

# PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND CRITICAL DISTANCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SPIRITUAL TEXTS

*Edward Howells*

**A**S SOMEONE WHO TEACHES Christian spirituality in a university, I meet students who are concerned to bring together the kind of critical methods that they learn in their studies with the experience and practice of their faith. They come with a desire to study academic discussions and methods, not for their own sake, but for how these might help them and others to grow spiritually.

The subjects that I teach involve classic texts, figures and ideas from the history of Christian spirituality. The question arises of how to study historical material in a way that is open to experience today, without either distorting it or losing touch with its original reality. There are two main risks. On the one hand, there is the danger of manipulating the texts to fit current preoccupations and agendas, to the extent that the original inspiration is lost; while on the other hand, a slavish literalism and attention to historical detail can, just as seriously, lose touch with the experience of the spirituality. This problem is not new but perennial; indeed, every time we think about how to interpret any text, we must strike a balance between immediate engagement and critical distance. Most often we alternate between the two, at one time finding a deep personal engagement and at another stepping back to ask about the history, the context, details about the author and so on. My purpose here is to suggest some ways to bridge the gap between personal engagement and critical distance, to find a balance which is both experiential and critical at once.

I remember that when I started studying theology as an undergraduate, I decided to keep what I learnt in the classroom and what I heard in church in two separate compartments in my mind. I could not cope with the sheer volume of criticism that the study of theology seemed to direct at the things I believed and practised spiritually. It took me a long time to bring the

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two together. Students of Christian spirituality, including mature students, tend to begin with this sense of opposition. Their assumption about the way to be ‘academically critical’ in relation to a text is that they must remove their own perspective from the interpretation as far as possible, along with all influences from the side of the reader, in order to get an ‘objective’ look at it. I try to introduce them to some basic hermeneutical theory to show that this need not be the case. The approach that students adopt is an older, Enlightenment approach, which seeks to treat texts as scientific objects that can be separated from the act of observation. In fact, it is possible for students to bring their own perspectives and experiences into the reading of texts, even when studying spiritual classics in an academic setting, without distorting their meaning.

For those students trained in Ignatian methods of spiritual direction and reflection, there is a strong imperative to give room to personal experience while engaging in the academic task. As Ignatius of Loyola said, ‘what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly’ (Exx 2). The kind of academic reading of a text that tells us everything about its origins and components, without supporting a personal engagement in which we can discover and savour the meaning in relation to our own experience, is unsatisfying. The aim must be to establish personal connections with the text that do not conflict with the demands of being objective and critical. Fortunately, this combination is entirely attainable in an academic setting, if we give some attention to the method.

To explain how to make this kind of approach, I would like take as an example a classic text from the medieval Western Christian tradition, Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (*Sermones super Cantica canticorum*). Bernard of Clairvaux’s writings date from the early decades of the twelfth century, and his sermons were read widely as a popular classic throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. They are less well known today, but are still available in English translation (from the original Latin) in a number of editions.<sup>1</sup> Bernard was a Burgundian nobleman who entered the fledgling Cistercian order in 1113. From the original monastery of Cîteaux he went to found a new monastery, called Clairvaux, where he

<sup>1</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, translated by G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987)—the text cited here. For the full text see Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, translated by Kilian Walsh, 4 volumes (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1976).



The Bride of Christ, *Chapel of Our Lady, Sacro Speco, Subiaco, Italy*

became abbot. He was instrumental in the rapid growth of the order. He took a prominent role in resolving a papal schism towards the end of his life, such was his international influence by then.

I include the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* in a course that I teach for MA students called ‘The History of Christian Mysticism to the Reformation’. Each week, we look at a landmark text in the Christian spiritual tradition. Bernard is taken as representative of the tradition of ‘bridal mysticism’, where Christ is the bridegroom and the soul is the bride, journeying towards a mystical union of love with Christ modelled on the text of the Song of Songs. After nearly nine hundred years, students today typically find this text immediately engaging. Not only is it full of highly charged erotic language—which is a novelty—but it calls on their experience, asking for a personal response.

For instance, consider this passage from the end of the first sermon. Bernard is explaining how he understands the place of the Song of Songs in his spirituality:

There is a song which, in its singular divinity and sweetness, outshines all those we have recalled, and every other there may be, and rightly have I called it ‘The Song of Songs’, because it itself is the fruit of all the others. This sort of song only the touch of the Holy Spirit teaches (1 John 2:27), and it is learned by experience alone. Let those who have experienced it enjoy it; let those who have not burn with desire,

not so much to know it as to experience it. It is not a noise made aloud, but the very music of the heart. It is not a sound from the lips but a stirring of joy, not a harmony of voices but of wills. It is not heard outwardly, nor does it sound in public (Isaiah 42: 2). Only he who sings it hears it, and he to whom it is sung—the Bride and the Bridegroom. It is a wedding song indeed, expressing the embrace of chaste and joyful souls, the concord of their lives and the mutual exchange of their love.<sup>2</sup>

Bernard's appeal is to the reader's experience, an experience contrasted with other forms of knowledge, which engages the desire, heard not 'aloud' but inwardly, in 'the music of the heart'. The Song of Songs is a love song. It begins with the desire for love, 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth' (1: 1, Vulgate), a phrase to which Bernard devotes the first eight sermons out of the total 86. The soul is said to desire the immediate presence of the love of Christ, which is felt in the heart, by experience alone. Desire is the point—desire is the experience that Bernard is seeking in the reader. The language of the 'kiss' of the Song of Songs is used by Bernard to suggest that this desire for love in relation to God points to the possibility of an immediate address by Christ in the heart, in a shared love song. It can only be a matter of personal experience, because the exchange between Christ and the soul is conveyed inwardly rather than through external information or instructions.

Bernard was named the 'mellifluous doctor' for his honeyed speech and the way that he could engage his audience with the sweetness of his words. He is open about his wish to start from the *affectus* or affect. He thinks that God works in this way. The reason that the Song of Songs is written as it is, he says, is that the language 'attracts the reader and leads him on, so that he delights to search into what lies hidden in it even if it costs him effort, and no difficulty can weary him where the sweetness of the discourse eases the labor'.<sup>3</sup> The affect is engaged, and leads the reader on. Bernard hints at a greater goal when he goes on to talk of 'the embrace of chaste and joyful souls, the concord of their lives and the mutual exchange of their love'. The experience is intended not to be merely momentary and passing, but to end in the goal of bringing one's whole self into 'concord' with God—not just at the level of the affect but of the will, attaining a 'harmony of wills' with God, where there is a 'mutual exchange' of love between the soul and Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 1. VI. 11, in *Selected Works*, 214–215.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 1. III. 5, in *Selected Works*, 212.

The idea that classic texts engage readers personally and affectively is acknowledged by scholars of hermeneutics today. Hermeneutics, or the study of interpretation, has turned increasingly in recent decades from treating texts as objects 'out there' to seeing them as points of engagement with readers, attending to readers' responses 'in here', in their personal experience. Texts are written to be read, and in reading there is in an inner engagement between the text and the reader.<sup>4</sup> Scholars note that interpretation begins with a heartfelt reaction. Subsequently, a shift takes place, as the reader begins to realise that there are things going on in the text that demand further study. They call this a move between two 'naïvetés', the first naïveté being the heartfelt reaction, the second naïveté a move to a more critical distance, often accompanied by a loss of the initial sense of engagement. Both steps are 'naïve' in that the hermeneutical goal lies beyond them, beyond the dichotomy between personal engagement on the one hand and critical distance on the other. The goal is to reach a reconciliation of the two, where we can be both personally involved and suitably critical. There is an initial destabilisation as we move from the first to the second naïveté.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, this tends to occur as the enthralling sense of an inner experience of desire for God gives way to confusion about how Bernard links this to his programme of spiritual growth. How is the goal of a 'union of wills' with Christ, in which one's life is transformed in relation to Christ, to follow from the initial experience?

Hermeneutical analysis proceeds by speaking of meaning as produced in what is called the world 'in front of the text'. The meaning emerges 'in front of' the text because it is not intrinsic to the text, but arises only from an engagement with a reader, as a product of the engagement. Just as a conversation has two partners, reading has two poles; the text and the reader, and interpretation concerns both of them together, not just the text. It quickly becomes clear that the element of personal engagement with a text, beginning with the 'first naïveté', need not be contrary to critical understanding. It can be regarded as central, because only the reader's personal engagement establishes the connection within which the meaning

<sup>4</sup> A valuable summary of recent hermeneutical methods appropriate to the interpretation of 'classic' texts, including spiritual texts, is to be found in David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981), chapter 3, 'The Classic', which I have largely followed here. Tracy draws in part on the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur.

<sup>5</sup> This move is well treated in Wendy M. Wright, 'The Spiritual Classics as Spiritual Guides', *The Way Supplement*, 73 (Spring 1992), 36–48.

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emerges, ‘in front of’ the text. If tensions arise between this engagement and the findings of critical study, it is not because criticism is ‘in opposition’ to personal engagement, but because there is a journey of deepening understanding to be undertaken, which can be challenging. In fact, personal engagement is what drives the process, and without it criticism loses its purpose. This gives the second naïveté a very different hue. The move to criticism need no longer be felt as a step away from the initial engagement, but as a way to understand and explore that engagement more deeply.

For the student reading Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, tensions between the initial sense of engagement and critical study of the text soon arise. For instance, Bernard takes it for granted that the monks for whom he is writing know how to progress spiritually by means of a number of steps. He assumes that they know how to pray in a way conducive to mystical contemplation. In a passing comment, he says that the love spoken of in the Song of Songs is applied only to those who know how to set their ‘minds at peace’ in prayer and to ‘master the disturbances caused by the vices and the tumults of care within themselves’.<sup>6</sup> He says that he is writing for those who have got beyond the ‘milk’ of the spiritual journey and are now ready for ‘solid food’.<sup>7</sup> These comments tend to disturb the modern reader. The reader feels obliged to ask: do I have (a) to be a monk, engaged in monastic life; (b) to have endless time for prayer; (c) to have perfected my practice to the point where I have mastered all disturbances; and (d) to be virtuous inwardly and outwardly, before I can practise this prayer? At one level, that is what the text says. The inevitable negative answers tend to quash the initial sense of engagement.

But if the student regards the critical task as not intrinsically opposed to the initial engagement, it is possible to approach the question rather more positively. Looking again, it is clear that Bernard’s rhetoric is deliberately designed to ‘hook’ the reader at the level of the *affectus*. He intends his message to develop in relation to this experience of affectivity, rather than in opposition to it. If I have been hooked in this way, I am to some extent ‘inside’ the text, even if I doubt that I am among the stated audience. Rather than using the critical task to oppose the sense of engagement, attention can be turned instead to trying to understand

<sup>6</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 1.IV.6, in *Selected Works*, 212–213.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 1.I.1, in *Selected Works*, 210, citing 1 Corinthians 3: 1–2 and Hebrews 5: 12–14.

how it is that the text does in fact engage the reader (even at hundreds of years' remove from its origins).

At this point, a further hermeneutical principle is helpful. While the reader is implicated in producing the world 'in front of the text', as a conversation partner to the text, this world is equally created by the text. The story, metaphors, genre, organization—all the creative things that the author has done in crafting the text—give the text a structure that shapes the reader's engagement with it. For instance, it can be observed that when the reader has an initial experience of engagement with Bernard's text, it is by means of his suggestive language of desire, filled out with the metaphors and devices that he uses to describe it. In this sense, the experience of reading the text, on closer inspection, is as much one of 'being read by' it.

This helps to explain why part of the pleasure of reading is to be taken out of one's familiar world and into another world, where there are new possibilities for self-understanding and action. It is a bit like going to a play, when I allow myself to be taken into the drama, imagining myself as part of the action and thinking how I might respond or act in those circumstances. If the play conjures an especially deep response, I may even say that 'it changes my life'. When this happens, the initial feeling of engagement deepens into a structure or means for the reader's transformation, served by the tools within the text that help the reader to articulate and pursue this engagement. In this light, the task of criticism is to enable readers to grasp those features of the text by which they are being moved and transformed, so that they become critically aware of these deep dynamics of the text.

Taking this approach, readers of Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* are encouraged to ask, even having seen that they are not included in the original audience named by Bernard, how it is that the text moves them. What is it within the language, expressions and features of the text that enables them to see or feel something new or noteworthy? Attention moves to the dynamics of the text, which draw the readers in and 'perform' something in relation to them. Bernard uses numerous devices to do this. The 'master device', if we can call it that, is his creative use of theology. That there is theology in the text is no surprise, since Bernard is a theologian writing for monks who share a medieval theological world-view. But this theology is worked into the text in such a way that (if we give it some critical attention) we can see that it shapes the reader's engagement with the text at the deepest level. The most valuable critical

work to be done by the reader is to try to unpick how the text achieves this underlying theological task—though, again, without at any point losing touch with the personal engagement that actually drives the reading.

I have already mentioned that Bernard regards the appeal to *affectus* as justified on the grounds that Christ's love seeks a personal response. In other words, the initial affective engagement with the text has a theological purpose: to raise the desire of the soul for Christ. Having recognised this point, we can also see its purpose, which is to make the soul ready to receive Christ's love (by grace). Further investigation reveals that this personal engagement has a deeper theological structure. The 'kiss' that we are preparing to receive from Christ, in the words of the Song of Songs, Bernard says, is the manifestation of a deeper one, in which the Father and the Son first 'kiss', in the union between them that is the procession of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Our desire, at its deepest, is for this divine kiss. Christ brings this kiss to us by becoming incarnate. Yet the achievement of the text is to situate the incarnation within our own experience of a lesser 'kiss', elicited through the language of the Song of Songs and related to our initial desire for Christ. We are not simply being told, as in doctrine, that God's presence in the world is by means of the incarnation. Rather, the 'kiss' is being used to draw out our personal experience of desire for Christ, at the same time as linking this desire to a claim that the same



The Holy Trinity, by *William Blake*

desire is rooted in the primal 'kiss' of the Father and the Son. The kiss of awakened desire for Christ is found to be a participation in the foundational kiss of the Father and the Son. It leads the soul where Christ goes; it is a dynamic joining of the soul with the Son's journey from the divine source and into creation. Thus, the theological teaching emerges *within* the experience of the soul's desire, linked intrinsically to the soul's personal experience. Further, it sets the soul on a process of deepening engagement with the divine kiss, as the text gradually expands the initial experience, in a number of steps, towards union with Christ.

When the critical task is understood in this way, far from detracting from personal engagement, it allows a spiritual text to become more transformative rather than less. In the case of Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, notice the dilemmas that this approach helps to resolve. First, the reader is able to stay with his or her experience, rather than leaving it behind in order to turn to criticism, as if criticism had nothing to do with experience. The experience will progress and change as a result of the criticism, but experience always remains central. Second, the disorientating move from the first naïveté to the second, in which the reader feels unable to make a connection between their initial experience and Bernard's wider teaching on spiritual progress, gives way to an understanding of the dynamics of the engagement, still at a personal level, but fleshed out and structured by Bernard's language and ordering of the text. Third, Bernard's elitist instructions on who is included in his audience, which seem to exclude the reader today, become capable of a more democratic interpretation. Inasmuch as the text engages the reader, and this engagement is deepened by attention to the rhetorical devices and structures of the text, there is still a transformative role for the text, even while recognising that it is being applied in a context different from its original application to the monks. Fourth, by using criticism to attend to the theological underpinnings of the text in the engaged and dynamic way that I have outlined, it is possible to make the judgment that the text has been interpreted truly and faithfully in the present circumstances. Readers can make the connection between the theological tradition of Bernard's day, of ongoing participation in the life of Christ, and their own life of faith today. The theological dynamics of the text provide that connection, and in a way that is public and critical, not merely restricted to the experience of this particular reader.

For students familiar with Ignatian methods, an exciting aspect of this hermeneutical approach is the extent to which it is compatible with

Ignatian spirituality. It would require another article of a more technical kind to spell out in what sense these elements of recent hermeneutical scholarship can be called 'Ignatian', but some points of resonance are worth noting.

The emphasis is on becoming aware, not just of what is in the text but of how it transforms the reader. It is a relational task, of relating myself to the subject matter of the text and entering into conversation with it. Through this engagement, I attend to the transformative movements arising in me through my appropriation of the words, metaphors and structures present in the text. It is a personal quest focused on the possibilities of transformation, rather than on finding merely objective information, however sophisticated. At the same time, the 'otherness' of the text, the capacity of the text to inform me beyond what I currently know or have experienced, is what drives the reading. 'Personal experience' does not mean sticking to my existing preoccupations and agendas. Indeed, my openness to what is greater than my current understanding allows this approach to be seen as consistent with grace. To seek grace in a reading is a theological move, beyond the concern of hermeneutical scholarship, but it is valuable for Christian readers to know that even specifically Christian readings of texts, open to grace, are compatible with—and can be supported by—academic methods.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to most students' initial assumptions, not only is there no conflict between personal experience and critical methods in reading spiritual texts, but a self-reflexive, experiential attention to personal transformation can be said to lie at the heart of critical reading in a university setting.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a task explored by David Lonsdale, 'Reading and Discernment as a Source of Personal Transformation', in *Sources of Transformation: Revitalising Christian Spirituality* (London: Continuum, 2010), 41–56.