance of his studies.<sup>139</sup> On the subject of the crusades, there is certainly doubt as to the intrinsic motivation of Bernard's support, which seems to be taken for granted in Phipps's indictment. Even Evans's introduction to Bernard's life and thought points to a complex situation surrounding his enthusiasm for the crusade. "Slow though he was to be won over to the idea that a second Crusade might be necessary and that it was his duty to try and raise support for it," Evans claims, "when once he was convinced, Bernard gave all his energies to the task."<sup>140</sup> As was the case with William of St. Thierry and the prosecution of Abelard, Evans provides a reasonable amount of evidence supporting her claim that Bernard was convinced by other churchmen, especially Eugenius III as encouraged by Louis VII. Evans claims that, "in allowing himself to be persuaded he moved away from his usual insistence that it was the welfare of the faithful which most deeply concerned the Church and was her primary

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<sup>139</sup> Jean Leclercq also explores the topic of sexual repression in *A Second Look At Saint Bernard*, trans. Marie-Bernard Saïd (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990) as it may or may not apply to Bernard and his aggressive relationship with Abelard. Leclercq helpfully notes, as he is wont to do, that literary genre was a crucial aspect of monastic culture that modern readers often overlook. "Bernard's psychological approach to Abelard as it is reflected in his style deserves careful study in light of those themes which, from its inception, the church traditionally used in combating heretics. Something of Bernard's inmost being surfaces by means of adherence to literary rules."(39) It is a promising possibility remaining to be explored whether Bernard's manner of writing against heretics is a form of performative reading in that he applies the textual template to a specific situation.

<sup>140</sup> G.R. Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 32.

responsibility.”<sup>141</sup> Far from seething with bitterness against humanity at large, Bernard’s masterpieces, such as *De Gradibus Humilitatis Et Superbiae*, *De Diligendo Deo*, and as we saw in the previous chapter, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*, concern themselves much more with a compassionate account of the person, the *homo*, before God in a community of the faithful that fosters such a flourishing relationship. The generalizations of Phipps and his colleagues fail to duly appreciate the nuances of their particular examples.

In fact, there appears to be no discrete substantiation to the charge that Bernard’s attitude toward bodily existence is due principally to internal motivations sustained purely by monastic sublimation and repression, especially if it is recognized that the most disconcerting revelations of the darker side of Bernard were provoked by Eugenius in the case of the Second Crusade and William of St. Thierry in Bernard’s notorious prosecution of heresies. Recognizing that these external factors play an important role in Bernard’s lurid actions may problematize the premise of a modern rejection of Bernard’s work as a whole. What may in fact sustain the contemporary objection is an underlying Freudian assumption that sexuality incessantly simmers beneath the surface of consciousness, and that a persons actions are to be interpreted in light of this hypothesis with only cursory examination of relevant historical evidence. Mark Burrows recognizes this tendency and indicates that, “such an approach surely reveals much about modern post-Freudian sensibilities, but offers less help than we might suppose in unraveling the complex milieu of monastic literature.”<sup>142</sup> A fundamental assumption of this modern critique of Bernard

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<sup>141</sup> Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard*, 35. A disclaimer must be added to Evans’s claim. The reason, it seems, that Bernard was convinced to participate in these activities external to his beloved cloister is not a deviation from his, “insistence that it was the welfare of the faithful which most deeply concerned the Church,” but was precisely because he understood crusade to be concerned with the welfare of the faithful. For Bernard, the crusades were an opportunity to physically enact the spiritual struggle against evil waged in the soul of every Christian, and the purpose of opposing heresies was to ensure the faithful were not lead astray. It seems a sensible policy to first assume congruence rather than variation in Bernard’s thought.

<sup>142</sup> Mark Burrows, “Foundations for an Erotic Christology: Bernard of Clairvaux on Jesus as ‘Tender Lover,’” *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998): 478-479.

is the modern supposition that the Song is about physical, sexual, erotic relations and nothing else. The power and aberrant nature of monasticism is assumed to have overwhelmed the liberated and inherent reference to bodily reality and especially sexuality, which we now explicate and meditate upon freely due to our emancipation from this warped religious ideology. Burrows addresses this point sympathetically, noting, “It is understandable but not altogether accurate for us *moderni* to interpret such writings [Bernard’s *Sermones*] as the product of sublimation, the stubborn and severe renunciation of sex provoked by the monastic suspicion of the body.”<sup>143</sup>

We may further discover that the contemporary distrust of monasticism and its attendant controversy is clarified in a critical examination of contemporary sexuality, such as the study provided by Michel Foucault. He astutely observes that we post-Freudians, “are often reminded of the countless procedures which Christianity once employed to make us detest the body; but let us ponder all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love sex, to make the knowledge of it desirable and everything said about it precious.”<sup>144</sup> Note the subtle difference Foucault indicates between historic Christianity and the contemporary world, seamlessly moving from “body” to “sex.” The body is analogically subsumed into sex, and the rejection of one constituted the rejection of the other. It is the modern “desire for sex”<sup>145</sup> which removes the distinction between bodies *per se* and sexuality, a division that requires a more refined

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<sup>143</sup> Burrows, “Foundations for an Erotic Christology: Bernard of Clairvaux on Jesus as ‘Tender Lover,’” 478. He later claims, “*Latet dolus in generalibus* [deceit lurks in generalizations]: it no longer seems plausible to suggest that monastic theologians beckon us down a path of unswerving domination of the weak and repression of the body.” (479-480)

<sup>144</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* trans. Robert Hurly (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 159. Foucault’s study is nuanced, and we cannot fully explore the implications of it in the confines of this essay, but his injunction prompts us to remember that we may be suspicious concerning a monastic stance on sexuality, but we must be equally so of our own, especially the drive to “transform” sex into discourse or even all discourses into sexual concerns.

<sup>145</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 156. This desire includes, “the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth.”

awareness. Sexual renunciation is a cornerstone of the monastic life, but against Freudian sensibilities, a monastic such as Bernard would not hold that sex is the ultimate reference in discourse and bodily existence. Caroline Walker Bynum affirms this conclusion in her work on the particularly medieval role of bodies. She firmly rebuffs simplistic dismissal of supposedly anti-body medieval Christianity, stating, “it is patently not true (however much passing remarks about ‘Platonic dualism’ may suggest it) that twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century thinkers who attributed some independent substantial reality to matter and/or body were inclined to see such entities as unreal or (in simple, categorical terms) evil.”<sup>146</sup> Simply stated, “the body is absolutely crucial in Bernard’s anthropology.”<sup>147</sup> Bynum leads us to believe that Bernard essentially holds the body functions in a way that recalls how Foucault sees the body function in western society—as something which points to another layer of reality. For the contemporary west, the body points to sex. For Bernard the body operates in an strange way, as Bynum describes the task of contemporary readers, “historians have sometimes noticed, to their puzzlement, it was those with the sharpest sense of body/soul conflict and the most ferocious ascetic practices (for example, Bernard of Clairvaux...) who had the clearest and most passionate awareness of the potential of body to reveal the divine.”<sup>148</sup> The medieval contemplative tradition Bynum claims, believed that the body presented a unique and vital link to spiritual realities; not as something to be superseded in favor of divine absolutes, but as the integral means by which these things are revealed and experienced.

With these reflections on bodily existence, medieval and modern, in mind, we may conclude that the majority of biblical scholars seem in their critiques of monasticism to be unaware of, or at least unwilling to explore, the underlying differences and similarities between

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<sup>146</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 256.

<sup>147</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>148</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 256.

themselves and monks such as Bernard. To us, the physicality of the Song is about sex, and it appears that to Bernard it was not. Therefore, the conclusion follows for us that in the final analysis Bernard must be “anti-body,” as proved by his avoidance of the sexuality in the text and other circumstantial evidence. Such a conjecture seems inconclusive based on a close textual examination. Bernard has certainly turned aside from physical sexual activity in line with the ascetic tradition, but in order to understand Bernard’s attitude toward physical existence we must disentangle the concepts of sex and body, as unusual as this may seem to moderns. A helpful way to frame this move is to examine the discourse in terms of reference. When scholars such as Longman, LaCocque, or Phipps, read the Song, the bodily descriptions refer to sex. But when Bernard performatively reads himself into the text, his experience yields no modernly recognizable sexual referent, undeniably because of his historical location as a medieval monk, just as the inverse is true of those historically located post-Freudian individuals. We must now examine the claims made by Bynum in the context of Bernard’s *Sermones*, where we will perceive that through his interaction with the Song Bernard does, in fact, exhibit an appreciation for bodily existence, one which is foreign to modern audiences but must be appreciated in its own right. The question is not about Bernard’s location relative to a modern idea of sex, or further about his understanding of women, but of the nature of bodies themselves in Bernard’s thought, and more importantly the images of these bodies that a person carried with them in memory.

### **Bernard’s Spiritual Words and Bodies: First Reading**

We will delve into an analysis of Bernard’s monastic understanding of the body by initially examining how he contrasted with others of his time, moving into particularly telling

instances in his *Sermones*. In doing so, we may initially strengthen the argument of those who condemn it. The young Cistercian Order Bernard entered in 1098 contrasted externally with older Benedictine houses, especially those with ties to Cluny, in the physical austerity of their lifestyle. A strict diet, simplicity of dress and architecture, and a regimen of manual labor marked the Cistercians in comparison with Benedictine houses that had adapted more elaborate liturgy and more lenient requirements for its own monks. The differing interpretations of the monastic life resulted in a number of conflicts between the religious communities, and Bernard was compelled to address the issue, once again prompted by William Saint-Thierry and a regular canon of Mont-Saint-Eloi named Oger.<sup>149</sup> His treatise on this subject of monastic discipline, the *Apologia Ad Guillelmum Abbatem* written in 1125 (around ten years before beginning his *Sermones Super Cantica*), is divided into two sections, the *minora* and the *maiora*, recalling the monastic practice of the abbot publicly recalling violations of the rule, the severity of which was divided into the categories of what was minor and major. By framing the differences between Cluny and Clairvaux as a monastic chapter meeting, Bernard both includes himself and Cluny in the same monastic community, and illustrates their differences in the substance of his grievances. In Bernard's use in this particular instance, the *minora* concern the most obviously perceptible differences: meals, drinking, policies governing the infirmary, clothing, the excesses of abbots, and splendor in travel. But after listing these very visible offenses, he informs his audience that, "these are small things; I am coming to things of greater importance, but which seem smaller, because they are more common."<sup>150</sup> He omits from the list of major offences the, "painstaking

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<sup>149</sup> "The traditional view of the origin of the *Apologia* has been that at some point... Bernard was asked by William of Saint-Thierry to write the treatise that would become the *Apologia*. Bernard complied, addressing the treatise to William. But historians are surprised as to why he then sent his preliminary draft to Oger, a canon regular of Mont-Saint-Eloi near Arras." Conrad Rudolph, *The "Things Of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1990), 211.

<sup>150</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *A Justification for Abbot William*, 279. When quoted in English, I am working from the translation provided by Conrad Rudolph in the appendix to his book, *The "Things Of Greater Importance": Bernard*

representations which deflect the attention while they are in them of those who pray and thus hinder their devotion,”<sup>151</sup> none too subtly suggesting that these depictions may belong to the category of *maiora*. Although he defers to the possibility that these things may be made *ad honorem Dei* and to instruct the unlearned, he certainly believes that for those who are not simple these “painstaking representations “ have no function but as a distraction. After rejecting the pride and avarice attached to the beautiful images that adorn the public areas of the church, Bernard concedes that religious communities should, “put up with these things which are found in the church, since even if they are harmful and avaricious, they are not to the simple and devout.”<sup>152</sup> Here we have Bernard’s second, highly qualified admission that physical images have a role in the life of the faithful. But this modest concession is eclipsed when Bernard calls his contemplative audience to examine their own practices: “we,” Bernard asks his colleagues regarding material senses, “who have left behind all that is precious and beautiful in this world for the sake of Christ, we who regard as dung all things shining in beauty, soothing in sound, agreeable in fragrance, sweet in taste, pleasant in touch—in short, all material pleasures—in order that we may win Christ; whose devotion, I ask, do we strive to excite in all this?”<sup>153</sup> This sentiment, one which greatly restricted sculpture and other visual arts in the uniformly constructed Cistercian communities, may well be foundational to the claim that Bernard’s monasticism sustains no positive role for sensual experience other than its strict renunciation. Here seems to be a decisive statement of what Bernard believes to be the proper monastic stance toward *oblectamenta corporea* (material pleasures). But as we will see, Bernard’s consistent

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of Clairvaux’s *Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art*. When providing my own translation in detail, I am working from SBO, v. III: 80-108, *Apologia Ad Guillelmum Abatem*, XII, 29, 20-25.

<sup>151</sup> Bernard, *Justification*, 279.

<sup>152</sup> Bernard, *Justification*, 283.

<sup>153</sup> Bernard, *Justification*, 281.

renunciation of physical sense experience is a spiritual exercise intended to position the reader in an edifying posture and trajectory.

The greatest outrage, the apex of his argument, follows his restriction of images and bodies to the use of the *simplices et devoti*. The secular community is one concern, but monks are entirely another, for, “apart from this [presence of images in the church], in the cloisters, before the eyes of the brothers while they read—what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity?”<sup>154</sup> The benefit of such forms in the presence of the religious is not a question for Bernard; the *ridicula monstruositas* is clearly an absurd distraction to more important work. After his descriptions of the *deformis formositas*, which are not only what we would consider monstrosities, but include depictions of apes, soldiers, hunters, lions and tigers, he grieves,

everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God. Good God! If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least troubled at the expense?<sup>155</sup>

Here again we see the literary play as Bernard hones his argument to maximum memorable effect. He transitions abruptly, focusing on uncontrollable external events which bring the discourse to a premature end, a device we have seen Bernard utilize in his *Sermones*. “In any event, this broad subject has suggested many other things deserving to be added. But my own sufficiently worrisome preoccupations tear me away, Brother Oger, as does your immediate departure which you will not agree to delay any longer—yet neither are you willing to depart

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<sup>154</sup> Bernard, *Justification*, 283.

<sup>155</sup> Bernard, *Justification*, 283. We might translate the phrase “magis legere libeat in marmoribus, quam in codicibus,” as, “rather, it may be pleasing to read in marble statues than in books,” emphasizing the subjunctive role of *libeat* and its implications of possible pleasure and agreeableness. This reveals that for Bernard the issue concerns providing amusement for monks rather than sound and strenuous training.

without this recent work.”<sup>156</sup> The effect of this mechanism is clear in his apparent distraction, for the core of his argument is contrasted to the two superficial elements of his concluding remarks: cost and temporal prepossession. In the appendix to his book,<sup>157</sup> Conrad Rudolph establishes that the *Apologia* underwent at least two drafts and emerged as a result of an extended conversation with Peter the Venerable and William Saint-Thierry—there was no historical instance of canon Oger waiting in the doorway for Bernard’s ink to dry. The appeal to expense is clever, for it is at once reminiscent of God’s discourse with the aberrant prophet Jonah after sparing judgment on the city of Nineveh, God finally justifying mercy in terms of the number of cattle such an affliction would have wasted. It also strikes at the heart of the paradox of rich monks: money should not matter, but if one decorates the church in order to gain pilgrimage revenue, expense takes on the veneer of investment. Interruption and diversion heighten the tension between reading for one’s self and the distraction of physical images, a conflict which Bernard masterfully sets before his audience with enough transparent direction for them to be precisely aware of the appropriate resolution. The study of the law trumps the interfering role of physical bodies.

This point provides us with an appropriate segue into Bernard’s *Sermones* where he provides further illumination of his understanding of the nature of the physical. In sermon forty, during his initial commentary on verse 1:9 in the Song, “Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove’s,” Bernard states outright his methodology with this preliminary warning to his audience, cautioning them,

You must not give an earthbound meaning to this coloring of the corruptible flesh, to this gathering of blood-red liquid that spreads evenly beneath the surface of her pearly skin, quietly mingling with it to enhance her physical beauty by the pink and white loveliness

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<sup>156</sup>Bernard, *Justification*, 284-285.

<sup>157</sup>Conrad Rudolph, “The Origin of the *Apologia*,” Appendix 1 in *The “Things Of Greater Importance”: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art*, 203-226.

of her cheeks. For the substance of her soul is incorporeal and invisible, possessing neither bodily limbs not [sic] any visible coloring.<sup>158</sup>

Bernard's counsel in sermon forty echoes the argument in his *Apologia* concerning the priority of word and soul over body and flesh, a stance which certainly gives substance to the most serious accusations leveled against monastic exegesis. The relatively tame translation of *carnis putredinem*, "corruptible flesh," may be more strongly rendered as "rotten meat," a statement of contrast with the preferable "*incorporea illa animae invisibilisque substantia*," that immaterial and invisible stuff of the soul. He solidifies his perspective in the following sentence, encouraging his audience to adopt his method of understanding the body in terms of the conceptual sense, instructing them to, "Arrive, if you can, at spiritual being via a spiritual seeing, and in order to have the pattern of the proposed likeness fit [the referent], consider the surface of the soul."<sup>159</sup> This sentence complicates what has thus far seemed an obvious understanding of Bernard's attitude toward the body, for here he has offered his readers a glimpse of how his reading technique operates: in terms of a *proposita similitudo*, or a proposed likeness. This likeness indicates the relationship between the "thing" itself and a human's knowledge of whatever it may be. The *schema* utilized to correspond to the spiritual essence is an ordered likeness suitable to the subject, therefore an appropriate interpretation according to Bernard is one where a spiritual image is proposed, and this projected likeness must be fit to the physical imagery of the text. In the preceding example, the description of the blushing bride is an image for the thriving of virtue and beauty, resulting in the increase of grace in the soul of the believer.

The images, and the meanings of these images, are *coaptandum*: "joined together" in Bernard's

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<sup>158</sup>Bernard, *SS II*, 199.

<sup>159</sup>"Tu vero spiritualem essentiam spirituali, si potes, attinge intuitu, et ad coaptandum propositae similitudinis schema cogita animae faciem," Sermo XL, I.1.21, in in SBO II, 25. Walsh translates this passage as, "Try then as best you can to grasp the nature of this spiritual entity by means of a spiritual insight; and to conserve the fittingness of the proposed comparison take note that the mind's intention is the soul's face." Bernard of Clairvaux, *SS II*, 199. The essence of what Bernard is saying remains, but in order to discern more exactly what he is trying to say I have utilized another rendering of the passage provided by Robert Sweetman.

interpretive action. As we read in his comments, Bernard would be incredulous to hear of a reader assuming that the meaning of a sentence describing a body is restricted to referring to the actual physical nature of the image. What would now be considered to be the spiritual connotation eclipses the physical denotation in terms of meaning; Bernard may be more incredulous than imperative to hear that a reader would not assign the primary meaning to the spiritual implications of the letter. Perhaps Bernard still incriminates himself under modern standards due to his preference for the spiritual.

A particularly marked instance of his predilection for turning to the spiritual and apparently scorning the body occurs in sermon fifty-six, where Bernard comments on Song 2:9, “Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattices.” In his commentary on the passage, he performs the same method of “joining” the spiritual understanding of the excerpt to the physical. “A true spiritual understanding,” he asserts, “will not condone what ill becomes either the one who acts or the one who describes the action.”<sup>160</sup> Description and meaning in the physical and spiritual sense must match in how they “become” each other, as it is rendered in this translation. If taken in a different sense, Bernard describes the inappropriate spiritual understanding of scripture as “*dedecept*”: it would be not fitting. By joining the substance of his reading together, attentive to how the images fit properly, Bernard constructs spiritual images out of the physical. Continuing with his sermon, Bernard offers his audience a scriptural example of joining spirit and body by recalling the Incarnation, the joining of the spiritual nature of God with the corporal nature of man in the person of Jesus. By meditation on the person of Jesus and his actions while embodied, Bernard has the opportunity to discover the spiritual within the physical. In his meditation Bernard does not abandon the

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<sup>160</sup>Bernard, *SS III*, 87-88. “Nil quippe quod vel auctorem dedecat, vel narratorem verus et spiritualis intellectus admittet,” *Sermo LVI*, I.1.18, in *SBO II*, 114.

physical in order to discover the spiritual significance. Rather, he pierces to the very core of the physical, and thereby finds a mystery that transcends our heretofore surface experience of the whole that we have been approaching via its surface. Fusing the imagery of the Song with his gospel illustration, Bernard explains that Christ “drew near the wall, therefore, when he joined himself to our flesh. Our flesh is the wall, and the Bridegroom’s approach is the incarnation of the Word.”<sup>161</sup> With this, Bernard seems to turn from his previous course in affirming the importance of physical substance, and apparently casts the role of the body in the lives of the faithful as a barrier, “for each one of us who desire his coming he also stands behind the wall as long as this body of ours, which is certainly sinful, hides his face from us and shuts out his presence. For ‘so long as we are in this body we are exiles from the Lord.’”<sup>162</sup>

### **Bernard’s Words and Spiritual Bodies: Further Meditation**

It may be easily concluded from the previous passage that Bernard views the body as sinful barrier to God’s presence, and in order to incorporate biblical descriptions that portray the body in a positive light Bernard superimposes spiritual meanings over physical imagery, thus accounting for his notion of “joining” significance to imagery. If this were true, Bernard truly seems to be a reader who cannot accept corporeal creation as an appropriate expression of life and modifies the text in order for it to harmonize with his philosophy and temperament. However, investigating a later passage in sermon seventy-four may nuance our understanding of Bernard’s position on the “fitting likeness,” which bridges the physical and spiritual.

But let us, as we proceed with caution and singleness of purpose in our exposition of this sacred and mystical utterance, follow the example of scripture, which speaks of the wisdom hidden in the mystery, but does so in words familiar to us, & which, even as it enlightens our human minds, roots our affections on God and imparts to us the

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<sup>161</sup> Bernard, *SS III*, 87-88.

<sup>162</sup> Bernard, *SS III*, 89-90.

incomprehensible and invisible things of God by means of figures drawn from the likeness of things familiar to us, like precious draughts in vessels of cheap earthenware.”<sup>163</sup>

The final lines of this sentence are crucial to our topic, especially the “impart[ing] to us the incomprehensible and invisible things of God by means of figures drawn from the likeness of things familiar to us.”<sup>164</sup> The language Bernard uses to describe how God “yields up” or “makes known” these incomprehensible or invisible things, *propinat*, plays off its double meaning of setting before someone in terms of both bodily and mental consumption. Humans, as vessels of clay receive precious wine, receive spiritual wisdom by joining it to the necessary and fitting bodily images that are familiar to them. We can establish from Bernard’s statement that he has some use for corporeal images in that they are able to make perceptible what is imperceptible, that the physical imagery of the Song is valuable in that it renders intelligible to the human mind what would otherwise be abstractly unknowable.

In the realm of actual physical bodies, as encountered in sermon fifty-six, we receive both further clarification and complication to Bernard’s seemingly clear declaration that a spiritual understanding of the biblical passage renders an understanding of the body that is less than enthusiastic since it is a barrier to the presence of God. As we have seen in the passage from sermon seventy-six, such a conclusion does not grasp the complex relationship Bernard cultivates between physical and spiritual experience. If we read on in sermon fifty-six, Bernard clarifies his observation on separation from God,

Not because we are embodied, but because we are in this body which has a sinful lineage, and is never without sin. So you may know that it is not our bodies but our sins that stand in the way, listen to what Scripture says: ‘it is our sins that raise a barrier between

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<sup>163</sup>Bernard, *SS IV*, 86.

<sup>164</sup> “notis rerum sensibilibus similitudinibus... ignota et invisibilia Dei, mentibus propinat humanis.” Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*, *Sermo 74:I.2*, in in SBO II, 240.

us and God.’ How I wish that the body’s wall were the only obstacle, that I should suffer only that single barrier of fleshly sin and not the many fences of vice that intervene!<sup>165</sup>

Here Bernard claims that the multitude of incorporeal vices act as the more serious *obex* to fullness in the spiritual life, more than the wall of the body (*paries corporis*) or sin of the flesh (*carne peccatum*), which seems to be relatively tame to the spiritual maladies our author faces. He is quite firm in declaring the locus of sin, “*Non quia in corpore, sed quia in corpore hoc*”: not because [we are] in the body, but because [we are] in this body. The *hoc*, the “this” of the sentence is the distinction, for bodies and material existence in general is not problematic in Bernard’s reckoning. It is life in *this* body, a body which has been affected by “sinful lineage,” as rendered by Walsh and Edmonds, or more generally “which certainly exists according to sin.”<sup>166</sup> Far from being the barrier between God and humanity, which is sin, bodies act as the bridge between the two realms, “impart[ing] to us the incomprehensible and invisible things of God by means of figures drawn from the likeness of things familiar to us,”<sup>167</sup> as Bernard said in sermon seventy-four. The *notae rerum sensibilibum similitudines*,<sup>168</sup> the known likenesses of sensible things, are none other than bodies.

We find Bernard utilizing this awareness back in sermon forty, where we first noted his practice of joining physical and spiritual meanings. A cursory reading of this passage seems to support the critical bias against how Bernard discusses the presence of embodied eroticism in the text. It would appear that he cannot even abide a fairly innocent description of blushing cheeks without insisting on the incorporeal nature of the episode. But there is an important aspect of Bernard’s treatment of this text that demands our attention, aside from what appears to be the fairly straightforward message in these few sentences. If attuned to the detail of his language,

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<sup>165</sup> Bernard, *SS III*, 90.

<sup>166</sup> Bernard, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum, Sermo 56:II.3*, in *SBO II*, 116.

<sup>167</sup> Bernard, *SS IV*, 86.

<sup>168</sup> Bernard, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum, Sermo 74:I.2*, in *SBO II*, 240.

the reader will notice the abundance of what seem to be unnecessary and even contradictory modifiers to what the “obvious” intention of his writing seems to be. If Bernard intends to de-eroticize the text, to censor the bodily language contrary to what we moderns believe the substance of the message of the Song is, he does it using a self-defeating, vividly physical description. What is the function of Bernard's rich descriptions of the young woman's “blood-red liquid that spreads evenly beneath the surface of her pearly skin, quietly mingling with it to enhance her physical beauty by the pink and white loveliness of her cheeks,”<sup>169</sup> if the intent is to minimize—even outright destroy—the bodily nature of the Song? Unless Bernard is wildly inconsistent, his reading enhances the corporeal world in the text. In his vivid description and focus on the bodily nature of the words, to the point that the portrayals of physical existence are extended beyond the letter of the text, Bernard indeed incorporates substantial human existence into his privileged spiritual understanding of scripture. Although it is certainly a different appreciation of body than what our modern culture possesses, the evidence from Bernard’s writings advocates a central position for sensible embodiment. In joining together images that are fitting in terms of physical and spiritual beauty, appropriate to the subject matter, Bernard seeks to discover the spiritual matter deep within the physical images to be found in Scripture.

### **Analogies and Images**

We will close this exploration of Bernard’s appreciation of the body by summarizing scholarly perception of medieval attitudes toward the body. We will look to Mary Carruthers to offer some suggestions as to what Bernard may have been attempting to do in his *Apologia*, especially evident in the passages we examined earlier. Her work will sensitize us to the role bodies play in the monastic life of the mind, and the observation of how meaning is connected to

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<sup>169</sup> Bernard, *SS II*, 199.

the words which express it are enlightening, and provide a way to fill in the gaps that permeate our understanding of Bernard's mental and spiritual process. We will then briefly incorporate an Augustinian theme of the sign into our understanding of 12<sup>th</sup> century perspectives on the spiritual sense of scripture. To integrate this primary source from late antiquity into a medieval context, we will utilize the scholarship of M.-D. Chenu and Peter Dronke in their explanations of how historically physical reality has been understood to refer beyond itself corresponding to spiritual truths. A significant assertion in the research of both Chenu and Dronke is that, for the medievals, this spiritual significance is not to be found beyond the corporeal, but firmly within the perceptible. By incorporating these observations, we will prepare the way for making firm the connections between Bernard and our own time.

In our last look at the *Apologia*, Bernard culminated his denunciation of excesses with the things of greater importance, specifically in integrating painted and carved images into the lives of monks. Carruthers echoes Conrad Rudolph's observation that, "Bernard saves his particular horror for the programs of images that in some monasteries... had invaded the cloister itself, where the monks customarily read."<sup>170</sup> Having these images in the presence of brothers while they read, especially novices, is more dangerous than having them at all. Images pose no threat to the *simplices et devoti*; in fact Bernard admits that laymen benefit from physical portrayals of spiritual realities. Properly used, they inflame devotion. But for the monk, Carruthers claims, "Bernard's [iconoclasm] is more like the concern that leads parents to forbid their children to watch television or play video games lest their imagination and attention span remain undeveloped, ineffectual, and 'torpid.'"<sup>171</sup> The danger of these images is that they will distract and make the imagination of monks lazy. The highly ornamented style of Bernard's oration

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<sup>170</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>171</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 87.

provides his monks with the guidance necessary for them to create their own images instead of lackadaisically looking about for something else to show them what and how to think. In a comment that is reminiscent of the performative reading we encountered in the last chapter, Carruthers claims,

What seems for Bernard to separate the novice from the master in the discipline of spiritual reading is the ability to create meditation compositions *entirely* within the mind, relying on a repertoire of images already in place, and not needing other people's programs to stimulate (or, worst of all, substitute for) his own fiction.<sup>172</sup>

This claim fits well with what we have seen in Bernard's use of and aversion to physical bodies. Understanding an image entails looking beyond the surface of the body, because bodies can do more. It would seem that Bernard has a higher opinion of the body than we moderns, for whom textualized and physical anatomy is a one dimensional referent to sexuality. In Bernardine fashion, the sexual and physical imagery requires the work of joining a fitting meaning to the *phantasia* of the text in line with the ultimate monastic goal of preparing for the gift of divine presence. Carruthers again explains, "Though the goal of spiritual life is the unmediated vision of God, divine *theoria*, one can only get there by traveling through one's memory."<sup>173</sup> This is done precisely by traveling through the bodily images contained in one's mind, formed by the imagination in the likeness of things familiar to us.

Here a particularly Augustinian notion reveals itself as undergirding the medieval understanding of the function of bodies. The concept of traveling into and through one thing to reach another recalls his definition in book two of *De doctrina Christiana*, "A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the

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<sup>172</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 85.

<sup>173</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 115.

senses.”<sup>174</sup> Of the many signs Augustine discusses, conventional signs—those intended to convey something understood—are of particular interest because it is through these that God communicated to humans through scripture. The letters that form a passage of scripture point to a *res*, which, as we discussed above in the first chapter through Carruthers' scholarship,<sup>175</sup> is the “thing” of the text: its meaning or gist. What often happens, however, is that multiple meanings are found upon a close reading. “When, however, from a single passage in the Scripture not one but two or more meanings are elicited, even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden, there is no danger,”<sup>176</sup> Augustine claims, provided such meanings are in line with other things found in scripture. Such a situation characterizes a plentitude of meaning, not a lack of clarity. He rhetorically asks, “what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witness approve?”<sup>177</sup> In this sense the *res* of the text itself acts as a placeholder of meaning, an object that exceeds and overwhelms the power of words in their ability refer to all that the *res* is and could mean. Just as crucial to the abundance of meaning beyond the words acting as signs is the belief that a reader can only access that surplus by means of a long-term examination of the *res*, that which is referred to by the words and is essential to the revelation as found in scripture. In discussing what he believes to be the meaning referred to by the sign of teeth in the Song of Songs, Augustine asks, “does one learn anything else besides that which he learns when he hears the same thought expressed in plain words without this similitude?”<sup>178</sup> To be sure, Augustine claims, the beautiful imagery which reveals these truths makes contemplation

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<sup>174</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 34.

<sup>175</sup> See paragraph **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and forward.

<sup>176</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 101.

<sup>177</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 102.

<sup>178</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 37.

of the *res* more pleasant, but he admits that the reason for the complication involved in similitude is difficult to explain. He offers two explanations. First, requiring a reader to grope for meaning counters the arrogance of the reader. Augustine claims that, “this situation [the difficulty of resolving similitudinal obscurity] was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat distain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless.”<sup>179</sup> More important to our investigation is his second reason, “that things are perceived more readily through similitudes.”<sup>180</sup> The similarity between words and the *res* to which they point makes the apprehension of the *res* possible. Although words act as signs, which consequently point away from themselves to other things, they share a likeness with what they represent. Only by sharing this similarity are they able to perform their task. Only by meditating on what is known to us, by dwelling on the familiar images, are the faithful to encounter the *res* of divine revelation.

Chenu explains that this Augustinian notion of signification was an important element of 12<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the realm of physical symbols. Chenu claims, “the symbol, in order to effect the transference for which it is the vehicle, calls for matter which does not disappear in the process of signifying, such, for example, as the reality of the natural elements, of the reality of history in biblical typology, or the reality of the material used in a liturgical action.”<sup>181</sup> The process of signification does not destroy the symbol, nor does it direct the person away from the substance of what acts symbolically. To the medieval, the symbolic matter itself was important because, “the representative value of things, even assuming that the transcendent exists, was to

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<sup>179</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 37.

<sup>180</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 38.

<sup>181</sup> M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 133.

be looked for within things, within their manifest natures.”<sup>182</sup> It was understood that symbols—whether they be bodies, words, elements or the like—contained within themselves the element of what they represented, not merely pointing to something entirely beyond or outside their nature. He summarizes that the figurative function of physical things did not render the things themselves worthless, for, “earthly forms of truth and beauty were not fleeting images of the ineffable beauty and the unique truth but were valid, intelligible, and analyzable analogies of these.”<sup>183</sup> Chenu’s observations on the 12<sup>th</sup> century’s concept of form, image and beauty is illuminated by Dronke in his work on the concept of the *fabula*, which is a type of story that may simultaneously conceal truth, provide a way to apprehend truth, or express truth beautifully.<sup>184</sup> During his exploration of the concept, Dronke arrives at a general rule extrapolated from the work of 12<sup>th</sup> century thinker William of Conches concerning the *imago* or *simulacrum*, the likeness or image of immutable, divine truth. Instead of dismissing the physical, fluctuating reality that humans can perceive, he affirms its value, claiming, “this mutable world is not merely *an* image of the immutable divine: in a profound sense, there is only one *imago*. Every attempt to know the divine wisdom must proceed through it, for it is all we have.”<sup>185</sup> Echoing the use of sensible imagery found in Bernard’s sermons, we can conclude that, to the minds of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, bodies ornate and beautiful held worth in themselves, for apart from their concealment of spiritual truths, they also marvelously and wonderfully revealed them in a way no other medium could.

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<sup>182</sup> Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, 134.

<sup>183</sup> Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, 145.

<sup>184</sup> “Basically... William in his discussion considers *fabula* under three aspects. *Fabula* can be a way of concealing truth, but it can also be a way of apprehending truth. Most significantly, there are suggestions... that *fabula* can be a way of expressing the truth with beauty and dignity.” Peter Dronke, *Fabula*, (Leiden and Koln: Brill, 1985), 55.

<sup>185</sup> Dronke, *Fabula*, 34.

## Conclusion

We cannot deny that we find many places in Bernard's writings where he clearly states his wary, if not hostile, opinion of the flesh in the lives of the faithful. We must also acknowledge that Bernard sustains a clear preference for the spiritual aspects of human existence, and therefore searches for metaphysical significance in physical reality. But we cannot stop at these observations, for a careful reading clearly shows that he does not deny the necessity of bodily creation to the complete human person. In fact, embodiment is an integral aspect of spirituality. Even after death, Bernard's hope does not lie in ethereal heavenly existence but in the eventual resurrection of the body. While at times the body may act as a barrier to contact with spiritual realities, Bernard understands bodily reality as the way in which humans could ever possibly access this knowledge. It may be that Bernard is aware of the sexual language of the Song of Songs, but his understanding of physicality is that it is the bearer of the spiritual, and while he cannot apply the sexual content to his community, he certainly exhorts his monks to absorb the spiritual aspect of scripture into themselves and their subsequent living. This may indeed be thought of as sublimation, but if it is he must be fully aware of the implications, for he is so literarily adept. Importantly, he does not repress the bodily aspect of the text, for the sexual language—the signs—remain intact, to the extent that they are amplified, even in the sublimation of their meaning. For it is specifically in and through bodies that Bernard discovers the spiritual truths so precious to his age; it would be a misreading to claim that he leaves behind the physical in favor of the spiritual. We have seen that, on the contrary, Bernard delves deeply into rich, bodily descriptions in order to reach beyond the surface of the physical, for spiritual truths are to be found at the heart of corporeal existence.

## CONCLUSION

### **Introduction to the Conclusion**

As we bring our exploration of Bernard's monastic exegesis to an end, this final section provides the opportunity to address challenges that have not reached an adequate resolution. We will first summarize our examination of Bernard's works thus far in order to locate issues requiring our further attention. We developed an introduction to the world of contemplative monastic commentary on scriptures by comparing the approaches of Bernard and Abelard. It was revealed that in order to appreciate the differences between the two, one must examine the methods rather than results of their reading. In doing so, the distinction is strongest in Abelard's refusal to rely on meditation, patient practice (in the sense of becoming a practitioner, rather than trial and error until one "gets it right"), and rhetorical invention based on memory, vital components to the monastic life of Bernard. By examining this nuance through the eyes of scholars, we established a twofold thrust to Bernard's reading technique as both an instance of performative reading and creating a series of enriched images that act as mnemonic tools for the purpose of fully experiencing and understanding the text. We then examined the contrast with this initial introduction to Bernard's method to many current biblical scholars' struggle to accept Bernard's approach as a careful way of reading the scriptures. Two concerns have proven themselves paramount in all criticism of Bernard. The first is that his interpretation yields results that are entirely unpredictable and without any recognizable systematic approach. The second is that Bernard maintains a demonstrable preference for disembodied existence, relegating physical human existence to the status of a barrier needing to be overcome. In addition to having laid the groundwork of some basic premises for Bernard's work, the first section charted a course for the

rest of the project, which was to respond to this two-pronged modern concern and prove that a contemplative monastic exegesis has a valid place in the wider Christian tradition.

The next two chapters follow this directive sequentially, first demonstrating that Bernard follows a precise and intricate methodology in line with his reception of the contemplative tradition. This is done in a way allowing for the reader to interact with the text by projecting themselves into the world they find in scripture, submitting their hopes and despairs to the possibilities present in the word. In the sampling of *Sermones* twenty-one to twenty-six, we observed Bernard interacting with his sacred text the way a good performer might utilize a script, except Bernard never exits the stage. His monastic vocation amounts to a superlative lifetime performance of scripture, reading the sacred writ and the circumstances in which he finds himself in light of each other as a guide to the proper way to live before the face of God. When he encounters a new situation in his life, such as the death of an intimate spiritual brother, it requires an altered entrance into the same passage that under different circumstances would result in an entirely different interpretive result. In this way, Bernard's life is submitted to the text in that it directs him how to respond to the reality he sees, but it is precisely the reality of his life that enables the text to speak.

Following this confirmation of the existence of Bernard's method is an examination of the substance of it, especially relating to the question of his attitude toward the body. Any reading of Bernard, cursory or comprehensive, will acknowledge a number of instances where Bernard makes clear statements concerning his wary, if not hostile, opinion of the flesh in the lives of the faithful. Parallel to this conclusion is his obvious inclination toward the spiritual aspects of human existence and his propensity for claiming metaphysical significance of physical reality. By examining sections of his *Sermones*, we have seen that while Bernard favors the

spiritual over the physical, he does not deny the necessity of bodily creation to the complete human person. Even after death, Bernard's hope does not lie in ethereal heavenly existence but in the eventual resurrection of the body. While at times the body may act as a barrier to contact with spiritual realities, Bernard understands bodily reality as the way in which humans could ever possibly access this knowledge. It is specifically in and through bodies that Bernard discovers spiritual truths; it would be a misreading to claim that he leaves behind the physical in favor of the spiritual. We have seen that, on the contrary, Bernard delves deeply into rich, bodily descriptions in order to reach beyond the surface of the physical, for spiritual truths are to be found at the heart of corporeal existence.

### **A Persistent Problem**

With these explorations our scrutiny of Bernard's texts has barely analyzed the surface of what may be found in them. Because of this, questions and distrust still remain; centuries of growth away from the contemplative path cannot be overcome with quick answers. This project has addressed the technical aspects of methodology and body, but it could still be said that in examining the minute details, we miss the wider picture of what Bernard does to this book. Without question, Bernard does not accept the sexuality and the raw physicality of the poetic lyrics in the Song. His personal vocation as a celibate monk testifies clearly to the fact that Bernard would not accept a contemporary interpretation that maintained a sexual referent in the text central to its intent, even if such an interpretation were to forego a claim of exclusivity and allow for the possibility of a spiritual meaning to exist within and alongside this affirmation of sexuality. The problem we face now is how we, as a people who affirm the goodness of physical sexuality in human relations, might find a use, if any, for Bernard's contemplative ascetic

methods. In confessing this problem, the question of self-sufficiency must be raised, for what is lost in the Protestant exegetical tradition that is worth reclamation by a respectful exploration of the monastic tradition, distinct from the scholastic tradition that emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> century universities?

Before we are able to offer a full reply, we must clarify the terms. It has been an underlying assumption throughout this project that within the Christian tradition there are historically at least two distinct, but by no means necessarily opposed, methods of interacting with the scriptures, broadly defined as scholastic and contemplative. The former, generally speaking, works under the assumption that the text is representative of a single logical intention, one implanted by the author during the composition of the text. This scholastic approach utilizes linguistic and historical analysis in an attempt to reveal this unified textual locus of meaning, for either the purpose of self-edification or to impart this meaning to others. Conversely, the contemplative approach utilizes the tools of “allegory,” which finds multiple textual implications revealed by the insights of a particular exegete. It is this apparent unpredictability in the eyes of the scholarly which renders the contemplative allegory unacceptable to most readers, for it appears to be undisciplined and open to the ideological inflection of whoever happens to be reading and interpreting the passage.

While we must recognize the differences between the two approaches, it does not follow that contemplative and scholastic approaches are opposed in that they contradict each other. It may, in fact, be more helpful to view these two as opposite ends of a continuum, recognizing that contemplatives often employ some sense of linguistic and historical analysis in their readings, and that scholastics might utilize the tools of contemplative methods, and in the final analysis cannot (and need not) completely isolate their beliefs from their reading. To illustrate this, I

offer the example of Calvin Seerveld and his presentation of the Song in *The Greatest Song*. He too notes disapprovingly the monastic tradition's renunciation of bodily existence, especially sexuality, and based on this disagreement claims that, "it can be argued that allegorical exegesis of biblical text is intrinsically wrong."<sup>186</sup> He explains,

Allegorical exegesis of The Greatest Song arose because it was not understood, and allegorical exegesis was scholastically perpetuated because its many monastic expositors were conditioned by a philosophic perspective and theological prejudice closer to a stoicised Platonism than to the tempered joy of St. Paul, which made them too, despite their acumen and obvious belief in Jesus Christ, unable to hear what the Old Testament Song of Songs was saying to the churches.<sup>187</sup>

The problem as Seerveld sees it is not simply that ideology influenced interpretation, but that the wrong ideology influenced interpretation. It was a scholastically maintained stoicised Platonism that caused these contemplative readers to look for other meanings aside from the plain literal sense. And it is this plain literal meaning that Seerveld seeks in his own interpretation and arrangement of the Song,<sup>188</sup> a transposition in the sense of, "getting it across, exactly in one's native tongue, what is literally there in the strange, original text."<sup>189</sup> While recognizing that there is this need for the preservation and transfer of original meaning, Seerveld believes that the message of the Song is relevant today, "unless your love be enflamed by the fear of Jahve, it profits you nothing."<sup>190</sup> In his estimation, the plain and unadorned truth of the text concerns the purity of love, an idea applicable to any age or community. But through this simple principle, revealed through the text of the Song, Seerveld believes there emerges other

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<sup>186</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *The Greatest Song* (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1963), 13. Although we have rarely used the label "allegorical" to describe Bernard's interpretation due to the complex nature of the different senses of scripture, for instance, as exhaustively studied in Henri De Lubac's volumous work, *Medieval Exegesis*. Seerveld defines his use of the term on page 13 as, "allegorical exegesis assumes that the text means something different than it says, and so requires specially learned interpreters who can supply the other, 'real' meaning." I will only use the term "allegory" or its related forms when dealing with Seerveld's use of it.

<sup>187</sup> Seerveld, *Greatest Song*, 13.

<sup>188</sup> "This book is meant to be simply a literal translation of those few pages of Hebrew text in the Old Testament called 'The Song of Songs.'" Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 10.

<sup>189</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 10.

<sup>190</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 80.

aspects of truth. Seerveld crafts his interpretation in the mold of a dramatic oratorio, based on a three character narrative where the Israelite King Solomon acts as an antagonist figure, kidnapping the virtuous Shulamite and spiriting her away from her country lover. This structure, he maintains, opens a number of meanings to the perceptive reader, and, “all these facts revealed by The Greatest Song in storied coherence are penetratingly true: historically matter of fact in olden Israel, unerringly exact in fathoming the folds of human consciousness, charged by the very Wonder-working power and vision of God Almighty’s speech.”<sup>191</sup> Seerveld claims that this biblical text is a divine revelation in that it discloses the human condition so soundly, and further believes that the Song was intended to act as a prophetic call to the people of Israel, and now to the church, concerning an unjust society based on power and greed, the lack of divinely inspired love clearly delineated from ravenous lust. “The Song, with Solomon as miserable case in point, not as villain, was given to teach the sex-saturated populace who had forgotten the Way [=Law, =Wisdom] of the Lord the meaning of faithfulness again and to capture the hearts of frustrated men and women by the telling beauty, joy and freshness of human love that honored the Law of the Lord.”<sup>192</sup> With this, Seerveld has indicated several ways a community may understand how the Song speaks to numerous levels of human existence: to the spiritual relationship between the self and God, to the psychological aspect of human consciousness, to the aesthetic pleasure the human is able to enjoy while experiencing the lush descriptions in this work of art, to the interpersonal relationships especially relating to gender and sexuality, to an indictment societal power structures and the call to obey the Law that leads to human flourishing. The power of its words and structure can certainly speak to perennial human concerns.

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<sup>191</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 70.

<sup>192</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 76.

Finally, Seerveld sees the appropriate means of understanding the song is best in line with its structure. “Rather than force what God has wrought of such tender, telling beauty into a modern literary category, it would be wiser to leave it as it is, uncatalogued. If it must be named, call it an oratorio, because it is more song than literature.”<sup>193</sup> In Seerveld’s estimation, hearing the Song performed in prayerful recital is the ideal way to appreciate the Song’s dialectical nature. The conversational, dialectic flavor, is, “the temper, inner structure and concentrated thrust of The Greatest Song, and it should not be overlooked just because its oratorio character lets the teaching sift so lightly, delightfully, into our consciousness.”<sup>194</sup> The method of delivery, allowing for slow meditation and attention to detail, is not for Seerveld intended for extravagant production, but, “must remain an oratorio [*oratorium* = originally, the quiet place of prayer], basically the word told and heard, with the impress of prayer.”<sup>195</sup> As a place of prayer created in a community, the text is fulfilled only when animated by the voices of the faithful, for, “The Greatest Song is to be heard, declaimed and sung, at the very least, read aloud. That is why the translation is a telling one, and why this book is only the architect’s plan from which the real product is to come.”<sup>196</sup> The product, we might assume, is the heart full of worship and lives lived in accordance with the scriptures.

Seerveld’s work is, in many ways, impressive. He animates the minority tradition of the three character dramatic interpretation and does so while admirably addressing scholarly concerns and making the conversation accessible to a broader audience. He also makes a valiant attempt to distinguish his approach to the Song from the excess of material produced by a multitude of communities within the Christian tradition. He succeeds in beautifully elaborating

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<sup>193</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 89.

<sup>194</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 92.

<sup>195</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 104.

<sup>196</sup> Seerveld, *The Greatest Song*, 103.

on the insights gained by approaching the text of the Song as he sees it to be originally intended: as song, as interactive, as a fertile directive for life. He seems less successful in distancing himself from the long history of Christian exegesis of the Song for, based on the research presented in this project, he runs straight into the territory of Bernard's contemplative exegesis. The Word is intended to be slowly consumed and absorbed through constant exposure and exploration of its truths. It is to be heard, pictured, and imagined. It is to be taken seriously, but in a humbly joyful manner that allows for play, delight, and beauty. The Word is often elusive, requiring us to remain attentive to the varied possible meaning but eventually favoring one, knowing that we may explore another path later. Most importantly, the Word is meant to be taken up and lived, performed so that others and ourselves might see and hear the gospel in the flesh, and through our bodies come to know the spiritual truths of transcendent reality that words alone cannot explain. When the technique is described in these terms, it is difficult to distinguish if the subject is medieval or modern.

### **Continuation**

*The Greatest Song* may provide us with a starting point for introducing Bernard's contemplative tradition into the Protestant community. By including a critical linguistic-historical apparatus, Seerveld seems to denounce the subjective nature of the contemplative tradition. Central to this rejection is his clear injunction to place the emphasis of meaning on authorial intention. But it seems to me that he fails *in practice* to distance himself from a particularly contemplative approach to reading scripture, and in his failure do we find his most startling success. The structure of his work is intentionally and explicitly an oratorio, functioning as a communally based prayer, prophecy, and performance. By doing this, he

reaches the heart of Bernard's contemplative tradition, the essence of which is not the formation of obscure allegories or an austere attitude of bodily rejection. It is rather concerned with earnestly reading the Word, exercising the gifts of human imagination in transforming the Word into virile and memorable images, and allowing the truth of the Word to take captive our entire being. By affiliating with the historical-critical mode, he also reaches for the reliable results promised by the scholastic approach, while attempting to avoid the pride and sterility so often associated with this school of thought. The only act he neglects to perform is acknowledging that he is drinking deeply from these two wells that draw from the same source: an extended attitude that places its hope in the Bible and reveres it as the revelation of God. Seerveld's passion is to give life to the words he believes will give life to the world in a similar vein to the way that Bernard's exposition of the word stirred countless men and women of his time to serve God as best as they knew how. In both men we have an example of interacting with the scriptures that has not been practiced widely for some time.

It is all too tempting for a modern to cast extraneous elements of a contemplative monastic exegesis as essential. Such is, I believe, the error of anyone who classifies the expository work of writers from Origen onward as broadly "allegorical," or "allegorizing." The language and logic of this era are indeed removed from our own, but I cannot help but hope that in the span of over one thousand years this group of men and women developed valuable tools worth taking seriously. The interpretive results of these communities are tied to parochial concerns, many involving renunciation of sexuality, but there are reasons for these concerns, reasons which deserve more than demeaning scorn or embarrassed avoidance. Looking at our own cultural milieu, such strenuous affirmation of sexuality may appear just as ridiculous to the next generation. But we must not allow secondary concerns to obscure the primary intention of

Bernard and his lineage, which is to live an honorable life in accordance with scripture as best as they could understand it.

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