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The Sweet Secrets of the Bedchamber: Veiling and unveiling in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*

Abstract:

Images of enclosed and inaccessible spaces, serving as locations for secret amorous encounters between the soul-bride and the divine bridegroom, recur throughout Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Perhaps the most striking of these images is that of the bed chamber (*cubiculum*), which is laid bare in detail in Sermon 23. What are the secrets of the bedchamber? Why are they secret? This paper explores embedded meanings in the notions of secrecy and spatial intimacy, arguing that Bernard, speaking «in our words» to express «wisdom hidden in mystery» (Sermon 74), uses secrecy as a rhetorical strategy to both establish and to breach the boundaries between the spiritual and the literal meaning of the eroticism in the Song of Songs.

Key words: Mysticism; hermeneutics; monasticism; rhetoric and literary style.

Medieval Authors: Bernard of Clairvaux.

Os doces segredos do quarto de dormir: Velamento e desvelamento nos *Sermões sobre o Cântico dos Cânticos* de Bernardo de Claraval

Resumo:

As imagens de espaços fechados e inacessíveis servindo como locais para encontros amorosos secretos entre a alma-esposa e o esposo divino são recorrentes ao longo dos Sermões sobre o Cântico dos Cânticos de Bernardo de Claraval. Talvez a mais notável destas imagens seja o quarto de dormir (*cubiculum*) descrito em pormenor no Sermão 23. Quais são os segredos de alcova? Porque são segredo? Este artigo explora sentidos implícitos nas noções de segredo e intimidade espacial, argumentando que Bernardo, falando «com palavras nossas» para

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expressar «a sabedoria oculta em mistério» (Sermão 74), utiliza o segredo como uma estratégia retórica para estabelecer e para romper os limites entre os significados espiritual e literal do erotismo do *Cântico dos Cânticos*.

Palavras-chave: Misticismo; hermenêutica; monaquismo; retórica e estilo literário.

Autores medievais: Bernardo de Claraval.

Sometime before 1124, while he was still a young and unknown Cistercian abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote his first work, a treatise called *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*. Here he depicts the soul as bride and describes her mystical ascent to the peaks of contemplation, thereby anticipating the major theme of his masterpiece, the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, which he would begin some ten years later: «She [the bride] is admitted at last to the bedchamber of the King, for whose love she languishes [...]. There she sees things invisible [*videt invisibilia*], hears the ineffable [*audit ineffabilia*], that which no man can utter»¹.

As exegete and preacher for his monks, exposing the hermeneutical secrets of the spiritual meaning of the Song of Songs, Bernard is faced with the problem of how to make the inaccessible accessible, how to describe the «ineffable» and make his audience envision the «invisible». Reading the bride of Christ as the saintly soul rather than just the Church, Bernard bent his interpretation towards tropology. Along with the shift from allegorical (the Church is bride) to tropological understanding (the soul is bride) another hermeneutical level of meaning was mobilized, namely anagogy: envisioning the soul's union with the divine bridegroom². Rather than aligning the Song of Songs principally with

¹ *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* (hereafter *Gra*), 1.7.21; in *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter *PL*), ed. by J.-P. MIGNÉ, Paris 1841-1866, vol. 182, cols 953-954; trans. by G. A. EVANS, «On the Steps of Humility and Pride», in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, Paulist Press, New York 1987, p. 118: «ad Regis demum cubiculum, cujus amore languet, admitteretur. [...] Ibi videt invisibilia, audit ineffabilia, quae non licet homini loqui».

² Applying the fourfold hermeneutical scheme to the bride of the Song, she would be interpreted more or less as follows: 1) she is no historical figure, 2) she is the Church in an allegorical sense, 3) she is the individual righteous soul in a tropological sense, and 4) her union with the bridegroom (*Christus-Verbum*) prefigures eschatological fulfilment in anagogical sense: the perfection of the Church or of the blessed soul after resurrection, the permanent condition of beatitude of which the mystical *extasis* or *raptus* is a momentary foretaste. Bernard's exegesis of the bride moves between all of the non-literal levels of meaning. On medieval exegesis of the Song of Songs, with particular attention to the hermeneutical levels of meaning, see E. A. MATTER, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1990.

ecclesiology, Bernard – like other twelfth-century exegetes – engaged the Song with mysticism or, to employ a more medieval term, contemplation³.

Bernard stands in a long tradition of Christian mysticism where the mystical experience – the encounter with God in divine contemplation – was seen to defy conceptualization and verbalization⁴. It is beyond the senses: «invisible» and «ineffable», as Bernard maintained. Hence it can only be presented indirectly and partially, by a verbal strategy that seeks to reveal while at the same time retaining the secrecy of the experience, shrouding it in mystery. Unlike apophatic mystics who clothed their writings in a «negative» language, Bernard's verbal strategy draws on the symbolism of the Song of Songs: imagery of kisses, embraces, and passionate meetings between the bride and the bridegroom in the bridal bed and the bedchamber⁵.

Into this eroticized language, Bernard weaves concepts of secrecy and mystery. Entering into «the secrets of the bedchamber», the bride discovers «treasures of knowledge and understanding hidden with the bridegroom»⁶. What are the secrets of the bedchamber? Why are they secret? This article explores the subtexts in conceptions of secrecy in the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and their relation with the highly erotic imagery. The references of this rhetoric – I argue in this article – are decisively monastic and, above all, hermeneutical. The monastic themes carry correlated notions of withdrawal, celibacy, contemplation, and contemplative pleasures. The hermeneutical themes, on the other hand,

³ Bernard, like most Medieval Latin writers commonly used *contemplatio* to convey experience of or participation in the divine, a term which also indicates the monastic life, the life of monks. On the problematic term «mysticism», see B. MCGINN, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Crossroad, New York 1991, pp. xiii-xx, esp. p. xvii. In my usage, «contemplation» and «mysticism» both refer to anagogy or anagogical meaning.

⁴ On ineffability as topos in mystical theology, see MCGINN, *Foundations*, cit., pp. 31-33, 37-38; regarding Bernard, see id., *The Growth of Mysticism: From Gregory the Great to the Twelfth Century*, SCM, London 1994, pp. 207-208.

⁵ On Bernard's bridal mysticism, see MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 158-224; J. LECLERCQ, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth Century View*, Seabury Press, N. Y. 1982, pp. 72-86 and id., *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979.

⁶ *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum* (hereafter *ScC*), 32.9-10, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, I-II, ed. by J. LECLERCQ et al., Editiones Cistercienses, Rome 1957, repr. in *Opere di San Bernardo*, vol. V, 1-2 (hereafter *OSB*), with Italian trans. by C. STERCAL et al., Fondazione di Studi Cistercensi, Milano 2006, V, 1, pp. 480-482: «postremo ad ipsa secreta cubiculi. [...] Isti sunt thesauri sapientiae et scientiae penes sponsum absconditi». Translations of Bernard's text are mine, modified from the English translation in *On the Song of Songs*, vols I-IV, trans. by K. WALSH et al., (Cistercian Fathers Series, 4, 7, 31, 40) Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1971-1980.

involve notions of unveiling and penetrating secrets that are hidden in words and in scripture. This aspect of Bernard's writing deserves greater attention, as it is easily eclipsed in studies that have principally aimed to bring the doctrinal groundwork to the surface⁷.

1. Secrecy and mystical ascent: The bedchamber

Images of enclosed and inaccessible spaces, serving as locations for secret amorous encounters between the bride and the bridegroom, recur throughout Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Perhaps the most striking of these is the bedchamber (*cubiculum*), which is exposed in detail in Sermon 23. The leitmotif and exegetical driving force in Sermon 23 is contained in the apparent misquotation: «The King has brought me into his bedchamber», repeated twice by the jubilant bride, once at the beginning of the sermon and once at the end⁸. Envisioning an all-female entourage surrounding the bridegroom, Bernard describes different souls – «queens», «concubines», and «young girls» – all in search of their own secret rendezvous in different locations:

There is not just one queen but many, the concubines are numerous and of the young girls there is no number. And each one of them finds their own secret [place] to be with the

⁷ Whereas traditional Bernardine scholarship, represented by the works of Jean Leclercq and Étienne Gilson, have characteristically emphasized doctrinal coherence but downplayed the imagery of the text, scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum, Martha G. Newman, Burcht Pranger, Wim Verbaal, and others have more recently been proposing less systematic and more literary approaches.

⁸ Bernard gives Song 1.3 as *Introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum* («The King has brought me into his chamber») rather than the Vulgate version *Introduxit me rex in cellaria sua* («The King has brought me into his cellars»). Using *cubiculum* for *cellaria* has been seen by some scholars as a slip on Bernard's part, e.g., in G. A. EVANS, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, cit., p. 203, n. 31. In that case, the same phrasing in *Gra* 1.7.21 (PL 182:953C) and *Sermones de diversis* 92.1 (PL 183:714A; cf. *Div* 8.9, PL 183:565B) must also be «a slip». B. PRANGER, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought: Broken Dreams*, Brill, Leiden 1994, p. 51, following J. DEROUY, *Bernardus en Origenes: Enkele opmerkingen over de invloed van Origenes op Sint Bernardus* 'Sermones super cantica canticorum', Diss. University of Nijmegen / De Toorts, Haarlem 1963, pp. 13-96, points to a Vulgate, Origenist tradition giving *cubiculum suum* rather than *cellaria sua*. Indeed, a quick search in the PL database reveals that the non-Vulgate version of Song 3.1 was used by the Latin writers who most influenced Bernard: Ambrose (*In Psalmum 118* 1.5; PL 15:1206; *Commentarius in cantica canticorum* 1.17-20; PL 15:1859-1860), Jerome (*Ep* 22; PL 22:395), Augustine (*Enarratione in Psalmos* 9.6; PL 36:119), and Gregory the Great (*Exposito in cantica canticorum* 1.12; PL 79:484A).

bridegroom, and so says: My secret is mine, my secret is mine [Is 24.16]. All do not enjoy the delightful and secret presence of the bridegroom in the same place⁹.

Repeating the notion of a polygamous divine household, Bernard imagines participation in divine presence bestowed according to various degrees of perfection:

There are many rooms in the bridegroom's house, and whether she be queen, or concubine or one of the numerous maidens, each finds place and destination in accordance with her merits until she might proceed in contemplation, and partake in the happiness of her Lord, to explore the bridegroom's sweet secrets¹⁰.

Both in terms of different female positions in the hierarchical divine household and in terms of different «rooms» in which to enjoy the bridegroom's «secret presence» and «sweet secrets», the passage invokes personal, individuated experience as a central dimension in spiritual growth and contemplation¹¹. Sermon 23 recounts the bride's spiritual journey, constructing a spiritual topography¹². The sermon provides a detailed description of the three stages of spiritual ascent, reaching from the lower carnal level, passing through a higher intellectual level, and then finally arriving at the superior contemplative level (i.e., union, *raptus*, vision, excess, presence). The references are palpably hermeneutical, corresponding to the three levels of hermeneutics in the Origenist tradition. First, the bride arrives at the garden, representing the literal or historical sense of Scripture. Next, she passes into the cellars, representing the tropological or moral

⁹ *Scs* 23.9; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 314: «Nam nec una est regina profecto, sed plures; et concubinae sunt multae, et adolescentularum non est numerus. Et unaquaeque invenit secretum sibi cum sponso, et dicit: *Secretum meum mihi, secretum meum mihi* [Isai. XXIV, 16]. Non omnibus uno in loco frui datur grata et secreta sponsi praesentia».

¹⁰ *Scs* 23.10; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 316: «Sic ergo apud sponsum mansiones multae sunt; et sive regina, sive concubina, sive etiam sit de numero adolescentularum, congruum quaeque pro meritis accipit locum terminumque, quousque liceat sibi contemplando procedere, et introire in gaudium Domini sui, et rimari dulcia secreta sponsi».

¹¹ On the role of personal experience in Bernard, see MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 185-190.

¹² On spatial metaphors as spiritual topography in Bernard's writing, see M. B. BRUUN, *Parables: Bernard of Clairvaux's Mapping of Spiritual Topography*, Brill, Leiden 2007, and M. T. PORCILE SANTISO, «El significado teológico y antropológico del amor», *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990) 233-241.

sense, before finally entering into the bedchamber, representing the anagogical or contemplative level¹³.

The bedchamber is the height of spiritual delight – and this is reserved for the bride alone: «no maiden, no concubine, nor even a queen, may gain access to the secret of the bedchamber, which the bridegroom reserves solely for her who is his dove, beautiful, perfect and unique»¹⁴. There the soul-bride is permitted to see and hear (the invisible, the ineffable), sharing in a protected secret which is defended from outside knowledge by the biblical invocation «my secret is mine, my secret is mine»¹⁵.

Nevertheless, Bernard does not withhold the secret – or rather he both does and does not. He invites the audience, namely his monks¹⁶, into the mystery of

¹³ This basic threefold pattern may be found in *Scs* 1, 3, 20, 23, 31, 45, 50, 57, and 83. Similar threefold divisions of progressive, spiritual growth were commonly employed by the early Cistercians: William of St. Thierry uses animal, rational, spiritual in *Brevis commentatio* (PL 184:407C). Amadeus of Lausanne uses three meanings of Scripture, historical, moral, and mystical, as analogy for the three stages of spiritual growth in the sixth Homily on the Virgin Mary (PL 188:1331-1336). Isaac of Stella has compunction, devotion and contemplation in the Letter on the Mass (*Epistola de officio missae*; PL 194:1892). Aelred of Riveaux uses triple schemes in *Speculum caritatis* (PL 195:501-620). Trilogies occur frequently in all of Bernard's writing, although he occasionally employs also other enumerations: e.g., seven (*Scs* 18.6), twelve (*Gra*) and four (*De diligendo deo* 8.23-10.29). For references to triadic formulas in Bernard, see M. CASEY, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1988, pp. 245-251; B. MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 183-185; and M. B. PENNINGTON, «The Three Stages of Spiritual Growth according to St. Bernard», *Studia monastica* 11 (1969) 315-26.

¹⁴ *Scs* 23.10; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 316: «Nunc vero id nosse sufficiat, nulli adolescentularum, nulli concubinarum, nulli vel reginarum patere omnino accessum ad secretum illud cubiculi, quod suae illi columbae, formosae, perfectae, uni unicum sponsus servat».

¹⁵ Cf. H. E. KELLER, *My Secret Is Mine: Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages*, Peeters, Leuven 2000, p. 105.

¹⁶ It was long assumed by scholars that the *Sermons* were originally delivered in chapter at Clairvaux, without formal preparations, and later written down by monks that had been present. This is the view of J. Mabillon, repeated by E. VACANDARD, *Vie de saint Bernard, Abbé de Clairvaux*, vol. I, V. Lecoffre, Paris 1895, p. 472. This is almost certainly not the case, however, and evidence suggests a carefully composed literary work, even though the question of whether the *Sermons* were ever delivered in chapter remains disputed. Arguing against oral delivery, see J. LECLERCQ, «Les Sermons sur Le Cantiques ont-ils été prononcés?», in *Recueil d'études sur Saint Bernard et ses écrits*, Raccolta di Studi e Testi, vol I, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1962, pp. 191-244. For the opposite view, see C. HOLDSWORTH, «Were the Sermons of St. Bernard on the Song of Songs Ever Preached?», in C. MUESSIG (ed.), *Medieval Monastic Preaching*, Brill, Leiden 1998, pp. 295-319. For a critique of both Leclercq and Holdsworth, see W. VERBAAL, «Réalités

the bride's entry into the divine bedchamber, the goal of her pursuit: «Let us now enter the bedchamber»¹⁷, announces Bernard, and proceeds to bring the monks along to the goings-on of the nuptial feast. But just as he is about to throw open the door and expose the secrets of the bedchamber, he hesitates:

What is this place? May I presume to know something about it? Far from it that I would claim for myself such an experience, nor glorify myself with such a privilege which is reserved solely for the happy bride. I am concerned, as the Greeks said, to know myself so that I may know, with the prophet, what is wanting in me [Ps 38.5]¹⁸.

Squarely outside, Bernard retreats into modesty. His Christianized version of the Greek motto *scito te ipsum* («know yourself») functions as a call to humility. To know oneself is to know what is wanting in oneself, to know what one is *not*, as stated by the Psalm¹⁹. He cannot, he says, claim for himself the glory reserved for the «happy bride» (*beatae sponsae*). Nevertheless, almost immediately and apparently quite unassumingly, Bernard leaves the door ajar, letting it be understood that he has indeed ventured into the bedchamber – into the very chamber which he refers to as reserved for the bride alone: «Yet if I knew nothing, I would say nothing [*nihil omnino scirem, nihil dicerem*]. What I do know I do not begrudge you, nor will I hold it back from you»²⁰. Here Bernard's (rhetorical) modesty is overcome by his duty as abbot and exegete. Constructing an ambivalent identification with the bride – denying the association while at the

quotidiennes et fiction littéraire dans *Les Sermons sur le Cantiques* de Bernard de Clairvaux», *Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses* 51 (2000) 201-218. For our concerns, suffice it to note that besides the question of whether or not the *Sermons* were actually ever delivered to the monks in chapter, there is no doubt that this is how it is reconstructed in the text.

¹⁷ *Sec* 23.9; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 314: «Iam ad cubiculum veniamus.»

¹⁸ *Sec* 23.9; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 314: «Quid et istud? Et id me praesumo scire quid sit? Minime mihi tantae rei arrogo experientiam, nec glorior in praerogativa quae soli servatur beatae sponsae, cautus, iuxta illud Graecorum, scire meipsum, ut sciam etiam cum Propheta, quid desit mihi [Psal. XXXVIII, 5].»

¹⁹ On humility and self-knowledge in Bernard, see MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 172-173; J. R. SOMMERFELDT, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1991, pp. 53-65; and É. GILSON, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1990, pp. 69-73 who names this motif an «asceticism of the mind» (ibid., p. 69). On this topic in twelfth-century literature, see C. MORRIS, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1995, pp. 64-95, esp. pp. 65-70.

²⁰ *Sec* 23.9; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 314: «Tamen si nihil omnino scirem, nihil dicerem. Quod scio, non invidio vobis, nec subtrahō.»

same time affirming it – he cleverly exposes himself in the act. His humility stops him from self-glorification but his «knowledge» obliges him to speak: «if I knew nothing, I would say nothing».

So what does he say? What secrets does he reveal? We can almost hear Bernard softening his voice to a whisper as he covertly discloses:

There is a place where God can be seen resting and giving rest – a place altogether of the bridegroom, where he is neither judge nor teacher. To me – for I do not know for others – this would truly be the bedchamber, if anyone were ever given entry there. But alas, how rare the hour and how short the stay²¹!

In this passage we find two of Bernard's most common topoi for referring to the encounter with God, the goal of contemplation. Firstly, he introduces an uncertainty regarding the experience («if anyone were ever given entry there»), thereby expressing doubt as to its possibility while also suggesting the exceptional state of grace involved. Secondly, he refers to the brevity of the experience («how rare the hour, how short the stay»), implying the fleeing and imperfect foretaste of eschatological realization²². The unfulfilled character of desire in Bernard's *Sermons* reflects these tensions of partial fulfilment, in the interplay between the beloved's presence and absence, between «now», but «not yet»²³. Ever suspended between anticipation and consummation (now and not yet), the bride – i.e., the saintly soul who longs for contemplative union with God – is torn between *languor* and *frui*, languishment and bliss.

²¹ *Scs* 23.15; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 322: «Sed est locus ubi vere quiescens et quietus cernitur Deus: locus omnino, non iudicis, non magistri, sed sponsi, et qui mihi quidem – nam de aliis nescio –, plane cubiculum sit, si quando in illum contigerit introduci. Sed, heu! rara hora, et parva mora!».

²² Contemplation and eschatology may be seen as two quite different manifestations of anagogy. The latter, sometimes termed «horizontal» anagogy, is connected with the last things and conceived in an objective, historical manner; the former, «vertical» anagogy, seeks to achieve a realization – albeit incomplete and momentary – of heaven on earth. See B. MCGINN, «Saint Bernard and Eschatology», in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Studies presented to Dom Jean Leclercq*, M. B. PENNINGTON (ed.), Cistercian Publications / Consortium Press, Washington D.C. 1973, pp. 161-185. Vertical anagogy corresponds to what de Lubac coined «mystical tropology», H. de LUBAC, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. II, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2000, pp. 127-178. It should be noted that horizontal anagogy and vertical anagogy in Bernard's text operate in a dynamic and inter-referential way, mirroring each other and mutually explaining one another.

²³ On the dialectics of eros in monastic eschatology, see D. TURNER, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1995, pp. 85-87.

In representations of contemplation in the *Sermons*, themes of absence and presence intermingle with themes of maintaining and discovering divine secrets. Paradoxically, here at the very moment of the bride's glorious entry into the bedchamber, the disjunction between presence and absence, which has been established and enforced throughout the sermon, dissolves as Bernard offers – though less than confidently – the possibility of mystical participation to a hypothetical figure (one of the monks?) rather than to himself²⁴:

If it should happen to someone among you [*vestrum*] to be similarly rapt up [*rapi*] and hidden [*abscondi*] in this secret and holy place of God [...], then he, when he returns to us again, may well give praise and say: The King has brought me into his bedchamber²⁵.

Thus working contrary to the expectations of his own making – he has, after all, been building up to and preparing his audience for his own role as the bride's double – he also introduces a definitively de-intensifying hesitancy, disappointing the expectancy of spiritual revelation. Retaining the secrets of the bedchamber, Bernard withdraws into the background leaving the bride's identity and her experience shrouded in darkness.

This decrease in rhetorical intensity is accompanied by a series of negative assertions – notions of what one does *not* experience in the bedchamber: «one is not diverted and disturbed neither by bodily needs, not by the gnawing of duty, nor by stabs of guilt, nor, which is yet more difficult to avoid, by obsessive fleshly images of the fantasy»²⁶. The soul, «rapt up and hidden away» (*sic rapi et sic abscondi*) in the divine bedchamber, is thus liberated from disturbances both of a corporeal nature (*sensus egens*), from mundane duties and responsibilities (*cura*), i.e., the obligations of the active life, and from the burden of guilt (*culpa*) and uncontrollable imaginative visions (*imaginum corporearum phantasmata*). Establishing the bedchamber of contemplation as an enclosed, secret and interior

²⁴ On Bernard's rhetoric of presence and absence, descent and ascent in Sermon 23, see PRANGER, *Broken Dreams*, cit., pp. 51-84, esp. p. 56, where he asks: «Precisely who, then, is the bride, who at this glorious moment of arrival is seen to be solidly inside, but who at the end of the sermon, is almost identified with a stranger whose identity remains more or less in the dark?».

²⁵ *Sec* 23.16; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 324: «In hoc arcanum et in hoc sanctuarium Dei, si quem forte vestrum aliqua hora sic rapi et sic abscondi contigerit [...] poterit quidem hic, cum ad nos redierit, gloriari et dicere: *Introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum* [Cant. I, 3]».

²⁶ *Sec* 23.16; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 324: «ut minime avocet aut perturbet vel sensus egens, vel cura pungens, vel culpa mordens, vel certe ea, quae difficilius amoveantur, irruentia imaginum corporearum phantasmata».

locus, Bernard evokes notions of (in)accessibility and (im)penetrability carrying inexplicit but inescapable allusions to the monastery and monastic life.

2. Secrecy, celibacy, and contemplative pleasures: The embrace

The bedchamber is metaphorically connected to eroticism and to repose, both of which are associated with contemplation and the anagogical sense in Bernard's hermeneutics. As an image conveying both intimacy and inactivity, the metaphor of the bedchamber is closely connected to another metaphor of the «erotic-contemplative group», namely the bridal bed of Sermon 46²⁷. Creating notions of protected and enclosed space, the abbot of Clairvaux invokes images of the recluse, of the cloister, and, implicitly, of celibacy. In Sermon 46, Bernard states his monastic concerns explicitly: «Indeed, in the Church, the bed in which one reposes is in my opinion the cloisters and monasteries, where one lives undisturbed by the cares of the world and the burdens of life»²⁸. The two sermons in question, Sermon 23 and Sermon 46, are among the most explicitly monastic in the whole work – *quies*, the «peacefulness of monks» (*monachorum quietem*)²⁹, is, after all, the prerogative of the cloister.

The theme of seclusion and secret spaces is amplified in Sermon 52. This is interwoven with an elaborately sensual and intimate image, where Bernard depicts the bridegroom embracing the bride, an image of the soul's mystical union with God:

Actually our race is not without someone who happily deserved to enjoy this gift, who has had experience of this sweetest secret [*suavissimi arcani*]. [...] What do you think she will receive there [*illic*] when she here [*hic*] is favoured with so great an intimacy that she feels herself embraced by the arms of God, caressed at the bosom of God, and guarded with care and attention by God³⁰?

²⁷ On «erotic-contemplative» images, i.e. the kiss (*Scs* 3-9), the embrace (*Scs* 52), the bed (*Scs* 46), and the bed chamber (*Scs* 23) over against «maternal-active» images, i.e. fecundation (*Scs* 85), lactation and maternal breasts (*Scs* 9), and maternal affection and compassion (*Scs* 23), see L. C. ENGH, *Gendered Identities in Bernard of Clairvaux's 'Sermons on the Song of Songs': Performing the Bride*, Brepols, Turnhout 2014, pp. 63-149.

²⁸ *Scs* 46.2; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 140: «Et in Ecclesia quidem lectum in quo quiescitur, claustra existimo esse et monasteria, in quibus quiete a curis vivitur saeculi, et sollicitudinibus vitae».

²⁹ *Scs* 46.4; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 142.

³⁰ *Scs* 52.2; *OSB*, V, 2, pp. 208-210: «Denique nec deest in nostro genere qui hoc munere felix laetificari meruerit, et sic in semetipso suavissimi arcani huius habuerit experimentum [...] Quid putas illic accipiet, quae hic tanta familiaritate donatur, ut Dei brachiis amplecti se sentiat, Dei

In the arms of the bridegroom – this secret and secluded space – the bride is hidden from the world and undisturbed by worldly and sensual cares. Here, as elsewhere, Bernard uses antitheses to imply the fusion between humanity and divinity: «here» and «there», implying earth-heaven, now-then. The full overlapping between these categories – and thus full enjoyment of the bridegroom in the bedchamber – is eschatological, but a momentary, fleeting foretaste of this bliss is possible in contemplation.

In Sermon 52, we note an intensification in Bernard's spaces of intimacy. This was already evident in the passage from the garden to the bedroom, i.e. from architectural exteriority to interiority (in Sermon 23) and in the image of the monasteries as the «beds of the Church» (in Sermon 46). With the embrace this progressive intimacy is taken one step further in the image of an inner room enclosed by arms, a spatial intimacy if ever there was one. Seclusion and protected space is a leading monastic image since it alludes to a certain invulnerability in regard to the secular world. Concurrently, this image of enclosed space carries undertones of virginity and specifically the «enclosed garden» (*hortus conclusus*) of Song 4.12 – a fertile but virginal space³¹. A metonym for the monastery and the monastic site itself, the virgin signalizes monastic withdrawal from the world and, instead, participation in divine presence³². Here the figure of the inaccessible, impenetrable, and secluded virgin blends into metaphors indicating contemplation and notions of sexual consummation between the bride and the bridegroom evoked by the erotic references. Thereby the secrecy of enclosed virginal spaces (bed, bedchamber, embrace) become paradoxically extended to notions of divine erotic pleasure.

The conjunction of eroticism and asceticism was not novel to the Song of Songs commentaries. Bernard's seemingly incoherent metaphorical reconstruction of celibacy as saintly bliss follows in the tradition of a distinctly ascetic Christianized eros as formulated by late ancient writers, like Origen, Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, and others³³. With the Song of Songs as exegetical vehicle,

sinu foveri, Dei cura et studio custodiri, ne dormiens forte a quopiam, donec ultro evigilet, excitetur?».

³¹ On constructions of virginity and fertility in the *Sermons*, see ENGH, *Gendered Identities*, cit., pp. 153-201.

³² On the virgin's body as metonym for the Church, see K. C. KELLY, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, Routledge, London 2000, p. 38.

³³ See E. A. CLARK, «The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis», *Church History* 77 (2008) 1-25; P. COX MILLER,

asceticism in the patristic and the medieval period could turn into a discourse of *counterpleasures*³⁴, i.e., transpositions of earthly and heavenly pleasures, where worldly and sensual temptations are supplanted and suppressed by spiritual desire and spiritual bliss.

In Sermon 20 Bernard proposes a deliberate inversion of desire by replacing worldly desire with divine desire: «Let your affections for your Lord Jesus be blissful and sweet, so as to oppose the falsely sweet allurements of fleshly life. Let sweetness conquer sweetness as one nail drives out the other nail»³⁵. Bernard does not extinguish desire, but rather directs it towards the right object: up rather than down, towards the superior rather than the lowly³⁶. This transferral whereby the flesh and the world are banished by saintly desire is thereby, in effect, a mode of *askesis* – no longer pungent and painful but sweet and blissful, for spiritual pleasure has replaced carnal pleasure. Asceticism ultimately reveals itself as a mode of divine erotics, thus echoing the general inversion – running throughout the whole collection of sermons – of asceticism and eroticism.

In a noted passage from the same sermon, Bernard establishes a fundamental, and quite novel, interconnection between fleshly love and spiritual love, focalized on carnal Christ³⁷:

I believe this is the primal reason why the invisible God wanted to be seen in the flesh and live as man among men. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men, those who could

«Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure. Eros and Language in Origen's Commentary of the Song of Songs», *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986) 241-253; V. BURRUS, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2004; V. BURRUS and C. KELLER (eds.), *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, Fordham University Press, New York 2006.

³⁴ Borrowing the term from K. MACKENDRICK, *Counterpleasures*, (SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture) State University of New York Press, Binghamton 1999; cf. BURRUS, *Sex Lives*, cit., pp. 3, 163-164, n. 5.

³⁵ *Scs* 20.4; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 260: «Sit suavis et dulcis affectui tuo Dominus Iesus, contra male utique dulces vitae carnalis illecebras, et vincat dulcedo dulcedinem, quemadmodum clavum clavus expellit».

³⁶ On desire in Bernard, see CASEY, *Athirst for God*, cit., pp. 63-314; on inversions of worldly and divine desire in the *Sermons*, see ENGH, *Gendered Identities*, cit., pp. 316-324. On Cistercian concerns for and interpretations of *caritas*, see M. G. NEWMAN, *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform, 1098-1180*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1996.

³⁷ On the centrality and novelty of carnal love in Bernard's teaching, see MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 174-177.

not love other than in a carnal way [*carnaliter amare*], by first drawing them to salutary love of his flesh, and then gradually leading them to spiritual love³⁸.

I suggest that Bernard's interpretation of desire, canalized towards Christ's flesh as salvific starting place, profoundly conditions his use of erotic imagery: for by substituting spiritual and eternal for fleshly and transient objects of desire they might both be encompassed by the same erotic language. At the same time, this interrelation between perverted desire (worldly, fleshly) and primeval desire (godly, spiritual) – conjoined by the desire for the flesh of Christ – provides more than just a spiritualized version of a language of desire (kisses, embraces, pleasure). More significantly, it produces a transfer upwards – from a literal to a spiritual meaning.

3. Secrecy and hermeneutics: Penetration

In Sermon 14 Bernard again creates notions of interiority versus exteriority (being «inside» as opposed to «outside»): i.e. spatial analogies to different degrees of spiritual understanding. He announces: «The bride and bridegroom are alone inside, enjoying their mutual and secret embraces, without the clamour of carnal desire, without the tumultuous turbulence of bodily fantasies»³⁹. Once more we find the sublimated desire of divine erotics, where the height of saintly bliss is associated with the absence of carnal lust. Meanwhile, all Bernard and the monks can do, is wait outside, eavesdropping at the door: «But there is hope also for us. Imperfect as we are, let us keep guard outside, rejoicing in hope»⁴⁰.

Bernard creates tensions, indeed frictions, in the relation of the literal to the spiritual level and, analogously, the outer and overt to the inner and secret. This is negotiated and enacted in terms of a hermeneutical condemnation of the Jews. Christ's crucifixion is inscribed as a hermeneutical event, indeed as a

³⁸ *Sec* 20.6; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 264: «Hanc ego arbitror praecipuam invisibili Deo fuisse causam, quod voluit in carne videri et cum hominibus homo conversari, ut carnalium videlicet, qui nisi carnaliter amare non poterant, cunctas primo ad suae carnis salutarem amorem affectiones retraheret, atque ita gradatim ad amorem perduceret spiritualem».

³⁹ *Sec* 14.5; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 184: «Sponsus et sponsa soli interim intus sint, mutuis secretisque fruuntur amplexibus, nullo strepitu carnalium desideriorum, nullo corporeorum phantasmatum perturbante tumultu».

⁴⁰ *Sec* 14.5; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 184: «Spes tamen est et nobis. Excubemus pro foribus qui minus perfecti sumus, spe gaudentes».

hermeneutical imperative to pass beyond the letter, beyond physicality and into the deep, hidden secrets beneath:

When the veil of the letter that brings death is torn in two at the death of the crucified Word, the Church, led by the spirit of liberty, daringly penetrates to his inmost depths. She is acknowledged and taken delight in, and occupies the place of her rival [the Synagogue] to become his bride, to enjoy the embraces of his newly-emptied arms⁴¹.

The bride's ability to «penetrate the Word» and thrust into «his inmost depths» is sanctioned by the death of the letter at the death of the Word which opens onto spiritual understanding. Hermeneutical tensions between letter and spirit are here reconfigured as a tension between *Synagoga* and *Ecclesia*, or Jewish literalism versus Christian allegory⁴². The death of the Word signaled the triumph of the Church and of Christian hermeneutics, revealing – or un-veiling – the letter «that brings death» (cf. II Cor 3.6), and simultaneously «tearing the veil» (cf. Mt 27.51-52). The Jews' hermeneutical fault, according to Bernard, is a literal reading of Scripture, insisting on the letter of the Law: Israel keeps wisdom bottled up «in books [*in codicibus*], but not in hearts [*in cordibus*]. [Israel] adheres to the outwardness of the letter»⁴³.

For Bernard, spiritual understanding is a hermeneutics of the heart, not the letter; it is internal, not external. This hermeneutical friction is here expressed in the assonant opposition: *in codicibus* («in books») versus *in cordibus* («in hearts»), or the letter versus the spirit, the candid versus the concealed. Spiritual interpretation stands for the attempt at recuperation of unity between letter and meaning which was made (partly) possible by the crucifixion: the hermeneutical sacrifice of the living Word that unveiled the letter of death. By refusing to spiritually, the Jews

⁴¹ *Scs* 14.4; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 184: «At vero Ecclesia, scisso velo occidentis litterae in morte Verbi crucifixi, audacter ad eius penetralia praeunte spiritu libertatis irrumpit, agnoscitur, placet, sortitur aemulae locum, fit sponsa, fruitur praereptis amplexibus».

⁴² In medieval hermeneutics Jewish readings were generally regarded as not illuminated by the Holy Spirit. According to a typological understanding, the events of the Old Testament took on sense only if viewed in light of Christ and the New Testament. In this sense, Christ himself *is* the spirit of the text. On the relation between Jewish and Christian exegesis, and St. Victor as a meeting-point between them in eleventh- and twelfth-century France, see A. GROSSMAN who underscores a Jewish school of literal interpretation in this period: A. GROSSMAN, «The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France», in M. SÆBØ (ed.), *Hebrew Bible. Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. II (Middle Ages) Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2000, pp. 321-371; cf. LECLERCQ, *Monks and Love*, cit., p. 30.

⁴³ *Scs* 14.8; *OSB*, V, 1, p. 188: «habet in codicibus, sed non in cordibus. Foris haeret in littera».

deny the non-literal, i.e. the spiritual senses of Scripture (allegory, tropology, and anagogy): levels of meaning which Bernard sees as the entire point of the Song of Songs, indeed of the Old Testament as a whole.

«The literal sense [...] is the portion of the Jews», he exclaims in Sermon 73. «I, instead, will examine for myself, as I have received it from the Lord, spirit and life in the depths of the bowels [*gremio*] of sacred scriptures»⁴⁴. Bernard presents Scripture not only as edible but, also, as containing anatomical depths into which the exegete must enter and extract the secrets that lie hidden deep inside (*gremio*). He queries: «How can I extract the sweet and salvific spiritual feast [*epulum*] from the barren and insipid letter», for, he says, «I will have nothing to do with the letter; it tastes of flesh [*gustata carnem sapit*], and swallowing it brings death! But what is hidden in the letter, is of the Holy Spirit»⁴⁵.

Here we must consider two factors. Firstly, that the hermeneutical frame of reference is, no matter how far the abbot digresses from the biblical verse he is expounding, the Song of Songs – a book shared with the Jewish tradition. Secondly, from a monastic-ascetic point of view, the hermeneutical threat posed by the Song's literal level of meaning, the «letter that brings death» and «tastes of flesh» is, quite literally, more acute than in exegesis of other biblical texts; if read on a literal level the Song is simply scandalous. In order to enter into ascetic discourse, the Song of Songs requires hermeneutical sublimation so that the literal meaning – i.e. its corporeal and erotic implications – is transformed and superseded⁴⁶. However, one might also consider this notion the other way around: just like Christians presuppose Jewish texts, salvation presupposes the body – or a body – for its turn towards spiritual ascent. Again our focus is shifted towards that salvific and desirable flesh, the body of Christ, asserted by the eucharistic subtext of the passage, merging Scripture and body of Christ, which is densely figured in references to eating, tasting, and swallowing as well as to Scripture as *epulum*, a ceremonious or sacrificial feast.

Christ's body as a hermeneutical excavation site appears also in Sermon 61. Here the clefts in his perforated body (*per foramina corporis*) become peepholes,

⁴⁴ *Scs* 73.2; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 476: «Hic litterae tenor, et haec Iudaeorum portio. Ego vero, quemadmodum accepi a Domino, in profundo sacri eloquii gremio spiritum mihi scrutabor et vitam».

⁴⁵ *Scs* 73.2; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 476: «Quidni eruam dulce ac salutare epulum spiritus de sterili et insipida littera [...] ? Nihil mihi et litterae huic, quae gustata carnem sapit, glutita mortem affert! Sed enim quod in ea tectum est, de Spiritu sancto est».

⁴⁶ Cf. F. B. A. ASIÉDU, «The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism», *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001) 299-317.

so to speak, into which the exegete may gaze⁴⁷. «Why should I not gaze through the cleft», inquires Bernard and, gazing, finds that, «the secret [*arcanum*] of his heart is laid open through the clefts of his body»⁴⁸. The nailwounds and sidewound of Christ's violated body figure hermeneutical exposure; they speak – indeed, they cry out: «The nail cries out, the wound cries out [*clamat clavus, clamat vulnus*] that God is truly in Christ, reconciling the world to himself»⁴⁹. Developing on the image of the nail which, having pierced the divine flesh, leaves perforations or lacerations for the reader, Bernard states that, «the nail that pierced him has become for me a keyhole unlocking the sight of God's will»⁵⁰.

Penetration and perforation thus indicates the *excessus*, the «going beyond», of contemplation: «penetrating the innermost secrets» (*penetrare intima, penetrare arcana*)⁵¹. More specifically, penetration is the hermeneutical act of moving from the letter (or literal level) to the spirit (or spiritual levels) of the text and, concurrently, breaching the boundaries between the worldly and the heavenly realm. It means entering into spiritual understanding, highlighting the particularly hermeneutical nature of Bernard's interpretation of contemplation. It implies penetrating the Word, as body and as text, uncovering the secrets of spiritual meaning hidden within.

Secrecy, then, has hermeneutical and especially anagogical references – or, rather, the anagogical meaning *is* the secret. It is the secret hidden away in the bedchamber, in the bridegroom's protective embrace. It is the secret found in the depths of Scripture and in the very bowels of Christ, the passageway from flesh

⁴⁷ On hermeneutical penetration of Christ's body; see ENGH, *Performing the Bride*, cit., pp. 367-379.

⁴⁸ *Scs* 61.4; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 320: «Quidni videam per foramen? [...] Patet arcanum cordis per foramina corporis».

⁴⁹ *Scs* 61.4; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 320: «Clamat clavus, clamat vulnus, quod vere Deus sit in Christo mundum reconcilians sibi».

⁵⁰ *Scs* 61.4; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 320: «At clavis reserans, clavus penetrans factus est mihi, ut videam voluntatem Domini».

⁵¹ *Penetrare intima*: *Scs* 5.4 (*OSB*, V, 1, p. 70), 52.6 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 214); *penetrare arcana*: *Scs* 62.6 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 336); see also *penetrare caelos*: *Scs* 25.5 (*OSB*, V, 1, p. 352), 35.3 (*OSB*, V, 1, p. 514), 49.3 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 176), 54.8 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 240), 62.2 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 330); *penetrare sublimia*: *Scs* 9.3 (*OSB*, V, 1, p. 112), 32.8 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 478), *penetrare plenitudinem luminis, irrupere claritatis abyssos*: *Scs* 38.5 (*OSB*, V, 2, p. 60). As in the example from *Scs* 14, imagery implying embraces and desire between bride and bridegroom allow for the image of penetration to be tinged by sexual allusions. Images of penetration, however, do not necessarily carry erotic overtones, but they certainly carry hermeneutical references.

and blood to spirit, from pale, insipid appearance to dense, hidden knowledge. Spiritual meaning is secret because it cannot be contained in the letter, in words, or in «books» – but only in «hearts». It is when «one tastes and knows [*gustat et sapit*] that the Lord is sweet [Ps 33.9]» and when «the affections, seasoned by the salt of wisdom, fills the mind with a mighty abundance of the sweetness of the Lord»⁵². Ultimately and eschatologically, divine union is the perfect mirroring of reciprocal love and reciprocal knowledge⁵³: «Then the soul will know as it is known, and love as it is loved, and the bridegroom will take delight in the bride, knowing and known, loving and loved»⁵⁴. Loving Christ means knowing Christ, and vice versa, and *that* is the secret.

4. Veiling and unveiling

In the hermeneutical transition from letter to spirit, Christ is the catalyst – the site of penetration. This movement from letter to spirit suggests recovering paradise, reverting the fall: returning to the condition of perfect and immediate spiritual understanding. The transition is desirable – indeed, it is the very focal point of all desire, the ultimate contemplative and eschatological goal – but not fully realizable in this life, in this body, in this condition of hermeneutical displacement.

In fact, during the pilgrimage of earthly exile the bridal soul is hermeneutically twice displaced, excluded not only from understanding but even from expression. Bernard's rhetorical strategy conceals as it reveals, approaching the ineffable and the invisible while constantly undermining his own experience and authority, thus creating deep ambiguities in delivering and communicating its message⁵⁵. In

⁵² *Sec* 50.4; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 188-190: «quae et gustat, et sapit quoniam suavis est Dominus [Psal. XXXIII, 9] [...] illa affectualis, quae sale sapientiae condita pinguescens magnam menti importat multitudinem dulcedinis Domini».

⁵³ Most scholars insist on the point that, for Bernard, knowledge equalled «experience», wisdom equalled «love», see, e.g., J. LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, Fordham University Press, N.Y. 1982, p. 212; MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., pp. 200-203; and A. H. BREDERO, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1996, p. 15.

⁵⁴ *Sec* 82.8; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 600: «Tunc cognoscet anima sicut cognita est; tunc amabit sicut amata est; et gaudebit sponsus super sponsam, cognoscens et cognitus, diligens et dilectus».

⁵⁵ Cf. H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of God: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. II, Crossroads, N.Y. 1984, p. 25, cited in MCGINN, *Growth of Mysticism*, cit., p. 208: the exegete «can clothe the

Sermon 74 we find some of Bernard's most striking disruptions between saying and not saying, veiling and unveiling:

It befalls me to fulfil my promise and apply this verse to the Word and the soul. Certainly, this sermon would be more fittingly discussed by one with more experience and more knowledge of saintly and secret love [*sancti et arcani amoris*]. But I can neither evade my duty nor your requests⁵⁶.

As he assumes the responsibility of exegete, Bernard returns to the rhetorical formula of simultaneously denying and affirming his own authority. This ambiguity is linked with his reluctance to the task at hand:

I am aware of the danger for me, but I shall not take precautions, for you force me into it. Indeed, you force me to walk among things which are too great and too awesome for me. Alas! How I fear to hear: Why do you speak of my delights and take my mysteries in your mouth⁵⁷?

Bernard is «endangering» himself, he says, by preaching on saintly and secret love. But he does not try to save himself, as he is «forced» by his duty towards his monks. Representing himself as violating esoteric prohibitions, speaking ineffable words, i.e. telling of the bridegroom's «delights» and taking his «mysteries» in his own mouth, Bernard hints at the nature of the transgression: he lacks knowledge and experience. Again the rhetorical strategy of humility causes Bernard to veil his message. Yet at the same time he is still under obligation to his role as spiritual authority (preacher, abbot, exegete) and this causes him to unveil his message. So he proclaims: «Hear me, then, as a man who fears to speak, but cannot remain silent»⁵⁸. Extending notions of humility onto the monks, he emphasizes their simplicity and humility:

Let him who can understand these things, understand. We, however, as we proceed cautiously and simply into the exposition of sacred and secret eloquence [*sacri mysticique eloquii*], must adopt the way of Scripture which speaks of wisdom hidden in mystery while

mystery in the drapery of a 'fine' style, either as an act of homage, or in an attempt to preserve it by veiling it».

⁵⁶ *Scs* 74.1; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 488: «Et mihi quidem, ut memini meae promissionis, incumbit assignare hunc locum Verbo et animae. Et certe sermo iste decuerat magis expertum, magisque conscium sancti et arcani amoris; sed non possum officio deesse meo, non vestris omnino votis».

⁵⁷ *Scs* 74.1; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 488: «Periculum meum video, et non caveo; vos me cogitis. Prorsus cogitis ambulare in magnis et in mirabilibus super me. Heu! quam vereor ne subinde audiam: Quare tu enarras delicias meas, et assumis sacramentum meum per os tuum?».

⁵⁸ *Scs* 74.1; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 488: «Audite me tamen hominem, qui loqui trepidat, et tacere non potest».

using our words, which refers to our feelings while representing God, and which offers human minds to drink from the unknown and invisible things of God by using the likeness of familiar and perceptible things, like some [cup of] cheap material [filled] with something precious⁵⁹.

This image of a cheap and fragile container (the flesh, the letter) carrying something precious and imperceptible (spirit, wisdom) reflects the hermeneutical tensions lodged in seeking to give linguistic representation to the mystical encounter between the soul and God, bride and bridegroom. I suggest that Bernard, speaking «in our words» to express «wisdom hidden in mystery», uses secrecy as a rhetorical strategy to both establish and breach the boundaries between the spiritual and the literal meaning of the eroticism of the Song of Songs.

Hermeneutical tensions between hidden, spiritual meaning and apparent, literal meaning, adjoined with related tensions between fleshly and spiritual desire, are brought to a semantic breaking point whereby distinctions between saying and not saying – preserving and revealing mystery – all but collapse. Concurrently veiling and revealing, implying and denying literalness, Bernard both affirms and negates the similitude between worldly eros and saintly eros.

⁵⁹ *See* 74.2; *OSB*, V, 2, p. 490: «Verum haec qui potest capere, capiat. Nos autem in expositione sacri mysticque eloquii caute et simpliciter ambulantes, geramus morem Scripturae, quae nostris verbis sapientiam in mysterio absconditam loquitur; nostris affectibus Deum, dum figurat, insinuat; notis rerum sensibilibus similitudinibus, tamquam quibusdam vilioris materiae poculis, ea quae pretiosa sunt, ignota et invisibilia Dei, mentibus proinat humanis».

