

# "A UNION NOT ONLY OF BODIES BUT OF SPIRITS"

THE IMAGE OF THE KISS IN THE COMMENTARIES ON THE SONG OF SONGS OF BERNARD OF  
CLAIRVAUX AND WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY

Lieke Smits

3957543

[l.a.smits@students.uu.nl](mailto:l.a.smits@students.uu.nl)

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Supervisor: dr. Els Rose

Second assessor: prof. dr. Wim Verbaal

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## Preface

My first acquaintance with the works of Bernard of Clairvaux took place during my bachelor in art history. I was interested in medieval writings about art, which, as I found out, are quite rare. I ended up examining Bernard's *Apologia*, in which the Cistercian author claims that art is a distraction for the monk. Something which I found fascinating was the contrast between Bernard's rejection of visual images as an aid in monastic spirituality on the one hand, and his abundant use of language which appeals to the senses and evokes images in the mind on the other hand.

In this master thesis, I focus on the function of this sensual language in spirituality. I have chosen for a close examination of three commentaries on the Song of Songs, written by Bernard and his friend William of St. Thierry. I have worked with the texts in Latin, and have also made use of the available translations in English. Some parts of the *Brevis commentatio* have not yet been translated; in these cases, I have made translations of my own. Besides the Song commentaries of these two Cistercian authors, I have made use of various other texts of Bernard and William and earlier authors to support my interpretation and provide the necessary context. One of the texts, Origen's *Contra Celsum*, was not available in a Latin edition, only in Greek. Since I have not yet had the opportunity to learn Greek, I have chosen to make use of an English translation and not render the text in Greek.

Although I started my study career examining art, the Latin literature of the Middle Ages, and especially the twelfth century, has been my interest for several years. Els Rose has given me the opportunity to do research in this field during several courses. She was also willing to be the supervisor of my thesis and was of great help in the development of my research question and in structuring and improving my text. I am thankful for her commitment and our fruitful discussions. I also want to thank Wim Verbaal, who, with his expertise of the sources I have studied, has given me useful tips during the starting phase and was willing to be second assessor. Finally, my thanks go to Lianne Heslinga, who gave very useful suggestions for the improvement of the text.

## Abbreviations

- BC: *Brevis commentatio*, S.D.B. Ceglar, P. Verdeyen (eds.), in: *Guillelmi a Sancto Theodorico opera omnia*, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 87 (Turnhout 1997), pp. 155-196.
- CC-CM: Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout, 1966-)
- CC-SL: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout, 1952-)
- ESCC: William of St. Thierry, *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum*, P. Verdeyen (ed.), in: *Guillelmi a Sancto Theodorico opera omnia*, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 87 (Turnhout 1997), pp. 19-133.
- SBO: *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, J. Lecelrcq, C.H. Talbot and H.M. Rochais (eds.), 8 vols. (Rome 1957-1977).
- SC: Sources Chrétiennes (Paris, 1941-)
- SSCC: Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, in: J. Lecelrcq, C.H. Talbot and H.M. Rochais (eds.), *Sancti Bernardi opera*, vols. 1 and 2 (Rome 1957-1958).
- SVG: Supplements to *Vigilae Christianae* (Leiden etc. 1987-)

For Bible quotation, I have used the Douay-Rheims edition, except for Bible verses in quotations from the commentaries, which I have rendered as in the translation of the concerning commentary.

## Introduction

"[A]s happens in the kisses of lovers, who by a certain sweet, mutual exchange, impart their spirit each to the other, so the created spirit pours itself out wholly into the Spirit who creates it for this very effusion; and the Creator Spirit infuses himself into it as he wills, and man becomes one spirit with God."<sup>1</sup> These words were written by William of St. Thierry in his *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum (Exposition on the Song of Songs)*. Just as his contemporary Bernard of Clairvaux, William uses the kiss from the first verse of the Old-Testamentary book – "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" – as an image for the ultimate mystical union between God and man. It may seem surprising that such sensual<sup>2</sup> words had an enormous appeal to twelfth-century monks belonging to the Cistercian order, a reform movement known for its asceticism.

By that time, the Song already had an extensive commentary tradition, not only in Christianity but also within Judaism.<sup>3</sup> In medieval Christian hermeneutics, different layers of Scripture were distinguished. First of all, the literal sense of the text, also called the historical meaning or narrative, was opposed to the non-literal spiritual or mystical sense. The non-literal sense, in turn, could be differentiated into an allegorical, an anagogical and a tropological or moral sense. Allegorically, the Old Testament, and thus the Song, was interpreted as a typology of Christ and the Christian Church. In the anagogical reading, events were interpreted in relation to their ultimate fulfilment in the kingdom of heaven. The tropological interpretation placed the allegorical and anagogical meaning of the text in the light of the life and behaviour of the individual Christian.<sup>4</sup> For medieval monastic authors, the literal sense of the Song was problematic; it is a love song in the form of a dialogue, possibly between Solomon and his Egyptian bride, in which God does not occur. Therefore, emphasis was laid on the spiritual meanings that can be found in the Song: the bridegroom and bride were either interpreted allegorically, as God and the Church, or tropologically, as the Word and the human soul. This made the text a story about the longing of the Church for God or the striving of the soul for union with Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> "[...] sicut solet in amantium osculis, suavi quodam contactu mutuo sibi spiritus suos transfundentium, creatus spiritus in hoc ipsum creanti eum Spiritui totum se effundit; ipsi uero creator Spiritus se infundit, prout uult, et unus spiritus homo cum Deo efficitur." ESCC XX.91, CC-CM 87, p. 70; transl. Hart 1970, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'sensual' can have various meanings. I use it to refer to something pertaining to experience through the senses, which does not necessarily have the connotation of 'unchaste'. I prefer 'sensual' to more technical terms like 'sensory', because it matches the affective quality and apparent ambiguity of the Song's language.

<sup>3</sup> Matter 1990, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Turner 1995a, pp.89-90.

Commentaries up to the twelfth century were heavily influenced by the commentary of Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-252).<sup>5</sup> The allegorical meaning of the bride as Church was stressed most, making the Song a text about the whole Christian community. The interpretation of the bride as the individual soul already existed, since Origen, as a secondary possible meaning, for example in the commentaries of Ambrose (ca. 340-397) and Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604).<sup>6</sup> However, in the twelfth century the focus shifted to the moral meaning of the Song as the soul's mystical union with God as the primary mode of interpretation. In the new monastic reform movements, like the Cistercian order, a personal spirituality was emphasized. The interpretation of the bride as the individual soul suits this new, personal approach well.<sup>7</sup> Bernard and William used this interpretation in their love-based mysticism, the goal of which was becoming one spirit with God.<sup>8</sup>

The Song of Songs overflows with sensual language. The bridegroom and bride praise each other's beautiful eyes and fragrant oils, they embrace and call out to each other and the bride praises the sweetness of her lover's fruits. The experiences of seeing and hearing have always been essential to Christendom, because with those senses God's Word can be read and heard.<sup>9</sup> The connected senses of taste and touch on the other hand, which come together in the bride and bridegroom's kiss, were generally considered to be the basest senses.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is not immediately evident why the Cistercian commentators attached great significance to the kiss as a sign of the ultimate union with Christ, the eternal and full fruition in God.

In this thesis I will answer the question why, for the Cistercian commentators, the kiss was deemed such an appropriate sign for the mystical union with God. I will do this by treating the kiss as an instance of sensual language, and by doing so I hope to shed more light on the wider question why the sensual language of the Song in general was deemed appropriate to the mystical goal of the authors: attaining union with God. I will search for new elements in the mysticism of the twelfth century, which have contributed to the popularity of the Song and the senses. My method will consist of a close examination of the texts themselves, but I will also place them within their context: the medieval theories on the (inner) senses and the theological framework of the Cistercian monks.

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<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum*, SC 375. Origen's text were known in the Latin West through the translations of Rufinus (ca. 345-410) and Jerome (ca. 347-420). For Origen's influence on medieval commentaries, see Matter 1990, pp. 134-141.

<sup>6</sup> Herde 1968, p. 958.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Matter 1990, p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Herde 1968, pp. 1057-1063; Matter 1990, pp. 123-133; Astell 1990, pp. 98-104.

<sup>9</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 4; Largier 2005, p. 236. Paul's Letter to the Romans played an important role in the high esteem for hearing: *Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ* (Rom 10:17)

<sup>10</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 52.

In answering this question, I will make use of the existing discourse on sensual language in the Middle Ages. Of special interest to me will be the scholars who pay attention to the twelfth-century shift toward the senses of touch and taste, like Gordon Rudy and Niklaus Largier.<sup>11</sup> I will also be able to make use of monographs dealing with the Song's medieval commentary tradition. Two fundamental works on the commentary tradition were published in the late 1950s by the German scholars Friedrich Ohly and Helmut Riedlinger.<sup>12</sup> A new wave of publications which are important to my research occurred in the 1990s. These works do not provide a basic chronological overview, but each take a more specific approach from which they investigate the medieval texts, like literary studies or Jungian psychology.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, studies on the history of the kiss in medieval culture have proven helpful for my research.<sup>14</sup>

What is missing in the existing scholarship is a study which focuses specifically on the image of the kiss in Song commentaries, which, as I will show in this thesis, was central to the mysticism of the Cistercians. With this research, I hope to contribute to the study of twelfth-century mysticism, by showing why the kiss was so appropriate to describe mystical union.

My corpus will be limited to three closely related texts: Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*), William of St. Thierry's *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum* and the so-called *Brevis commentatio* (*Brief Commentary*), which has been attributed by scholars to both of the before named authors but is now assumed to have been written by William after a conversation he had with Bernard, whom he was befriended with.<sup>15</sup> This *Brevis commentatio* was written before the two other texts and can thus be seen as the basis of the two authors' thinking on the Song.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, I will treat the three commentaries more as a unity in which ideas can complement each other than as texts containing conflicting ideas. As a result, this research will not have the form of a comparison between the three texts, although significant differences will of course be noted. As has been said, the mystical union between the soul and God is an important interpretation

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<sup>11</sup> See Rudy 2002, Largier 2003 and Largier 2005. Also of interest with regard to this theme are Carruthers 2006 and Fulton 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Ohly 1958 gives an overview of the most important Greek, Latin and vernacular Song commentaries written between 200 and 1200. Riedlinger 1958 focuses on the image of the spotless Church in commentaries up to the fifteenth century. Also noteworthy is Rosemarie Herde's work on the Song in Latin literature up to the twelfth century (Herde 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Matter 1990 examines the medieval Song commentaries from a literary point of view; Astell 1995 applies Jungian archetypes to the different types of brides; Kingma 1993 turns to the commentaries for religious ideals in twelfth-century culture; and Turner 1995a researches the concept of *eros* in medieval Song exegesis.

<sup>14</sup> Perella 1969; Carré 1993.

<sup>15</sup> On the authorship of the *Brevis commentatio*, see Ceglar 1997, pp. 137-140. On the friendship between Bernard and William and their conversations about the Song, see Verdeyen 2001, pp. 16-24.

<sup>16</sup> Turner 1995a, pp. 275-276.

of the kiss in the Cistercian commentaries. The content of the texts, with regard to the kiss, will be treated elaborately in chapter one. They were written for a monastic public; this intended public of the commentaries will be discussed more elaborately in the second chapter. The influence of the texts in medieval spirituality will be discussed in chapter four.

Bernard (1090-1153), abbot of Clairvaux, was one of the most influential authors of the twelfth century.<sup>17</sup> He played an important role in the flowering of the relatively new Cistercian order, founded in 1098. Bernard is known for his mystical text, which had a great influence on late medieval mysticism. He was, however, not only a mystic and abbot; he was also active in the world, for example by fighting heresy.

William (ca. 1075/1080-1148) was abbot of the Benedictine abbey of St. Thierry before he entered the Cistercian order in 1135. William had an intimate friendship with Bernard, and although he was the older one, he is often said to be heavily influenced by the abbot of Clairvaux. William is known as theologian and mystic, who mainly wrote about the monk who seeks union with God.<sup>18</sup>

After this short introduction of the texts and the authors, I will set forth the structure of my research. In the first chapter, I will introduce the passages in the three texts in which Song's verse about the kiss is interpreted. I will examine how, in these sections, the kiss is treated as a sign of mystical unity. Thus, the tropological meaning of the kiss will be discussed, but because, as has already been noted, this meaning was dependent upon the allegorical and anagogical meaning, those modes of interpretation will be taken into account as well when relevant. In this chapter, I will identify the most important themes brought forward by the authors that can serve to explain the kiss as image of union with God, like the kiss as sign of the incarnation and as indication of the perception of God's immediate presence. These themes form the basis of the subsequent chapters, in which they will be more thoroughly investigated and contextualized.

In the following chapter I will place the kiss within the theory of the inner or spiritual senses, which was already developed in the third century by Origen in his commentary on the Song. According to Origen, the sensual language and the spiritual meaning of the Song refer to the senses of the invisible body of the inner person. These are separated from the outer senses, which must be mortified. As Gordon Rudy has shown, this division was less strict for the Cistercian: "Bernard's usage suggests that the human person has a single sensorium that

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<sup>17</sup> The scholarship on Bernard is very extensive. Among others, good general introductions are provided by Dinzelbacher 1998, Evans 2000 and McGuire 2011. On Bernard's mysticism, see, among others, Gilson 1934, McGinn 1994, pp. 158-224 and Pranger 1994.

<sup>18</sup> On William's mysticism, see Baudelet 1985, McGinn 1994, pp. 225-274, Verdeijen 1990 and Verdeijen 2001.



can be directed both to material and bodily things and to spiritual and divine things."<sup>19</sup> In this chapter I will examine how the sensory language of the Song could be perceived by the interior senses, and how they were related to the outer senses, to which the Song's sensual language seems to appeal at first sight. I will show that, in the commentaries, we can find a new, closer relationship between inner and outer senses.

In the third chapter I will clarify the image of the kiss as a way towards union with God by relating the interior and exterior senses to important theological concepts, like the creation, Fall, incarnation, Eucharist and Trinity, which are central to the works of both authors. By providing a theological framework, I will make clear why the Cistercian thought it possible and even necessary to reach God through the human senses. As we will see in chapter one, some of these concepts are explicitly related to the kiss as sign of mystical union in the three commentaries. By examining this relation more thoroughly, I will shed more light on the relations between the corporeal and the spiritual, between the senses and God. I will show how the Cistercians' emphasis on the bodily presence of Christ in the incarnation formed a stimulus for sensual language and how the sense of taste can specifically be related to important theological concepts, like the Eucharist and the Word.

In the fourth chapter I will treat the senses as indicators of God's presence. As will be shown in the first chapter, the senses, and also the kiss as an instance of sensual language, indicate presence, absence, distance and proximity in the Song. I will show how a hierarchy of senses could serve to denote different degrees of God's presence, and that this hierarchy changed in the twelfth century, giving taste and touch a more prominent role. This last chapter will make clear why the kiss, consisting of touching and tasting, could serve as an ideal image of God's presence, and thus of the union with God.

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<sup>19</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 45.

## Chapter I: Introduction to the texts

In this chapter, the three commentaries on the Song that are central to this study will be presented. The aims are to make the reader more familiar with the primary sources that are discussed in this research, and to investigate how, in the texts, the kiss is treated as a sign of mystical union. Therefore, besides short general introductions to the commentaries, only passages are treated here which pertain to or are directly relevant to the kiss as an image for the union between God and the soul. The texts are discussed in the chronological order in which they were written, so that it will be clear which elements of existing texts the authors may have used. Instead of arranging the passages under themes selected beforehand, I have chosen to treat them in the order in which the medieval authors have arranged them. This will provide more insight in the way the mystical process was presented throughout the commentaries. At the end of this chapter, the most important themes that come forward in the texts will be identified and connected to the themes of the following three chapters, in which they will be examined more thoroughly.

### I.1. *Brevis commentatio*

The *Brevis commentatio* was written after conversations between Bernard and William about the Song, which took place at Clairvaux probably between 1120 and 1130.<sup>20</sup> In this commentary, the first two chapters of the Song are discussed. The author gives a moral explanation of the Song, with the bride and bridegroom as the soul and Christ. Denys Turner regards the *Brevis commentatio* as "the basic outline not only of [William's] own work but of Bernard's *Sermones* as well."<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, we will see that, indeed, many elements from this work recur in the later commentaries of the two authors.

The text begins with an exposition on the three stages of the love for God in the Christian soul, which will be summarized here briefly because they play an important role in the explanation of the kiss.<sup>22</sup> A person who is at the first stage of love feels love for the humanity of Christ. At the second stage, the mysteries of faith and the power of the

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard and William met in 1118 or 1119 (Verdeyen 2001, p. 19). Turner dates the conversations before 1125 (Turner 1995a, p. 275), while Verdeyen says they probably took place between 1127 and 1130 (Verdeyen 2001, p. 24).

<sup>21</sup> Turner 1995a, pp. 275-76.

<sup>22</sup> BC I-III, CC-CM 87, pp. 155-158.

sacraments are discovered, but the eyes are still prevented from seeing Christ. At the third stage, which takes place in God, a person loves God for God's sake. The climbing of the stages does not have to be a linear process; the levels of love often run together and support one another. The author describes how the stages relate to the life of a person striving for moral perfection and union with God: "In the first is forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of vices; in the second, the practice of virtues; in the third the perfection of virtues and a clinging to and enjoyment of the highest good."<sup>23</sup> Thus, in this passage that precedes the actual commentary on the Song, the author gives an outline of the mystic's process in his desire for God.<sup>24</sup> The longing soul strives to arrive at the third stage of love, in which he will love God for God's sake, but this cannot be attained at once. First the mystic has to practice himself in the first two stages, and when he arrives at the third, those former stages should not be left aside.

The author of the *Brevis commentatio* begins his discussion of the kiss with an explanation of the language of the Song.<sup>25</sup> In Scripture, divine mysteries are revealed to human beings in parables, "for their weakness of mind would otherwise prevent them understanding".<sup>26</sup> This speaking in parables is equated with the incarnation; God became man to teach those people who did not know how to think about God to increase their rational power of understanding. Christ's time on earth was a kind of parable, because it helped people to understand things they could not see through what they could see. Then, the author compares the union of the bride and bridegroom, which is the most desirable form of bodily love, in which the two become one flesh, to the incarnation,<sup>27</sup> the union of the created with the uncreated spirit, which is the most desirable form of spiritual love, in which the two become one spirit. When the bride asks to be kissed with the kiss of the mouth, she has already taken the first two steps of love, and now longs for the third. The author adds that the kiss is a sign of peace, and when we seek reconciliation for our sins this is like asking for a kiss of peace.<sup>28</sup>

In these first remarks on the kiss, already some important things are said which help to understand the kiss as an appropriate sign of mystical union. The kiss of the mouth is

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<sup>23</sup> "In primo remissio peccatorum et emundatio uitorum; in secundo exercitium uirtutum; in tertio uirtutum perfectio et summi boni adhaesio uel fruitio." BC III, CC-CM 87, p. 157; transl. Turner 1995, p. 279.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kingma 1993, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> BC IV, CC-CM 87, p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> "[...] quorum infirmitas aliter ea intelligere non poterit." BC IV, CC-CM 87, p. 159; transl. Turner 1995, p. 281.

<sup>27</sup> On the incarnation in the Cistercian commentaries, see Astell 1990, p. 101; McDonnell 1997, p. 11; Perella 1969, pp. 52-55 and Rudolph 2002, pp. 46-52.

<sup>28</sup> On the kiss as a sign of peace in Cistercian mysticism, see Carré 1992, pp. 22-226 and Perella 1969, p. 52.

described as the sign of the ultimate, highest union of the bride and bridegroom, or the soul and Christ. This union is compared to the union of the human and the divine in the incarnation. The incarnation, in turn, is a kind or parable, just like the parables in the Song, through which we can gain understanding of God. Thus, the kiss is connected to the incarnation and knowledge about God. In the other two commentaries, we will see that the connection between the kiss and the incarnation is more elaborately explained.<sup>29</sup>

The kiss as a sign of peace is also something that will be more extensively treated in Bernard's sermons. This was not invented by one of the Cistercian authors; in the Christian tradition, the kiss and the notion of peace (*pax*) were connected to each other. In the New Testament, both Peter and Paul urge the brethren to salute one another with a holy kiss.<sup>30</sup> In the second Epistle to the Corinthians, this kiss is explicitly placed in the context of peace and reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the kiss was a mystic symbol in the early Christian community.<sup>32</sup> In the liturgical context of later times, the kiss of peace is given during the Eucharistic communion of the Mass.<sup>33</sup> The kiss in the first verse of the Song was traditionally linked to this liturgical kiss of peace. This connection was strengthened because the name of Solomon, the Song's supposed author, meant "the Peaceful One". Moreover, the incarnate Christ, identified with the kiss, is called "the Prince of Peace", spoken of in Isaiah 9:6.<sup>34</sup>

In the following, the three stages of love are compared to three kisses which the loving soul can give to her bridegroom Christ.<sup>35</sup> The first kiss is the kiss to the feet, which is the kiss of those who seek reconciliation; the second kiss, to the hand, is of those who have gained some merit; and the third kiss, to the mouth, is of contemplatives. When she offers a kiss to the Lord's feet, the bride wins the mercy of sinners. These two feet are mercy and judgment. Then, the bride rises from the humility of repentance to the Lord's hand, to offer a kiss by way of thanks to the gift of his love and the effects of good works, which are designated by the hand. This kiss is a loving act of thanksgiving. The third kiss, of contemplation, is longed for by the bride when she has gained confidence from the first two kisses.

Thus, the author deals with three stages of the soul's progress under the figure of the three kisses. The characteristics of the different kisses are more or less the same as those of the stages of love. A striking aspect is that the author does not limit himself to a commentary

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<sup>29</sup> On the kiss as incarnation in Bernard's *Sermones* see section 2, pp. 14-15, 17-18; for this connection in William's *Expositio*, see section 3, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; II Cor 13:12; I Thes 5:26 and I Pet 5:14.

<sup>31</sup> II Cor 13:11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Perella 1969, pp. 12-13.

<sup>33</sup> Carré 1992, pp. 225-227.

<sup>34</sup> Perella 1969, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> BC V, CC-CM 87, p. 160.

on the biblical verse. He does not only explain the spiritual meaning of the kiss of the mouth, but adds two elements on the literal level of the text: a kiss of the feet and a kiss of the hand. These two kisses have, strictly speaking, no biblical basis, but serve to provide a better understanding of the kiss of the mouth as an image of mystical union with God.<sup>36</sup> They show the individual monk how to achieve this most intimate kiss. The kisses of the feet and the hand are treated rather briefly here. In Bernard's sermons, we will encounter a far more elaborate discussion of the three kisses. Since this threefold division of the kiss is not based on the commentary tradition, the treatment of it in the *Brevis commentatio* can be seen as an outline of Bernard's sermons.

The author goes on with his discussion of the kiss of the mouth.<sup>37</sup> This kiss is explained in relation to the Trinity. In God, existing and knowing is the same thing. The Father has both his existence and his knowledge from himself. The Son receives both from the Father, but the Father and the Son are both complete "subsistences" (*subsistentiae*): they are persons in themselves, but one in the Trinity. The Father and the Son turn towards each other in a kiss of mutual recognition and an embrace of mutual love, which are both the Holy Spirit, who reveals the unity of the Father and the Son. The bride asks to be kissed "with the kiss of his mouth" instead of "with his mouth", because the touch of God's mouth would be to possess his self-understanding. We are touched by the kiss, which is the Holy Spirit through which God has made his revelation, and who fills us with love and knowledge, the imprints of God's lips, which are one in God. The lips of the bride, receiving the kiss, represent will and reason, and love is pressed on her will, knowledge on her reason.

In this passage, the kiss is treated in the context of Trinitarian mysticism. The union between the soul and the Word is possible because it participates in that greater union of the Trinity, in which the Holy Spirit is the unifying principle of love and knowledge. The kiss as an image of Trinitarian mysticism will recur in Bernard's sermons.

Before going on to the second verse of the Song, the author remarks that there are more kisses.<sup>38</sup> One of them is the union of divine and human nature in Christ, which the Church longs for. This is a kiss of charity. There are three other kisses: a kiss of nature, of teaching and of grace. These, the author says, are left to the reflection of the reader.

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<sup>36</sup> The addition of the kisses of the feet and hand seems to be invented by Bernard and/or William. The hands of the bridegroom occur in verses 2:6, 5:14 and 8:3; his feet are not mentioned explicitly, but are alluded to in verse 5:14.

<sup>37</sup> BC VI, CC-CM 87, pp. 160-162.

<sup>38</sup> BC VII, CC-CM 87, pp. 162-163.

One last relevant remark that will be treated here is made further in the text, in the commentary of verse 1:3 of the Song. The author says: "The bride has received the kiss, and together with this kiss the oil. That is, by an interior inspiration she has received, to a certain extent, the knowledge of the bridegroom, and with this knowledge the joy of love. Then she cried out: "Your name is oil poured out; therefore the young maidens have loved you.""<sup>39</sup> This passage is of interest because it makes clear that, to the mystic, the kiss serves as an interior inspiration that, as a kind of inner sense, can acquire knowledge about God.

## I.2. Bernard's *Sermones*

That Bernard chose the Song of Songs as the subject of his eighty-six sermons might not come as a surprise; in his earlier treatises, charity (*caritas*) already held a central position. According to M. Corneille Halfants, the doctrines in his sermons on the Song "can be said to be a synthesis of the whole of his spiritual teaching".<sup>40</sup> Bernard began writing his sermons in 1135 and continued working on them until his death, in 1153. In his 86 sermons, he treats the first two chapters of the Song and the beginning of the third. Bernard occasionally refers to contemporary events, and the sermons do not seem to have an overall plan.<sup>41</sup> He sometimes identifies the bride with the Church or the Virgin Mary,<sup>42</sup> but the love between the individual soul and the Word is central to his sermons. This is also the predominant interpretation of the bride and bridegroom in the passages on the kiss. Because the sermons were composed over such a long time, we should not consider them a static commentary. We can see a development towards more complex thinking.<sup>43</sup>

Jean Leclercq has considered whether Bernard's sermons were actually orally delivered in chapter in the form they are written down, either by Bernard himself or someone in his audience. Although this has been thought to be the case by previous scholars, Leclercq addresses the fact that the sermons are so polished, of such finished literary form and contain

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<sup>39</sup> "Accepto sponsa osculo, et oleo cum osculo, id est, per internam inspirationem aliquatenus accepta sponsi notitia, et cum notitia amoris laetitia, exclamavit dicens: Oleum effusum nomen tuum, ideo adolescentulae dilexerunt te." BC XIII, CC-CM 87, p. 169; my own translation.

<sup>40</sup> Halfants 1971, p. ix.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Matter 1990, p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> The first author who interpreted the bride as the Virgin Mary was Bruno of Segni († 1123). In the twelfth century several other commentators, like Rupert of Deutz, Honorius of Autun and Alain de Lille, presented the Song from the perspective of the relationship between Mary, the perfect type of the church, and Jesus. See Astell 1990, pp. 15-16, 42-72 and Matter 1990, pp. 159-170.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Robertson 1987, p. 11.

such closely reasoned doctrine that this is hard to believe.<sup>44</sup> He provides further arguments to support this thesis. First of all, when Bernard and his contemporaries write about the *Sermones*, they use a vocabulary that implies a written, rather than a spoken text.<sup>45</sup> In the sermons, Bernard addresses his public in the second person singular, instead of the second person plural, which would be the case if he were speaking to an audience. He writes with a reader in mind, rather than an audience.<sup>46</sup> Leclercq further argues that the sermons are too long and hard to follow for oral delivery in the context of the Cistercian chapter.<sup>47</sup> Some elements that do imply oral delivery, namely the personal emphasis and references to the chapter in the sermons, can be understood as conforming to the literary style of sermons.<sup>48</sup> Leclercq concludes that, during the writing of the *Sermones*, Bernard probably spoke frequently to his monks about the Song. However, his *Sermones* cannot be regarded as a written version of these talks; they are the product of a process of literary composition.<sup>49</sup> Wim Verbaal has shown that Bernard opens and ends his sermon with plural forms like *fratres* (brethren), creating a context of community, while in the main text he uses the singular 'you' to emphasize the personal and individual nature of the sermon.<sup>50</sup>

In the very first sermon, Bernard addresses his public with a kind of introduction.<sup>51</sup> He also treats the abrupt beginning of the first verse of the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."<sup>52</sup> Bernard devotes attention to the peculiar formulation of this sentence. The person demanding a kiss does not ask for a "kiss of his mouth", but for a kiss "with the kiss of his mouth", which is, according to Bernard, more intimate. Thus, "the kiss of his mouth" indicates certain proximity, as opposed to the explanation of this formulation in the context of the incarnation in both the *Brevis commentatio* and Bernard's second sermon, where "the kiss of the mouth" indicates a greater distance. This delightful sentence, Bernard says, inspires and entices the reader to the difficult search for what is hidden and increases the attention. Here, Bernard presents the verse almost as a didactic tool, helping the reader to look for the spiritual meanings contained in the text.

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<sup>44</sup> Leclercq 1976, pp. vii-x.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xi-xiii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xiii-xv.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xvii-xxii.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xxii-xxx.

<sup>50</sup> Verbaal 2006, p. 332

<sup>51</sup> SSCC 1.I.1-II.4, SBO I, pp. 3-5.

<sup>52</sup> SSCC 1.III.5, SBO I, p. 5.

In the second sermon, Bernard discusses two related meanings of the kiss.<sup>53</sup> He compares the longing of the patriarchs for the incarnation of Christ to the desire for the kiss.<sup>54</sup> This remark should be understood with the liturgical setting in mind: this sermon is placed in the liturgical context of Advent.<sup>55</sup> The celebration of Christ's birth, the incarnation, was near. This should, however, not be seen as the only reason he speaks about the incarnation; as we have seen, this theme was already part of the *Brevis commentatio*. Bernard compares the kiss to the Word:

For his living, active word is to me a kiss, not indeed an adhering of the lips that can sometimes belie a union of hearts, but an unreserved fusion of joys, a revealing of mysteries, a marvellous and indistinguishable mingling of the divine light with the enlightened mind, which, joined in truth to God, is one in spirit with him.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the bride's desire for the kiss is associated with both the longing for the incarnation and the individual's striving for union with God. In both of the latter cases, human and divine are connected to each other. However, Bernard distinguishes between the human nature of Christ and all other humans, by referring to the formulation of the opening verse again.<sup>57</sup> The mouth is the Word that assumes human nature, and this human nature receives the kiss. The kiss itself is Christ, who is formed by both the giver and receiver. For this reason, people say "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth", to distinguish between their union with God and the unique position of the human nature of Christ, "on whom uniquely and in one sole instance the mouth of the Word was pressed, that moment when the fullness of the divinity yielded itself to him as the life of his body."<sup>58</sup> Bernard says here that the union between the soul and God should not be seen on the same level as the union of human in divine nature in Christ. Thus, the request for the "kiss with the kiss of his mouth" instead of the "kiss of his mouth" could be interpreted as an act of humility and as the recognition of the relatively large distance between man and God.

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<sup>53</sup> SSCC 2.I.1-IV.9, SBO I, pp. 8-14.

<sup>54</sup> SSCC 2.I.1-2, SBO I, pp. 8-9.

<sup>55</sup> Walsh 1981, p. 8, n.1. The sermons begin and end frequently with references to the liturgy and other elements of daily life; cf. Robertson 1987, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> "Cuius utique sermo vivus et efficax osculum mihi est, non quidem coniunctio labiorum, quae interdum pacem mentitur animorum, sed plane infusio gaudiorum, revelatio secretorum, mira quaedam et quodammodo indiscreta commixtio superni luminis et illuminatae mentis. Adhaerens quippe Deo unus spiritus est." SSCC 2.I.2, SBO I, p. 9; transl. Walsh 1971, pp. 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> SSCC 2.II.3, SBO I, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> "[...] cui singulariter semelque os Verbi impressum tunc est, cum ei se corporaliter plenitudo omnis Divinitatis indulsit." SSCC 2.II.3, SBO I, p. 10; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 10.



Another explanation of the kiss is peace, already mentioned briefly in the *Brevis commentatio*. The desire for the kiss can be interpreted as the longing of the holy men of the Old Testament for the coming of Christ, who would bring peace.<sup>59</sup> On the level of the individual's union with God, the kiss of the mouth can be seen as a covenant of peace between God and a human being.<sup>60</sup> This covenant is an assurance that Christ is the mediator to whom a person can entrust himself without being failed by him. Thus, in this interpretation of the kiss, the incarnation plays an important role again. Christ can be trusted as mediator because he assumed human nature: "Not even a shadow of mistrust can [...] exist, for after all he is my brother, and my own flesh. It is impossible that I should be spurned by him who is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh."<sup>61</sup> This explanation expands on the kiss as an image of the incarnation. The kiss as a covenant of peace offers another dimension to the kiss as union between the individual soul and God. Both explanations offered in this sermon indicate a clear link between the kiss as image of the incarnation and the kiss as spiritual union with God.

In the third sermon Bernard focuses, even more than before, on the personal, mystical interpretation of the kiss.<sup>62</sup> He announces that he is going to study with his monks "the book of our own experience" (*liber experientiae*).<sup>63</sup> Here begins Bernard's most characteristic and experimental explanation of the kiss, which focuses on the union between the soul and the Word.<sup>64</sup> It becomes clear that the mystical union designated by the kiss is not a permanent state, but can be experienced multiple times. The person who has received the kiss at least once wants to renew it frequently. However, few souls can strive for this ultimate union, this kiss from the mouth of Christ. Souls burdened with sins, subject to carnal passions and lacking knowledge of spiritual delights are not ready to aspire to the lips of the bridegroom. It is their appropriate place in the way to salvation to prostrate at the feet of God, humbly as a penitent: "Prostrate yourself on the ground, take hold of his feet, soothe them with kisses, sprinkle them with your tears and so wash not them but yourself."<sup>65</sup> After a person has kissed the feet and his sins are forgiven, he can proceed with the kiss of the hand.<sup>66</sup> This hand is a

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<sup>59</sup> SSCC 2.III.5, SBO I, pp. 10-11.

<sup>60</sup> SSCC 2.III.6, SBO I, pp. 11-12.

<sup>61</sup> "Minime et plane [...] mihi suspectus erit: frater enim et caro mea est. Puto enim spernere me iam non poterit os de ossibus meis, et caro de carne mea." SSCC 2.III.6, SBO I, pp. 11-12; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> SSCC 3.I.1-II.6, SBO I, pp. 14-17.

<sup>63</sup> SSCC 3.I.1, SBO I, p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Perella 1969, p. 53.

<sup>65</sup> "[...] prosternere et tu in terram, amplectere pedes, placa osculis, riga lacrimis, quibus tamen non illum laves, sed te [...]" SSCC 3.I.2, SBO I, p. 15; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> SSCC 3.II.3-4, SBO I, pp. 15-16.

guide to the kiss of the mouth, which gives the grace of temperance. Thus, the penitent will not fall back in his old habit of sinning. The kiss of the hand serves to glorify the Lord because he has forgiven the sins and adorned the penitent with virtues.<sup>67</sup> Then, after these two kisses, the time has finally arrived to ask for the most intimate kiss of the mouth.<sup>68</sup>

In this explanation of the three kisses, Bernard follows the *Brevis commentatio*, but elaborates upon it extensively. It becomes clear that, in these three kisses, spatial distance plays an important role; first the feet, that are furthest away from the mouth have to be kissed, and because it is "a long and formidable leap from the feet to the mouth, a manner of approach that is not commendable,"<sup>69</sup> then the intermediate step to the hand has to be taken. The full presence of God can only be experienced in the kiss of his mouth, through which the soul becomes one spirit with him.

In the fourth sermon, Bernard continues his discussion of the kiss of the feet, hand and mouth.<sup>70</sup> Here he defends his decision of adding two kisses: doing so serves a better understanding of the last kiss and by saying "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" the bride indicates that there are more kisses.<sup>71</sup> As E. Ann Matter points out, in the Latin text of the Song the related words for kiss and mouth are repeated three times: "*Osculetur me osculo oris sui.*"<sup>72</sup> It is fitting to call the two favours of forgiveness of sins and grace that follows on good deeds kisses, because the kiss is a sign of peace.<sup>73</sup> Bernard goes into the criticism of people who might say that God does not have bodily members, and therefore no hands and feet<sup>74</sup>. However, since Scripture attributes a mouth to God, we may attribute hands and feet as well. God does not have these by his nature; they represent certain modes of encounter with him. With his mouth he teaches men knowledge, with his hand he provides for all living creatures and the earth is a footstool for his feet. Since God is the creator of every creature, he is present to them. No one can be more intimately present and at the same time no one is more incomprehensible. God had made all things by his Word and does not need any bodily instruments, unlike created souls, who need bodies, which in their turn need senses to know

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<sup>67</sup> At this point, Bernard does not go into the exact nature of those virtues, but from his later sermons, for example sermon 34, it becomes clear that the most important virtue for the mystic is humility. The importance of humility in Bernard's thinking can also be seen in his treatise *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* (*On the Steps of Humility and Pride*).

<sup>68</sup> SSCC 3.III.5, SBO I, p.17.

<sup>69</sup> "Longus saltus et arduus est de pede ad os, sed nec accessus conveniens." SSCC 3.II.4, SBO I, p. 16; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> SSCC 4.I.1-III.5, SBO I, pp. 18-21.

<sup>71</sup> SSCC 4.I.1, SBO I, pp. 18-19.

<sup>72</sup> Matter 1990, p. 126.

<sup>73</sup> SSCC 4.I.2, SBO I, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> SSCC 4.III.4, SBO I, pp. 19-20

and influence each other.<sup>75</sup> For our purposes, the most interesting remark in this defence of the addition of the hand and feet is the remark about God's presence in relation to the act of creation. According to Bernard, the bond between creator and creature makes it possible for people to seek his presence.

Sermon five is, technically, not a commentary on the kiss.<sup>76</sup> In this chapter Bernard expands on the four different kinds of spirits – animal, man, angel and God – of which the former three all have need of a body or a body's likeness. Because the kiss is not explicitly mentioned, this sermon will not be discussed here. However, it will be treated in the second chapter, when the inner senses are discussed.

The sixth sermon can partly be seen as a digression as well, on God's sovereign power.<sup>77</sup> The second half, however, is of interest to us because it deals with the kiss of the feet.<sup>78</sup> After quoting several verses from Scripture, Bernard concludes that the head represents Christ's divinity, and the feet stand for his humanity.<sup>79</sup> Following the *Brevis commentatio*, he calls one foot mercy, the other judgment, which are both connected to the assumed humanity. The feet play an important role in the mystical experience, because with them Christ walks into the souls of his lovers.<sup>80</sup> Judgment leaves the sign of fear in the soul which is the beginning of wisdom; mercy leaves the sign of hope, which is the growth of wisdom.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, in the first of the three kisses neither of these feet should be neglected.

The seventh sermon proceeds with a discussion of the two hands of the Lord, to which the second kiss is given.<sup>82</sup> One is called liberality because it gives generously; the other one is called fortitude because it powerfully defends whatever it gives.<sup>83</sup> Both must be gratefully kissed. After this rather short explanation, Bernard passes on to the third kiss: the kiss of the mouth. The bride who asks for this holy and chaste kiss is the soul thirsting for God.<sup>84</sup>

In sermon eight the explanation of the kiss of the mouth is continued.<sup>85</sup> Here, the kiss is identified with the mutual knowledge and love between the Father and the Son. Much of this discussion is based on the *Brevis commentatio*. The bride does not dare to ask for a "kiss

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<sup>75</sup> SSCC 4.III.5, SBO I, pp. 20-21.

<sup>76</sup> SSCC 5.I.1-II.10, SBO I, pp. 21-26.

<sup>77</sup> SSCC 6.I.1-5, SBO I, pp. 26-28.

<sup>78</sup> SSCC 6.II.6-III.9, SBO I, pp. 28-30.

<sup>79</sup> SSCC 6.II.6, SBO I, pp. 28-29.

<sup>80</sup> SSCC 6.II.7, SBO I, p. 29.

<sup>81</sup> SSCC 6.III.8, SBO I, pp. 29-30.

<sup>82</sup> SSCC 7.I.1-VI.8, SBO I, pp. 31-36.

<sup>83</sup> SSCC 7.I.1, SBO I, p. 31.

<sup>84</sup> SSCC 7.II.2, SBO I, p. 31.

<sup>85</sup> SSCC 8.I.1-VII.9, SBO I, pp. 36-42.

with his mouth", because this is the prerogative of the Father alone.<sup>86</sup> It is impossible to know God in the same way that the Father and the Son know each other. Therefore, the bride asks something less: to be kissed with the "kiss of his mouth", which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit both the Father and the Son will reveal themselves to the bride. Thus, there is a distinction between the kiss with the mouth and the kiss with the kiss of the mouth. The kiss between the Father and the Son, who are one, is given from equal to equal. The kiss with the kiss of the mouth, however, which is the highest human beings with their limited capacity can aspire, is humbly asked for from an inferior position. This kiss is given as a privilege and enables people to know and love God. In the kiss, the soul is joined with the Lord in one spirit. In this sermon, based on the *Brevis commentatio*, the kiss is an image of Trinitarian mysticism. The kiss is an appropriate image of this union because it is affective by nature. The Holy Spirit is of great importance because it is represented by the kiss as the one that unifies the Father and the Son.<sup>87</sup> However, in the mystical union between the soul and the Word, Christ is the one who can bring the soul to the Father and thus he is the one who gives the kiss.<sup>88</sup>

In his ninth sermon, Bernard explains why, after having been favoured with the first two kisses, the bride asks in the first verse of the Song for the kiss of the mouth.<sup>89</sup> When she has touched the hand, she says that she is content with that and asks for nothing more. But she cannot rest until she is kissed with the kiss of his mouth. This question does not spring from ingratitude; she longs for the kiss because she is in love. She dares to ask for this favour because she has lived a virtuous life for a considerable time. Bernard describes this in the terms of the way of living of his monks:

Don't you see that by his grace I have been for many years now careful to lead a chaste and sober life, I concentrate on spiritual studies, resist vices, pray often; I am watchful against temptations, I recount all my years in the bitterness of my soul. As far as I can judge I have lived among the brethren without quarrel. I have been submissive to authority, responding to the beck and call of my superior. I do not covet goods not mine; rather do I put both myself and my goods at the service of others. With sweat on my brow I eat my bread. Yet in all these practices there is evidence only of my fidelity, nothing of enjoyment.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> SSCC 8.I.2, SBO I, p. 37.

<sup>87</sup> SSCC 8.II.4-5, SBO I, p. 38.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Perella 1969, p. 54

<sup>89</sup> SSCC 9.I.1-II.3, SBO I, pp. 42-44.

<sup>90</sup> "En gratia ipsius multis iam annis caste sobrieque vivere curo, lectioni insisto, resisto vitiis, orationi incumbo frequenter, vigilo contra tentationes, recogito annos meos in amaritudine animae meae. Sine querela me arbitror, quantum in me est, conversari inter fratres; superioribus potestatibus subdita sum, egrediens et regrediens ad imperium senioris. Aliena non cupio; mea potius et me pariter dedi. In sudore vultus mei comedo panem meum.

This quotation makes clear the monk's situation when he asks for the kiss of the mouth. He has already been favoured with the graces of the feet and the hand, and has lived a virtuous life in the service of God. But because his mind is still devoid of the sweetness of the Spirit, he longs to be kissed with the kiss of the mouth.

Then, Bernard proceeds with the second verse of the Song: "For your beasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments."<sup>91</sup> In his treatment of the first verse up to this point, Bernard has spoken only about the bride's longing for the kiss. He has not said that she will actually receive what she asks for, and the reader does not yet know what will happen when she receives the kiss. In his discussion of the second verse, however, Bernard describes the moment when the bridegroom finally kisses the bride:

While the bride is conversing about the Bridegroom, he, as I have said, suddenly appears, [and] yields to her desire by giving her a kiss[.] [...] [S]o great is the potency of that holy kiss, that no sooner has the bride received it than she conceives and her breasts grow rounded with the fruitfulness of conception [...] Let us hear the Bridegroom: "You have received, my love, what you asked for, and here is a sign to show [...] that you have received the kiss because you will be conscious of having conceived."<sup>92</sup>

According to Nicolas Perella, the spiritual children that the bride will bear are the good works born of and carried out in charity.<sup>93</sup> The monk who receives the kiss and conceives will, says Bernard, feel his interior overflowing with affection (*pietas*).<sup>94</sup> Because the monk is conscious that he has received the kiss, he will start longing for yet another kiss of the mouth.

Here, Bernard's treatment of the kiss ends. The ninth sermon proceeds with a commentary on the Song's verse on the breasts. It should, however, be noted that Bernard has devoted a large quantity of sermons to the kiss. There are eight sermons in which the explanation of the image of the kiss plays a significant role. This is more than any of the other verses of the Song. Bernard's elaborate commentary on the kiss is telling of the importance he ascribes it with.

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Ceterum quod in his omnibus est, totum constat de consuetudine, de dulcedine nihil." SSCC 9.II.2, SBO I, p. 43; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> SSCC 9.III.4-VI.10, SBO I, pp. 44-48.

<sup>92</sup> "Sponsa loquente de sponso, repente, dixeram, adest ille; annuit voto, dat osculum[.] [...] Tantae nempe efficaciae osculum sanctum est, ut ex ipso mox, cum acceperit illud, sponsa concipiat, tumescentibus nimirum uberibus [...]. Dicat ergo: "Habes, sponsa, quod petisti, et hoc tibi signum [...] te scilicet noveris osculum accepisse, quod te concepisse sentis."" SSCC 9.V.7, SBO I, p. 46; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 58.

<sup>93</sup> Perella 1969, p. 56. Perella points out that grace is, in Bernard's thinking, not a private gift, but a privilege that comes with the responsibility of helping others with it.

<sup>94</sup> SSCC 9.V.7, SBO I, p. 46.

### I.3. William's *Expositio*

Before William wrote his *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum*, around 1138, he already had a great familiarity with commentaries on the Song. Not only is he the presumable author of the *Brevis commentatio*; he had also written two florilegia of patristic interpretations of the Song, namely those of Ambrose<sup>95</sup> and Gregory the Great.<sup>96</sup> In his commentary, William sometimes writes in the form of a prayer, speaking to God.

In his introduction, William states that he hopes that the reader can to some degree participate in the holy conversations of the bride and bridegroom.<sup>97</sup> He is not going to talk about Christ and the Church, but about the moral meaning of the bride and bridegroom: the soul and Christ.<sup>98</sup> William discerns four parts of the Song, which all end in a union of the bride and bridegroom, in which they rest together.<sup>99</sup> The extant text preserves only the first and almost all of the second part, and ends with verse 3:4 of the Song.

Furthermore, in the introduction, three states of prayer are described, which lean heavily on the three stages of love in the *Brevis commentatio*: the natural, the rational and the spiritual stage.<sup>100</sup> The animal man (*homo animalis*) prays to God to ask for things, and imagines him in a bodily manner.<sup>101</sup> The rational man (*homo rationalis*) is led by reason, but as he realises that love is the way to God, he reaches the third stage.<sup>102</sup> The spiritual man (*homo spiritualis*) realises that love is understanding, and he wishes to know God and be known by him.<sup>103</sup>

While Bernard dedicated a relatively large part of his sermons to the kiss, in William's commentary the space devoted to the different verses of the Song is much more evenly divided. This may have to do with the fact that William's text has the form of a commentary in the strict sense, while Bernard wrote his commentary in the form of sermons, which gave him more freedom to elaborate and to make digressions.

At the start of his exposition on the verse on the kiss, William emphasizes that the bride only longs for the bridegroom's kiss of the mouth, and no-one else's kiss, because the

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<sup>95</sup> William, *Excerpta de libris beati Ambrosii super Cantica Canticorum*, CC-CM 87, pp. 207-384.

<sup>96</sup> William, *Excerpta ex libris beati Gregorii super Cantica Canticorum*, CC-CM 87, pp. 395-444. On the composition of these excerpts, see DelCogliano 2007.

<sup>97</sup> ESCC I.3, CC-CM 87, p. 21.

<sup>98</sup> ESCC I.4, CC-CM 87, p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> ESCC II.6, CC-CM 87, p. 22.

<sup>100</sup> ESCC III.10-11, CC-CM 87, p. 24.

<sup>101</sup> ESCC III.12-15, CC-CM 87, pp. 24-26.

<sup>102</sup> ESCC III.16, CC-CM 87, pp. 26-27.

<sup>103</sup> ESCC III.17-19, CC-CM 87, pp. 27-29.

bridegroom's kiss is divine.<sup>104</sup> This kiss, which on the literal level designates a loving and external bodily union, is a sign and incentive (*signum et incentiuum*) of an inner union. Not only bodies are joined, but spirits are united too.<sup>105</sup>

William proceeds with a comparison of this mystical union with the incarnation. Christ offered his Church a kiss from heaven and in this intimate connection God and man became one. Williams says that Christ "also offers this same kiss to the faithful soul, his Bride, and imprints it upon her".<sup>106</sup> Here, a notable difference between William and Bernard can be noted; while Bernard makes a distinction between the kiss as a sign of incarnation and the kiss of the mouth as a sign of mystical union, William considers both kisses to be of the same nature. When Christ gives the kiss to the soul, he pours the grace of his love and his own Spirit into her, so that they become one spirit. Here it becomes clear that William, just as Bernard and the *Brevis commentatio*, identifies the kiss with the Holy Spirit. Thus, the kiss is associated with the Trinity, but William does not expound upon Trinitarian mysticism as much as Bernard does. This might have to do with the limited space he had reserved in his commentary for the kiss, for in general the Trinity plays an important role in William's mysticism.<sup>107</sup>

Then, William goes back to the literal level of the Song. He places the verse on the kiss in context, by adding some elements: he imagines that before he left, the bridegroom had kissed his bride hastily in the storage rooms.<sup>108</sup> Now she desires to experience the full sweetness of the kiss: "She wished to be dissolved and to be with Christ, thinking, after a taste of the highest Good, that it was no longer needful for her to abide still in the flesh."<sup>109</sup> William describes how the bride longs to taste the sweetness of the bridegroom's goodness.<sup>110</sup> The request of the bride becomes the request of William himself, in the form of a prayer: "I entreat that the Father may be spoken to me plainly—face to face, eye to eye, kiss to kiss: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!"<sup>111</sup> In this passage, closeness and presence play an

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<sup>104</sup> ESCC IV.27, CC-CM 87, p. 33.

<sup>105</sup> "Osculum amica quaedam et exterior coniunctio corporum est, interioris coniunctionis signum et incentiuum. Quod oris ministerio exhibetur, ut non tantum corporum, sed ex mutuo contactu etiam spirituum coniunctio fiat." ESCC IV.27, CC-CM 87, p. 33.

<sup>106</sup> "Ipsum etiam osculum fideli animae sponsae suae porrigit et imprimit." ESCC 27, CC-CM 87, p. 33.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. McGinn 1994, pp. 267-73. Odo Brooke even said that "the great contribution of William of St. Thierry is to have evolved a theology of the Trinity which is essentially mystical, and a mystical theology which is essentially Trinitarian." Brooke 1980, p. 8.

<sup>108</sup> ESCC IV.28, CC-CM 87, p. 33.

<sup>109</sup> "Dissolui uolebat et esse cum Christo, post summi boni gustum permanere sibi in carne non arbitrans esse necessarium." ESCC IV.28, CC-CM 87, p. 33; transl. Hart 1970, p. 26.

<sup>110</sup> ESCC IV. 31-32, CC-CM 87, p. 35.

<sup>111</sup> "[...] palam mihi annuntiari de Patre deposco, faciem ad faciem, oculum ad oculum, osculum ad osculum [...]" ESCC IV.32, CC-CM 87, p. 35; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 28-29.

important role. The soul longs to be kissed because she wants to experience the presence of the Lord. The kiss, but also the sense of sight, forms part of this union.

In the following passage, William concerns himself with the formulation of the verse.<sup>112</sup> Why does the bride speak about the bridegroom in the third person, as one who is absent, instead of addressing him with the words "Kiss me"? She longs to know the bridegroom as he knows himself, which is the kiss of perfection. But so far she has only received the kiss of science, which is the knowledge she has gained about him from others, like teachers, and from Scripture. Thus, in her experience the bridegroom is absent. She has received knowledge, but what she misses is the taste of his kiss. Again, the kiss is presented as an indicator of presence. This is connected with the sense of taste.

From here, William goes on with a commentary on the next verse of the Song, about the bridegroom's breasts. However, he makes many connections between this verse and the first verse on the kiss. Therefore, I will treat the remarks about the kiss he makes in this section. It is because she has been fed by the bridegroom's breasts, that the bride longs for the kiss and dares to ask for it.<sup>113</sup> Because the bride, in her human weakness, cannot obtain the eternal union of the kiss of the mouth, she places herself at the breasts.<sup>114</sup> When someone asks for the kiss, he looks at the light of God's countenance.<sup>115</sup> But, because of the reflecting brightness of the love, he turns away, down to the breasts, and practices the more ordinary virtues. The bride strives for spiritual growth in the odour of the bridegroom's ointment, like she says: "Even though at the present moment I am not deserving of the joy of your countenance or the kiss of your mouth, at least do not withdraw from me the fragrance of your perfumes."<sup>116</sup> This fragrance is a memory of fading sweetness. William seems to present a hierarchy of senses. The kiss, which is identified most with the sense of taste, is equated with the sense of sight. These two are higher than the sense of smell, which just reminds of the taste of sweetness. Thus, a clear distinction is made between higher and lower senses. In this hierarchy, spatial distance plays an important role; the perfumes can be smelled from afar, but the sweetness of the kiss can only be tasted in close proximity.

There are still two passages in William's commentary worth noting, which both pertain to verse 1:16 of the Songs: "Behold you are fair, my Beloved, and comely! Our little bed is flowery." William identifies the bed as the place where the kiss is given:

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<sup>112</sup> ESCC IV.33, CC-CM 87, pp. 35-36.

<sup>113</sup> ESCC V.34, CC-CM 87, p. 36.

<sup>114</sup> ESCC V.35, CC-CM 87, pp. 36-37.

<sup>115</sup> ESCC V.36, CC-CM 87, p. 37.

<sup>116</sup> "Etsi interim non mereor gaudium uultus tui, uel osculi oris tui, saltem odorem mihi ne subtrahas inguentorum tuorum." ESCC VI.40, CC-CM 87, p. 39; transl. Hart 1970, p. 33.



Upon this bed are exchanged that kiss and that embrace by which the Bride begins to know as she herself is known. And as happens in the kisses of lovers, who by a certain sweet, mutual exchange, impart their spirit each to the other, so the created spirit pours itself wholly into the Spirit who creates it for this very effusion; and the Creator Spirit infuses himself into it as he wills, and man becomes one spirit with God.<sup>117</sup>

Here, William presents the mystical union designated by the kiss as the last explanation and the final goal of creation. God has created men out of a longing for love, and he hopes that man, in his turn, will render himself to God, so that he can participate in the divine life.<sup>118</sup> A bit further in the text, William describes the moment of mystical union indicated by the kiss:

Not only shall the Bridegroom be seen as he is, but every soul that has merited the name of Bride shall be as he is. The kiss will also know its plenitude when, kiss to kiss and embrace to embrace, full and abiding fruition shall be attained. Then nevermore shall anyone stir up the Bride or make her to awake, until she please; and never again will she please.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, with the kiss, the first of the four parts of the Song ends; the bride and bridegroom are united and rest together.

#### I.4. Themes

After this close examination of the texts, the most important themes can be identified, which will form the basis for the rest of this study. First of all, I want to mention something that is not frequently stated explicitly in the commentaries, but is implied often: the kiss as an instance of sensual perception. We have seen that the senses of touch and taste are mentioned, that they are equated with the sense of sight and distinguished from the sense of smell. Moreover, according to the author of the *Brevis commentatio*, the kiss provides knowledge of God through some sort of inner perception. Also, the kiss is, in this same commentary,

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<sup>117</sup> "Ibi etenim comparat se sibi ille amplexus et illud osculum, quo cognoscere incipit sponsa, sicut et cognita est; et sicut solet in amantium oculis, suavi quodam contactu mutuo sibi spiritus suos transfundentium, creatus spiritus in hoc ipsum creanti eum Spiritui totum se effundit; ipsi uero creator Spiritus se infundit, prout uult, et unus spiritus homo cum Deo efficitur." ESCC XX.91, CC-CM 87, p. 70; transl. Hart 1970, p. 78.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Verdeyen 2001, p. 73.

<sup>119</sup> "[...] cum non solum uidebitur sponsus sicuti est, sed et quaecumque sponsa esse meruerit, erit sicut et ipse est; fietque osculum plenum, cum oculo ad oculum, amplexu ad amplexum plena fiet et perpetua fruitio. Tunc iam ultra nemo sponsam suscitabit, uel euigilare faciet, donec ipsa uelit; ipsa uero nequaquam uolet ultra." ESCC XX.94, CC-CM 87, p. 72; transl. Hart 1970, pp.79-80.

connected to the Song as a parable, which makes invisible truths understandable through visible images. In the second chapter, the remarks on and allusions to sensual perception will be elucidated by explaining the kiss within the medieval theory of the inner senses.

In all three of the commentaries, the incarnation and the Trinity are important elements in the explanation of the kiss, which are analogous to and even make possible the union between Christ and the soul. The creation is an important factor too; because of the bond between creator and creature, union with God is possible. In the third chapter, the relation between these theological concepts on the one side and the kiss and the (interior) senses on the other side will be more elaborately examined.

The last theme is formed by the related concepts of presence, absence, proximity and distance. These play an important role in Bernard's description of the three kisses, in which the mystic climbs up from the distant feet to the presence of God's mouth. We have also seen that the senses are used to indicate presence or absence, and that God can be present to humans because he is their creator. Thus, this last theme of presence is closely connected to the themes of the former two chapters. In the fourth chapter I will show how the kiss indicates God's presence, by making use of my findings in chapters two and three.

Of course, not all three of the commentaries put the same emphasis on all themes. The spiritual process in terms of the spatial distance between the kisses of the feet, hand and mouth, for example, is something which is treated in the *Brevis commentatio*, neglected by William and extensively elaborated by Bernard. As we will see, however, in the next three chapters, all themes I have selected are important to both authors. Some of the differences between the commentaries can be explained by their form. The *Brevis commentatio* and William's *Expositio* are both running commentaries and follow the text of the Song quite closely. William has made his text original and personal by sometimes writing in the form of a prayer. Because all verses of the Song receive approximately the same amount of attention, William's writing is sometimes quite dense, making him sometimes seem more complicated than Bernard. Bernard, by writing in the form of sermons, is much freer to elaborate on the themes that interest him. Lacking the restrictions of a running commentary, his sermons show his genius and eloquence on a very high level.

## Chapter II: Sensual language and the inner and outer senses

In the first chapter, we have seen that the kiss was presented as an instance of sensual perception, which could provide spiritual truths through some sort of inner perception. In this chapter, I will elucidate this by examining how the sensory language of the Song could be perceived by the interior senses, and how they were related to the outer senses, to which the Song's sensual language seems to appeal at first sight. Bernard and William do not set forth a systematic theory of inner perception in their commentaries. Therefore, it will be helpful to first set out the origin of theories of the inner senses: the patristic tradition, beginning with Origen. As we will see, Origen's theory was dualistic, with a strong division between the senses of the inner and of the outer body. As has already been suggested in the introduction, this dualism was less strict in the thinking of the Cistercians. However, scholarship is divided as to whether the inner and outer senses were connected or separated in the twelfth century. Before examining the commentaries, this discussion in the literature will be rendered briefly. In order to take a position within this debate, first attention will be paid to twelfth-century theories on the functioning of the human body and soul. Then, Bernard's and William's commentaries will be examined. My conclusion about the relationship between inner and outer senses in these texts will both contribute to the scholarly discussion, and form the beginning of the answer to the question of this research: why was the kiss, as instance of sensual perception, appropriate to the mystical text?

### II.1. The tradition of inner senses

Origen was the first Christian to discuss the theological question how the sensual language of Scripture, which refers to the perception of physical reality, could apply to God, who is non-corporeal.<sup>120</sup> As has been explained in the introduction, Origen distinguished between a literal and a spiritual sense of the Bible. Metaphorical language of the senses, which would nowadays in hermeneutics be considered as part of the literal sense of the text, was seen by Origen as part of the spiritual sense.<sup>121</sup> Thus, whenever sensual language functioned in a

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<sup>120</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 1. The most important works in which Origen addresses sensual language and the spiritual senses are his *De principiis*, *Dialogus cum Heraclide*, *Contra Celsum*, *Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum*, *Homiliae in Lucam*, *Commentarius in Matthaem*, *Commentarium in Johannem*, *Homiliae in Leviticum* and *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*.

<sup>121</sup> Turner 1995a, pp. 92-99.

spiritual way it had a spiritual meaning. Because bodily language is actually inappropriate to talk about God, it serves, according to Origen, to force the reader to look beyond the literal meaning, which is unacceptable, to the spiritual layers of the text.<sup>122</sup> However, although Origen did indeed consider sensual language to be part of the spiritual meaning of Scripture, not all sensual language was metaphor to him; in some cases, this language indicated the actual perception of God.<sup>123</sup> A good example of this can be found in his *Contra Celsum* (*Against Celsus*):

There is, as the scripture calls it, a certain generic divine sense (*sensus divinus*) which only the man who is blessed finds on this earth. Thus Solomon says: 'Thou shalt find a divine sense'. There are many forms of this sense: a sight which can see things superior to corporeal beings, the cherubim or seraphim being obvious instances, and a hearing which can receive impressions of sounds that have no objective existence in the air, and a taste which feeds on living bread that has come down from heaven and gives life to the world. So also there is a sense of smell which smells spiritual things, as Paul speaks of 'a sweet savour of Christ unto God' and a sense of touch in accordance with which John says that he has handled with his hands 'of the Word of life'.<sup>124</sup>

Origen argued that the sensual language of the Bible refers to the spiritual senses of an inner, spiritual person, through which he is able to gain knowledge about God. His ideas about the spiritual senses are dualistic; he sees a sharp distinction between matter and spirit, between the outer and the inner person and between knowledge of spiritual and of material things.<sup>125</sup> The spiritual senses do, however, have spiritual corollaries to the bodily parts of the outer person, and all this together forms one divine sense. This is the knowing intellect that sees the divine light. Therefore, the language of seeing is highest in the hierarchy of senses. Language of hearing is acceptable too, because it pertains to learning. The other senses, however, are too bodily.<sup>126</sup>

Origen's ideas changed a little over the years. In one of his early works, *De principiis* (*On First Principles*), he stated that humans have just one single spiritual sense, which is close to the intellect. Origen explains that the various bodily senses are used as analogies for the functioning of this *sensus divinus*:

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<sup>122</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 21.

<sup>123</sup> McInroy 2012, pp. 22-24.

<sup>124</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* I.48, SVG 54, A.48.

<sup>125</sup> Rudy 2002, pp. 30-31.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1-3.

For the names of the organs of sense are frequently applied to the soul, so that it may be said to see with the eyes of the heart, i.e., to perform an intellectual act by means of the power of intelligence. So also it is said to hear with the ears when it perceives the deeper meaning of a statement. So also we say that it makes use of teeth, when it chews and eats the bread of life which cometh down from heaven. In like manner, also, it is said to employ the services of other members, which are transferred from their bodily appellations, and applied to the powers of the soul, according to the words of Solomon, "You will find a divine sense." For he knew that there were within us two kinds of senses: the one mortal, corruptible, human; the other immortal and intellectual, which he now termed divine. By this divine sense, therefore, not of the eyes, but of a pure heart, which is the mind, God may be seen by those who are worthy.<sup>127</sup>

In his later works, such as his *Commentarium in Canticum Cantorum* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*) and *Contra Celsum*, Origen distinguishes five spiritual senses, corresponding to the bodily senses,<sup>128</sup> but he is primarily concerned with the operations of the single *sensus divinus*. He does, however, write that one sense can be active without the others. But when all five senses are filled by the Logos, the inner person is completely intent on God. This does not mean that the various senses can apprehend the Logos in different ways; they are just directed to different signs of the presence of Logos in the Bible. Thus, although he speaks of five senses, they seem to be essentially one.<sup>129</sup>

In these later works, Origen is concerned with the connection between spiritual knowledge and union with God, and to the relationship between body and spirit in human beings. There is still a strong dualism present in his thought; humans are able to gain spiritual knowledge solely because they have immaterial spirits, whereas their bodies can only gain knowledge about material things. This idea comes from Platonism, in which knowing is based on likeness. However, the spiritual senses can serve as a bridge that connects body and spirit, although Origen had some trouble maintaining this; in the end, the spiritual senses belong, as we have seen, to intellect and spirit, not to the body.<sup>130</sup>

Origen's dualism is clearly present in his ideas on how the spiritual senses can best be used. First of all, the outer senses have to be mortified. Then, the spiritual senses can be

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<sup>127</sup> "Frequenter namque sensibilibus membrorum nomina ad animam referuntur ita, ut oculis cordis uidere dicatur, id est uirtute intelligentiae aliquid intellectuale coniciere. Sic et audire auribus dicitur, cum sensum intelligentiae profundioris auertit. Sic et uti eam posse dentibus dicibus, cum mandit et comedit panem uitae, qui de caelo descendit. Similiter et ceteris uti membrorum officiis dicitur, quae ex corporali appellatione translata uirtutibus animae coaptantur, sicut et Salomon dicit: *Sensum diuinum inuenies*. Sciebat namque duo genera esse sensuum in nobis, unum genus sensuum mortale, corruptibile, humanum, aliud genus immortale et intellectuale, quod nunc diuinum nominauit. Hoc ergo sensu diuino non oculorum, sed cordis mundi, quae est mens, deus uideri ab his, qui digni sunt, potest." Origen, *De principiis* I.1.9, SC 252, pp. 108-110; transl. Butterworth 1873, p. 14.

<sup>128</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Cantorum* prol. 2.9, SC 375, p. 99.

<sup>129</sup> Rudy 2002, pp. 27-28.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 17-19, 25.

trained by investigating the spiritual meaning of Scripture. They are activated by God's grace.<sup>131</sup> Thus, outer and inner senses are not connected in a positive way. The outer senses merely serve as an analogy to the operation of the inner senses.

Origen's concept of the spiritual sense was very influential with theologians in the Latin West. His works were still read in the twelfth century, and were especially popular among the Cistercians.<sup>132</sup> However, his ideas on the spiritual senses were also developed by other patristic authors who were influential in the twelfth century. Following Origen's dualism, they too saw danger in bodily, sensual language, and only found the language of sight and hearing acceptable. Examples are Augustine (354-430) and Gregory the Great, who regarded the spiritual senses not so much as active tools that humans can use to know God, but more as God's way through which he can act in human beings, as a form of grace.<sup>133</sup>

It is striking that Augustine, whose teacher Ambrose wrote a commentary on the Song, rarely used the sensual language of the Song to speak about the soul's union with God.<sup>134</sup> Thus, the kiss is an image which hardly occurs in his work. This does not mean, however, that Augustine did not use sensual language at all to speak about God. His *Homiliae in psalmos* (*Homilies on the Psalms*), his most important mystical work, is filled with language of the senses.<sup>135</sup> Matthew R. Lootens distinguishes three ways in which Augustine makes use of sensual language: in a metaphorical way to describe human understanding; as something which can be perceived with inner, spiritual senses; and in the context of his illumination theory, in which language of seeing is used to describe the divine illumination of the human intellect.<sup>136</sup> It is not always easy to recognize which of these three modes of sensual language he is using. A good example of abundant use of sensual images to describe God, which shows some degree of ambivalence towards the senses, can be found in his *Confessiones*:

But when I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory, not the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, not the gentle odour of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace of my inner man (*interioris hominis*), where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is a taste for

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>132</sup> Matter 1990, pp. 134-141. On the influence of Origen on Bernard's sermons, see Brésard 1982, Brésard 1985 and Deroy 1963.

<sup>133</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 4.

<sup>134</sup> Asiedu 2001, pp. 300-301.

<sup>135</sup> McGinn 2001, p. 160.

<sup>136</sup> Lootens 2012, p. 60.

food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.<sup>137</sup>

Augustine regards the inner and outer senses as fundamentally separated, just like Origen. In his *Retractationes* Augustine emphasizes the distinction between *sensus mortalis corporis* and *sensus mentis*, which he is afraid he has not stated clearly enough in his earlier works.<sup>138</sup>

Augustine promotes, again in the line of Origen, an ascetic way of life, which enables the spiritual senses to perceive God. The images which enter the memory through the outer senses can, namely, enter the inner senses, which are then not able to distinguish between material images and God. Thus, the outer senses should be mortified, because "from the habit of living in the flesh, a crowd of phantasms surges into even those interior eyes in the likenesses of bodies."<sup>139</sup>

Gregory the Great wrote an influential commentary on the Song, which was certainly known by William, who compiled an excerpt of Gregory's Song commentary.<sup>140</sup> In several of his works he speaks about spiritual senses distinct from the senses of the outer body.<sup>141</sup>

Gregory, too, emphasized the importance of an ascetic lifestyle in order for the spiritual senses to perceive God. In his commentary on the prophet Ezekiel, he describes three stages for the soul to contemplate God.<sup>142</sup> The first stage is diminishing the stimulation of the outer senses, so that there are no earthly images in the mind to distract from spiritual contemplation. In the second stage, one has to visualize the body as distinct from the soul, and put the body entirely in the soul's service. In the third stage, at last, the soul pursues only spiritual things and one rises above the needs of the body.

Thus, although Augustine and Gregory add some elements to Origen's discussion, they still see a fundamental difference between spiritual and bodily senses.<sup>143</sup> The senses of the

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<sup>137</sup> "Quid autem amo, cum te amo? Non speciem corporis nec decus temporis, non candorem lucis ecce istis amicum oculis, non dulces melodias cantilenarum omnimodarum, non florum et unguentorum et aromatum suavolentiam, non manna et mella, non membra acceptabilia carnis amplexibus: non haec amo, cum amo deum meum. Et tamen amo quandam lucem et quandam uocem et quendam odorem et quendam cibum et quendam amplexum, cum amo deum meum, lucem, uocem, odorem, cibum, amplexum interioris hominis mei, ubi fulget animae meae, quod non capit locus, et ubi sonat, quod non rapit tempus, et ubi olet, quod non spargit flatus, et ubi sapit, quod non minuit edacitas, et ubi haeret, quod non diuellit satietas. Hoc est quod amo, cum deum meum amo." Augustine, *Confessiones* X.vi.8, CC-SL 27, p. 159; transl. Chadwick 1998, p. 183.

<sup>138</sup> Augustine, *Retractationes* I.I.2, I.III.2, I.IV.2, CC-SL 57, pp. 7-8, 12-14.

<sup>139</sup> "inruit enim de consuetudine carnalis uitae in ipsos quoque interiores oculos turba phantasmatum in similitudinibus corporum". Augustine, *Epistularum* 147.XVII.42, CSEL 44, p. 316; cf. Lootens 2012, pp. 66-67 and Pranger 2005, pp. 65-66.

<sup>140</sup> On William's excerpt of Gregory's commentary, see DelCogliano 2007 and above, p. 21.

<sup>141</sup> On the spiritual senses in Gregory's thinking, see Demacopoulos 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechielem* II.V.9, SC 360, pp. 242-244.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. McGinn 2001, p. 161.

outer man have to be mortified in order for the inner senses to be able to perceive God. We will now proceed to the twelfth century, and examine whether this fundamental difference still exists in the commentaries of the Cistercian authors.

## II.2. The scholarly discussion

As we have seen, in the patristic tradition, influenced by Origen's dualism, outer and inner senses were clearly distinguished from each other. Some scholars point out this distinction in the works of Bernard and William too, emphasizing the continuity between the tradition of patristic ideas and the thinking of the twelfth century.

According to Gueric Aerden, William saw the senses as an entrance to the soul, marking the boundary between the interior and exterior man, but there was no direct connection between sensual perception and spirituality. The outer senses did not form a step that could lead to the inner senses, but rather functioned as an analogy. Aerden shows, for example, that in his *De natura et dignitate amoris* (*The Nature and Dignity of Love*), William draws an analogy between the five corporeal senses, which unite the body with the soul, and the five spiritual senses, which unite the soul with God.<sup>144</sup>

An author who has a similar opinion is Denys Turner, who examines *eros* and allegory in medieval Song commentaries. He addresses what he calls the physiological analogies for spiritual realities in the Song. According to Turner, the *eros* of the Song is, from a neo-platonic point of view, image (*imago*), and not likeness (*similitudo*). In the Middle Ages, *imago* was generally regarded to be a purely formal, non-participatory likeness, while *similitudo* was a participative likeness which shares in the reality of that of which it is the likeness. If inner and outer senses were really connected, and the outer senses could have an effect on the inner man, we would speak of a *similitudo*. However, according to Turner, the human, sexual love described in the commentaries with sensual language is caused by the divine love, but this causal relationship goes only one way. Thus, human and divine *eros* only have a quantitative or formal likeness (*imago*), but do not qualitatively share in the same reality, which would make them a participative likeness (*similitudo*). Turner claims that the human *eros* of the Song can, for medieval authors, only convey spiritual truths if its meaning

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<sup>144</sup> Aerden 2011, pp. 485-490.



of sexual love is diminished. This makes it suitable as formal likeness, and it can be praised as the image of the Song's spiritual meaning.<sup>145</sup>

There is also another interpretation of the relation between inner and outer senses, regarding them as being more closely related, which is advanced by many scholars. In this interpretation, by the twelfth century Origen's dualism has made place for a view in which there is more harmony between interiority and exteriority, and there is no sharp distinction between inner and outer senses. The mysticism of Bernard and William is presented as a new spirituality, in which the body plays an important role.

Among authors who advance this theory are those investigating the spiritual senses, like Niklaus Largier. He sees a connection between the revaluation of the sense of touch, which he calls a 'tournant tactile', and the decline of the binary opposition between interiority and exteriority. Spiritual pleasure can include and transform the outer senses. The relationship between the two is not simply that of a metaphor or allegory, but transcends the distinction between outer and inner world, because of the evocation of emotions through sensation. Biblical verses, for example, can be used as stimuli, which give rise to certain sensations and emotions. Emotions are, in turn, strongly connected to the soul.<sup>146</sup>

Another scholar writing on sensual language who has a similar opinion is Gordon Rudy. He speaks of a 'rhetorical synaesthesia' in the work of Bernard, in which the distinctions between the senses are broken. There is one single *sensorium* that can be directed to both material and spiritual things.<sup>147</sup> Bernard McGinn, in a study on the inner senses, claims that Bernard undercuts the distinction between inner and outer sensation, but more in practice than in theory.<sup>148</sup>

Authors writing about medieval Song commentaries also note a strong connection between the inner and outer man in the twelfth century. According to Ann Astell, Origen's dualistic dichotomy between body and spirit was gone by then. She suggests that this new anthropology led to the renewed interest in the Song, and to a 'reliteralization' of the text in which the emotions were evoked.<sup>149</sup> Kingma states that William had a very nuanced view on the relationship between body and spirit, without a strict dichotomy. He does, according to

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<sup>145</sup> Turner 1995a, pp. 139-156.

<sup>146</sup> Largier 2003, *passim*, esp. pp. 5-6; Largier 2005, *passim*, esp. pp. 239, 248.

<sup>147</sup> Rudy 2002, pp. 14, 45.

<sup>148</sup> McGinn 2012, p. 193. See also McGinn 2001, pp. 162-163.

<sup>149</sup> Astell 1995, pp. 1-10.

her, not emphasize bodily abstinence or the rejection of sensual pleasures, but affective purification.<sup>150</sup>

Thus, in the scholarly tradition, many different ideas exist about the relationship between inner and outer senses in the works of Bernard and William. These ideas can, simply put, be divided into two categories. There is an interpretation, advanced by Aerden and Turner, according to which Origen's dualism is still present in the twelfth century. The inner and outer senses are seen as strictly separated. The sensual language, which appeals to the outer senses, merely functions as an analogy. The other interpretation, of Kingma, Largier, Rudy and Astell, states the exact opposite. Unlike Origen's dualism, in the twelfth century the outer and inner senses are connected and sensual language can activate the inner senses through the appeal they have to the outer senses. In this process, emotions and affections play an important role. They form a bridge between the physical and spiritual part of man. Sensual language is, in this interpretation, appropriate to mystical union because the inner and outer man are connected.

### II.3. Medieval images of man

Bernard's and William's theology is very much connected to the most important theological concepts. Chapter three is devoted to the relationship between sensual language and these theological concepts, but in order to gain an understanding of inner and outer senses it is necessary to treat this subject briefly at this point.

The medieval images of man and the soul are largely based in the Augustinian tradition, in which Christianity and Neo-Platonism are combined.<sup>151</sup> According to this tradition, the aim of man in this life is to retain in himself the image of God. This image was lost in the Fall, and the mystic looks for it in himself. The soul is connected with both the body and the divine, and can thus serve to glorify the material body. In the mystical goal of union between the soul and God, reason (*ratio*) plays an important role. It is divided into two parts. The higher reason is aimed at spiritual matters and mystical union, while the lower

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<sup>150</sup> Kingma 1993, pp.78-81.

<sup>151</sup> On Augustine's image of man, see Maertens 1976. On the influence of Augustinian spirituality in William's thinking, see Bell 1984.

reason is directed at the bodily matters of sensory perception. Due to the Fall, man's higher reason has diminished in power, and he has become dependent on the senses.<sup>152</sup>

Following Augustine, Bernard and William ascribed to the soul the three inseparable faculties of memory (*memoria*), understanding (*intellectus*) and will (*voluntas*), after the model of the Trinity. Humans are distinguished from animals because they have a rational will. The will is very important to the mystical goal: unity with God is willing what he wills. The will can direct itself either to the inner or the outer life and governs sense perception. In his memory, man can find the hidden presence of God. This is the place where the image is most deeply incised. The will can apply understanding to the memory, so that one can think about God. Then, as William writes in his *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* (*Letter to the Brothers of Mont-Die*):

[W]ill becomes love, the Holy Spirit communicates himself. Immediately, memory becomes wisdom, when God's goodness has a sweet taste for her and the thought that rises from it is there to be formed into an affect, and is applied to understanding; the understanding of the thinker becomes the contemplation of the lover, and, forming this into some experiences of spiritual or divine sweetness, from there it affects the keenest sight of the thinker, and this sight becomes the delight of joy.<sup>153</sup>

This quotation from William shows the importance of affect and sensual experience in the soul's mystical process.

In the perception of the outer senses, an image of the object is appropriated by the perceiving subject. Thus, in some way, a man becomes what he perceives. Likewise, when the senses of the soul perceive God, they become somehow divine; thus, union with God in this life is possible.<sup>154</sup> How exactly this was possible according to Bernard and William, will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

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<sup>152</sup> Decorte 1994, pp. 216-230.

<sup>153</sup> "Cum vero de eis quae de Deo, vel ad Deum sunt cogitatur, et voluntas ei proficit ut amor fiat, continuo per viam amoris infundit se Spiritus sanctus, spiritus vitae, et omnia vivificat, adjuvans seu in oratione, seu in meditatione, seu in tractatu infirmitatem cogitationis. Et continuo memoria efficitur sapientia, cum suaviter ei sapiunt bona Domini, et quod ex eis cogitatum est formandum in affectum, adhibet intellectui; intellectus vero cogitantis efficitur contemplatio amantis, et formans illud in quasdam spiritualis vel divinae suavitatis experientias, afficit ex eis aciem cogitantis, illa vero efficitur gaudium fruētis." William, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* 249, SC 223, p. 342; transl. Van 't Spijker 2004, p. 194. Cf. Van 't Spijker 2004, pp. 193-196.

<sup>154</sup> Decorte 1994, p. 209; Van 't Spijker 2004, p. 190.

## II.4. Inner senses in the commentaries

### II.4.1. A theory of inner senses in the commentaries?

From the survey in the first chapter, it appeared that the Song's image of the kiss could, in some way, stimulate inner perception. However, as has been noted in the beginning of this chapter, Bernard and William do not advance a systematic theory of the inner senses. This might give rise to the question whether the Cistercian authors actually had such a theory in mind when they commented on the Song. Therefore, I will first show that, from the three commentaries on the Song, it does become clear that Bernard and William had a notion of inner senses which was based on, but not completely identical with patristic theories on the senses.

In the *Brevis commentatio*, inner or spiritual senses are not mentioned explicitly. However, it is clear that the author was acquainted with the notion of an inner person, because he talks, for example, about the "inner love of the heart" (*amor cordis interior*).<sup>155</sup> That this inner person also has senses is apparent from the identification of one of the bride's eyes as a mystique, contemplative eye.<sup>156</sup> The author compares the requirements for perfect sight, namely "a strong and pure ray of light which proceeds from the pupil; pure and clear air that does not hinder its transmission; a body which it can hit, a reason for which it is communicated, a memory that reason consults",<sup>157</sup> with those for God's true love, namely

pure affection, by which God is not loved for anything other than God, and no other thing is loved with God if not in God and for God's sake; purity of life and consciousness that does not hinder love; discernment of mind that does not allow wandering purity when it contemplates, but that God teaches and does not seek to perceive of anything instead of God; a reason that judges in account of discernment; a faith that consults the reason on all its judgments, and that, holding together its rules and words, does not allow to wander.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> BC XX, CC-CM 87, p. 177.

<sup>156</sup> "Porro duo oculi sponsae sunt, mysticus et actiuus, uel contemplatiuus et moralis." BC XXVIII, CC-CM 87, p. 187.

<sup>157</sup> "radium ualidum et purum qui de pupilla procedat, aërem purum ac lucidum qui transitum eius non impediatur, corpus in quod offendet, rationem cui renuntiet, memoriam quam ratio consulat." BC XXVIII, CC-CM 87, p. 187; my own translation.

<sup>158</sup> "affectum purum, quo Deum non nisi propter Deum diligat, nec aliquid cum Deo nisi in Deo et propter Deum; uitae et conscientiae munditiam, quae amorem non impediatur; discretionem spiritus, quae puritatem contemplantis non sinat errare, sed Deum doceat, et non aliquid pro Deo, intelligere; rationem, quae iudicet de discretionem; fidem, quam ratio de omnibus iudiciis suis consulat, et quae, suis eam regulis cohibens et terminis, errare non sinat." BC XXVIII, CC-CM 87, p. 187; my own translation.

In his *Expositio*, William does make mention of spiritual senses, for example in his commentary on verse 1:3 of the Song, which begins with the bride saying "I am black but beautiful." William explains that the bride turns black because of the bridegroom's absence, just like without illuminating grace all virtues and good deeds fail to attain success; "they give no joy and lack the oil of gladness, the unction that teaches, the taste of divine sweetness, the perfume of eternity and the powerful experience of the spiritual senses."<sup>159</sup> In this sentence, the spiritual senses are linked directly to examples of sensual language and they are presented as an experience that is related to the presence of God. In another passage, William talks about one single "sense of enlightened love [by which] the bride begins to experience more fully and clearly the sweet charms of the bridegroom who loves her."<sup>160</sup>

This *sensus amoris* is a central concept in William's thinking.<sup>161</sup> According to Bernard McGinn, William's sense of love is connected to the spiritual senses, but is not exactly the same; rather, it is a development from it, by which we "concretely, almost tactilely, perceive or "feel" God".<sup>162</sup> The sense of love has a transformative power through which subject and object become one; through it, man becomes "one spirit with God, beautiful in his Beauty, good in his Goodness [...]. He is then in God, by grace, what God is by nature."<sup>163</sup>

Bernard addresses the nature of sensual language in his 32th sermon on the Song, in which he talks about grace: "The words that describe these visions or images seem to refer to bodies or bodily substances, yet they are means of conveying spiritual truths to us, and hence there must be a spiritual character to our inquiry into their causes and meaning."<sup>164</sup> The mysteries can be understood, according to Bernard, by turning our gaze to the interior, and hoping that the Holy Spirit will provide his light that enables to see them. Bernard seems to mean that there is one look that can be turned either outward or inward. This gives rise to the interesting question what exactly the relationship was between inner and outer senses. In the following, this question will be answered by a close examination of the commentaries. Before treating the relationship between inner and outer senses, I will first pay attention to the

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<sup>159</sup> "Vel si utcumque uidentur habere, non uigent, non laeticant, non habent oleum laetitiae, non unctionem docentem, non gustum diuinae suauitas, non odorem aeternitatis, non efficacem spiritualium sensuum experientiam." ESCC VIII.44, CC-CM 87, p. 42; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 38-39.

<sup>160</sup> "Hinc dilectionis diligentis se sponsi amicas suauitates per illuminati sensum amoris largius ac dulcius sponsa incipit experiri". ESCC X.54, CC-CM 87, p. 46; transl. Hart 1970, p. 46.

<sup>161</sup> See Ryan 2005, *passim* and Walsh 1959, *passim*.

<sup>162</sup> McGinn 1994, p. 255.

<sup>163</sup> "Cumque efficitur ad similitudinem facientis, fit homo Deo affectus; hoc est cum Deo unus spiritus, pulcher in pulchro, bonus in bono; idque suo modo secundum uirtutem fidei, et lumen intellectus, et mensuram amoris, existens in Deo per gratiam, quod ille est per naturam." ESCC 90, CC-CM 87, p. 69; transl. Hart 1970, p. 76.

<sup>164</sup> "Nam etsi verba illa, quibus ipsae visiones seu similitudines describuntur, sonare corpora atque corporea videantur, spiritualia tamen sunt quae nobis ministrantur in his, ac per hoc in spiritu quoque causas et rationes earum oportet inquiri." SSCC 32.I.1, SBO I, p. 226; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 134.

question to whom the sensual language in the commentaries was directed. This will help to clarify for which stage in the spiritual process this language was meant.

#### II.4.2 Sensual language: for whom?

With the aim of this chapter in mind, namely to show why sensual language was appropriate to describing the path to mystical union, an important question that should be answered is whom this sensual language was directed to. Was sensual language only for those who were still far from this union and who could, without that language, not understand abstract theological concepts? Or was this language, on the contrary, most appropriate for the spiritually advanced? Another option, of course, is that the sensual language of the Song was meant for all humans. In that case, it would be interesting to know whether this language was necessary, because of the inability of humankind to understand God in a more abstract way, or whether it was given a more positive value, as an appropriate language for mystical union.

In modern studies on the medieval inner senses, the necessity of sensual language for the weak human mind comes forward. Niklaus Largier, in a study on the inner and outer senses in medieval theories of prayer, explains the medieval mystic's problem of the human mind that in its finitude was inadequate in understanding the eternal, incomprehensible God, but nevertheless felt a strong desire to communicate with the divine. This problem gave rise to a tradition of dialogue structures, in which the individual explored his relation to the divine by means of an inner dialogue: a conversation between the soul and God. The Song played an important role in this tradition, because it provided the model for such a dialogue and for "a deeply eroticized exchange between the soul and God [...] portrayed in terms of sensory and emotional experience [...]"<sup>165</sup> Thus, Largier regards the Song with its sensual language as part of a response to the problem of the inadequacy of the human mind to communicate with God.

Eloe Kingma writes about the necessity of the Song's sensual language as well, and makes it clear that the idea of this notion of necessity already existed before the twelfth century. Many medieval commentators followed Gregory the Great, who said that since the Fall mankind was blind for spiritual understanding. This relation between the Fall and man's ability to understand God will be further investigated in chapter three. The language of outer, bodily love, which man is familiar with, can, according to the commentary tradition, lead him to inner, spiritual love. By means of allegory or tropology, the unknown can be understood through the known.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Largier 2003, p. 4.

<sup>166</sup> Kingma 1993, p. 59.

Thus, in the literature, the necessity of sensual language for the weak humankind is stressed. I will now investigate whether this position can be supported by Bernard's and William's commentaries. To start with, it is interesting to know what the intended public of the commentaries was. They were all written in a monastic context and in Latin, and there is no indication that they were meant, for example, as a help for priests who preached to lay people. Therefore, we may assume that the texts were only meant for monks, or other residents of the monastery. This is in agreement with the references to monastic life in the commentaries, and with the findings of scholars examining the texts and manuscript tradition.<sup>167</sup> Thus, the public was probably to some degree advanced in the spiritual life. But, of course, there was a difference between novices and monks with more spiritual experience. Thus, it is fruitful to investigate whether the authors make more detailed statements about their monastic audience.

The author of the *Brevis commentatio* does not speak about the intended public. Since the text was probably based on conversations between Bernard and William, the content might, initially, not even be intended to be read by others.

Bernard gives the most extensive insight in his audience in his first sermons. He addresses his brothers and states that the instructions he delivers to them differ from those he should deliver to lay people; the monks are already spiritually enlightened. The public has already been acquainted with the teachings of the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs and is now ready for the sermons on the Song, which "may be delivered only to well prepared ears and minds."<sup>168</sup>

William does not explain what his intended audience is as explicitly as Bernard does. He does, however, make an interesting remark in his prelude to the second book of the Song. He recapitulates that he has talked about the bride and bridegroom's first repose, and adds that the first part of the Song "seems to be devoted to the first steps of novice fervour."<sup>169</sup> William regards the second part of the Song to be more suitable to the more spiritually advanced monk, because in this part "the bride renews herself, by more prudent patience and more

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<sup>167</sup> Van 't Spijker 2004, pp. 186-187; Leclercq 1976, pp. viii-xxii.

<sup>168</sup> "Depulsis ergo duobus malis duorum lectione librorum, competenter iam acceditur ad hunc sacrum theoricumque sermonem qui, cum sit amorum fructus, non nisi sobriis mentibus et auribus omnino credendus est." SSCC 1.I.3, SBO I, p. 4; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 2. The division of the wisdom of Solomon into three levels of instruction comes from Origen. Ecclesiastes corresponded with natural wisdom, Proverbs with moral wisdom and the Song with mystical wisdom. Cf. Asiedu 2001, p. 312.

<sup>169</sup> "Iam ergo in gaudio festi nuptialis primo accubitu utcumque digesto, et suo ei cantico prout potuimus assignato, qui nouitii feruoris rudimentis uidetur deseruire". ESCC XXX.140, CC-CM 87, p. 99; transl. Hart 1970, p. 117.

experienced prudence, for the Bridegroom's second embrace."<sup>170</sup> However, in the first part William already talks about the highest degree of mystical union, designated by the kiss, which does not correspond with the first steps in the spiritual process. Possibly, William's intended public consisted of both groups. Sensual language, which occurs in both the first and the second part, is, thus, appropriate for both groups.

Based on this investigation of the public of the commentaries, we can conclude that this was certainly not limited to those who were just beginning climbing the ladder towards mystical union. Bernard emphasizes that his brothers are already spiritually enlightened, and William wrote his commentary probably for both novices and monks with more spiritual experience.

When we look more closely at the sensual language, this conclusion seems, at first sight, to be contradicted by William's treatment in the prelude of the animal man (*homo animalis*), who is at the first stage of prayer (see chapter one, p. 22), and who does not know yet how to pray. This man seeks a God who has a likeness to himself, and when he thinks of that God it is like the "eyes of his heart [are] fast shut (*clausis oculis corde*)."<sup>171</sup> He understands God only in his human form. Although this is not the correct way of praying, it can help the animal man to obtain a higher degree of understanding:

Imagining these things in a rather bodily manner, he often deserves to be enlightened by the sweetness of this sensual imagination and to grow in ardent affection for spiritual prayer and contemplation. From these bodily imaginings, he arrives – without knowing how – at understanding certain mysteries of piety.<sup>172</sup>

Sensual imagination, to which sensual language appeals, seems to be described here as something that can only be of help to the animal man, who is just a beginner in the spiritual life. It is, however, important to note that, according to William, the eyes of the animal man's heart are shut. Thus, he can only perceive sensual language with the outer senses of his exterior body, and not with the senses of his inner person.

A bit further in his prelude, William writes that the man who has already reached the spiritual state (*status spiritualis*) must sometimes revert to the rational state (*status rationalis*). Apparently, just like the *Brevis commentatio*'s stages of love (see chapter one, pp. 10-11),

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<sup>170</sup> "prudentiore patientia et doctiore prudentia ad secundos se reparet sponsi sponsa amplexus." ESCC XXX.140, CC-CM 87, p. 99; transl. Hart 1970, p. 117.

<sup>171</sup> ESCC III.12, CC-CM 87, p. 25.

<sup>172</sup> "hoc ipsum tamen plus ipsa sibi imaginans corporaliter, ex dulcedine ipsius animalis imaginationis saepe illuminari meretur, et incalescere in affectum spiritualis orationis uel contemplationis, modo quodam sibimet incognito, de imaginationibus ipsis corporeis quaedam sibi concipiens sacramenta pietatis". ESCC III.14, CC-CM 87, p. 26; transl. Hart 1970, p. 13.



William's three states of prayer do not form a linear process, but the states can support one another. Imagination, belonging to the animal man, is mostly an obstacle in prayer. But, when during prayer the attraction of love suddenly springs up, imagination can serve as a help rather than as a hindrance:

For when the eyes are very weak, an intermingling of images will not always be useless or harmful. They are a sort of vehicle offered by the body. Being accustomed to the sight of and knowledge of bodies and bodily things, the spirit of him who prays or contemplates is thereby transported to the realm of truth; and although it is only an image, man's thought, by the vehicle of this image, is borne onward to the truth which attracts it.<sup>173</sup>

William goes on by explaining that because these bodily images can be helpful in the gaining of spiritual knowledge, the Holy Spirit clothed the spiritual and divine Song on spiritual love in images pertaining to bodily love. Because only love can comprehend the divine, he says, the love of the flesh must be transformed into love of the spirit, in order that it can quickly comprehend things that are similar to it.<sup>174</sup>

In these passages, William brings up some very interesting points. First of all, he talks about weak eyes that can be helped by bodily images. From his words, it does not become exactly clear whether he is talking about weak eyes as opposed to the eyes of stronger men, or whether he means that the eyes of humans are always weak. The use of the comparative word 'weaker' (*inferioribus*) might point to the former, but the context implies that the latter is the case; William was talking about the final two states of prayer, and when he describes how spirits can be raised from the bodily to the spiritual terms, he seems to talk about man in general. This interpretation is also in agreement with the *Brevis commentatio*, in which it is said that the Holy Spirit speaks in parables, because the human mind would otherwise be too weak to understand the divine mysteries.<sup>175</sup> Another point that is of interest to us is William's remark that the spirit can reach the realm of truth by making use of the sight and knowledge of bodily things, which he is familiar with. Thus, he can use the things he already knows to move on to less familiar things.

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<sup>173</sup> "Non enim infirmioribus oculis semper inutilis est uel noxius omnis intercurrentium imaginationum usus; quarum quasi corporali uehiculo, ipso usu uidendi et cogitandi corpora et corporalia assuefactus spiritus orantis uel contemplantis, defertur ubi est ueritas; et licet in imagine, tamen per ipsum cogitatae imaginis pertransit homo in idipsum afficientis ueritatis." ESCC III.20, CC-CM 87, p. 29; transl. Hart 1970, p. 18.

<sup>174</sup> ESCC III. 21, CC-CM 87, p. 29.

<sup>175</sup> "Lingua igitur hominum, id est consueto hominibus modo, scilicet quasi quibusdam parabolis, Spiritus sanctus sua hominibus manifestat secreta, quorum infirmitas aliter ea intelligere non poterit." BC IV, CC-CM 87, p. 159; transl. Turner 1995, p. 281.

These examples from William's commentary on the Song, which are in agreement with the position of Largier and Kingma, all seem to stem from the idea that the use of the senses is a necessary evil, that humans have weak minds and are so bound to their mortal bodies that they cannot gain any understanding of God without a language filled with bodily images that appeal to their senses and imagination. However, this negative approach is not ubiquitous in William's text. Above (p. 37) passage has been quoted in which he talks about the powerful experience of the spiritual senses, and the fact that the kiss, which is a very sensual image, is presented as an ultimate image for union with God, implies a more positive evaluation as well.

Bernard's sermons are also ambiguous with regard to the question whether sensual language was a necessity for the weak human mind, or the most appropriate way of talking about union with God. As Rudy points out, Bernard thought, just as William did, that man needed bodily images to understand God because of the Fall. Divine knowledge through bodily things was possible because God took on flesh in the incarnation<sup>176</sup> – something that will be further examined in chapter three.

In his fourth sermon, Bernard emphasizes that while God does not need bodily instruments, human souls "have a need for bodies, and bodies in turn a need for senses [...]."<sup>177</sup> In his next sermon, on the four different kinds of spirits (animal, man, angel and God), Bernard expounds upon this further. Quoting Paul, he explains that man can understand God through God's creation. Therefore, humans have a need of a body and its instruments: "Without it we cannot attain to that form of knowledge by which alone we are elevated toward the contemplation of truths essential to happiness."<sup>178</sup> This need for the bodily senses is regarded by Bernard as a shortcoming of humankind, because the angel, who has a body too, does not have a need for bodily senses, for he can attain knowledge of God very easily "because of the native fineness and sublime quality of its being."<sup>179</sup> Only the Holy Spirit can communicate himself directly to the mind; he "is perceived in us in proportion to our

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. Rudy 2002, p. 46.

<sup>177</sup> "Animae corporibus et corporeis egent sensibus". SSCC 4.III.5, SBO I, p. 20; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 24.

<sup>178</sup> "Habet igitur necessarium corpus spiritualis creatura quae nos sumus, sine quo nimirum nequaquam illam scientiam assequitur, quam solam accepit gradum ad ea de quorum sit cognitione beata." SSCC 5.I.1, SBO I, pp. 21-22; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 25.

<sup>179</sup> "Quo enim is involutus carne ac terrae incola spiritus, ex consideratione sensibilibus proficiens, gradatim quodammodo paulatimque nititur pervenire, eo ille caelestium habitator ingenita subtilitate ac sublimitate sua". SSCC 5.I.4, SBO I, p. 23; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 27.

rectitude."<sup>180</sup> From sermon 51, it becomes clear that, like William, Bernard too regarded the senses as useful tools to proceed from the familiar to the unknown:

But that which is unchangeable is incomprehensible, and hence cannot be expressed in language. Where, I ask, can you find the words to pay worthy tribute to that majesty, or properly describe it, or adequately define it? But we speak as well as we can of that which we do our best to understand, as the Holy Spirit reveals. We are taught by the authority of the Fathers and the usage of the scripture that it is lawful to appropriate suitable analogies from the things we know, and rather than coin new words, to borrow the familiar with which these analogies may be worthily and properly clothed. Otherwise you will make an absurd attempt to teach the unknown by the unknown.<sup>181</sup>

So far, these passages from Bernard show that the weak human mind needs the senses in understanding God. However, Bernard also makes more positive remarks, which emphasize the beauty and suitability of sensual perception in the way to mystical union. An example of this can be found in sermon 41, in which Bernard treats verse 1:10 of the Song: "We will make you ornaments of gold, studded with silver." Bernard interprets those ornaments as pendants, made by heavenly goldsmiths and given to the bride by the bridegroom's companions to insert them in the soul's inward ears. According to Bernard, this means "the construction of spiritual images in order to bring the purest intuitions of divine wisdom before the eyes of the soul that contemplates [...]."<sup>182</sup> He goes on by emphasizing the shortcomings of the human body in knowing the divine. However, humans are able to contemplate the divine partly. When a vision of God comes into the mind, the inner senses perform an important task:

[I]mmediately, but whence I know not, images of earthly things fill the imagination, either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light. So well-adapted are they to the divinely

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<sup>180</sup> "Per se infunditur, per se innotescit, purus capitur a puris." SSCC 5.III.8, SBO I, p. 25; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 30.

<sup>181</sup> "At si quid invariabile est, id incomprehensibile, ac per hoc etiam ineffabile esse necesse est: ubi quaeso invenias verba, quibus illam maiestatem vel digne assignes, vel proprie proloquaris, vel competenter diffinias? Tamen utcumque loquamur quod utcumque de ea, Spiritu Sancto relevante, sentimus. Docemur auctoritate Patrum et consuetudine Scripturarum congruentes de rebus notis licere similitudines usurpare, sed et verba non nova invenire, sed nota mutuari, quibus digne et competenter eadem similitudines vestiantur. Alioquin ridicule ignota per ignota docere conaberis." SSCC 51.III.7, SBO II, p. 88; cf. Wimsatt 1984, p. 80; transl. Walsh 1979, pp. 45-46.

<sup>182</sup> "Quod ego non puto esse aliud quam texere quasdam spirituales similitudines, et in ipsis purissima divinae sapientiae sensa animae contemplantis conspectibus importare [...]." SSCC 41.III.3, SBO II, p. 30; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 206.

illuminated senses, that in their shadow the utterly pure and brilliant radiance of the truth is rendered more bearable to the mind and more capable of being communicated to others.<sup>183</sup>

In this passage, the senses are still considered to be a necessity. The function of the earthly images to temper the divine light to make it bearable for the human mind is something we did not see with William. However, when Bernard elaborates more on these images, he becomes more positive in his evaluation of them. They are pure and beautiful, and made by the angels.

As we have seen, the evaluation of sensual language in the commentaries is ambiguous. A possible solution to this problem might be to distinct between language that is perceived by the outer senses on the one hand and the inner senses on the other hand; with the patristic theories on the inner senses in the back of our heads, we might expect a negative evaluation of the outer senses, and a positive appreciation of the inner, spiritual senses. In the passages discussed above, it is often not very clear which of the two is meant by the authors. Therefore, it will be useful to examine passages which indicate theories of inner senses in the works of Bernard and William more closely, with special attention to the relation between inner and outer senses.

#### II.4.3 The relationship between inner and outer senses

As we have seen, scholars like Aerden and Turner see the sensual language of the Song presented in the commentaries as essentially separated from the inner senses and spiritual meaning. This position can certainly be confirmed by certain passages from Bernard's and William's commentaries, which are very negative on the role of the exterior senses in the spiritual process, especially from William's *Expositio*.

At the very beginning of his prelude, William states that when the soul is pure in its longing for God, it is freer from bodily things, and will thus turn to the spiritual things.<sup>184</sup> Likewise, in prayer nothing bodily should be attributed to God, because otherwise this prayer is not entirely spiritual.<sup>185</sup> This can be contrasted with the attribution of bodily members and sensual characteristics such as taste and smell to God in the commentaries, and thus implies a

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<sup>183</sup> "[...] sive ad temperamentum nimii splendoris, sive ad doctrinae usum, continuo, nescio unde, adsunt imaginariae quaedam rerum inferiorum similitudines, infusus divinitus sensis convenienter accommodatae, quibus quodam modo adumbratus purissimus ille ac splendidissimus veritatis radius, et ipsi animae tolerabilior fiat, et quibus communicare illum voluerit capabilior." SSCC 41.III.3, SBO II, p. 30; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 207.

<sup>184</sup> "[...] [T]anto ad te ardentior, quanto in se mundior, tanto autem mundior, quanto a corporalibus ad spiritualia liberior". ESCC 1, CC-CM 87, p. 19.

<sup>185</sup> "[...] [Q]uia quamdiu ab orante, in eo quem orat corporeum quid cogitatur, pie quidem, sed non omnino spiritualiter oratur. Deus enim spiritus est, et necesse est qui eum adorat, in spiritu et ueritate adorare." ESCC 15, CC-CM 87, p. 26.

strong division between things that appeal to the outer senses, and the sensual language of Scripture which is directed to the inner senses.

In William's commentary, more remarks can be found that diminish the exterior person. He claims that man consists almost exclusively of soul; "the body is his least part."<sup>186</sup> The bride, longing for the bridegroom's kiss, "wished to be dissolved and to be with Christ, thinking, after a taste of the highest Good, that it was not needful for her to abide still in the flesh."<sup>187</sup> This sentence is ambiguous, because on the one hand William talks about the sensual experience of the taste of the highest Good, while on the other hand the body is cast aside.

William compares the bodily sensual perception of God with the vision of God through the sense of love. In the perception through the external senses, a mental image is formed in the mind, resembling the object in accordance with the nature of the perceiving sense and the object. By this process, the perceiving subject is transformed into the object.<sup>188</sup> William continues:

In this way, and to a much greater degree, the vision of God is brought about in the sense of love by which God is seen. [...] [I]n the vision of God, love alone [is] operative without the cooperation of any other sense, in a manner incomparably nobler and more refined than any imagination due to the senses [...].<sup>189</sup>

Further on, when William comments upon "the voice of my beloved" in verse 2:7 of the Song, he identifies this voice with the Word, which, through the Holy Spirit's operation in the sense of love, is perceived "in the enlightened intellect by pure affection, while all the bodily senses and mental faculties are at rest and idle."<sup>190</sup> Likewise, "the beloved speaks to me" (verse 2:8) denotes the Word too, which can be perceived with the bodily senses, for instance by sight in reading or by hearing, but it can also be perceived by the grace of inner instruction, "calling

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<sup>186</sup> "Totus quippe pene homo anima est: minima eius portio corpus est." ESCC 51, CC-CM 87, p. 45; transl Hart 1970, p. 43.

<sup>187</sup> "Dissolui uolebat et esse cum Christo, post summi boni gustum permanere sibi in carne non arbitrans esse necessarium." ESCC 28, CC-CM 87, p. 33; transl. Hart 1970, p. 26.

<sup>188</sup> This theory of sense perception is constant in William's thinking; see McGinn 2012, p. 194. A similar theory can be found in Bernard's 31st sermon on the Song.

<sup>189</sup> "[...] [S]ic et multo magis idem operatur uisio Dei in sensu amoris, quo uidetur Deus. [...] In uisione uero Dei, ubi solus amor operatur, nullo alio sensu cooperante, incomparabiliter dignius ac subtilius omni sensuum imaginatione, idem agit puritas amoris ac diuinus affectus". ESCC 90, CC-CM 87, p. 69; transl. Hart 1970, p. 77.

<sup>190</sup> "Vox tamen potius dicitur quam uerbum, quia non distinguitur syllabis, non lingua formatur, sed puro fit affectu in illuminato intellectu, sopito uel feriato omni sensu corporis uel rationis; et totum rei negotium sancto Spiritu operante in sensu amoris." ESCC 137, CC-CM 87, p. 96; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 112-113.

her who hears from the flesh to the spirit and from the senses to interior understanding, that she may live not in the flesh but in the spirit."<sup>191</sup>

Bernard says very explicitly that wisdom should not be sought in the bodily senses:

Taste resides in the palate, but wisdom in the heart. Do not look for wisdom with your eyes of flesh, because flesh and blood will not reveal it to you, but the Spirit. [...] [E]xperience is deceptive. [...] When he said "Do not touch me," he meant: depend no longer on this fallible sense; put your trust in the word, get used to faith.<sup>192</sup>

This passage already shows how complicated the interpretation of the sensual language of the Song actually is. When the bride and bridegroom kiss and embrace each other, the sense of touch should be interpreted as a very positive thing, denoting, as we have seen, union between God and the soul; but when God commands his bride not to touch him (a reference to the *noli me tangere* of John 20:17), this touch is a fallible sense that cannot lead to divine wisdom.

In sermon eight, on the kiss, Bernard explains why knowledge received through the outer senses is not useful in the mystical process. The kiss stands for the revelation of divine wisdom through the Holy Spirit, but there exists also a kind of knowledge which can be gained from creation through the bodily senses, which is led by "the inane conceits of human curiosity."<sup>193</sup> This kind of knowledge lacks the love for God and should be avoided by those seeking union with God.<sup>194</sup>

As we have seen, William is very clear in his statement that in the mystical process of union with God, the inner senses can and should operate without help of the bodily senses. In Bernard's sermons something similar can be found, for example when he praises the angelic virtue of gazing without the use of bodily likenesses.<sup>195</sup> The author of the *Brevis commentatio* speaks of a *comparison* between bodily and spiritual things (*similitudine de carnalibus ad spiritualia*), which implies no closer relationship than an analogy.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> "Auditur autem aliquando per sensus corporis, sicut ex intuitu lectionis et auditu doctrinae; aliquando per gratiam aspirationis internae, euocans audientem a carne ad spiritum, a sensibus ad interiorem intellectum, ut non sit in carne, sed in spiritu." ESCC 157, CC-CM 87, p. 110; transl. Hart 1970, p. 132.

<sup>192</sup> "Sapor in palato, in corde est sapientia. Ne quaeras sapientiam in oculo carnis, quia caro et sanguis non revelat eam, sed spiritus. [...] [E]xperimentum fallax. [...] Noli me tangere, inquit, hoc est: Dissuesce huic seducibili sensui; innitere verbo, fidei assuesce." SSCC 28.III.8-9, SBO I, pp. 197-198; transl. Walsh 1976, pp. 94-96.

<sup>193</sup> "Merito proinde sponsa, quem diligit anima sua inquirens, non se suae carnis sensibus credit, non curiositatis humanae inanibus ratiociniis acquiescit; sed petit osculum, id est Spiritum Sanctum invocat, per quem accipiat simul et scientiae gustum, et gratiae condimentum. SSCC 8.IV.6, SBO I, p. 39; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 49.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Kingma 1993, p. 6.

<sup>195</sup> SSCC 52.III.5, SBO II, p. 93.

<sup>196</sup> BC IV, CC-CM 87, p. 159.

It may not come as a surprise that these authors, belonging to the ascetic Cistercian order, promoted the neglect of the body. However, as Kingma has noted, it might strike the reader that the authors do not pay *more* attention to bodily asceticism; the remarks that disregard the body are by far outnumbered by the sensual language of the longing bride.<sup>197</sup> A possible explanation is that the Cistercian commentaries – at least Bernard’s sermons – were directed at a spiritually advanced public, which did not need incitement to asceticism. Matter, for example, contrasts this with Hugh of St. Victor’s *De amore sponsi ad sponsam*, which laid more emphasis on asceticism, chastity and austerity, because it was not directed at a spiritual elite.<sup>198</sup> However, I think that the explanation for the moderation in ascetic admonitions should be sought in the positive role that the senses could play in the spiritual process. To examine this hypothesis more profoundly, first the relationship between inner and outer senses, both negative and positive, will be discussed.

We have seen that some scholars, like Rudy and Largier, see a close relationship between inner and outer senses in the twelfth-century interpretation of the Song's sensual language. This interpretation, which is more positive on the role of the senses, is supported by the practice of an abundance of sensual language in the Song. If this language was supposed to have no effect at all on the bodily senses, we might expect that the authors had given even more warnings, especially with regard to the basest senses of touch and taste. It is more difficult to find support for this interpretation on the theoretical level. William, however, suggests the importance of the outer senses by describing the kiss as both an inner and outer union:

A kiss is a certain outward loving union of bodies, sign and *incentive* of an inward union. It is produced by use of the mouth and aims, by mutual exchange, at a *union not only of bodies* but of spirits.<sup>199</sup> [my emphasis]

From this quotation, it becomes clear that the inner and outer senses can be regarded as connected to each other. The images of the kiss can bring about mystical union *through* the outer senses. The aim of the image is inner union, but there is an outer union as well, which functions as an incentive. This passage is important and remarkable, because it is a rare instance in which the close connection between inner and outer senses is stated. This single quotation may not be able to provide a counterbalance for all the remarks Bernard and

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<sup>197</sup> Cf. Kingma 1993, p. 201.

<sup>198</sup> Matter 1993, p. 136; cf. Kingma 1993, p. 201.

<sup>199</sup> "Osculum amica quaedam et exterior coniunctio corporum est, interioris coniunctionis signum et incentiuum. Quod oris ministerio exhibetur, ut non tantum corporum, sed ex mutuo contactu etiam spirituum coniunctio fiat." ESCC 27, CC-CM 87, p. 33; transl. Hart 1970, p. 25; cf. Kingma 1993, pp. 80-81.

William make on the diminishing of the body. However, in connection with the abundance of sensual language in the commentaries, it does provide support for the assertion that there is a close relationship between inner and outer senses. I think it is telling that William makes this remark with regard to the kiss, which on the one hand consists of the basest senses of taste and touch, and on the other hand denotes the ultimate union between the soul and God.

## II.5. Conclusion

It is not easy to pin down the relationship between the inner and outer senses in the commentaries. As we have seen, two opposite positions can be found in modern scholarship. For both, supportive evidence can be found in the sources. This makes it impossible to disregard one of the positions completely. But how can they both be true?

A solution that I would like to offer is that the outer senses were evaluated according to the intention with which they were used. When the bodily senses were not directed at spiritual truths, but at knowledge of the world, or were merely used to experience worldly pleasure, they were obviously evaluated negatively and had to be diminished. However, the senses of the outer person could also operate in the spiritual process. For those who were not yet advanced in the mystical process, sensual language could simply function as an analogy for spiritual truths. Moreover, the senses of hearing and sight could be used to perceive of Scripture and spiritual teachings. For the spiritual elite, the sensual language of the Song could, by way of the bodily senses, form a stimulus to activate the inner senses. Through these spiritual senses, the mystic can know and approach God.

This evaluation of the outer senses according to the purpose which it is put to can be supported by William, who says that he who seeks union with God "loves himself well and in right order if he cares for his flesh not according to his desires but for the sake of the spirit, [which should receive] complete servitude on the part of the body."<sup>200</sup> Likewise, Bernard says that a man lives a spiritual life if he controls his five senses and puts his body "at the service of righteousness for [his] sanctification, as once [he] put them at the service of vice and immorality."<sup>201</sup> The mystic did not have to mortify his outer senses in order for his spiritual

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<sup>200</sup> "Sic autem dilectus Dei ac dilector bene et secundum ordinem diligit seipsum, si suam carni curam fecerit, non in desideriis, sed propter spiritum [...]. [S]piritui uero sua habenda est caritatis, cultus suus exhibendus usque ad omnem corporis seruitutem." ESCC 124, CC-CM 87, p. 89; transl. Hart 1970, p. 102.

<sup>201</sup> "Si teipsum advertas, in hoc teipsum noveris vita vivere spirituali, ac mysticum hunc implere numerum, si sensualitatis tuae quinarium caritatis binario subicis, exhibesque, iuxta Apostolum, membra tua servire iustitiae



senses to become active; he rather had to transform them, so that they could stimulate the senses of his inner person.

With this in mind, a better understanding of the kiss as a sign of mystical union can be gained. For 'animal men', the union of bodies could be seen as an analogy for the mystical union between God and the soul. In that case, the kiss should be regarded as an image with no sensual meaning. For the more spiritually advanced monk, the kiss as instance of sensual language could stimulate the inner senses, be appealing to the outer senses and forming an incentive for inner union. This might explain why the authors describe the kiss in such sensual words, ascribing sweetness to it and emphasizing the element of touch. But why were these two senses, considered to be the basest of all five, especially deemed appropriate for the image of ultimate union with God? This question will be answered in the two remaining chapters.

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in sanctificationem, quae prius exhibuisti servire iniquitati ad iniquitatem". SSCC 16.III.3, SBO I, p. 91; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 116.

### **Chapter III: Sensual language and the theological framework of the Cistercians**

In the previous chapter, we have concluded that, because of the potentially close relationship between the outer and inner senses, sensual language was deemed appropriate to mystical union. In this chapter, we will examine some of the questions that might rise from this conclusion. Why did sensual language appeal to authors belonging to the Cistercian order in particular? How does the use of the senses in the gaining of spiritual knowledge and union fit within the theological framework of the monks? And why was the kiss such a popular instance of sensual language?

More light can be shed on all of these questions by taking into account some of the most important theological concepts of Christianity, especially those which appealed most to the Cistercians. Those central concepts, of which, as we shall see, the incarnation is the most important one, have a strong connection with ideas about the relationship between matter and spirit, body and soul, and outer and inner senses. In the first chapter we have seen that the kiss is explicitly associated with the incarnation and the Trinity. Moreover, these concepts formed such a prominent part in the religious culture in which the commentaries were written, and occur so frequently in those writings, that it is necessary to not just mention them briefly, but elaborate on them more extensively. This will provide a better insight into the framework with which the Cistercians read the sensual language contained in the Song.

#### **III.1. Why the Cistercians?**

A question that many authors try to answer is why precisely in the twelfth century, in the order of the ascetic Cistercians, the sensual language of the Song became so popular. In chapter two we have seen that, in comparison with the strict dualism in Origen's Song commentary, in the works of Bernard and William the inner and outer senses are more closely related. The outer senses should not be mortified, but transformed in order that they can be of help in the spiritual process. Thus, the Cistercians, known for their asceticism, advance a relatively positive evaluation of the body in spirituality. To understand this revaluation of the body, it is important to examine the order more closely.

A possible explanation for the use of the body in spirituality, suggested by Jean Leclercq, can be found by looking at the historical context and the statutes of the Cistercians. While in the order of the traditional Benedictines monks entered the monastery at a young age

as oblates, men who entered Cistercian monasteries were already adults. Some of them were monks who came from monasteries belonging to other monastic orders, but many of them had a previous life in the secular world behind them. They had been trained as knights or clerics, or had been troubadours or *trouvères*. This meant that many of them had experience with secular love, either from experience or from the reading of love literature.<sup>202</sup>

This secular background of many of the monks formed a challenge for the Cistercian order. There was a great interest in the process of conversion; the process of turning a secular adult into a monk. To achieve this goal, the secular background was not ignored or forgotten. On the contrary, it was used in the process of transformation and in sermons imagery from the secular life was used, which the listeners were familiar with. This could have served to capture their attention, to help their memory or to make them understand the meaning of their new way of life by, as we have seen in chapter two, proceeding from the known to the unknown. Leclercq describes this, with regard to Bernard, in a psychological way:

Bernard's complete pedagogy was aimed at recognizing and accepting the whole dimension of the psyche: by means of parables and symbols taken from current literature and contemporary experience he attempted to bring the more or less hidden impulses, motives, and memories of the infraconscious into the light, to effect a recognition and acceptance by the monks of their spontaneous selves and then, by a process of sublimation and by the word of Scripture addressed to them, to raise them consciously to the supraconscious levels of the psyche where basic human needs become freely chosen options, accepted values, and a fertile field for religious experience.<sup>203</sup>

This use of imagery from the former life of the monks to effectuate a transformation can be seen as part of the explanation why the sensual language appealing to the outer senses could have an effect on the inner man. We should, however, not only look at the rhetoric that was used, but also at the spirituality that lay behind it and was closely connected to it. As Martha Newman has shown, the use of secular imagery influenced monastic culture and the meaning of traditional concepts, symbols and rituals.<sup>204</sup> One of those concepts that changed was the idea of *caritas*, traditionally both the love of and for God. However, "caritas" had no accompanying verb, and thus Latin authors had to choose between the verbs *amare* and *diligere*. Augustine stood at the start of a tradition in which *amare* denoted a neutral love and

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<sup>202</sup> Leclercq 1979, p. 14; Newman 1996, p. 16.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 104.

<sup>204</sup> Newman 1996, pp. 16-41.

*diligere* a love controlled by the will that could either be good or evil.<sup>205</sup> Bernard, however, used *amare* and *amor* for both human and divine love, implying an equation between the two.<sup>206</sup> This reflects a change in spirituality which took place in the twelfth century. This change was centred around a transformation of the image of God: the distant and just Father made place for the loving incarnate Son.<sup>207</sup> This new image of the divine was incorporated into the concept of *caritas*. For the Cistercians, *caritas* could stand for the individual's relationship with God, but also for the bond that linked the monk to his community.<sup>208</sup>

This more personal and loving image of God should, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, be seen within the preoccupation of the Cistercians with a more affective contact with God.<sup>209</sup> The need for this contact can be understood within the context of the order's ideas. The Cistercians wanted to live a sober life like the apostles and the early Desert Fathers. However, they preferred a life in community under the Benedictine Rule instead of the purely solitary lifestyle of an eremite. To achieve this, withdrawal from the laity and the secular world was very important to the Cistercians. Even family ties had to be broken by the monks. Instead of dependence on the world, they formed emotional ties with both their community and God. To make these ties as strong as possible, a personal, affective relationship with God was encouraged. The incarnate Christ, who embodied the connection between man and God, was emphasized, in affective roles such as lover. These images of bodily closeness, denoting personal growth within the monastic community, were, according to Bynum, more dominant in the orders of the Cistercians and Carthusians, than with the Victorines, Premonstratensians and Benedictines. The latter group had a preference for images of houses and cities, which they used not only to describe personal growth, but the variety of mansions and role on the edifice of God and the stages of Christian history as well.<sup>210</sup> The Cistercians' emphasis on the incarnate Jesus in a close, personal relationship is of course closely related to a desire for the presence and proximity of God. How this presence is suggested, other than with the incarnation, in the commentaries, will be further investigated in chapter four.

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<sup>205</sup> Augustine, *In epistolam Joannis ad Parthos tractatus decem* II.11, SC 75, pp. 172-174. Cf. Burnaby 1938, p. 115; Newman 1996, p. 17.

<sup>206</sup> In his *De diligendo deo*, Bernard uses both *amare* and *diligere* for the love for God: Bernardus, *De diligendo deo* 15-17, SBO 3, pp. 131-134. Cf. Newman 1996, p. 17 (see also n. 6).

<sup>207</sup> Richard Southern signals this change as well and sees as its origin the works of Anselm (ca. 1033-1109): Southern 1967, pp. 224-229.

<sup>208</sup> Newman 1996, pp. 17-18.

<sup>209</sup> Walker Bynum 1982, pp. 160-166.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 165-166. On the shaping of medieval communities by affective bonds, see Rosenwein 2006, *passim*.

The increasing focus on the human Christ can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on his direct bodily presence in the Eucharist, and the desire of the Cistercians to imitate Jesus and his followers by living an apostolic life.<sup>211</sup> This emphasis on the humanity and corporeality of Christ can be seen as an important explanation for the reevaluation of the bodily senses. The physical human body came to be accepted as a way to think and talk about God. This applies to bodily language in general, but also to specific senses. The sense of taste had, for example, a strong connection with the Eucharist.<sup>212</sup> The monks literally tasted Christ's body during the Mass. Both the Eucharist and the incarnation itself were connected to Psalm 33:9: *O taste and see that the Lord is sweet*. The theological concept of the incarnation, as part of salvation history, formed an important reason for the use of sensual language in spirituality. This will be the subject of the following section.

### III.2. The possibilities of the senses

#### III.2.1 Salvation history and sensual language

The possibility and necessity of the senses as a way to divine knowledge are very much intertwined with some important events in salvation history. This subject has already been touched upon in chapter two, but will be elaborated on here more extensively.

The first event, which is important for the *possibility* of sensual language as a way to knowing God, is the very beginning of salvation history: the creation of the world and of man. The new emphasis on the incarnation in the twelfth century mentioned above came together with a decline in the prominence of resurrection and last judgment, and a new interest in creation.<sup>213</sup> Both Bernard and William thought that because God created man in his own image and likeness, humans were able to know and touch God in the created world.<sup>214</sup> For Bernard, this defines the relationship between the Word and the soul. The Word is the image, in which the soul was made, which is righteousness, wisdom and truth. The soul is not those things, but is capable of them.<sup>215</sup> God is in a state of blessedness, but the soul, made in his likeness, is not naturally blessed; the *similitudo* is only to a degree. For the soul this means

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<sup>211</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 5.

<sup>212</sup> Gavrilyuk 2012, p. 9.

<sup>213</sup> Walker Bynum 1982, p. 17.

<sup>214</sup> Aerden 2011, p. 483; Evans 2000, pp. 79-80.

<sup>215</sup> SSCC 80.I.2, SBO II, p. 278.

that existence is living, which can be raised to living well and even to living in a blessed state.<sup>216</sup>

The importance of the notion of being created in God's image and likeness is apparent from the fact that William begins his exposition with a reference to this idea: "O Lord our God, you did create us to your image and likeness, it is plain, that we might contemplate you and have fruition of you."<sup>217</sup> In his 24th sermon on the Song, Bernard makes it clear that the image of God is in the soul, not in the body. However, the body can have a positive influence:

God indeed gave man an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that his corporeal uprightness, exterior and of little account, might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness; that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind. [...] Created upright and in your [the soul's] Creator's likeness, you received me [the body] as a helper like to yourself, at least on bodily uprightness.<sup>218</sup>

Humanity lost this image of God in the Fall. The likeness is retained, but covered with an additional other likeness of death: "But the primal likeness remains, and this increases the soul's distress at the unlikeness. How good the one is, how evil the other!"<sup>219</sup> Thus, man has to make an effort to regain the likeness of God.

With the Fall, the original sensory perception, the way in which Adam and Eve in paradise could perceive God in the nature around them, was lost. This is the reason for the *necessity* of sensual language. Fallen man is unable to perceive God directly, and thus the original sensory experience has to be reconstituted through the inner senses.<sup>220</sup> William describes the limitations of fallen man: "For as long as God is not seen save in a glass and in riddle (1 Cor 13:12), man will succeed in contemplating him only through an image. Whether it be the glass or the riddle (that is, the image clearer or more obscure), man in his lifetime will succeed in this only through an image."<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> SSCC 81.I.2, SBO II, pp. 284-285.

<sup>217</sup> "Domine Deus noster, qui ad imaginem et similitudinem tuam creasti nos, scilicet ad te contemplandum teque fruendum [...]." ESCC I.1, CC-CM 87, p. 19; transl. Hart 1970, p. 3.

<sup>218</sup> "Quamquam et corporis staturam dedit homini Deus rectam, forsan ut ista corporea exterioris viliorisque rectitudo figmenti hominem interiorem illum, qui ad imaginem Dei factus est, spiritualis suae rectitudinis servandae admoneret, et decor limi deformitatem argueret animi. [...] Creata Creanti similis recta, me quoque accepisti adiutorium simile tibi, utique secundum lineamenta corporeae rectitudines." SSCC 24.II.6, SBO I, pp. 157-158; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 46.

<sup>219</sup> "Nam manet prima similitudo; et ideo illa plus displicet, quod ista manet. O quantum bona ista, quantumque malum illa!" SSCC 82.III.6, SBO II, p. 296; transl. Edmonds 1980, pp. 177-178.

<sup>220</sup> Largier 2003, p. 9.

<sup>221</sup> "Quamdiu enim non uidetur Deus nisi per speculum et in aenigmate, tamdiu ad contemplandum Deum non nisi in imagine pertransit homo. Siue illud speculum sit siue aenigma, id est manifestior uel obscurior imago,

As has been explained above, the Cistercians laid great emphasis on the incarnation and the humanity of Christ. This is one of the most important events in salvation history, and is also crucial to the possibility of obtaining spiritual truths through sensory perception and to achieving mystical union with God. Because God took on a human form, the body became in some sense divine. Christ sanctified the human body as a way to divine knowledge and spiritual union with God.<sup>222</sup> This use of the body was necessary, because of humankind's fallen condition. In the words of Bernard: "He became incarnate for the sake of carnal men, that he might induce them to relish the life of the Spirit."<sup>223</sup>

We can conclude that the connection between body and soul, and the use of the senses as a way to approach God, are very much intertwined with theological concepts of salvation history. Because God created man to his own image and likeness, it is possible to arrive at a state of union. Because of the Fall, mankind lost its direct contact with God and had to make use of the inner senses. The incarnation made it possible for the body to be of help in the spiritual process. This is in accordance with the conclusion to the previous chapter; with the right intention, the outer senses can be transformed and function as a stimulation to the inner senses, in the process of gaining ultimate union with God.

### III.2.2. The kiss, incarnation and Trinity

In the first chapter, we have already seen that the kiss in the Song's first verse is, in the commentaries, often connected with the incarnation. The *Brevis commentatio* is of special interest, because here the author connects the incarnation both to the ultimate union designated by the kiss, and to knowledge about God, which is possible because God became man:

[I]t was for this reason that God himself was made man for all human beings, so that they, who did not know how to think of God and understand him, raise up their rational powers of understanding. [...] Of all kinds of fleshy love there are, there is none so attractive, none found more commonly desirable, than the union of the bride and the bridegroom; and so it is of the spiritual, of the [union of the] created spirit with the uncreated. In the one case the two become one flesh; in the other the two become one spirit. And so, by means of the comparison drawn between the things of the body and those of the spiritual, between the human and the divine, here are described the bridegroom and bride, Christ and the Church or the holy soul, which now [...]

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quamdiu omnino hic uiuitur, illuc non nisi in imagine pertransit homo." ESCC II.19, CC-CM 87, p. 28; transl. Hart 1970, p. 17.

<sup>222</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> "Obtulit carnem sapientibus carnem, per quam discerent sapere et spiritum." SSCC 6.I.3, SBO I, p. 27; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 33.

strives to pour herself out without restraint into the love and the sweetness of the bridegroom; and out of desire for his embrace of love and for the kiss of his knowledge now says: May he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.<sup>224</sup>

This basic idea of the kiss as sign of knowledge about God through the incarnation is further elaborated in Bernard's and William's later commentaries. William says, in his *Expositio*, that when the Word became flesh, God offered a kiss both to the Church and to the human soul. From his words, it becomes clear that the author sees the incarnation as an important condition for mankind to be able to gain spiritual understanding and mystical union:

Christ the bridegroom offered to his bride the church, so to speak, a kiss from heaven, when the Word made flesh drew so near to her that he wedded her to himself; and so wedded her that he united her to himself, in order that God might become man, and man might become God. He also offers this same kiss to the faithful soul, his bride, and imprints it upon her, when from the remembrance of the benefits common to all men, he gives her her own special and personal joy and pours forth within her the grace of his love, drawing her spirit to himself and infusing into her his spirit, that both may be one spirit.<sup>225</sup>

As has been noted in the first chapter (see pp. 16-17), Bernard compares, in his second sermon on the Song, the desire for the kiss with the longing of the patriarchs for the incarnation of Christ. However, Bernard makes a distinction between the union of divine and human nature in Christ, and the mystical union between God and the soul. Man can only ask for a kiss with the kiss of the mouth, and not for a kiss of the mouth, because the latter is the "prerogative of Christ, on whom uniquely and in one sole instance the mouth of the Word was pressed, that moment when the fullness of divinity yielded itself to him as the life of his body."<sup>226</sup> Thus, he seems to be slightly more cautious than William with regard to the sanctification of the human body. Bernard sees another association with the incarnation in the

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<sup>224</sup> "Quinimmo et ipse Deus ideo homo pro hominibus factus est, ut, qui Deum cogitare non nouerant, per eum quem nouerant, scilicet hominem, ad cogitandum et intelligendum Deum paulatim edocti ab ipso, rationalem mentis intelligentiam erigerent. [...] In omni enim carnali affectione nichil dulcius, nichil esse solet desiderabilius coniunctione sponsae ad sponsum; in spirituali uero, creati spiritus ad increatum. Ibi enim de duabus una caro, hic autem de duobus unus spiritus efficitur. Unde ducta similitudine de carnalibus ad spiritualia, de humanis ad diuina, describitur hic sponsus et sponsa, Christus et ecclesia, uel quaelibet sancta anima, quae [...] se super se effundere gestit in sponsi amorem et dulcedinem; et iam amplexum amoris eius et osculum notitiae eius desiderans: Osculetur me, inquit, osculo oris sui." BC IV, CC-CM 87, p. 159; transl. Turner 1995, pp. 281-282.

<sup>225</sup> "Sponsus uero Christus sponsae suae quasi osculum de caelo porrexit, cum Verbum caro factum in tantum ei appropinquauit, ut se ei coniungeret; in tantum coniunxit, ut uniret, ut Deus homo, homo Deus fieret. Ipsum etiam osculum fideli animae sponsae suae porrigit et imprimit, cum de memoria communium bonorum, priuatum ei et proprium commendans gaudium, gratiam ei sui amoris infundit, spiritum eius sibi adtrahens et suum infundens ei, ut inuicem unus spiritus sint." ESCC IV. 27, CC-CM 87, p. 33; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 25-26.

<sup>226</sup> "Hac ergo ratione sanctorum nemo dicere praesumebat: "Osculetur me ore suo", sed tantum: osculo oris sui, ipsi sane servantes praerogativam istam, cui singulariter semelque os Verbi impressum tunc est, cum ei se corporaliter plenitudo omnis Divinitatis indulsit." SSCC 2.II.3, SBO I, p. 10; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 10.



kiss of the feet, in the sixth sermon. The head represents Christ's divinity, the feet his human nature. With these feet, he steps into the mystic's soul: "With these very feet he finds his way into the souls of his lovers, tirelessly enlightening and searching the hearts and loins of the faithful."<sup>227</sup> This makes it clear that the incarnation makes it possible for the soul to come into contact with God. On the other hand, however, this union with the incarnate Christ, in the kiss of the feet, is only the first step towards ultimate mystical union: the final goal is achieving the kiss of the mouth, which stands for union with the divine nature of Christ.

The link between the kiss and the incarnation forms an important part of the reason why the kiss was deemed such an appropriate image for mystical union. The kiss can almost be seen as a justification for itself: in its connection with the incarnation, it shows the reader how to use the sensual language, such as the kiss, as a way to spiritual truths. Moreover, the kiss fitted in well with the preference of the Cistercians for a personal, affective relationship with the incarnate Word.

The kiss was also, in the commentaries, associated with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, as part of the Trinity, closely connected with the incarnation of the Word or the Son. The Spirit is the love bond between the Father and the Son, or, in the commentaries in the Song, the kiss given by the Father to the Son:

Upon this bed takes place that wonderful union and mutual fruition – of sweetness, and of joy incomprehensible and inconceivable event to those in whom it takes place – between man and God, the created spirit and the Uncreated. They are named Bride and Bridegroom, while words are sought that may somehow express in human language the charm and sweetness of this union, which is nothing else than the unity of the Father and the Son of God, their Kiss, their Embrace, their Goodness and whatever in that supremely simple Unity is common to both.<sup>228</sup>

This quotation is followed by a passage already quoted in the first chapter (see p. 25), where the kiss of lovers is compared to the union of the created and the uncreated spirit.<sup>229</sup> The Trinity was used as a model for many things on the human and material level. We have already seen in chapter two that the threefold division of the soul in memory, understanding

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<sup>227</sup> "His, inquam, pedibus devotas perambulat mentes, incessanter lustrans scrutansque corda et renes fidelium." SSCC 6.II.7, SBO I, p. 29; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 36.

<sup>228</sup> "In hoc siquidem fit coniunctio illa mirabilis, et mutua fruitio suavitatis, gaudiique incomprehensibilis, incogitabilis illis etiam in quibus fit, hominis ad Deum, creati spiritus ad increatum; qui sponsa dicuntur ac sponsus, dum verba quaeruntur quibus lingua hominis utcumque exprimi possit dulcedo et suavitas coniunctionis illius, quae non est alia quam unitas Patris et Filii Dei, ipsum eorum osculum, ipse amplexus, ipse amor, ipsa bonitas, et quicquid in unitate illa simplicissima commune est amborum". ESCC XX.91, CC-CM 87, p. 70; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 77-78.

<sup>229</sup> XX.91, CC-CM 87, p. 70.

and will could be compared to it. Also, the uses of the senses could be conceived of in relation to the Trinity; the relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object was the image of the object in the perceiver's mind. This image was comparable in function to the Holy Spirit, representing the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Spirit is very important for the relationship between the soul and God. He is the one who reveals both the Father and the Son to humankind. Thus, he performs the same function as the kiss, which is the contact between the Word and the soul.<sup>230</sup> Christ is the one who gives the soul a kiss, but the kiss is the Holy Spirit. William explains the union of the kiss in terms of the effusion of the Spirit: "[T]he created spirit pours itself out wholly into the Spirit who creates it for this very effusion; and the Creator Spirit infuses himself into it as he wills, and man becomes one spirit with God."<sup>231</sup>

Bernard devoted his eighth sermon to the kiss of the mouth, which is the Holy Spirit. His treatment of the subject is of special interest to us, because he makes a connection with the sense of taste by attributing the highest degree of sweetness to the kiss/Spirit: "Now, that mutual knowledge and love between him who begets and him who is begotten – what can it comprise if not a kiss that is utterly sweet, but utterly a mystery as well?"<sup>232</sup>

This comparison of the kiss with the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity certainly contributes to the appropriateness of the kiss as an image of mystical union. Just as the Holy Spirit unifies the Father and the Son, the kiss can unite the soul with God. The kiss is also connected to the image in sense perception, and thus connects the perceiver, the soul with its inner senses, with the object, which is God.

### III.3. The taste of the kiss

The two senses which are most connected with the kiss are touch and taste. The sense of touch will be discussed extensively in the next chapter. Here, the kiss will be treated as example of taste and sweetness, because taste has many connections with the theological concepts which have been discussed above.

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<sup>230</sup> BC VI, CC-CM 87, p. 162.

<sup>231</sup> "[C]reatus spiritus in hoc ipsum creanti eum Spiritui totum se effundit; ipsi uero creator Spiritus se infundit, prout uult, et unus spiritus homo cum Deo efficitur." ESCC XX.91, CC-CM 87, p. 70; transl. Hart 1970, p. 78.

<sup>232</sup> "Illa itaque mutua gignentis genitique cognitio pariter et dilectio, quid nisi osculum est suavissimum, sed secretissimum?" SSCC VIII.I.1, SBO I, p. 36; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 45.

As Mary Carruthers points out, sweetness was in the Christian tradition often used to give a positive moral evaluation. It was even commonly used to describe the goodness of God. However, it could also have a more ambivalent moral meaning, in connection with the Fall.<sup>233</sup> The fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil are sweet (*suave*). The tasting of this sweetness by Adam and Eve was a sin. This taste was committed through the mouth, just as God took this sin upon himself with the incarnation, compared with a kiss of the mouth. The act that drove God and man apart is quite similar to the act that brings God closer to the soul again. The most important difference is that Eve tasted the apple out of curiosity, which is the sin of directing the senses to the things of the world, while in the longing for the kiss the soul is purely focused on God.

Besides curiosity, through the Genesis story taste also became associated with the important Christian virtue of being able to discriminate between good and evil; the mouth can decide whether something tastes good or bad.<sup>234</sup> Connected with this is the ancient association between tasting and knowing. This is apparent from the derivation of the word *sapientia* from *sapiens*, which in its turn goes back to the verb *sapio*, designating both tasting and understanding, as Isidore of Seville pointed out.<sup>235</sup>

In the *Brevis commentatio*, the Word is described in terms of tasting. It is hardly possible to become satiated by the Word, because when its taste becomes better, the appetite increases.<sup>236</sup> Thus, the longing for the taste of the kiss becomes the soul's longing for union with the Word.

Sweetness was associated too with the sacrifice of Christ. This connection was very prominent in the hymn *Dulcis Jesu memoria*, the authorship of which is ascribed to Bernard.<sup>237</sup> The hymn opens as follows:

Sweet memory of Jesus,  
giving true joys to the heart,  
but above honey and all else  
is his sweet presence.

Nothing is sung more sweet,  
nothing heard more pleasant,

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<sup>233</sup> Carruthers 2006, pp. 999-1003.

<sup>234</sup> Fredrikson 2003, p. 65.

<sup>235</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive originum* X.240, ed. By Lindsay 1911, vol. 1. Cf. Carruthers 2006, p. 1003.

<sup>236</sup> "De sacramento enim uerbi Dei, uix est qui possit satiari. Gustare possumus, satiari non possumus; quia quanto sanior gustus, tanto ualidior appetitus." BC XXXI, CC-CM 87, p. 189.

<sup>237</sup> Fulton 2006, pp. 176-177.

nothing thought more sweet  
than Jesus, son of God.<sup>238</sup>

The monk was confronted with this association between Christ and sweetness every time he took part in the Eucharist and tasted the body of Christ. The sensual language of the Song might have stimulated him to use this experience as a stimulation for his inner senses.

#### III.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that some important questions with regard to the kiss and sensual languages as appropriate means to describe mystical union, can be clarified by taking into account the theological concepts to which they were related by the monks. Sensual language had a special appeal to the Cistercians, because they had need of an affective, personal relationship with God, which caused them to emphasize the bodily presence of the incarnate Jesus. Moreover, the incarnation sanctified the body as a way to knowing God. The kiss was explicitly associated with the incarnation and the Holy Spirit, both of which were in their turn connected to the possibilities of sense perception. I think that this new emphasis on the bodily presence of Christ in the incarnation in the twelfth century is important for our understanding of the popularity of the kiss and sensual language. It coincided with a more positive evaluation of the bodily senses, which we have examined in chapter two, and an emphasis on the longing for God's presence, which will be the subject of the next chapter. This examination of the theological framework with which the monks read the Song and the commentaries has shown why certain elements had an appeal to them, and why the tradition of inner senses and Song commentaries changed during the twelfth century.

Of course, the overview given in this chapter is not exhaustive. Other theological concepts, like baptism, can be related to the Song, and other senses, like smell, can be explained as appropriate to mystical union by relating them to elements of medieval theology. However, I hope to have highlighted the cases that were most relevant for the twelfth-century Cistercian monks who wrote and read the commentaries, and to have shown the fruitfulness of this approach.

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<sup>238</sup> "Dulcis Jesu memoria,/dans vera cordi gaudia,/sed super mel et omnia/eius dulcis presentia./ Nil canitur suavius./auditur nil iocundius,/nil cogitatur dulcius/quam Jesus Dei filius." *Dulcis Jesu memoria* 1-2, ed. and transl. by Deeming 2014, p. 35.

## **Chapter IV: Perceiving God's presence**

In this last chapter, I will focus on the question how and why sensual language, and especially the image of the kiss, was deemed suitable to describe God's presence to the mystic. I will examine how Bernard and William thought about the possibility to describe the perception of this presence, and I will treat how sensual language is used to indicate presence, absence, distance and proximity in the Song. Attention will be paid to the difference between the various senses. Were all five of the senses equally suitable to describe God's presence? What was the position of taste and touch, which occur in the image of the kiss? In answering these questions, I will be able to build on the findings of the previous chapters, which are connected with the perceiving of God's presence.

The experience of the presence of God is very much intertwined with the connection between inner and outer senses, treated in the second chapter. We have seen that in the commentaries from the twelfth century the senses no longer have to be mortified, but can be used to stimulate the inner senses with the goal of perceiving God. As we will see in this chapter, this new close relationship between inner and outer senses coincided with a more positive evaluation of the senses of taste and touch, which are especially suitable to describe God's presence.

The theological concepts, which were the subject of chapter three, are also in close connection with the presence of God. The possibility to perceive this presence is, as we have seen, closely connected with important events in salvation history, like creation and the incarnation. The incarnation is especially important for the perception of God's presence, because Christ's presence on earth made it possible for humans to actually see and touch him with their bodily senses. When Christ's bodily appearance was gone, people still longed to experience his presence, and used their inner senses to do so.

In this chapter, I will first examine the possibilities of describing the mystical experience of God's presence. To do so, I will ask the question whether Bernard's and William's commentaries can be said to belong to the tradition of positive mysticism, in which an abundance of descriptions and metaphors is used to describe God, or negative mysticism, in which it is believed that all words fail to describe God's presence. These concepts will be further explained in the first section. In section two, I will begin answering the question whether some senses were more suitable to describe the perception of God's presence than other. For this goal, I will introduce the traditional Christian hierarchy of the senses, which is sometimes used by Bernard and William. In order to gain a better understanding of the

ranking of senses, I will say more about the fundamental differences between the senses, or groups of senses. In the third section, I will show how the various senses are used to describe different degrees of proximity. It will become clear that the traditional hierarchy is sometimes referred to in the commentaries. In section four the two senses contained in the image of the kiss, touch and taste, will be treated more profoundly. In the fifth section, attention will be paid to the emphasis that is put in the commentaries on the process the mystic has to go through. The elaborate description of this process enables us to describe different degrees of proximity with the use of sensual language.

#### IV.1. Positive and negative mysticism

In the mysticism of Bernard and William, the mystic longs, as a bride, for the presence of God, the bridegroom. It is believed that it is possible to achieve union in this lifetime, and, to some extent, to describe this union with earthly images. This idea is not natural to all medieval mystics. We can roughly discern two different directions: cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) mysticism. According to the cataphatic mystics it is possible to describe the mystical experience. Positive qualities can be attributed to God, and an abundance of metaphors and images is used. Apophatic mystics, however, claim that nothing can be said about the experience of union with God, because it is, just as God himself, indescribable or *ineffable*; the Greek word *apophasis* means "the breakdown of speech". The apophatic tradition is strong within Christian mysticism; Denys Turner, who points at the Neo-platonic origin of this discourse, even claims that "the mediaeval mind thought of the 'mystical', that is to say the 'hidden' or 'secret', wisdom as being [...] a 'divinity' which is 'hidden' precisely *from* experience."<sup>239</sup> He points to pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth/sixth century) and Augustine as influential authors who stood at the foundation of an apophatic mysticism which was a synthesis of their Neo-platonic and Christian backgrounds.<sup>240</sup>

When we look at the twelfth-century commentaries on the Song, elements from both cataphatism and apophatism can be found. Turner argues that the concepts of "interiority", "ascent" and "oneness with God", which play an important role in the commentaries, are closely related to the negative tradition within mysticism.<sup>241</sup> However, the abundance of

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<sup>239</sup> Turner 1995b, p. 4.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-101.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibidem, passim*, esp. p. 1.

metaphors in cataphatic mysticism can be found in the commentaries too. Thus, Bernard and William cannot simply be subdivided into one of these groups. Both mystics describe the mystical experience, but at the same time state that God is *ineffable*. Both the apophatic and cataphatic tradition can be discerned in Bernard's statement that "[t]hough no one can be more intimately present to us, no one is more incomprehensible."<sup>242</sup> It seems that the unknowability of God and the description of his presence in sensual language go side by side in the commentaries.<sup>243</sup> Bernard and William did not think that the affective, sensual language of the Song was incompatible with their claim that God is incomprehensible. As I will show, the Song fits in very well with the two Cistercians' position in between apophatic and cataphatic mysticism, with its dialectics of the bride longing for the bridegroom while he is absent, and the descriptions of their union in affective terms.

#### IV.2. The traditional hierarchy of the senses

In the traditional ranking of the senses, seeing and hearing were regarded as the highest, most spiritual senses.<sup>244</sup> They could be used to see and hear the Word. Seeing, moreover, was connected with the divine light. After these two spiritual senses came smell and the lowest were taste and touch. As has been noted in chapter two, Origen, for example, regarded those senses as too base and earthly. Thus, in the Song's commentary tradition, taste and touch had not always been regarded as 'mystical senses', most suitable to describe the union with God.

In the twelfth century, this hierarchy still exists and can be found in the works of Bernard and William. In his *Discretio vitae et quinque sensibus animae* (*Sermon on the Life and the Five Senses of the Soul*), Bernard ranks spiritual vision, hearing and smell highest, because they allow the soul to perceive objects corporeally more remote from itself, like God, who is far removed from us. Spiritual taste and touch, on the other hand, only allow us to communicate with the human persons around us.<sup>245</sup> Thus, we can see that the ranking of the senses stands in close relationship with the distance between the soul and God, a distance which has to be overcome. When, as in Bernard's ranking in his sermons on the life and the five senses of the soul, God's remoteness is emphasized, the restrictions of the senses are

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<sup>242</sup> "[...] et nil eo prasentius, et nil incomprehensibilis." SSCC 4.III.4, SBO I, p. 20; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 24.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. McGinn 1994, pp. 207; 273-274.

<sup>244</sup> Fulton 2006, p. 190.

<sup>245</sup> Bernard, *Discretio vitae et quinque sensibus animae* 2-4, SC 496, pp. 226-232. Cf. Fulton 2006, p. 191; Rudy 2002, pp. 51-52.

pointed out, and taste and touch are regarded the lowest and least spiritual forms of sensory perception.

A useful contribution to the understanding of the distinction between the two groups of senses in relation to spatial distance is provided by the philosophical and biological distinction made by Hans Jonas between the so-called mediated and unmediated senses. The senses of taste and touch require direct contact between subject and object. They have to be in reaching distance to each other. This makes taste and touch unmediated senses, as opposed to the mediated senses of sight, hearing and smell. The latter group allows a subject to perceive of an object at a certain distance, by means of a medium other than the body, such as light or air.<sup>246</sup> As Gordon Rudy has shown, this modern distinction is very suitable to analyze medieval texts,<sup>247</sup> an opinion which is supported by the close resemblance between Jonas' division and Bernard's dichotomy in his *Discretio*.

Mary Carruthers has pointed out that, in the Aristotelian tradition, there was yet another way to distinguish these same two sets of senses. Vision, hearing, and smell were seen as the cerebral senses, all of which operate through the brain, while touch and taste both connect directly to the heart.<sup>248</sup> This classification might not be known to Bernard and William. There are, however, clues that they had a similar distinction in mind. The most affective descriptions of contact between the bride and bridegroom are the kissing and embracing in which touch and taste play an important role.

In the following, I will examine the hierarchy of the senses in the Cistercian commentaries more elaborately. As we will see, Bernard and William introduce a new ranking, which, in their works, coexists besides the traditional division in which taste and touch are the lowest senses. This new ranking is, as I will argue, closely connected to the spatial distance which is indicated by the different senses. In the next section, I will show how, in the commentaries, the distinction between the senses is used to describe different degrees of God's proximity.

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<sup>246</sup> Jonas 1982, *passim*.

<sup>247</sup> Rudy 2002, p.8.

<sup>248</sup> Carruthers 2006, p. 1004.



### IV.3. The senses and the degrees of proximity

In order to shed more light on the question what the relationship is between the senses and the perception of God's presence, I will now show how specific senses are used to describe different degrees of the distance between the soul and God. I will first treat some passages in which, according to the traditional hierarchy, sight is used to describe God's presence. Then, however, we will see that the traditional order of the senses can also be reversed in the commentaries.

William talks extensively about seeing when treating verse 2:9 of the Song: "See! He himself stands behind our wall, looking through the windows, peering through the lattices." In his commentary on this verse, he brings up many themes that are of interest to us in this chapter. William explains the verse as a description of the presence of God in spiritual union, emphasizing the sensory meaning of the word "see" (*en*): "'See!' expresses the sense of presence; 'he himself,' the joy of experience; 'stands,' the sweetness of fruition."<sup>249</sup> A bit further, William explains the bridegroom's looking through the wall:

But since through this thick wall of clay no way of contemplation opens to allow the bride to see the bridegroom, you, o desire of the soul, make yourself nevertheless direct windows in it through which you may look at her directly, and oblique lattices through which you may peer at her as it were covertly. [...] Through the windows, you look with approval at the bride's good deeds; through the lattices, you peer with pity at whatever in her has need of your mercy. Thus by first looking at her, you enable her to see you; by standing before her, you make her stable toward you; until he who pities and she who loves mutually draw near, and this encounter completely breaks down the enmity of sin, the intervening wall of separation. Then come mutual vision, mutual embrace, mutual joy and unity of spirit.<sup>250</sup>

This passage is of particular interest, because something unusual is described: the bridegroom, who is the desire of the soul, perceives his bride. In most parts of the commentaries, emphasis is laid on the bride, or the soul, who feels, tastes, smells, hears or sees God. The perceiving of God is treated as an indicator of his presence. Here, however, it is the bridegroom who sees

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<sup>249</sup> "*En* sensum sonat praesentiae; *ipse* gaudium experientiae; statio suavitatem fruitionis." ESCC XXXIII.152, CC-CM 87, p. 106; transl. Hart 1970, p. 127.

<sup>250</sup> "Sed cum per densum hunc parietem luti, nulla sponsae ad sponsam pateat uia contemplationis, tu tamen, o desiderium animae eius, tu tibi facis in eo fenestras rectas, per quas in directum eam aspicias; et cancellos obliquos, per quos quasi ex obliquo ei prospicias. [...] Per fenestras bona sponsae approbando aspicias; per cancellos ei in quibus misericordia indiget, miserando prospicis. Sicque tu prior uidens eam facis uidentem te, et stans illi stabilem facis tibi, donec miserantis et amantis mutua appropinquatio soluat omnino inimicitias peccati, medium maceriae diuidentis, et fiat mutuo uisio, mutuus amplexus, mutuuum gaudium, unus spiritus." ESCC XXXIII.152, CC-CM 87, p. 107; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 127-128.

the bride before she can see him. William uses this verse to make it clear that it is not solely the merit of the soul when she achieves union with God; he is the one who, with his divine grace, makes this union possible. This interpretation is supported by William's description of the mystical process, before ultimate union is achieved: "In the meantime, the bride sometimes goes over the wall not by herself but in you, O Lord her God; and she is admitted to clearer understanding, more perfect knowledge and sweeter love."<sup>251</sup> The spiritual process is presented here as quite passive. Mystical union may be initiated by the soul, but ultimately it is God who makes it possible.

Thus, in the Song's sensual language, it matters greatly who is the perceiver and who is the perceived. With this in mind, an important dimension of the image of the kiss comes forward: the kiss is given to the soul, who thus perceives God, but in the mutual touching of a kiss both giver and receiver feel something, one might reason. We will come back to this at the end of this chapter.

In the following, William compares verse 2:9 with the previous one: "Behold (*Ecce*), it is he! He comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills." In these two consecutive verses, he sees an increase in the degree of proximity between God and the soul:

"He" is someone pointed to outwardly, with one's finger, so to speak; but "he himself" glories in the bride herself and delights in her. "He" appears in the motion of leaps and bounds; "he himself" in the stability of the good soul. The interjection *En* – "See!" indicated closer proximity than *Ecce* – "Behold!" *Ecce* shows something that is perceptible to the senses, even though far away; but *En* points out something within hand's reach, or in hand.<sup>252</sup>

Here, the bridegroom's approach is equated with the soul's progress in achieving union with God. Although William associates both scenarios with the act of seeing, he adds the sense of touch to the moment where the bridegroom is nearest. First the bride could only see him coming; now she sees him from so close by that she could also touch him. This is a reversal of the traditional hierarchy of the senses; touch is treated here as indicating a higher degree of God's proximity than sight.

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<sup>251</sup> "Interim etiam aliquando non in se, sed in te domino Deo suo transgrediens murum, admittitur ad lucidius aliquid intelligendum, ad perfectius cognoscendum, ad dulcius amandum [...]. ESCC XXXIII.152, CC-CM 78, p. 107; transl. Hart 1970, p. 128.

<sup>252</sup> "Iste exterius quasi digito demonstratur; ipso in semetipsa sponsa gloriatur ac fruitur. Iste in saltuum siue transsaltuum motu; ipse in bonae mentis statu. "En" etiam coniunctio propinquius aliquid designat quam "ecce". Ecce enim demonstrat quicquid sensibus praesto est, quantumvis longe sit; en uero, quod prae manibus siue in manibus habetur." ESCC XXXIII.153, CC-CM 87, p. 107-108; transl. Hart 1970, p. 108.

Thus, this is an example of different senses indicating different degrees of proximity. Other senses than vision and touch can be used for this purpose too. Smell is often used to describe a rather low degree of closeness. In Bernard's 50th sermon on the Song, the author presents smell as inferior to taste in this respect, when he laments: "How long shall we smell and not taste, gazing toward the fatherland and not taking possession, sighing for it and saluting from afar?"<sup>253</sup> But smell is not only treated with this negative approach, as the absence of taste; smell can also be a strong stimulation for the mystical process, because it arouses the longing for the closeness of taste and touch. Bernard writes that "the odour of the spouse's outpoured oil rouses them [the maidens] to taste and feel that the Lord is sweet."<sup>254</sup> Here, as in most of the commentaries and in the image of the kiss, emphasis is laid not on the achieving of mystical union, but on the desire for it, the mystical process. This will be the subject of section five. Both the negative and positive approach of the smell occur in William's commentary on verse 1:4: "Draw me after you; we will run into the fragrance of your perfumes":

Behold her now weary and ready to faint, and needing to be drawn – unless the fragrance of him whom she no longer sees still draws her and leads her to run. This is why she says: "We will run into the fragrance of your perfumes!" As if she said: even though at the present moment I am not deserving of the joy of your countenance or the kiss of your mouth, at least do not withdraw from me the fragrance of your perfumes. For the presence of the bridegroom is memory well-disposed toward him; it is intelligence enlightened by the light of his countenance; and it is the unction of the Holy Spirit teaching the soul concerning all things. The fragrance of perfumes which vanish with him is a certain impression, still living in the memory, of vanished sweetness and, in what thought still recaptures, the joy of dwelling on the remembrance of consolation once possessed.<sup>255</sup>

From this passage, it becomes clear that fragrance can refer to God's presence in mystical union both in the past and in the future. It is the memory of the sweetness of God's presence, but also the promise of that same sweetness when mystical union will be achieved. This passage highlights the importance of memory in the mystical process; it is the place where

<sup>253</sup> "[Q]uousque odoramus et non gustamus, prospicientes patriam et non apprehendentes, suspirantes et de longe salutantes?" SSCC 50.III.8, SBO II, p. 83; transl. Walsh 1979, p. 37.

<sup>254</sup> "Habet oleum effusum sponsa, ad cuius illae excitantur odorem, gustare et sentire quam suavis est Dominus." SSCC 19.III.7, SBO I, p. 112; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 144.

<sup>255</sup> "Vide iam lassam et deficientem et egentem trahi, nisi quod odor eius, quem iam non uidet, adhuc eam trahit, et currere facit. Vnde et dicit: *In odorem unguentorum tuorum curremus*. Ac si dicat: Etsi interim non mereor gaudium uultus tui, uel oculi oris tui, saltem odorem mihi ne subtrahas unguentorum tuorum. Sponsi enim praesentia bene affecta de ipso memoria est, et mens lumine uultus eius illuminata, et unctio Spiritus sancti docens de omnibus; odor unguentorum cum eo abeuntium sensus quidam est adhuc memoriae inhaerens abeuntium suauitates, et in reliquiis cogitationis festiua memoria de recordatione habitae consolationis." ESCC VI.40, CC-CM 87, pp. 39-40; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 33-34.

one can find God's presence (see chapter two, p. 35). Again, we can see that one of the unmediated senses, taste, is used to indicate a higher degree of proximity than one of the mediated senses, smell. It is also of interest that intelligence is associated with sight ("the light of his countenance"), while the taste of sweetness is treated in a more affective context.

Touch is used to describe the presence of God as well. The three senses of touch, smell and taste are treated in the context of presence and absence by the author of the *Brevis commentatio*. While touch is associated with presence, smell is again connected with a lower degree of proximity, but also with a promise of presence in the future, because it provides an example which can be followed in order to come in the presence of the Word:

We can see here three elements in the breasts of the bridegroom: touch, smell and taste. Touch in the mildness of the ointment, smell, in the fragrance of the oil, taste in the wine. Touch is given to those who are present in the Word; smell to those who are absent, as example; taste to the bridegroom, by whom is signified the good intention of the spirit.<sup>256</sup>

There are various elements which contribute to the senses in general being appropriate to describe the presence of God. One of the reasons can be found in the theory of the inner and outer senses, which has been described in chapter two. Just as the senses unite body and soul, the spiritual senses unite the soul and God. Moreover, in sense perception knower and known become one. Thus, union with God is like sensory perception.<sup>257</sup> But, as we have seen, this is not merely an analogy; the senses help the soul to reach God by stimulating the spiritual perception of the inner man.

Another reason for the suitability of sensual language to describe God's presence has been treated in chapter three. When God was incarnated and walked upon the earth, he was present to humankind and could be seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. Before God became human, men longed for the presence of his human body, and when his bodily presence was no longer on the earth men longed, with a sanctified body, to perceive his presence again.

We have now seen that the different senses could be used to describe the process of approaching God's presence, or to distinguish between those who are already close to him and those who are yet far removed. In this usage of the senses, sometimes the traditional hierarchy

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<sup>256</sup> "Tria hic uidemus in uberibus sponsae: tactum, odoratum, et gustum. Tactum in lenitate unctionis, odorem in unguenti fragrantia, gustum in uino. Tactus praesentibus in uerbo; odoratus absentibus in exemplo; gustus sponso, per quem signatur bona mentis intentio." BC XII, CC-CM 78, p. 169; my own translation.

<sup>257</sup> Cf. McGinn 2012, p. 194.

is maintained, but we have also seen examples in which taste and touch denote the closest proximity to God. We will proceed with the special case of the kiss, which was deemed the most suitable image for describing the presence of God. The kiss consists, mostly, of the senses of tasting and touching. The sense of taste has been extensively studied in chapter three. Here, the emphasis will lay on explaining the sense of touch in relation to God's presence. However, because taste was sometimes regarded as a form of touching, as we will see, I will take this sense into consideration as well when relevant.

#### IV.4. Touch

In twelfth-century mysticism, as we have seen, something interesting happens. The traditional order of the senses still exists, but besides it a new ranking emerges, in which taste and touch are regarded as the most elevated senses. That both hierarchical orders can exist side by side is proven by the fact that the authors advance both of them.

Bernard has provided a theoretical explanation for the traditional ranking of the senses, which has been treated in section two. He does not provide such a theory in which taste and touch are the highest senses. It is, however, apparent that he sees those senses as very important for the mystical process. One indication for this is his extensive use of tactile language. In sermon 28, for example, Bernard says that only those who truly believe may dare to touch. He puts the following words into Christ's mouth: "Become beautiful and then touch me; live by faith and you are beautiful. In your beauty you will touch my beauty all the more worthily, with greater felicity. You will touch me with the hand of faith, the finger of desire, the embrace of love; you will touch me with the mind's eye."<sup>258</sup> Thus, touch is connected to faith. In sermon 76 Bernard talks about how faith can find what intellect fails to find:

[D]o not let that unapproachable brightness and glory hold you back from seeking him or make you despair of finding him. [...] How can faith fail to find him? It reaches what is unreachable, makes known what is unknown, grasps what cannot be measured, plumbs the uttermost depths, and in a way even encompasses eternity itself in its wide embrace.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> "Esto formosa, et tange me; esto fidelis, et formosa es. Formosa formosum et dignius tanges, et felicius. Tanges manu fidei, desiderii digito, devotionis amplexu; tanges oculo mentis." SSCC 28.IV.10, SBO I, pp. 198-199; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 96.

<sup>259</sup> "[N]ec te illa inaccessibleis claritas vel sublimatas a quaerendo deterreat, ab inveniundo desperet. [...] Quid non inveniatur fides? Attingit inaccessa, deprehendit ignota, comprehendit immensa, apprehendit novissima, ipsam

This passage is of special interest in the light of Bernard's position between apophatic and cataphatic mysticism. Sight is connected to the fact that God is *ineffable*, but Bernard shows how faith can be used to reach the incomprehensible God. Moreover, Rudy interprets the language Bernard uses to describe this as tactile: *atingere, deprehendere* and *comprehendere*.<sup>260</sup>

Largier signals this shift from the traditional patristic and medieval emphasis on sight to a new emphasis on taste and touch from the twelfth century onwards, and calls this a “tournant tactile”.<sup>261</sup> He thinks that this new emphasis on touch was connected with a monastic spiritual tradition that tried to bridge the gap between interiority and exteriority. As we have seen in chapter two, this was indeed something with which Bernard and William were concerned. Largier does not limit the group of authors who emphasize the sense of touch to those belonging to the Cistercian order. Instead, he states that the importance of touch is mostly found in works of authors who can be said to belong to affective mysticism, inspired by the Song: Hugh (ca. 1096-1141) and Richard (†1173) of St. Victor, Carthusian authors like Denys the Carthusian (1402-1471) and Franciscans such as Bonaventure (1217-1274).<sup>262</sup> This connection between the sense of touch and love mysticism is of special interest with regard to the image of the kiss. The kiss is an instance of touching, and also one of the most affective images that can be found in the Song. It would be interesting to know whether touch gained importance because of the popularity of the Song's kiss, or whether it was the other way around. However, the question is probably impossible to answer with certainty, for lack of explicit theorizing by the medieval authors.

Thus, Largier places Bernard and William at the start of a tradition in which taste and touch were positively evaluated as senses to describe mystical union. Besides the authors mentioned above, also late medieval mystics writing in the vernacular, like Mechtild of Magdeburg (ca. 1207-ca. 1282/1294), Henry Suso (†1366) and John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) placed themselves in this tradition.<sup>263</sup> Largier is not the only one who sees the Cistercian authors as the beginning of a new tradition; Bernard McGinn presents them as forerunners of late medieval mysticism,<sup>264</sup> and Gordon Rudy places Bernard at the start of a

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denique aeternitatem suo illo vastissimo sinu quodammodo circumcludit." SSCC 76.III.6, SBO II, p. 258; transl. Edmonds 1980, pp. 114-115.

<sup>260</sup> Rudy 2002, p. 57.

<sup>261</sup> Largier 2005, p. 236.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241.

<sup>264</sup> McGinn 2012, *passim*.

tradition to which Hadewijch (13th century), Bonaventure, the Franciscan Rudolf of Biberach (1270-1330) and Ruysbroeck belong.<sup>265</sup> Both authors see, just as Largier, a connection between the emphasis in taste and touch in this tradition and the close connection between inner and outer senses.

So far, we have established that in the twelfth century, sensual language is used in a new way to describe God's presence. The various senses were used to describe different degrees of proximity to God. Sometimes the traditional hierarchy of the senses was used, but alongside a new order arose, in which taste and touch were considered to be the highest senses, which could denote the presence of God. In the next section, I will show why the Cistercian authors needed such a distinction between the senses, to represent different stages of the mystical process.

#### IV.5. The mystical process

We have seen that the Song's sensual language is very suitable to describe the presence, absence, proximity and distance of God. It was important for the authors of the commentaries to have language at hand that enabled them to denote all these things, because the Song is not just about the presence of God. Union with God is the ultimate end of the mystic, but the Song and its twelfth-century commentaries are more about the process and the desire than about the goal that can be achieved. Even the image of the kiss, which is the sign of union between the soul and the Word, is used in the context of a longing; the bride asks to be kissed, but has not yet received this divine kiss.

One of the best examples of this emphasis on spiritual development towards mystical union is the tripartite division of the kiss in a kiss of the feet, of the hands and of the mouth, which occurs in the *Brevis Commentatio* and Bernard's sermons, as has been noted on chapter one (pp. 12-13 and 17-19). The mystical process is clearly mirrored in the sequence of the three kisses; the feet stand for conversion, and can be kissed by the beginner; the hand is kissed by someone who has made some progress, and the mouth forms the last step of perfection. These three stages are described in terms of spatial distance. The feet are furthest away, and in order to be able to reach God's mouth, first the intermediate step of the hand has to be taken. The spiritual process towards mystical union is described as climbing up, with essential intermediary steps which are explained elaborately.

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<sup>265</sup> Rudy 2002, *passim*.

The spiritual process of the mystic receives extensive attention from William as well. Patrick Ryan explains how William, in many of his works, describes the experience of God in three stages. First, the human person looks, in a movement upwards, to God. Then there is a movement back to himself, in which he contemplates his own humanity and the desire and love of the human person seeking God. Finally, he looks up to God again, in desire and in love.<sup>266</sup> Just as with Bernard's three kisses, the mystic has to take three steps, which are indispensable. The importance of the second step is emphasized by William in his commentary on verse 1:8 of the Song:

Next comes this: "If you know not yourself, O fairest among women, go forth and depart, following after the steps of the flocks. As if to say: What you ask me to show you, this you know; but you know not yourself. For you suppose you know me not, because you know not yourself. And you know not yourself because you have gone forth from yourself. [...] Know yourself, then, to be my image; thus you can know me, whose image you are, and you will find me within you."<sup>267</sup>

The second step, contemplation of the own human nature, is here connected to man being an image of God. This bond ensures the possibility of knowing and perceiving God.

A useful contribution to the understanding of the presence and absence of God in Bernard's sermons is offered by Burcht Pranger, who has thoroughly examined this theme as it occurs in the 23th sermon on the Song, commenting on verse 1:3 of the Song: "The king has brought me into his rooms." Pranger emphasizes the dynamic nature of the text, in which words of movement, such as *currere* (to run) and *trahere* (to draw) play an important role.<sup>268</sup> This dynamic language is intertwined with sensual language, as can be seen in this passage, which is mostly written from the viewpoint of the bride's companions:

The king has brought me into his rooms. This is where the fragrance comes from, this is the goal of our running. She said that we must run, drawn by that fragrance, but did not specify our destination. So it is to these rooms that we run, drawn by the fragrance that issues from them. The bride's keen senses have been quick to detect it, so eager is she to experience it in all its fullness.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Ryan 2005, p. 164. He treats two specific passages: William of St. Thierry, *Meditatio* 3.6-8, SC 324, pp. 62-78; and William of St. Thierry, *Speculum fidei* 26-30, SC 301.

<sup>267</sup> "Sequitur: Si ignoras te, pulchra inter mulieres, egredere, et abi post uestigia gregum. Ac si dicat: Quae indicari tibi petis a me, non ignoras, sed scire te ignoras. Idcirco enim uideris tibi ignorare me, quia ignoras te. Ideo ignoras te, quia egressa es a te. [...] Sed cognosce te, quia imago mea es, et sic poteris nosse me, cuius imago es, et penes te inuenies me." ESCC XII.59-60, CC-CM 78, pp. 49-50; transl. Hart 1970, pp. 50-51.

<sup>268</sup> Pranger 1994, pp. 55-60.

<sup>269</sup> "Introduxit me Rex in cellaria sua. Ecce unde odor, ecce quo curritur. Dixerat quia currendum, et in quo currendum; sed quo currendum esset non dixerat. Ergo ad cellaria curritur, et curritur in odore qui ex ipsis



In the following, Bernard says that the bride runs faster and arrives earlier, because her love is more vehement. The passage is of special interest because sensual language, language of spatial distance and different spiritual stages are linked to each other. The bride is more spiritually advanced than her companions. She is described as having keen senses and overcoming the distance toward God's presence faster. Pranger talks of an interaction between presence and absence, which is the leitmotif for this sermon.<sup>270</sup>

This emphasis on the process and longing for union may partly be explained by Bernard's and William's mysticism, which contains elements of both apophatic and cataphatic mysticism. An elaborate, discursive account of the blessed state of union is, in their view, not possible. Thus, more emphasis is put on the way towards this state, which can be described, and on the more affective features of achieving union with God. Spiritual development is described in terms of a passionate longing for the kiss. Bernard emphasizes this affective nature of the process when he says that "[i]t is desire that drives me on, not reason."<sup>271</sup> Kingma associates this tradition of affective mysticism with a positive evaluation of the body, which can be attributed to the Cistercians, as has been shown in chapter two.<sup>272</sup>

Something which is related to the emphasis on the mystical process and the use of words to denote different degrees of proximity is the longing for the real presence of God in person, as opposed to the showing of his presence through something or someone else. Above, we have already seen that when William comments upon the Song's verse 2:9, he associated the words "he himself" (*ipse*) with the joy of experience. He says more on the subject of the presence of the real person of God:

Here it should be noted that when the bride saw him coming she said: "Behold, it is he!" And now that she sees him approaching her she says: "Behold it is he himself." In other words, this is he in person, for he is he who is; he no longer shows himself to me in a prophet, an angel or an apostle; but beyond the glass and the riddle, he shows himself, to a certain extent, in himself.<sup>273</sup>

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procedit, sponsa illum solita sua sagacitate praesentiente, et cupiente in ipsius plenitudinem introduci." SSCC 23.I.1, SBO I, p. 138; transl. Walsh 1976, p. 25.

<sup>270</sup> Pranger 1994, p. 57.

<sup>271</sup> "Desiderio feror, non ratione." SSCC 9.II.2, OSB I, p. 43; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 54.

<sup>272</sup> Kingma 1990, p. 80.

<sup>273</sup> "Vbi notandum quod, cum uideret uenientem, *Ecce*, inquit, *iste*; et cum uideret appropinquantem, *En*, inquit, *ipse*; hoc est iste ipse est; quia est qui est, non in propheta, non in angelo, non in apostolo, sed supra speculum et aenigma se mihi exhibens aliquatenus in semetipso." ESCC XXXIII. 151, CC-CM 78, p. 106; transl. Hart 1970, p. 126.

The subject of God in person versus his ministers is also raised with regard to the kiss. The bride longs for the kiss of her bridegroom, not the kiss of a stranger, which is the kiss of knowledge:

But why does she say, "Let him kiss me," as if he were absent, and not rather, "Kiss me"? It seems that in the storerooms she had striven much to see him face to face and as he is, and to know him even as she was known by him—which is the kiss of perfection. And it seems that the bridegroom, by the agency of the prophets, apostles and other doctors, by the knowledge of the Scriptures, had offered her, so to speak, sundry kisses of his grace; then, as though satisfaction had been given her, he withdrew and departed. She at once began to complain, as one chides the absent, impatiently calling after him and crying: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!" Just as if she said: How long must I put up with these alien kisses of knowledge that adds to my sorrow? Even though I deserve not that kiss of perfection or any other, before he withdraws from me, let him grant me the kiss of his mouth. A kiss that is passed on is, indeed, good; but it seems not to retain the full strength of its charm when it is transferred from vessel to vessel. What his ministers bring gives knowledge; but what the breath of his mouth and of his kiss inspires, gives savour; and it will give full savour when my joy in him shall be full.<sup>274</sup>

In this passage, the kisses of the ministers, which are knowledge, are contrasted with the more affective kiss of God himself. Once again, a preference for an affective approach to God is given, and it is described in terms of the tasting of the kiss.

In Bernard's commentary, similar ideas can be found. In his second sermon, for example, he connects the real presence of God with the incarnation, stating that man longed for the presence of his human body, like the bride longs for the kiss. Man has enough of the words of the prophets and asks for his real presence:

But he, the one whom they proclaim, let him speak to me, "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." I have no desire that he should approach me in their person, or address me with their words, for they are a watery darkness, a dense cloud; rather in his own person let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth; let him

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<sup>274</sup> "*Osculetur me osculo oris sui*. Quare autem "osculetur", tamquam de absente, et non potius "osculare"? Videtur in cellariis multum eam adnissam fuisse, ut facie ad faciem, et sicuti est, eum uideret ac cognosceret, sicut ipsa est cognita ab eo, quod est osculum perfectionis. Sponsum uero per prophetarum siue apostolorum caeterorumue doctorum ministeria, per scientiam scripturarum, uaria ei quasi oscula gratiae suae porrexisset, sicque quasi satisfacto ei recessisse et abisse; illam uero iam quasi de absente conqueri impatienterque post eum clamare ac dicere: *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*. Ac si dicat: Quousque mihi aliena oscula scientiae apponentis dolorem? Etsi non mereor osculum illud perfectionis, uel aliquod mihi, priusquam a me recedat, indulgeat osculum oris sui. Bonum quidem est osculum transmissum, sed gratiae suae non plenam retinere uidetur uirtutem, de uase in uas transfusum. Innotescit quod infert minister eius, sed sapit quod inspirat spiritus oris uel osculi eius. Quod tunc sapiet ad plenum, cum in ipso erit gaudium meum plenum." ESCC IV.33, CC-CM 78, pp. 35-36; transl. Hart 1970, p. 29.

whose presence is full of love, from whom exquisite doctrines flow in streams, let him become a spring inside me, welling up to eternal life.<sup>275</sup>

We have now seen that in the commentaries emphasis is laid on the mystical process, which is affective of nature. In this process the mystic strives for the presence of the real person of God, instead of his intermediaries. To describe this longing, the image of the bride asking for the kiss of the mouth is used. The kiss itself is the image of the ultimate state of blessed union. Although the process is described more elaborately than this state of union, we are able to say something about the kiss as image for this blessed state.

In the commentaries, sensual language is mostly used to denote the soul perceiving God. However, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, there are some cases in which God is the one who perceives the soul. In the act of kissing, as is the case with all forms of touching and tasting, we can speak of an immediate, direct contact in which both parties sense something; they are both at the same time subject and object. Thus, they fuse into a state of complete union. This is described by William, in a passage quoted above, as "mutual vision, mutual embrace, mutual joy and mutual spirit."

The author of the *Brevis Commentatio* addresses this special feature of the kiss when he writes about the Trinity and the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father's turning towards the Son "is in a kiss and embrace. The kiss is a mutual recognition, the embrace a mutual love."<sup>276</sup> This kiss and embrace is the Holy Spirit. However, this mutual recognition of the kiss is, according to the author, reserved for God only. Humans cannot hope to touch God:

And so we say of him to whom the Son, through the Holy Spirit, has made this revelation that God kissed him not with his mouth, but with the kiss of his mouth. We do not touch his mouth: rather we are touched by his kiss. We are touched by the kiss when we are filled with love and knowledge. We do not touch his mouth, for that would be to possess his self-understanding.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> "Ipse, ipse, quem loquuntur, ipse loquatur; ipse me osculetur osculo oris sui. Non in eis iam aut per eos loquatur mihi, quoniam tenebrosa aqua in nubibus aeris; sed ipse me osculetur osculo oris sui, cuius gratiosa praesentia et admirandae fluentia doctrinae fiant in me fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternam." SSCC 2.I.2, SBO I, p. 9; transl. Walsh 1971, p. 9.

<sup>276</sup> "Conuersio autem ista est in osculo et amplexu. Osculum est mutua de se cognitio; amplexus est mutua dilectio." BC VI, CC-CM 78, p. 161; transl. Turner 1995, p. 284.

<sup>277</sup> "Cui igitur Filius per Spiritum reuelat, non dicendus est osculari ore suo Deus, sed osculo oris sui. Non enim os tangimus, sed osculo tangimur. Osculo tangimur, cum amor et cognitio nobis infunditur. Non os tangimus, id est mutuum illum intellectum." BC VI, CC-CM 78, p. 161; transl. Turner 1995, p. 284. See also chapter 1, p. 12.

Bernard says something similar in his eighth sermon, as has been noted in the first chapter (see pp. 19-20). The kiss is common to the kisser and the kissed, but this kiss is the privilege of the Father and the Son; the soul can only hope to receive the kiss of the mouth, which is the Holy Spirit.

Thus, it seems that the potential of the image of the kiss for denoting ultimate union between God and the soul is not always fully exploited. For the Cistercians, with their ideal of humility, there has to be some hierarchical distance between God and the soul, even in the state of mystical union. I hope, however, to have shown how the image of the kiss, as an instance of sensual language of touching and tasting, was very appropriate for Bernard and William to describe the affective process of mystical union between the soul and God. In the following section, I will touch upon the influence of this new emphasis on the kiss and the sense of touch in the visual arts.

#### IV.6. The image of the kiss

As has been noted in section four, the emphasis on touch was very influential in the writings of late medieval mystics, a subject which has already been well researched.<sup>278</sup> It would also be interesting to know what impact the sensual language of the Song, filled with images, had on medieval visual culture. In the context of my research, I am specifically interested in the representation of the image of the kiss in art. An interesting case might be to examine illustrations of the kiss in Song commentaries. However, in the time of Bernard and William the Cistercians produced few visual artworks, including manuscript illustration. Therefore, I have chosen to treat an image from a later time and a different context, in which we might see a trace of the influence of the emphasis on the sense of touch.

The image which I am going to discuss is a frontispiece of a manuscript dated in the last quarter of the twelfth century, of which the possible provenance is the German Benedictine monastery Benediktbeuern (fig. 1). The manuscript contains several texts of Honorius of Autun, among which a commentary on the Song. In this commentary, the bride and bridegroom are interpreted as Christ and the Church, and thus the commentary does not seem to stand in the tradition of Cistercian mystical commentaries. The frontispiece, however, suggests otherwise.

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<sup>278</sup> Largier 2005, pp. 241-242; McGinn 2012, *passim*; Rudy 2002, pp. 67-119.

In the images, four verses of the Song, three of which involve touching, are depicted in one scene. In a building, the bridegroom and bride are sitting enthroned and crowned as king and queen, after the usage of eastern marriage ritual.<sup>279</sup> The bride holds a book in which can be read the first verse of the Song: *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*. The bridegroom embraces his bride with his right arm. Where his hand touches her shoulder, we read: *dextera illius amplexabitur me*, the second half of verse 2:6. The first half of the verse, *Leva eius sub capite meo*, is found at his left hand, with which he reaches outside through a window and touches the head of another depiction of the bride, yet uncrowned. She is resting under an apple tree, according to verses 8:5, written on the tree: *sub arbore malo suscitavi te*. In her hand she holds the text of verse 5:4: *Manum suam dilectus meus misit per foramen et ad tactum eius intremuit venter meus*. In this frontispiece, a hierarchy of touching seems to be applied, corresponding with the mystical process of the soul seeking union with God.<sup>280</sup> The soul was asleep at first, but when she has been awakened she is touched by Christ's left hand. His right hand is preserved for the soul which is more advanced in the spiritual life, and already sits besides Christ as bride. However, ultimate union is not yet achieved; the bride still asks for the kiss, and they are not depicted kissing.

This image can also be interpreted within the context of the bride as Church.<sup>281</sup> However, I do think it is striking that the sense of touch plays such a prominent role in both the inscriptions and the composition. This implies that touch was regarded as an acceptable and esteemed sense, suitable to be the central theme of an illustration of a commentary on the Song. The Cistercians' emphasis on touch and the kiss might have contributed to the new status of this sense.



Fig. 1: The bride and bridegroom, München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms. lat. 4450, fol. 1v, end of twelfth century (provenance of image: Decorte 1994, p. 228).

<sup>279</sup> Decorte 1994, p. 228.

<sup>280</sup> This image is also interpreted in the context of the soul in Decorte 1994, p. 228.

<sup>281</sup> Stuttgart 1977, p. 565.

#### IV.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that sensual language was very suitable for the cataphatic descriptions in the Cistercian commentaries. The hierarchy of the senses could be used to describe different stages of the mystical process, indicating different degrees of God's proximity. Not only presence, but also absence could be indicated by sensual language; as we have seen, for example, smell could stand for a vanished sweetness, the absence of the taste of God's presence. This could have appealed to the apophatic elements in Bernard's and William's thinking; God's unknowability could be expressed in terms of the absence of sensory experience.

The traditional hierarchy of the senses was based on their shortcomings. Taste and touch were ranked lowest because they failed the capacity to overcome the distance toward God. The new hierarchy, which we can see in the commentaries alongside the traditional ranking, the capacity of the senses is evaluated more positively. We can see, hear and smell God over quite a distance, but when we describe his taste and touch, it is clear that we are in his presence. This new order of the senses, which coincided with the close relationship between inner and outer senses described in chapter two, was very influential for the mysticism of the following centuries.

In the image of the kiss, taste and touch are united. Thus, it is a very appropriate image to describe God's immediate presence. Those who receive the kiss of the mouth are so close to him that they experience the taste and touch of the kiss. The emphasis in the commentaries on the mystical process can, however, be seen in the fact that the kiss is not so much used to describe the state of union, but rather the longing for that state. The bride desires the presence of the bridegroom, by asking "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth".

## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to show why the image of the kiss was, for Bernard and William, such an appropriate image to describe mystical union. In the first chapter we have seen what the authors themselves have said about the kiss. From this, three important themes have been selected, of which a further examination in the following three chapters, provided more context to understand the image of the kiss as sign of mystical union.

In the second chapter, I have placed the kiss within the context of the theory of the spiritual senses. As we have seen, scholarship is divided between those who see in the commentaries a strict separation between inner and outer senses, in the tradition of Origen, and those who see a new relationship between inner and outer senses arising in the twelfth century, in which the outer senses can serve as a stimulus for the spiritual senses. The key passage in support of this last viewpoint is one from William's commentary, in which he described the kiss as "a certain outward loving union of bodies, sign and incentive of an inward union. It is produced by use of the mouth and aims, by mutual exchange, at a union not only of bodies but of spirits."<sup>282</sup> I think it is no coincidence that the kiss is used to express a positive relation between inner and outer senses. The union designated by the kiss was something which could only be attained by the spiritually advanced, who are able to put their bodily senses at the service of spiritual union. The image of the kiss is not only a description of that union, but forms also a stimulus for the inner senses that will help to reach the state of union with God. Moreover, we have seen that the emotions play an important role in the connection between the inner and outer man; they form a bridge between body and spirit. The affective image of the kiss is, thus, very suitable to describe this connection.

In the third chapter, sensual language has been placed within the context of the theological concepts that were important to the Cistercians. I have shown the connection between the Cistercians' need for affective images, their emphasis on the bodily presence of the incarnate Christ, specifically associated with the kiss, and their use of sensual language. We have also seen that the possibility and necessity of the senses as a way to God can be found in salvation history. The preference for the sense of taste can, as I have shown, partly be explained by its connection with some of the most important theological concepts, like the Eucharist.

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<sup>282</sup> "Osculum amica quaedam et exterior coniunctio corporum est, interioris coniunctionis signum et incentiuum. Quod oris ministerio exhibetur, ut non tantum corporum, sed ex mutuo contactu etiam spirituum coniunctio fiat." ESCC 27, CC-CM 87, p. 33; transl. Hart 1970, p. 25.

The fourth chapter focused on the senses as indicators of God's presence. I have shown that the use of different senses could denote different degrees of the distance toward God. In the commentaries, we can see a new preference for the senses of taste and touch, which denote a very high degree of God's presence. This new hierarchy can be connected to the closer relationship between inner and outer senses and also with the Cistercians' emphasis of the bodily presence of Christ, which could be touched and tasted in the Eucharist. This new potential of the senses of taste and touch to denote God's presence can be seen as an important reason why the image of the kiss became so popular in the twelfth century.

To sum up, some essential new elements arose in the spirituality of the twelfth century, which formed a stimulus for the popularity of the image of the kiss: a close relationship between inner and outer senses, a new hierarchy of the senses, and emphasis on an affective relationship with God, the incarnation and the experience of God's immediate presence. These elements all have to do with an appreciation of the body and an affective approach to God. I think we can say that these new elements in twelfth-century mysticism have also contributed to the popularity of the Song in general. The Song, in its turn, with its abundance of sensual images, provided an impulse for the description of mystical union in sensual terms. We cannot say with certainty whether the Song inspired the new use of sensual language, or whether it was the other way around, but whichever was the first, I think we can say that they have strengthened each other in the twelfth century. This resulted in new, original mystical texts, which formed a great inspiration for mystics in the centuries that followed. Moreover, the personal descriptions of the experience of God's presence in the beautiful language of the Song are still appreciated by many today.

Thus, I have shown why the kiss was deemed an appropriate image for mystical union for the Cistercian authors. It would be interesting to examine to what extent my conclusions are also valid for other authors writing in the twelfth century, such as the Victorines. My examination of the frontispiece depicting the bride and bridegroom has already shown that the new elements in the thinking of Bernard and William were not limited to the Cistercians, but were continued in the broader monastic culture of the century. A comprehensive study of the Song's kiss in the twelfth century, including not only written commentaries, but images and the relation with the concept of the kiss of peace in liturgy as well, would be a great contribution to the scholarship on Song commentaries, the spiritual senses and medieval mysticism in general. With this thesis, I have given a first contribution to this, and hopefully an incentive to further research.



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