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Aesthetic Negotiations in Devotional Texts

A Comparison of Chapter II,25 of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* and Meister Eckhart's Sermon 57

Abstract

This chapter brings together literary studies and theological investigations in the field of Church History. It examines aspects of a Christian aesthetics as prevalent in the Middle Ages, focusing on Chapter II,25 of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead,* handed down under the name of Mechthild of Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart's Sermon 57. Christian aesthetics finds its place here somewhere between the concealment of a transcendent God and his becoming visible in the incarnation. With its rhetorical inventory, Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* aims to achieve a performative comprehension of what is said in order to lead, qua identification, to the experience of unity (*unio*) with God. Even if the structure of argumentation in Meister Eckhart's Sermon 57 largely follows scholarly and learned guidelines and patterns, the goal here is also to convey and visualize the salvation of the biblical events in the here and now. In the tension between the religious reference to salvation and the linguistic design, whose mediating power is both doubted and celebrated, aesthetic processes of negotiation become tangible with great intensity. Therefore, this article aims to show how functionally bound texts, especially those claiming to mediate religious salvation, could become an outstanding site of aesthetic reflection in the pre-modern era.

Keywords

Flowing Light of the Godhead, Eckhart, Aesthetics, Transcendence, Incarnation, Mysticism

1. Defining the Problem: Christian Aesthetics?

The scholarly consensus on medieval aesthetics is that it is largely to be understood as a Christian aesthetics. The term "Christian aesthetics," however, contains contradictions[1]

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1 Köbele 2004; cf. also Kiening 2019, p. 31.

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paradigmatic of the difficulty in speaking of "aesthetics" in the premodern period.[2] This is especially evident in medieval mysticism, particularly in the influence the tradition of Neoplatonic concepts and images of light had upon it, as they were conveyed by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His paradoxical concept of divine presence in brilliant earthly appearance (ὑπέρφωτος γνόφος / *hyperphotos gnophos*)[3] is connected to the use of light imagery to describe Christ in the Gospel of John 1:4 f. Thus it leads directly to the center of Christological ideas[4] which, via the concept of a connection between divine and human nature, prepare the theological solution to a problem that presents challenges in terms of both media and aesthetics: how to comprehend transcendence in immanence. For what has already taken place in Christ but always needs to be newly accessed in the experience of each individual can only be conveyed through material or linguistic signs. At the same time, however, this gives rise to a paradoxical tension: On the one hand, in order to appear (i. e., be always available to be experienced anew) divine truth must be conveyed by earthly means. In the process, the earthly *signum,* as a reflection of divine light, is accorded the highest dignity. On the other hand, earthly radiance remains ontologically only a secondary referential medium whose own claim must take second place to its referential character if it is not to be mere appearance or diabolical self-conceit. But how the complex relationship between divine radiance and earthly reflection, brilliance and semblance, truth and its conveyance, theological and aesthetic reference,[5] is to be expressed by the earthly *signum* will only emerge anew in each negotiation.[6]

2 Andreas Speer has often pointed this out, i. a. Speer 1993; Speer 1994. Statements about the "beautiful" cannot be assembled into a "theory" (Assunto 1982) nor can they be assumed as the foundation of "art" or "aesthetics" in the modern sense, since phenomena as well as concepts (beauty, *claritas*, *proportio* etc.) remain tied to their heterological frames of reference in ontology or theology. On the project of an aesthetics in medieval literature and its methodological handicaps, cf. also Braun 2007.

3 Pseudo-Dionysius: De mystica theologia I,1 [PTS 67], pp. 142,1 f.: κατὰ τὸν ὑπέρφωτον [...] γνόφον ("in the over-bright darkness").

4 See also the Nicene Creed with its famous phrase: φῶς ἐκ φωτός / *lumen de lumine*; Denzinger: Compendium, no. 150; pp. 65 f.

5 The thematic interconnections between shining, appearing, and emerging (cf. German *scheinen*, *erscheinen*, *in-Erscheinung-treten*) are characteristic of the reflections in medieval contexts between theological and aesthetic semantics with respect to individual concepts; i. a., *claritas*: cf. Eco 2002, pp. 81 f.; *lux* and *lumen*: cf. Perpeet 1977; regarding Neoplatonic approaches: Olejniczak Lobsien 2007; courtly narratives: Müller, J.-D. 2006; theoretical reflections on images: Ganz / Lentes 2004; Schellewald 2012 etc. Such reflections continue to this day, but are mostly divided between philosophical-aesthetic and theological discourses: e. g., Mersch 2002; Seel 2005; Welte 2015. For an interdisciplinary study of images of emerging, see Eusterschulte / Stock 2016. Cf. also Gerok-Reiter et al. 2023, with a forthcoming English translation (2025).

6 The question of shine (*Schein*) and semblance (*Anschein*) must be raised since the attribute "Christian" can be precarious when applied to mysticism. Even where mystical authors proclaim their

In the framework of the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1391 and proceeding from these questions, project C3 of the group, entitled "The *schoene schîn* in Mysticism," aims to clarify the specific presuppositions, conditions, and manifestations of premodern aesthetics with regard to medieval vernacular mysticism. Against this background, the project investigates two bodies of texts that give insight into extremely different ways of staging the thematic field of radiance and reflection, brilliance and semblance, truth and its conveyance, theological and aesthetic reference, in order to approach the basically paradoxical idea of a "Christian aesthetics." Central to our investigation are *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*), traditionally ascribed to Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207/08–1282), and the German-language sermons of Meister Eckhart (died 1328).[7] Both corpora are especially relevant to the CRC 1391, since contemporaries certainly did not regard them as 'works of art' but rather as compendia of religious didactics or as practical guides to meditative experience of the divine. They are thus the kind of sources that are not only chronologically "different"[8] (i.e., premodern) and deploy aesthetic assertions implicitly, if at all, but that also correspond to that expanded, "different" area of the research group's program to the extent that there too, we seek aesthetic negotiations where cultural practices rather than artistic aspirations are at the forefront.[9] Our approach to religious devotional texts thus explicitly touches on a contested area of aesthetic discussion.

As a starting point for our analysis, we have selected from the two corpora of medieval mystical texts both argumentative passages in which the problematic areas mentioned above are explicitly discussed, as well as passages where they are implicitly the-

own Christianity, many of them became the object of investigations and convictions for heresy. The problematics of brilliance that can become mere semblance can also be reformulated in dogmatic language, for instance, when the papal bull *In agro dominico* makes Meister Eckhart's statement in his commentary on John that God's glory shines (*relucere*) even in an evil work the basis for its condemnation; Denzinger: Compendium, no. 954. Here the dogmatic critique responds to the dogmatic implications of Eckhart's metaphysics. Thus the emergence of such dogmatically vulnerable statements can be traced back to claimed experience and aesthetic forms of conveyance, which also means that not only their problematic character but also their productive power could have an effect on theological content.

7 The corpora thus span two generations of vernacular mysticism. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* was begun in 1250, and by 1265, five books were finished. Eventually an edition of seven books was assembled. Meister Eckhart's sermons were composed at various points in his life, and their order and dating is a contentious issue to the present day. The modern critical edition founded by Josef Quint attributes them to him, as does the edition of Niklaus Largier, which is the one we use, on the basis of their correspondence to a corpus of sermons Eckhart used in his defense during his trial for heresy.

8 Cf. the chapter on the research program of the CRC: Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, especially section 4.1 ("'Different' in Three Ways, or the Aesthetic before Aesthetics").

9 Cf. Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, pp. 3–48.

matized. We have selected passages, for instance, that invoke the conditions for divine revelation, constellations of corporeality and the experience of truth, possibilities of earthly perception, or reflections on the effectiveness of verbal transmission, often in conjunction with images of light or light phenomena or the exegesis of the *Song of Solomon*. In this context, individual arguments, elaborations of motifs, or lexemes are to be understood as "figures of reflection"[10] whose aesthetic modus remains to be unpacked, case by case from each text passage, in the relationship between theological conceptualization and social functionality on the one hand and the inherent logic of their presentation on the other. Our working hypothesis is that implicit, collaborative aesthetic negotiations arise from the opposition and cooperation between the religious claim to direct revelation of salvation and the new, vernacular expression which aims to convey the radiance of divine manifestation in the *barbara lingua* and its social context.[11]

However, this also means that answers to the questions raised can be found only in the dynamic relationship between textual strategies of form and presentation on the one hand and contextual influences and functions on the other. The praxeological model of the CRC[12] serves to analyze the interplay between autological (i.e., textual) and heterological (i.e., contextual) aspects. The corpora establish not only parallel but also differing autological and heterological perspectives, for instance in the texts' separate transmission histories, forms, dialogic character, and argumentative structure, and also in the divergent ways in which they are connected to institutions, educational backgrounds, and gender perspectives determining those backgrounds. The differences between the corpora raise questions about their often complementary profiling of the problem as well as the capacity of the praxeological model itself.

Based on these questions, we outline the implications of a premodern aesthetics that remains beholden to a Christian frame of reference even while contributing to its formation. To do justice to the challenge of this double perspective, we must consistently bring together theology and literary studies in an interdisciplinary perspective.

10 On the toolset of the "figure of aesthetic reflection," cf. Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, especially section 6. Preliminary studies to this toolset, with examples, can be found in Gerok-Reiter et al. 2019.

11 "Collaborative" refers here to the fact that quite different participants and text networks are involved. On the concept of translingual and transcultural text networks, cf. Selden 2019; on the phenomenon of plural authorship, cf. foundational Gropper et al. 2023 (English translation forthcoming 2025); on the *Flowing Light*, cf. Gerok-Reiter 2023.

12 On this point, see the chapter by Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume. We should point out that the conceptual pair *autological – heterological* has different connotations than the triad of heteronomy, autonomy, and theonomy introduced especially by Paul Tillich 1967, pp. 83–86. While Tillich's concern is above all the "structural elements of reason" (Tillich 1967, p. 83), the CRC's praxeological model is oriented around determing, for an aesthetic product, the relationship between the inherent logic of composition and its external or socially determined influences.

Hence, we must account for the fact that these disciplines view aesthetic ideas from basically different professional and intellectual traditions, whose diversity cannot be fully presented in a brief outline. The following summary will therefore focus on asking to what extent both approaches involve problematic correlations that can be traced back on the one hand to the contradictions mentioned above and, on the other, to difficulties in dealing with the historical variance of aesthetic constellations.

2. Theology and Literary Studies: Similarities and Differences in Aesthetics Research

In the field of theology, the state of research on aesthetics is extremely disparate, for several reasons. The discipline of theology is characterized today by a great diversity of subjects and methods, which is made even more complex by the way different confessions, especially in the German-speaking world, locate theology. Despite many convergences in individual research projects and in the ecumenical world as a whole,[13] theologians of different confessions have developed different heuristic approaches to the question of aesthetics.[14] According to a recent interpretation of Martin Luther's *Theology of Beauty*, it was precisely a difference in the understanding of aesthetics that made Luther take issue with his opponents in the Heidelberg disputation of 1518.

> What makes Christ beautiful simply violates the standard medieval criteria of proportion, clarity and perfection. In aligning himself with sinners of all sorts, Christ associates with the disproportionate, the dark, and the imperfect, and he himself becomes all this ugliness. Hence, Christ's beauty is one which is "hidden under the opposite appearance."[15]

Thus declares Mark C. Mattes in his monograph on Luther's understanding of beauty, and he follows this thread of difference into 20th-century theologies. Mattes contends that whoever, like Aquinas, defines beauty as that which is in itself pleasing to perception,[16] is liable to the charge of endorsing a theology of glory, a *theologia gloriae*, to which Luther in his disputation opposes the theology of the cross, the *theologia crucis*. Luther's dialectical interpretation of beauty by no means blocks access to aesthetics, but it does caution against serving an inappropriate *theologia gloriae*.

13 See especially Holzem / Leppin 2020.

14 These are not only grounded in the individual educational history of the researcher but in the resonating space of a believing community. On religion as a resonating space, cf. Rosa 2019, pp. 258–268.

15 Mattes 2017, p. 96.

16 Thomas Aquinas: Summa theologiae I–II q. 27 a. 1 ad 3, 2b: *pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet* (We call that beautiful whose perception elicits pleasure).

Against this background, it is noteworthy that the 20th-century rediscovery of aesthetic theology in Roman Catholic systematic theology is linked to precisely the concept of "glory." Hans-Urs von Balthasar introduces his comprehensive presentation of theology with several volumes on this topic.[17] He can do so because he understands beauty, along with truth and goodness, against the background of the medieval doctrine of transcendentals, above all as a fundamental ontological determination.[18] Aesthetics means uncovering the beauty inherent in being. Thus for him, *gloria* is not in opposition to *crux*, as it is for Luther. Instead, God's glory consists precisely in the revelation of his love on the cross. Thus for Balthasar, Christianity is eminently aesthetically determined, and he can declare that a "theory of beauty [can be deduced] from the data of revelation itself."[19] From this perspective, he says, it is the theologian's task to delineate not merely an aesthetic theology but a theological aesthetics.[20] Accordingly, revelation has an aesthetic quality of beauty grounded in God, and vice versa.[21] This genuinely aesthetic-theological approach has been continued in modified form and applied to the liturgy in an enormous project of Catholic theology: the eleven volumes of Alex Stock's "Poetische Dogmatik" (Poetic Dogmatics).[22]

Protestant approaches to an aesthetic theology are distinctly less developed. They center around the difference between written and visual media and the repeatedly evoked "crisis of the Scriptural principle,"[23] but with a broad spectrum of interpretation: Malte Dominik Krüger develops a theory of Protestantism as a critical religion of images that explicitly includes aspects of linguistic imagery.[24] Accordingly, there is

17 Balthasar 1982–1991.

18 See Balthasar 1965, p. 27: "God comes not primarily as a teacher for us ('true') nor as a purposeful 'redeemer' ('good'), but to show and to broadcast and to radiate HIMSELF, the glory of his eternal triune love in that 'disinterestedness' that true love shares with true beauty. The world was created to God's glory, through it, and to it the world will also be redeemed."

19 Balthasar 1982, pp. 215 f.

20 Balthasar 1982, p. 117.

21 Cf. Lentes 2004, pp. 13–15, who refers to the incarnation as the paradigm of medialization.

22 Stock 1995–2016. Stock argues less against a classic ontological background, as per Balthasar, and more within the horizon of liturgical practice. See the introduction to his project on liturgics and liturgy in Vol. 11, pp. 7 f., pp. 15–90. The various approaches are collected in the *Handbuch der Bildtheologie*: Hoeps 2007–2021. On the emphasis on conditions of practice, see esp. Hoeps 2020, p. 7: "Religious images are the expression and vehicle of religious functions. In religious traditions, visual images are not produced for their own sake; they serve prescribed purposes of visual representation and the visual features of particular rooms and times. [...] Their conditions of practice influence the images down to their materiality, their outward shape, and their compositional structures."

23 Cf., e.g., Bayer 1999; Stoellger / Klie 2011; Stoellger / Gutjahr 2014; Krüger, M.D. 2017; Stoellger 2019.

24 Krüger, M.D. 2017, pp. 489 f.

an inherent tension in God's becoming visible due to the fact that "in Jesus the absolute is visualized."[25] The result is "a contemplative and differentiating impulse toward the absolute [...] which appears in human creativity and its image-making ability"[26] but without being subsumed therein. Thus the image of God in Christ and in all the linguistic images that follow has the quality of expressing in an exemplary way the relationship of religiosity to divine reality in their difference. As Oswald Bayer states, the classic principle of *sola scriptura* can then be introduced to put limits on the legitimacy of aesthetic phenomena.[27] But that principle can also be called into question – for example by Philipp Stoellger – because in the wake of the Enlightenment it became mired in crisis, or relativized by the revelatory quality of an image that possesses unique power.[28] As far as practical action is concerned, such considerations open up wide vistas in one direction or another, and it is no accident that aesthetic reflection plays a large role precisely in practical theology. Already in 1975, Rudolf Bohren published a manifesto entitled "Praktische Theologie als Ästhetik" (Practical Theology as Aesthetics),[29] and a good decade later Albrecht Grözinger issued a comprehensive theory of such a theology.[30]

This situation makes it all the more obvious that in theologically focused ecclesiastical history, questions of aesthetics have so far not been clearly defined. Except for individual approaches, for instance, to the inclusion of imagery in research by Bernd Moeller,[31] Berndt Hamm,[32] and especially Thomas Lentes,[33] aesthetic questions play only a secondary role. There are many reasons for this. It may result from a certain abstinence from theory in the field of ecclesiastical history or from the proximity of church history to history in general. The important thing is that because of this secondary status, the historical distinctions which are a central heuristic precondition of aesthetic analysis in disciplines that naturally pursue questions of aesthetics – such as literary studies, art history, and musicology – have not been sufficiently explored or integrated into systematic and practical theology. Even if from certain points of view revelation can count in general as an aisthetic phenomenon, nevertheless revelation as revelation can only be grasped and experienced by individuals in various historical phenomena, modes

25 Krüger, M.D. 2017, p. 522.
26 Krüger, M.D. 2017, p. 508.
27 Its status remains a basic theological question which must be debated in the theoretical framework of systematic theology.
28 Stoellger / Kumlehn 2018.
29 Bohren 1975.
30 Grözinger 1987.
31 Arndt / Moeller 2003.
32 See Hamm 2011.
33 E.g., Ganz / Lentes 2004; Lentes / Gormans 2007.

of apprehension, and aesthetic practices[34] whose quality and claim to revelation can be extraordinarily disparate. The *historical* validation for how God's timeless beauty is "revealed" and apprehended thus remains an unfulfilled task of theological scholarship and leads back to the contradiction inherent in a "Christian aesthetics" with which we began.

On first glance, the situation in literary studies seems to be quite different. There is no lack of studies on aesthetic questions, and the emphasis on the historical variation in aesthetic practices and modes of staging and perception is one of the basic concerns of literary studies and of cultural studies in general,[35] especially in the field of medieval studies in the Germanic languages, where objections were raised early on to aesthetic generalization.[36] However, it should not be overlooked that the current concern with historical variation is in response to to earlier ideas and aesthetic concepts that had been systematized and even canonized by literary history and that were marked by a tendency toward de-historicization as part of the claim to artistic autonomy. Whether explicit or latent, this tendency has long remained powerfully influential.[37] The tendency toward de-historicization followed entirely different patterns of argumentation and logic than those offered in the theological discourse on glory with its ontological arguments. Yet it was intimately connected to religious themes. In particular, it paradoxically proved to be the correlate of that teleological narrative of secularization which, with its foundation in religious studies, had success not only as a category of explanation for political and social changes in the modern era,[38] but also gained pow-

34 Cf. the approach to "religious knowledge" developed by the DFG research training group 1806. According to their analysis, the knowledge of revelation must be again and again acquired and actualized by believers: Holzem 2013; including especially aesthetic perspectives: Dürr et al. 2019; Gerok-Reiter / Mariss / Thome 2020.

35 Foundational: Belting 1994; Krüger, K. 1997; Kablitz 2012 et al.; Braun / Young 2007. More literature in the compact research report in the chapter by Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, section 2.

36 See, e. g., the vehement critique of Haug's theory of the "discovery of fictionality" with its inherent claim to autonomy (cf. Haug 1997b) in Huber 1988; Heinzle 1990; also, the alterity debate starts here, beginning with
Jauß 1979, with measured perspectives: Peters 2007; Baisch 2013; comprehensive: Braun 2013.

37 Cf. Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, especially section 2.2. This influential idea, which continues to the present day, is discussed critically from a philosophical perspective in Bertram 2019, with productive suggestions for an alternative.

38 Cf. Taylor 2007. Köbele / Quast 2014 offer a good overview of the "variety of discourses of secularization" (p. 12) as well as the current opposite debate in the wake of "(re)sacralization" (p. 11). They rightly emphasize that the "current discussion among intellectual historians of the interpretive formula of secularization and (re)sacralization, de-Christianizing and re-Christianizing [...] leave behind the debates of the 1960s and 1970s, which were intensified by perspectives from the philosophy of history and the critique of ideology" (p. 11) and thus also work against "one-sided

erful influence precisely in the field of *aesthetic* discourse and evaluation.[39] Thus, the emergence of a categorical conception of art – indeed, the postulation of a genuine art liberated from all restraints and so possessing timeless value – was demonstrated especially often in literature and scholarship by the rejection or secular overwriting of any religious function. An example from literary practice is this passage from the ninth book of Lessing's treatise *Laokoon: oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry, 1766):[40]

> If one wants to compare the painter and the poet in individual cases, one must first of all decide whether they have both had complete freedom, without the slightest outside constraint, to strive for the greatest effect in their art. For an artist in the past, religion was often such a constraint. His work, intended to be venerated and worshiped, could not always be as perfect as if he had been intent only on pleasing its beholder. [...] [Thus] one wishes to give the name of art only to those works in which the artist can show himself to be a real artist, and in which beauty is his first and last intention. Everything else on which one sees too obvious marks of having been commissioned for liturgical use does not deserve the name, since in that case, art does not operate for its own sake, but is a mere aid to religion, and the sensual ideas assigned by the latter look more to its significance than to its beauty [...].[41]

Lessing defines the "work of art" that "deserves" the name, where the artist can show himself to be a "real" artist, as a work which is emancipated from heteronomous pur-

teleologies" in the realm of aesthetics as well (p. 15). Braun 2014 convincingly shows de-historicization and de-differentiation as the "hidden preconditions" for theses of secularization.

39 Cf. Vietta / Uerlings 2008a; an overview in Stierle 2008; Vietta / Uerlings 2008b.

40 Cf. Robert 2024, pp. 37 f.; according to Robert, "the essence of aesthetic autonomy" is already outlined here, even before the philosophically idealistic drafts. "The emphasis is on the opposition of 'freedom' and 'external constraint' or purpose ('intention,' 'preagreement') represented above all by 'religion.'" Lessing thereby dissolves "the Horatian unity of *prodesse* and *delectare*." Robert adds that even if Lessing is referring only to painters and sculptors, "above all the surviving paralipomena [show ...] that besides differentiating those two genres, he had in mind for the first time an integral theory of *art in general*." Cf. Robert / Vollhardt 2013.

41 Lessing: Laokoon, pp. 80–82, for the German original: "Wenn man in einzeln Fällen den Mahler und Dichter mit einander vergleichen will, so muß man vor allen Dingen wohl zusehen, ob sie beyde ihre völlige Freyheit gehabt haben, ob sie ohne allen äußeren Zwang auf die höchste Wirkung ihrer Kunst haben arbeiten können. Ein solcher äußerlicher Zwang war dem alten Künstler öfters die Religion. Sein Werk zur Verehrung und Anbetung bestimmt, konnte nicht allezeit so vollkommen seyn, als wenn er einzig das Vergnügen des Betrachters dabey zur Absicht gehabt hätte. [...] [So] daß man den Namen der Kunstwerke nur denjenigen beylegen möchte, in welchen sich der Künstler wirklich als Künstler zeigen können, bey welchen die Schönheit seine erste und letzte Absicht gewesen. Alles andere, woran sich zu merkliche Spuren gottesdienstlicher Verabredungen zeigen, verdienet diesen Namen nicht, weil die Kunst hier nicht um ihrer selbst willen gearbeitet, sondern ein bloßes Hülfsmittel der Religion war, die bey den sinnlichen Vorstellungen, die sie ihr aufgab, mehr auf das Bedeutende als auf das Schöne sahe; [...]."

poses, for example religious practices. This point of view was conspicuously involved in the debates of the 18th century, and as such is historically contingent, i.e., understandable and plausible in that context. At the same time, this historical contingency is obscured by the way artifacts from antiquity are introduced into the argument and the contrast between the old and the progressive artist is transferred to ancient times. This indicates the decisive point: As valid as Lessing's understanding of "art" may be in his contemporary context, it implicitly makes the problematic claim of a *timeless* quality to the "perfect" work of art and the "real" artist. Since Lessing develops *fundamental* criteria of aesthetic quality from a specific, historically contingent understanding of "art" and "work of art," his perspective becomes ahistorically absolutized as a criterion of value. The approaches that subsequently appeared and emphasized aesthetic autonomy are already suggested in Lessing.[42] The problem does not lie in the historically contingent and (from a historical perspective) plausible claim to the "complete freedom" of artist and work of art, but rather in the *timeless* evaluative categories that especially literary historians and philosophers derived from that claim, with the consequence that artifacts with a functional purpose – for example, components of a religious practice – had to be excluded from the canon of "genuine," "perfect" art.

Thus, dehistoricizing approaches are precarious, whether ontologically based, as in theology, or evaluatively based, as in literary studies. Literary studies has long since begun an offensive against historically undifferentiated approaches and value judgments;[43] it would be rewarding for theology to also pay more attention to historical perspectives when dealing with aesthetic questions. On the other hand, especially in historical research in the field of late medieval piety, literary studies ought to devote much more attention to the diversity of discourse on piety and especially to the variety of male and as well as female participants in that discourse, their institutional affiliation, devotional practices, social status, gender, etc.[44] Scholarly reflection should take more cognizance of the fact that according to some 13th- and 14th-century devotional practices, the presence of the divine on earth was considered to be literally incarnate and always already realized in the *hic et nunc* of the entire creation,[45] which makes phrases such as the "invasion of transcendence into immanence" obsolete. Our task in this chapter is not only to test the toolset of the CRC 1391 on devotional texts of the 13th and 14th centuries, but also, in an interdisciplinary combination of divergent perspec-

42 Cf. Robert 2024, pp. 35–37.

43 The discussion has often focused on the interference of religious and aesthetic aspects. From the abundance of sources, we include here several examples with various approaches: Kiening 2015; Köbele / Notz 2019; Kellner / Rudolph 2021.

44 Oexle was among the first to oppose the idea of the Middle Ages as a "unified Christian culture": Oexle 1991, quotation, p. 65.

45 Cf. Hamm 2011; Hamm 2016; Leppin 2021a, esp. pp. 109–197.

tives, to reconsider the presuppositions of both sides with regard to aesthetics and the history of piety.

We will compare and analyze two very different religious texts. Our point of departure will be to discover in a historical perspective the inherent value of linguistic formulations that, from a theological point of view, are often seen as a mere accessory. Our analysis will focus on aesthetic issues that play a productive part in the development of and reflection on divine speech. However, literary approaches leading to an aestheticization of religious discourse must not be misunderstood as a form of secularization but will be described as effects resulting from and leading back to the practice of religious action and experience.[46] The task of our interdisciplinary perspective, both theological and literary, is not to solve the contradictions and tensions of a "Christian aesthetics" by giving precedence either to the heterological or the autological side, or by reflecting separately on the theological discourse and the formal aspects of its presentation. Instead, our goal is to reveal the constructive and practical relatedness of both sides. After our analyses, we shall return to this interrelatedness in the conclusion.

3. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* II,25: From the Hunt to *sůsser einunge* (sweet union)

In its assemblage of heterogeneous texts, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, whose seven books were composed in stages between c. 1250 and 1282,[47] is a document of religious didactics and theological reflections with claim to a mystical encounter with God. In order to locate it in its milieu and in the history of piety, it is important to note that recent scholarship[48] has shown its attribution to Mechthild of Magdeburg to be biographically uncertain. In its declaration that the writer, who came from a noble background, was a beguine, that she had contact with the Dominican confessor Heinrich von Halle, and that she later transferred to the Cistercian cloister Helfta, it follows a narrative that aims at certification, authentication, and legitimation. In the process, it also reveals the different aspects of plausibility that, in the history of piety and the social milieu, could create legitimacy. For the text and our understanding of it, these declarations are important indications of its heterological context, and even in the absence of biographic certainty

46 Köbele / Quast 2014, p. 18, see the productive potential of a dynamic concept of secularization in these mutual dialectical interactions that must always be newly negotiated.

47 On its genesis in general: Ruh 1993, pp. 247–266; Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 671–673; more differentiated and skeptical: Nemes 2010, pp. 246–307.

48 Cf. Peters 1988, pp. 53–67; Poor 2004. A critical and comprehensive assessment of this attribution and its substance is offered by Nemes 2010, pp. 309–387. Cf. also Gerok-Reiter 2023.

do not lose their interpretive value, for example, when the text repeatedly hints at the precarious status of the untaught author (e.g., *Nu gebristet mir túsches, des latines kan ich nit*; *Now my German fails me; I do not know Latin*, FL II,3, p. 82, 24; FT 72,11)[49] and the apparent lack of protection from an institutional connection (FL II,26, p. 136, 3–5; FT 96, 17–20) or when Dionysian, neoplatonic associations crop up in the frequently occurring light metaphors and ideas about emanation,[50] whose transmission via the Dominican environment is plausible. One must also take into account the literary education of the obviously female writer, especially her knowledge of the language of *Minnesang* (courtly love lyric),[51] and her intended audience, which we assume consisted of the believers in her immediate vicinity, especially the *mulieres religiosae* and fellow nuns. The function of the text, the "formation of a way of life directed toward sanctification,"[52] is indisputable and documented in its later reception, to the extent that that is accessible.[53]

We have chosen Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* not only because it is "one of the poetically outstanding texts of German medieval literature,"[54] but because in it the relation between theme and presentation and between heterological and autological connections is especially clear.[55] In genre, the chapter oscillates between praise and lament in a dialogue between the Soul and the divine interlocutor.[56] From the units of dialogue, one can deduce the chapter's structure, although those units have no sharp borders. Instead, the themes of separation and *unio*, difference and identity, longing and fulfillment are acted out and propelled forward across a widespread network of metaphors in constantly renewed allusions, elaborations, and modulations.

49 Quotations are from the edition of Vollmann-Profe 2003 (FL followed by the number of the book in Roman numerals and the chapter, page, and line in Arabic numerals. When the quotation is from Book II, Chapter 25, page and line numbers follow "FL" immediately.) The text is based on the Einsiedler manuscript. The English translation is Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead, trans. by Frank Tobin, New York 1998, and is followed by FT and the page and line number.

50 It is hardly possible to establish more than associations: cf. Balthasar 1989, pp. 390–392; Leppin 2007, p. 88. On other possible theological influences: Ruh 1993, pp. 285–292.

51 Generally on the writer's knowledge of courtly culture: Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 677 f.; a critical assessment of her knowledge of *Minnesang*: Suerbaum 2019; on the style of lyrical language in the *Flowing Light*: Linden 2011.

52 Hasebrink 2007, p. 92.

53 On the manuscript transmission and the history and reception of the manuscript, briefly: Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 671–673; more thoroughly: Nemes 2010. – Stridde focuses on pragmatic aspects of the circumstances of communication of mystical texts: Stridde 2009, on the *Flowing Light* esp., pp. 122–146.

54 Hasebrink 2007, p. 91.

55 On this chapter, see esp. the commentary of Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 743–745, with further literature; Seelhorst 2003, pp. 102–104 und 123–125; foundational: Hasebrink 2007.

56 On the dialogic structure: Haug 1984; Suerbaum 2003; Volfing 2003; Hasebrink makes the structure of the complaint the point of departure for his incisive interpretation: Hasebrink 2007.

On the basis of the network of metaphors, the structure is as follows:

(1) Hymnic Praise (FL 126,9–11; FT 92,27–29)

(2) Dialogue Part 1 (FL 126,12–130,10; FT 92,30–94,10):
ich brinne (*I am on fire*)
hunt
mutual desire

(3) Dialogue Part 2 (FL 130,11–30; FT 94,11–28):
the *fúrige*[] *minne strale* (*the beam of your fiery love*)
wounding
balance

(4) Dialogue Part 3 (FL 130,31–134,10; FT 94,29–96,3):
the abandoned bride
the orchard of love
the *liehte sunne* der *ewigen gotheit* (*the bright sun of my eternal Godhead*)

(5) Close: The Bride's Song (FL 134,11–21; FT 96,4–15):
wort, sang and *sûsse*[*r*] *herzeklang* (*word, song,* and [*sweet*] *melody of the heart*)

(1) The chapter opens with a triple invocation of God, who is visualized in his infinite fullness. This infinity is semantically underlined on the one hand by the elaborate apostrophes *schatz an diner richeit*, *wunder an diner manigvaltekeit*, and *herschaft diner edelkeit*; *treasure beyond reckoning in your abundance*, *marvel in your variety*, *power of your nobility* (FL 126,9–11; FT 92,27–29), and on the other by the denial of any restrictions whatsoever in the adjectives *unzahlhaftig*[], *unbegriffenlich*[], and *endelos*[]; *beyond reckoning, incomprehensible*, and *infinite* (FL 126,9–11; FT 92,27–29), and emotionally emphasized by the anaphoric, triple adorative exclamation, *O du*; *Oh, you* (FL 126,9–11; FT 92,27–29). In this hymnic prelude, the problem that underlies the theme of separation and *unio*, difference and identity, longing and fulfillment is already predetermined. Namely: How can one strive for unity with what is *endelos*? How can such an everlastingness – i.e., earthly transcendence – be borne or even comprehended?

(2) The first dialogic part develops from this thought by initially supposing that God wants to protect the Soul from such infinite fulness and glory (FL 126,13; FT 92,31). Implicitly then, the above questions are answered negatively. However, that also means that God's unbounded fulness – his splendor, multiplicity, and glory (FL 126,9–11; FT 92,27–29) – is withdrawn from the Soul and cannot be grasped (cf. FL 128,16; FT 93,17f.). The result of this withdrawal (*Eya herre*, [...] *du* [...] *hast* [*mir*] *alles enzogen, das ich von dir han* [...]; *Ah*[57] *Lord,* [...] *you have taken from me all the things I have from you*, FL 128,17; FT 93,19f.) is the *unmenschliche not*; *inhuman anguish* (FL 126,17; FT 92,34) that

57 "Ah" here replaces "Please" in Tobin's translation.

the Soul seeks to formulate in its despairing complaint. In response, however, there develops a dynamic of an equally endless desire that in insistent activity seeks – despite the withdrawal – to reestablish the connection between the I and the Thou – with clear allusions to the *Song of Solomon*: *Ich sůche dich* [...] (FL 126,18), [*i*]*ch růffe dir* [...] (FL 128,5), *ich beiten din* [...] (FL 128,7); *I seek you* (FT 93,1), *I cry out to you* (FT 93,7), *I hope for your coming* (FT 93,9). In a fourth attempt, emotional intensity remains the theme (*ich mag nit růwen*; *I cannot rest* (FL 128,8; FT 93,10), while the transitive orientation changes into a participatory relation: *ich brinne / unverlôschen in diner heissen minne*; *I am on fire / Unquenchable in your burning love* (FL 128,8 f.; FT 93,10 f.). Even so, however, neither rest nor balance has been achieved.[58] The structure of this love is basically asymmetric. This is in keeping not only with the connection to God, ontologically speaking, as the "incomparable partner,"[59] but in the literary field – with the roles reversed – it is also in keeping with matches the connection to the first-person poems of courtly love. Thus the possible solutions that follow participate in the topoi of different fields of reference: The transitive searching impulse is taken up again, using the motif of the hunt in an almost aggressive way: *ich jage dich mit aller maht*; *I pursue you with all my might* (FL 128,10; FT 93,12). This, however, in a clear allusion to *Minnesang*, gives way to the twice repeated tender interjection, [*e*]*ya lieber* (FL 128,14), [*e*]*ya herre* (FL 128,17); *Ah, my Love* [...] *Ah, Lord* (FT 93,16 and 19), and to the attitude of undemanding fidelity, which, unlike in *Minnesang*, is not presented as the achievement of the lover but as a merciful gift (FL 128,18). In any case, that fidelity is obliged to maintain engagement within the withdrawal, even if fulfillment seems unattainable: *das ich dir getrúwe si in miner not* / [...] *des gere ich sicherlich / serer denne dins himmelriches*; *That I might be loyal to you in my misery* / [...] *This I do indeed desire / More than I yearn for heaven* (FL 128,20–23; FT 93,23–26). The goal of this struggling search is in the end to grasp God (cf. FL 128,16; FT 93,18), a grasping which here ambiguously refers to both intellectual and physical apprehension.[60] Theologically crucial is that through the central metaphor of the bride, including the appellation of dove (FL 128,24; FT 93,27) and the following reference to divine wisdom (*gôtlichú wisheit*; *divine wisdom*: FL 128,25; FT 93,28), Christological allusions are present; the God being referred to is thus not simply the transcendent God, but the incarnate God, withdrawn again by Resurrection and Ascension.

In reaction to the Soul's desperate search for him, God draws near through his voice, responding with several suggestions. First, he takes up the theme of protec-

58 An exegetical allusion to the divine revelation in the burning bush (Exodus 3) is possible here – an image for the convergence of transcendence and immanence. Although the "difference between presence and absence" has been "suspended" for a moment, as Hasebrink 2007, p. 99, rightly remarks, the aspect of suffering remains; the "transformation in the process of union," which can be connected to the metaphor of burning, seems not to be succeeding in this case.

59 Haug 1984.

60 Cf. Hasebrink 2007, p. 100.

tion: It is part of his wisdom to grant divine gifts to the Soul only to the extent that its *arme*[*r*] *lí*[*p*] (*frail body*) can bear them (FL 128,24–27; FT 93,27–30). This wisdom is *úber* (*upon*) the Soul (FL 128,25; FT 93,28). Here too, the partnership is asymmetrical. Subsequently however, and in precise correspondence, the images of searching, hunting, being bound together, and burning are taken up again and opposed to *vinden* (FL 128,28; *reach*, FT 93,31), becoming *můde* (FL 128,30; *exhaust* [*ed*], FT 93,33), *kůle*[*n*] (FL 128,31; *cool*, FT 93,35), and the Soul's own boundedness (*ich* [*bin*] *in gebunden*, FL 128,33; cf. 128,1 f.; *I have been bound*, FT 93,36): The asymmetry seems to achieve balance in a promise (*můs*, FL 128,28; *shall*, FT 93,31), in a possibility (*mag*, FL 128,29; *can*, FT 93,32) and finally, in the presence of a reciprocal love (*din sůsses jagen*; FL 128,30; *your sweet pursuit*, FT 93,33). The balance culminates in God's surprising acknowledgment, *Ich mag nit eine von dir sin!* (FL 128,37; *I cannot be without you*, FT 94,1).[61] But even here, the tension of engagement within withdrawal, withdrawal within engagement, is by no means suspended, for [*w*]*ie wite wir geteilet sin – / wir mǒgen doch nit gescheiden sin*; *No matter how far we are apart, / We can still never be really separated* (FL 130,1 f.; FT 94,2 f.) is as valid as *Ich kann dich nit so kleine beriben: / Ich tů dir unmassen we an dinem armen libe*; *No matter how softly I caress you, / I inflict immense pain on your poor body* (FL 130,3 f.; FT 94,2 f.). Although an almost unsurpassed connection is established – through the constitutive elements of the dialogic structure, the corresponding groups of images, and the (self-)portrait of God as a partner in love and suffering – on the level of theological logic the status quo is unchanged: Although the immanence is Christologically always connected to the transcendence that has preceded it,[62] the unfolding of the omnipresent transcendence remains up to this point a miracle and as a miracle beyond human conception (cf. *du unbegriffenliches wunder*; *you incomprehensible marvel* (FL 126,10; FT 92,28).

(3) This internally contradictory structure is characteristic of the following two dialogic parts as well, which we will only summarize briefly. In the Dialogue Part 2, the Soul sharply rejects God's offer of protection with a pointed emphasis on the worthlessness of her physical body – which she describes as a *dank prison* (*pfůligen kerker*[], FL 130,11; FT 94,11) and beset by *frailty* (*brǒdekeit*, FL 130,14; FT 94,13). At the same time, she transforms the fire metaphors into the image of a *beam of* [...] *fiery love* (*fúrigen minne strale*, FL 130,16; FT 94,15), connecting the partnership to an attribution of cause and liability; the sender of the beam of love is not *amor*, but God himself. Again, the response picks up the metaphoric strand precisely and balances out the declared shortcoming, at least in the course of the unfolding speech act: At the very moment the beam of love inflicts its wound (*in der selben stunde*; *immediately*, FL 130,22; FT 94,21), a healing salve is at hand. The humiliation *is* reversed in the presence of God's fulness. Unlike in

61 The emphasis on mutual desire is characteristic of the *Flowing Light*: Ruh 1993, p. 264; Hasebrink 2007, pp. 100 f.

62 Cf. Bleumer 2020, pp. 154 f.

the Dialogue Part 1, the endangering superior power of transcendence does not have the last word. Instead, the conception of a consonant harmony is completed phonetically by the rhyme *din* / *sin* (FL 130,23 f.) and visually by the image of the balance, even though the idea of separation in unity subtly remains in the image of counterbalancing with its future-directed auxiliary verb *wil ich* [...] *widerwegen*; *I shall balance off* (FL 130,28; FT 94,27), along with the conception of a salvation that cannot be realized as a presence in immanence, but only eschatologically.

(4) Nevertheless, the incipient harmony seems to take possession of the Soul to the extent that it now gives up its restless search. Its dramatically emotional complaint is replaced by two questions that seek an intellectual understanding of the paradoxical condition of suffering: How should the speaker understand her own physical suffering, again presented in extreme images: *min fleisch mir entvallet, / min blůt vertrukent, min gebein kellet*; [...] *my flesh melts away, / My blood dries up, my bones torture me* (FL 132,2 f.; FT 94,37 f.)? And where is God in the midst of his withdrawal? The emotional complaint thereby opens itself to theological discussion. God's response harkens back to the image of the forsaken bride to which the Soul has already alluded, again in a direct allusion to the *Song of Solomon*'s allegory. The explanation strengthens the eschatological connection: *Die wile das dem jungeling sin brut ist nit heim gegeben, / so můs si dike ein von im wesen*; *As long as his bride has not been delivered to his house, / She must often be apart from her young man* (FL 132,18 f.; FT 95,15 f.). Yet immediately thereafter, God locates himself in an eternal present: *Ich bin in mir selben an allen stetten und in allen dingen / als ich ie was sunder beginnen*; *I am in myself in all places and in all things, / As I always have been eternally* (FL 132,25 f.; FT 95,22 f.). Both things are valid: immanence and transcendence interpenetrate, although the Soul remains in a state of deficiency. Once again, the basic theological problem of the asymmetric relationship is invoked and confirmed, the problem to which the Soul determinedly seeks a solution.

The final passages of Dialogue Part 3 are devoted to that solution. It becomes apparent in the images of the loving union in the orchard. The prerequisite of that union is first, that God's arrival – *Ich kum zů dir*; *I come to you* (FL 132,20; FT 95,17) – cannot be compelled, captured, or discovered but is dependent on God's pleasure (*lust*, FL 132,20; FT 95,17), choice (*wenne ich wil*; *when I will*, FL 132,20; FT 95,17), and mercy. The other prerequisite is the Soul's self-control and receptive *stille* (*calm*, FL 132,20 f.; FT 95,18 f.) as they already performatively appear in the change from complaining to questioning, for it is precisely this that increases the *minne kraft; power of love* (FL 132,23; FT 95,20). The danger that superabundance might break the Soul apart has been anticipated and is offset by the experience of *sweet union* (*sůssen einunge*, FL 132,28; FT 95,25), the divine *attractiveness* (*lustlicheit*, FL 132,32 f.; FT 95,28), in which all the dialogue's acoustic, visual, and sensory impressions seem to coalesce synesthetically: *So brichestu denne die grůnen, wissen, roten ůppfel miner saftigen menscheit; Then you shall pick the green, white, and red apples of my succulent humanity* (FL 132,37 f.; FT 95,31). In the erotically depicted en-

counter, the painful burning of love's fire is transcended in the gleam of divine love and desire: *und dú liehte sunne miner ewigen gotheit / beschinet dich mit dem verborgenen wunder miner lustlicheit; And the bright sun of my eternal Godhead / Shall make you radiant with the secret wonder of my attractiveness* (FL 132,31–33; FT 95,27 f.).

And yet, the Soul has obviously still not reached its goal. For what the verses FL 132,20–22 and 132,27–134,9 (FT 95,17–19 and 95,24–96,2) depict remains curiously open concerning the question of whether here a future, eschatological event is again imagined, or whether God's coming occurs in the actual present, *hic et nunc*, e. g., simultaneous to or within the text itself. On the one hand, the text continues to speak of a *verborgenen wunder* (*secret wonder*, FL 132,32; FT 95,28) and the scenery remains in a mood of preparation (for instance, of a *bette*, FL 132,29; *bed*, FT 95,26) and expectation (*ich warten din*, FL 132,27; *I shall be waiting for you*, FT 95,24) and the *herzeleit* (FL 134,3; *heartache*, FT 95,35) still exists. On the other hand, in the urgency of the temporal impulse as well as the symbolism of the approaching Trinity (*und da neige ich dir den hôhsten bŏn miner heligen drivaltekeit* (FL 132,35 f.; *And I shall bend down for you the towering tree of my Holy Trinity*, FT 95,30) and the speaker breaking the apples (FL 132,35 f.; FT 95,31), the *sůsse einunge* (*sweet union*) seems to have been *in actu* achieved. This tension recurs at the end of the Dialogue Part 3, where the divine speaker holds out the prospect of teaching the Soul the song of the virgins at some future time (*So du den bůn umbevahest, / denne lere ich dich der megde sang*, FL 134,4 f.; *When you embrace the tree, / I shall teach you the song of the virgins*, FT 95,36 f.), and then only a few lines later encourages the Soul to complete the song now (*Liebú, nu sing an und la hŏren, wie du es kanst*, FL 134,10; *Beloved, begin the song and let me hear how well you sing*, FT 96,3).

(5) Only at this moment, i. e., in the sound of the Soul's song, is identity in difference achieved, and [T]*he melody, the words, the dulcet sounds* (*die wise, dú wort, den sůssen klang*, FL 134,6; FT 95,38) become an actual event.[63] It is as if the adoration of the apostrophe at the beginning (*O du*) is overwritten by the unity that has cancelled out the duality in complete reciprocity. The initial negations that refer to the dangerous infinitude of divine glory (*unzalhaftig*[], *unbegriffenlich*[], *endelos*[], FL 126,9–11; *beyond reckoning, incomprehensible, infinite*, FT 92, 27–29), now seem newly formed in relation to the mystery of the incarnation, and they again actualize the miracle of the *einunge* of God and man in the Soul's compelling song:

> Herre, din blůt und min ist ein, unbewollen –
> din minne und minú ist ein, ungeteilet –
> din kleit und min ist ein, unbevleket –
> din munt und min ist ein, ungekust – etc.
> (FL 134,15–18)

63 On the category of "event": Bleumer 2020, esp. pp. 13–19.

Lord, your blood and mine are one, untainted.
Your love and mine are one, inseparable.
Your garment and mine are one, immaculate.
Your mouth and mine are one, unkissed.
(FT 96,7–10)

Not only does the song declare the absorption of duality in unity, externalization in purity, and love in transcendent inseparableness, but it also realizes this absorption in language that is now clearly lyrical and rhythmic.[64] In these lyrical lines, the parallelisms in syntax and participial structure are bound together in the fourfold formula of identity *din* [...] *und min ist ein*, (*your* [...] *and mine are one*) the fourfold repetition of the prefix *un-*, and the melodic alternation of the vowels *-i- and -u-*. Performatively, the text lends a voice to those listeners or readers who have identified with the Soul in its dramatic vicissitudes. It draws them into the rejoicing and even turns them into actors in the encounter with God. Thus the text's primary function – to stimulate mystical experience – is achieved.

Yet the experience of unity in jubilation is immediately interrupted by the following reference to the inadequate presentation by the human hand (FL 134,21; FT 96,15) of the writer. The written *wort* alone, without [*d*]*er minne stimme* or the *sůsse*[*n*] *herzeklang* (FL 134,19 f.; *the voice of love* [...] *the melody of the heart*, FT 96,14), lacks the vitality that could guarantee the recreation of the incarnation. The text that was able to performatively actualize the presence of divine *einunge*, reverts to the status of a representation. In Section 6, we will return to this deconstruction from autological and heterological perspectives.

4. Meister Eckhart's Sermon 57: Fourfold Sense of the Scripture and Performative Kerygma

In our analysis of Eckhart's Sermon 57 we will examine the possibilities of reading it from a theological and literary perspective.[65] Intended as part of the liturgy for a church consecration with Revelation 21:2 as the central text,[66] and probably composed shortly after Eckhart's first sojourn in Paris,[67] Sermon 57 seems – unlike the passages from the

64 Cf. the foundational work in Emmelius 2013; Emmelius 2015; according to Linden 2011, p. 373, the Soul must now prove itself in song, which is "designated as the exclusive access to God"; also: Gerok-Reiter 2022a, pp. 57–59.

65 On Eckhart's sermons in general: Köbele 1993, pp. 123–129; Largier 1993, pp. 715–742; Leppin 2007, pp. 99–110; on Sermon 57, cf. Quint 1969, pp. 592 f.; Theisen 1990, pp. 207–210; Largier 1993, pp. 1076–1082.

66 Buchinger 2011, p. 254.

67 See Largier 1993, p. 1076.

Flowing Light – at first difficult to approach through an aesthetic reading since it shows the Thuringian preacher to be above all the scholastic academic he was well-known to be, who primarily wants to teach and argue logically with sharp definitions. Nevertheless, distinct groups of images with a life of their own find their way into his exegetic argumentation. Similarly, in the staging of a dialogic scene toward its end, the sermon exhibits a formal element which, although not impossible in a scholastic context (recall Anselm of Canterbury's famous dialogue *Cur Deus homo*), stands in sharp contrast to the gestures of scholastic argumentation. One must thus ask what function these different modes of presentation and explication serve within the genre[68] of the sermon and the space of its social resonance.[69]

In the interpretation of the central verse, Revelation 21:2: *Vidi civitatem sanctam Ierusalem novam descendentem de caelo a domino*,[70] Eckhart's sermon seeks to comprehend the conditions for a mystical experience of God, similar to Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light*. We must keep in mind the overall dominance of the structure of scholastic argumentation. This is already evident from an outline of the sermon, which is reminiscent of scholastic treatises in its internal divisions. Using the page and line numbering of Largier's Eckhart edition,[71] the outline follows:

Theme (EP 606,4): The Descent of Jerusalem from Heaven

(1) Exposition of the theme on the basis of the concept of *stat* (city, EP 606,5–13)

(2) *Ze dem êrsten: vride* (first: peace, EP 606,14–26)
vride as an ordering force (EP 606,15–18)
vride as love (EP 606,18–20)
vride as a service community (EP 606,20–24)
vride as a return to God (EP 606,24–26)

(3) *Daz ander: heilic* (second: holy, EP 606,27–610,6)
heilic as purity (EP 606,27–608,11)
heilic as a separation from the earth (EP 608,12–610,6)

(4) *Ze dem dritten: niuwe* (third: new, EP 610,7–610,25)
niuwe in relation to time and eternity (EP 610,7–610,22)
niuwe in relation to all *bilde* and *creâtûre*[*n*] (images and creatures, 610,22–25)

(5) Summary: the possibility of knowing God (EP 610,25–614,21)

68 On the sermon as a genre, see Schiewer / Schiewer 2009; on the form of Eckhart's sermons: Largier 1993, pp. 740 f.

69 Cf. Rosa 2019.

70 "And I [...] saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven" (King James Version).

71 Where not otherwise noted, quotations follow the edition of Largier 1993, vol. 1 (in the following abbreviated EP, followed by the sermon number, page, and line). When the quotation is from Sermon 57, EP is followed only by page and line number of the Middle High German text. Largier 1993, vol. 2, is abbreviated EP 2.

The sermon basically develops through a fourfold definition of concepts (*stat*, *vride*, *heilic*, *niuwe*). To begin with, these four ideas are not on the same level. The abstract concepts *vride, heilic, niuwe* serve to explicate the concrete noun *stat*, which through the thematic Bible verse and the opening vision (*Sant Johannes sach 'eine stat'*: Saint John saw 'a city', EP 606,4) is doubly emphasized.

(1) Eckhart explains that the city – at first still on a basic, material level – stands for the defense and unity of its inhabitants; he soon moves on toward his goal of a spiritual interpretation: *Disiu 'stat' bezeichent eine ieglîche geistlîche sêle* (This 'city' represents every spiritual soul, EP 606,10). Obviously, he considers the possibility of this interpretation – which in the end implies a serious leap in conceptual and interpretive levels – is justified by the doctrine of multiple scriptural senses: An eschatological vision thus becomes (by way of allusions to the literal level) in the *sensus allegoricus* a statement of essential contents of belief and in the *sensus moralis* a reference to the soul of the individual believer. In a positively didactic way, Eckhart thus succinctly alludes to all four levels of fourfold scriptural sense, while at the same time emphasizing the *sensus moralis* as decisive, thereby also indicating how to understand what follows.

Eckhart's introduction to the spiritual interpretation as well as his continuation also show that he clearly sees that such an exegetic operation poses a challenge in the context of the sermon, and for that reason – and possibly also in view of a heterogeneous audience that could have included some who were not familiar with the multiple senses of Scripture – that it needs to be made plausible on further levels of coherence. Thus the *stat* is at first clearly delineated in a literal sense, both with references to its fortifications and its inhabitants and by omitting the powerfully symbolic name *Jerusalem*. Mention is made only of *ein stat* (EP 606,4 f.). The Biblical quotation that follows[72] then demonstrates, however, the dissolution of the concrete reading into a sort of reversable figure; a house of prayer (cf. Isaiah 56:7 and Mark 11:17) as well as the sun and the moon are concretely invoked, but only in negation: *Disiu stat enhâte kein betehûs; got was selber der tempel. Man endarf keines liehtes der sunnen noch des mânen; diu klârheit unsers herren erliuhtet sie* (This city had no house of prayer; God himself was the temple. One needs no light of the sun or the moon; the clarity of our Lord illumines it, EP 606,7–9). Thus the impression that he is describing a city on the literal level is sustained through the use of concrete nouns, only for the city's existence to be immediately denied. The concrete house of prayer is rejected in favor of God's all-encompassing presence. The concrete heavenly bodies are rendered superfluous by God's illuminating *klârheit* (clarity, EP 606,9). Both things derive from the eschatological announcement of the Biblical seer, but in the negation of everyday reality can be understood as a direct interpretive in-

72 It comes from the context of the verse being interpreted and occurs twenty verses further on in the same chapter, Revelation 21:22 f. Eckhart thus consciously shifts it forward in his interpretation.

struction, preparing the listener for the concise exegesis of the *stat* in verse 606,10, which gives the *sensus moralis*.

(2) A complex concentration of Biblical and theological ideas also characterizes the next large segment, which concerns the theme of *vride* (*peace*). Just as in the emphasis on the individual in the first segment, *vride* is more precisely defined as *vride, der in der sêle sîn sol* (peace that should be in the soul, EP 606,14 f.), with the further explanation, *Dar umbe ist si genant 'Jêrusalem'* (That is why it is called 'Jerusalem', EP 606,15). It is striking that the concept of *vride* is not explicitly present in the Biblical text being interpreted. Eckhart himself introduces the theme using the motif of harmony among the inhabitants of Jerusalem (*eintrehticheit der liute*; harmony of the people, EP 606,7) which was omitted in the explanations of the first segment. At the same time, but without calling explicit attention to this background, he has recourse to the basic exegetical knowledge that Jerusalem is etymologically related to שָׁלוֹם/*shalom*, peace.[73] The coherence of the connection – by no means obvious – is established, as before, by two procedures: on the accessible level by interconnecting motifs, already noted above, which even less informed hearers can understand, as well as on the level of academic knowledge.

Having introduced the concept of peace in this way, Eckhart goes on to develop it on a decidedly learned level – now, however, with explicit recourse to Neoplatonic traditions of discourse as well as to Dionysius – by introducing two basic ideas: on the one hand, a continuous order of interdependence, and on the other, a flowing out from God and a flowing back into him, i. e., emanation and the *exitus-reditus* model.[74] Thus the first two areas of definition – *stat* and *vride* – are in their commonality an indication of the close connection between mysticism and neo-Platonism, which support and determine each other. Eckhart establishes their mutual connection primarily by using Neoplatonic thought to integrate emphasis on the individual soul into the great interconnection of all creatures that take part in the relation between order and flow. The relationship between Biblical and patristic authority works similarly. It is noteworthy that in his elucidations of the *stat*, Eckhart quotes three Bible passages, but now refers to none explicitly and instead offers a lengthy quotation from Pseudo-Dionysius. But the link is given by the interpretation of Jerusalem in terms of peace, and in the context of the medieval hermeneutics of harmony, the discrepancy between the Bible and the Church Father need not be overemphasized.[75]

73 Cf. Petrus Lombardus: Commentaria in psalmos, on Psalm 59 (60):1 (PL 191,553A): *Haec est civitas trinomia, quae prius dicta est Jerus, postea Salem, inde Jerusalem. Jerus conculcata; Salem, pax: Jerusalem visio pacis interpretatur*. (This is a city with three names. Earlier it was called Jerus, later Salem, then Jerusalem. Jerus means the despised one, Salem means peace, and Jerusalem means the vision of peace.)

74 Beierwaltes 2014, pp. 100–124, finds Neoplatonic influence on Master Eckhart above all in the doctrine of unity (and its opposite, multiplicity).

75 The medieval hermeneutics of harmony does not reckon with a possible opposition between a church father and the Biblical text. Instead it posits them together as an interpretive unit, especially when a figure is involved like Dionysius Areopagita who, according to the medieval concep-

(3) The question that still remains unanswered is to what extent the soul is included in the cycle of all creatures that Eckhart invokes, since it is to be thought of as immortal. The subsequent passage of explication, which also continues paraphrasing the conditions for a mystical encounter with God, provides the answer. The opportunity is offered by the remarks on sanctity that proceed from the corresponding attribute of the city Jerusalem in Revelation, and Eckhart elaborates on them especially. The Bible, Augustine, and Dionysius along with the Neoplatonic tradition again constitute the learned points of reference that Eckhart increasingly applies to his own understanding. Accordingly, sanctity means first of all the purity (*lûterkeit*) and freedom (*vrîheit*) of the soul that allow it to reach perfection (*volkomenheit*) (EP 606,28 f.), i. e., that point where God takes up residence in the soul and equality ([*g*]*lîchnisse*) between the soul and God is achieved (EP 606,30 f.). In a complementary way, sanctity likewise means a distance from all earthly things. Eckhart emphasizes that in this context, sin is the antithesis of sanctity. By the mere mention of the words, he conjures up the encompassing context of the Christian doctrine of original sin in the Augustinian tradition. According to Eckhart, however, original sin can be overcome, so that the soul leaves behind the earth and its bodily and material demands (*lîchamen*; body, EP 608,5 – *lîphaftigiu dinc*; bodily things, EP 608,17 – *irdischen dingen*; earthly things, EP 608,24), and enters into God's purity. It is especially notable that to depict the path to purity (*lûterkeit*), Eckhart repeatedly demands a separation from all material things whilst also emphasizing that it is only with the body that the soul can be carried back up to God (*mit dem lîchamen ze gote*; EP 608,20). Similarly, in the account of the purification process, there is a notable increase in concretizing images (the soul that is carried by the body, EP 608,19 f.), similes (Zacchaeus on the ground before climbing the tree to see Jesus, Luke 19:1–10; EP 608,21–23), and examples drawn from scientific or artisanal practice (gold mining, EP 608,26–29). Here, if not before, it is no longer possible to separate the register of learned knowledge from that of vividly concrete images; here, if not before, Eckhart returns to the problem of verbal communication in general.

(4) In the last explanatory segment, the necessary purification process is subsumed under the concept of newness: *Swanne wir mit ihm vereinet sîn, sô werden wir 'niuwe'* (When we are united with Him, we become 'new', EP 610,9 f.). Much like the *exitus-reditus* scheme mentioned above, this *unio* consists in a return to God as *anvanc* (beginning, EP 610,9), but the beginning itself is timeless. The idea of newness seems to introduce a temporal dimension, which creates a tension with God's immediacy in the *unio*. Eckhart develops this complex metaphysical problem, which simultaneously invokes the paradoxical basis of mystical insight, in two ways that now even more clearly bring together substitutive scholastic knowledge and performative immediacy (EP 610, 10–25). One is

tion, belongs to the first post-apostolic generation. On the compilation of biographical material on Dionysius, see Leppin 2021b, pp. 126 f.

that, in addition to the aforementioned authorities, a collective *wir* now appears (EP 610,9 f.), alongside the speaker himself as explainer (*als ich iu sagen wil*; as I will tell you, EP 610,13 f.) and as exemplary figure (*ich stân hie*; I stand here, EP 610,14 f.). The other is the metaphor of the mirror, which Eckhart uses to conceive of eternity and newness together, a metaphor he presents in the most immediately vivid way. The image of a person in the mirror seems new every day, although the person remains identical with himself; according to Eckhart, this is the way to understand the creatures that God posited outside himself. There is no newness in God himself. More generally, there is no time except in the world presented in the mirror. Eckhart develops this in opposition to the possibility that God made things eternal with himself and then placed them into time (EP 610,10–12). Thus ontologically (he continues), the unity of God with his creatures is also a given. Their departure and return are merely an expression of God, not an alternate reality opposite to him in the dimension of time.

With these considerations, which lead us to the summarizing closing passage, a question arises about the relationship between the understanding gained through the process of definition and explication and the realization of perfect cognizance of God in the sense of the *unio* (EP 614,3 f.). Eckhart now introduces another metaphor as a central illustration of this relationship, one that he has already used in passing but to whose deep roots in Neoplatonic metaphysics he now explicitly refers: the metaphor of light, for which he again cites Dionysius. Eckhart's doctrine of the five ways mankind deals with light (EP 612,9–27) is a kind of scale with which – beginning with those who fail to receive light at all – he describes a greater and greater reception of light, tied to cognitive ability. The subtext of these remarks is obviously John 1 with its talk of the light shining in the darkness and the darkness not comprehending it.

(5) Yet a different Biblical text will lead to an explanation of the fifth group of people, those most strongly gripped by the light: the *Song of Solomon*. Eckhart assembles several passages from it into a dialogue, using a method that relates content to presentation surprisingly concisely and binds together the previous modes of comprehension: learned explication and metaphorical vividness. To understand these final passages, one must also take into account the liturgical context, the consecration of a church. The Biblical context of Revelation 21 could refer not only allegorically to the church community as mentioned above – especially its heavenly, pure realization – but also in liturgical history to an image of the heavenly Jerusalem as embodied in the church erected on earth.[76] Bernard of Clairvaux, however, interpreted the act of consecrating a church as connected to the encounter between God and the individual believer: "Therefore, brothers, let us strive with all our yearning and fitting thanksgiving to build for

76 See Böcher 2010, pp. 19–23; Berger 2017, p. 1386.

him a temple in ourselves."[77] Obviously, Eckhart stands in this tradition whose liturgical and Biblical context is only fully grasped when one reads the Biblical text beyond the brief passage quoted at the sermon's beginning. For Jerusalem's descent from heaven is then compared to a bride adorned for her bridegroom. This allusion, which fits with the mystical metaphor of the bride – employed by Bernard but seldom used by Eckhart – and its source in the *Song of Solomon*, thus gives Biblical support to Eckhart's insertion of the dialogue gleaned from that text into his sermon as its closing passage.

Like many previous passages, the dialogue is introduced by a source reference in an instance of the sermon's typical appeal to authority: *Jâ, hie von sprichet diu sêle in 'der minne buoche'* (Of course, the soul speaks about this in the 'Book of Love', EP 614,4 f.). Moreover, the citations circle around the definitional idea of the soul's purity as a precondition for the encounter with God. The lyrical[78] quotations, however, obviously chosen for the power of their images, cannot freely develop but are constantly interrupted by the staccato beat of an interpretive *daz ist* [...] (that is [...]) that brings the sermon's close back to the technique of the fourfold sense of the Scripture and resolves the sensuality of the images in their spiritual interpretation – a masterpiece of exegesis. Nevertheless – and this is the astonishing thing – the inserted dialogic structure of the *Song of Solomon*, in league with its sensual imagery and rhythmically charged prose, becomes itself an element in which the method of presentation not only underscores and makes plausible the intended message; in its closing passage, it almost realizes that message performatively, thereby clearly differentiating itself from the sermon's previous academic-definitional procedure. In the tempo with which the varying citations and concrete images of window, dove, rain, flowers, and north and south winds are invoked, the interpretive structure does not disappear entirely but loses its precedence. In the same way, the reference to authorities clearly recedes at the end in comparison to the event that is invoked. From the perspective of the history of piety, one sees here a phenomenon that can be observed elsewhere as well: a reenactment.[79] In the sermon, the past process of salvation is quasi reenacted, just as the liturgy is also a reenactment of the events on Golgotha. Such a reenactment would have had special appeal for Eckhart if one takes seriously his preceding thoughts on the suspension of temporal difference in God and thus in reality in general. Here, it is not that the past needs to be made present through action. Rather, in dialogic action, the omnipresent God can be experienced – and indeed, even heard – in a new way.

For although, in his explanatory interruptions, Eckhart permanently distances himself from the dialogic role-play, at the same time he quotes the dialogue without

77 Bernard of Clairvaux: In Dedicatione Ecclesiae Sermo 2, pp. 824 f.: *Itaque, fratres, toto cum desiderio et digna gratiarum actione studeamus ei templum aedificare in nobis.*

78 On the *Song of Solomon* as Oriental love poetry, see Fox 1985.

79 See on this concept Leppin 2021a, pp. 17 f.

naming the speakers. Indeed, in the course of the dialogue, he can slip from one first-person subject to another. In the following passage, there are three separate speakers, Eckhart, the bride / soul, and the bridegroom / Jesus:

[Eckhart:] Jâ, hie von sprichet diu sêle in *der minne buoche*:
[Bride / soul:] 'mîn liep sach mich ane durch ein venster'
[E.:] – daz ist: âne hindernisse –,
[S.:] 'und ich wart sîn gewar; er stuont bî der want'
[E.:] – daz ist: bî dem lîchamen, der nidervellic ist –
[S.:] und sprach:
[Bridegroom / Jesus:] 'tuo mir ûf, mîn vriundinne!'
[E.:] – daz ist: wan si ist zemâle mîn an der liebe, wan
[S.:] 'er ist mir und ich bin im aleine';
[J.:] 'mîn tûbe'
[E.:] – daz ist: einvaltic an der begerunge –,
[J.:] 'mîn schœne'
[E.:] – daz ist: an den werken –,
[J.:] 'stant ûf snelliclîche und kum ze mir! [...]'
(EP 614,4–12)

[Eckhart:] Of course, the soul speaks about this in the *Book of Love*.
[Bride / soul:] 'My beloved looked at me through a window.'
[E.:] – That is, without a barrier –
[S.:] 'and I became aware of him. He stood by the wall.'
[E.:] – That is, by the body that is frail. –
[S.:] 'and said:'
[Bridegroom / Jesus:] 'Open the door for me, my beloved!'
[E.:] – That is, she belongs wholly to me in love, for –
[S.:] 'He is with me, and I am his alone.'
[J.:] 'my dove'
[E.:] – That is, naïve in desire –
[J.:] 'my beauty'
[E.:] – That is, in her deeds –
[J.:] 'Get up quickly and come to me! [...]'

The interweaving of speaker perspectives in this brief passage,[80] however, is extremely striking: In the line *daz ist: wan si ist zemâle mîn an der liebe* (EP 614,9), it is carried even further, since here in his explication, Eckhart assumes the voice of the bridegroom / Jesus. If one considers the oral nature of a sermon,[81] then the frequent change

80 Cf. Leppin 2021a, pp. 224 f.

81 One problem for historical analysis of the sermon is that this genuinely oral genre comes down to us only in written form, through multiple stages of hearing, transcribing, and copying. To that extent, what follows includes a certain methodological caveat, but is intended to draw attention to how this dialogue functions.

of speakers, performed by the single voice of the preacher, lets his role blur into those of the role-players in the *Song of Solomon* and makes him into the first-person speaker of Christ. Thus, in the staging of its speech acts, the dialogue underscores the sermon's final promise that God himself commands all perfection to enter the soul (EP 614,20f.). This pledge comes from God, who is present to the soul and whose words were just now audible in the voice of the preacher. And it is precisely therein that, the distanced sermon, although retaining to the end its gesture of academic explication, becomes performative kerygma.

5. Between Autology and Heterology I: The Choice of Artistic Means

Both Chapter II,25 of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* and Eckhart's Sermon 57 revolve around the realization of God in the conjunction of transcendence and immanence, conceived as a unity. This raises in both texts the basic theological question of how the soul may comprehend God and the equally basic question of how any verbal representation may serve to do so. Both texts strive to answer these questions, but in clearly different ways.

Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* presents the theme by "staging a drama in which the paradox of the presence of transcendence"[82] is acted out in constantly renewed approaches to and perspectives on the tension between withdrawal and engagement, separation and possible *unio*, difference and longed-for identity, desire and hoped-for fulfillment, duality and unity. In keeping with the idea of an exegesis "in process,"[83] as it offered itself especially to the unlettered in continuation of the Cistercian interpretation of the *Song of Solomon* what is foregrounded is not a propositional statement, a logical explanation of causality, or a learned explication. Instead, adapted to the expected listeners and readers, the numerous creative means employed aim for emotional enactment and performative participation.

Thus the complaint that emerges from the opening praise and flows back into it is per se an affective form of speech. Emotionality is further emphasized by lexemes of misery, suffering, and desire. Metaphors drawn from the classical vocabulary of amorous passion – the arrow of love, wounds, injuries, fire, fetters – underscore the emotion, as do words and paradoxical figures of thought from the vocabulary of courtly love (*triuwe* [*faithfulness*], engagement / withdrawal, and the salutation *Herzeliebú*[84] [*dear heart*], FL 130,19; FT 94,18), as well as, above all, the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Solomon*. But this affective verve is also triggered by everyday images (*wider-*

82 Hasebrink 2007, p. 94.

83 Largier 2000, p. 104.

84 A conjecture from *liebú herze*, cf. on this passage Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 743.

wegen [*balance off*], FL 130,28; FT 94,27 – *zuker* [*sugar*], FL 134,13; FT 96,5), animal and nature allegories (*lǒwe*[] [*lion*], FL 132,7; FT 95,4 – *bǒngarten* [*orchard*], FL 132,27 – *ǒppfel* [*apples*], FL 132,37; FT 95,37) or the network of lexemes of fire, light, and illumination derived from classical, Biblical, and Dionysian tradition. Central to the resulting impression of dynamic breathlessness is that the groups of images rapidly succeed one another, often overlapping and almost seamlessly melding with allusions to the Bible (e.g., Psalms 12:15 f. or Job 19:20)[85] and learned theological questions (e.g., *gabe von nature*; *per naturam – gabe von gnade*; *per gratiam – gifts of nature*; *gifts of mercy*, FL 128,18–23; FT 93,16–26; the color allegory of the apples, FL 132,37 f.; FT 95,31 f.).[86] Syntactic elements such as anaphora ([*i*]*ch rǔffe dir, ich beiten din,* [*i*]*ch jage dich*; *I cry out to you, I hope for your coming, I pursue you*, FL 128,5,7,10; FT 93,7,9,12) and the rhythmic sentence structure that – through rhyme or its evocation – repeatedly assumes the character of verse contribute to the rapid flow of images and complaint, a flow into which the audience, like the Soul, can immerse itself.[87] Thus the Soul's disquiet is mirrored less in sentence content than in the constantly changing groups of images and rhythmical values; the artistic means become an equal – and sometimes the primary – agent of meaning.

The artistic means prove to be a strategy of immersion which brings together synesthetic experience and theological reflection, emotional connection and cognitive perception to support understanding of and participation in what is said. The goal is to enable, via the emotive stages of despairing pursuit and mutual counterbalance, the listeners or readers to experience performatively the *sůsse einunge* themselves.[88] This goal is aided by the fact that the "I" of the text is not a biographically specific person but the depersonalized voice of the purified Soul, which offers the receptive audience a surface of identification permitting an infinite number of inscriptions.

Given Eckhart's scholastic background, his training in Latin, and mostly educated circle of listeners, the style of his Sermon 57 is quite different. The structure of his

85 Cf., e.g., Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 743.

86 Cf. Hasebrink 2007, p. 100, or Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 744.

87 On similar practices of immersion as part of mystical readings, see Nemes 2012. Cf. on Scripture's inherent "program of implemented action" also Kiening 2011, p. 13.

88 It is decisive that this immersive participation, initiated by aesthetic means, both includes difference of experiences and also enables knowledge (just as "unity is still operative in separation," see Köbele 1993, p. 95). Precisely the "necessity of discerning the spirits" that accompanies sensuous sweetness (Largier 2007, p. 47), however, should counter the danger of an opposition between independent, autonomous aesthetic experience and the goal of *cognitio experimentalis* – thus implicitly Largier 2007, pp. 55–60 – a danger which in this form is probably due above all to a modern understanding of aesthetics. For a critique of Largier on this point, cf. Zech 2015, pp. 15 f. Hasebrink 2007, p. 105, sees the difference to modern aesthetics in the fact that "a transcendent connection is specific for the understanding of medieval aesthetics; thus the aesthetic is not completely subsumed in the beautiful appearance of the work of art, but also carries with it the difference of what has made it possible and thus expresses absence".

argumentation follows predominantly learned scholastic models and patterns, clearly evident in its hierarchical outline, its constant appeal to authorities, its conceptual definitions, its continual quotation of Biblical and patristic sources, and above all in the way it employs the hermeneutic practice of the fourfold sense of the Scripture, especially in interpretation of the *sensus moralis*. It is therefore no accident that the interpretive practice of addressing the fourfold sense of the Scripture in homiletic endeavor is especially evident at the beginning of Eckhart's sermon – as an unmistakable demonstration of a receptive mode that is of fundamental importance to the entire sermon.

However, even here, specific rhetorical means support the understanding of the thematic fields and interpretive relationships.[89] As in the *Flowing Light*, these consist in connections made via internal structures, motivic correspondences, and semantic ambiguity. There is a use of metaphors, similes, and examples from various realms of imagery,[90] here too with a connection to everyday skills (EP 608,26–29). The end of the sermon deploys intensified syntactic and rhythmic concentrations. In contrast to the *Flowing Light*, however, the sermon tends to use such means sparingly and mostly in the service of rhetorical coherence and clarity in support of the objective, argumentative logic of explication in passages where the audience's knowledge of the arguments may not be adequate for a system of implied references that skims over traditions of complex commentary. But when they are combined with intensified verbal and sensual presentation, in the extreme case they can also aim at an actualization which – measured by the extensive prophecy of the literal sense – partially realizes the eschaton in the soul.

It is important to note that, like the author of the *Flowing Light*, Eckhart intends to convey and realize in the here and now the salvation connected to Biblical events. Both the author of the *Flowing Light*, as a fellow sister to whom God has given responsibility, and Eckhart, as a preacher and highly respected Dominican teacher, seek to carry out their task and bring that realization to fulfillment in the best possible way, with all the rhetorical ingenuity at their command. Despite their identical pastoral goal, its implementation is clearly different in each case, adapted to the genres of mystical praise and complaint on the one hand and sermon on the other, as well as to the educational and institutional conditions of the speakers and their audiences. In comparing them, it is obvious how firmly the means they employ in the autological dimension remain embedded in the speakers' heterological connections or their enactments and thus resist a purely literary, linguistic reading. It also emerges how much the different verbal resources on the level of reception aim to convey salvation according to their heterological environment, and thus – again, we say this with all necessary caution – how much they can reveal about that environment: a methodological gift from literary studies to theology.

89 Cf. esp. Seelhorst 2003, pp. 150–230.

90 On Eckhart's use of metaphor, see – with variable focus and emphases – Köbele 1993, pp. 123–191, and Seelhorst 2003, pp. 215–230.

6. Between Autology and Heterology II: Verbal Reflexions

The variation-rich and stringent application of resources – whether in the sense of consistent strategies of immersion as in the *Flowing Light* or the increasing convergence of an academically learned gesture of explication with immediate vividness, as in Eckhart's sermon – also points to a level of reflection that allows obvious rhetorical considerations as to *ornatus* or *aptum* to become implicit aesthetic negotiations. Its claim of mediation aims not only at religious teaching but also at realization and even at the experience of a mystical *unio*. As a consequence, the fundamental theological problem, with which both texts struggle, of how the soul might comprehend God necessarily raises the paradox of how God might be comprehended (or perceived to withdraw) in the representations of the chosen verbal medium.[91]

One must take into consideration that both the speaker in the *Flowing Light* and Eckhart repeatedly make critical remarks about verbal presentation and its resources, although in part with completely different motivation. Thus it is notable that the speaker in Chapter II,25 describes her own bodily voice as *ellendig*[] (FL 128,6; FT 93,8), which can have the connotation "in a foreign place" as well as the sense of a weak, almost inaudible, "miserable" voice – the opposite of *great longing* (*grosser gere*, FL 128,5; FT 93,7). As lamentation takes over, the tongue can be lamed and the mouth closed tight (FL 130,34f.; FT 94,32f.). Likewise, the writer's earthly hand (FL 134,20f.; FT 96,15) can become inadequate and offer only fragments; the written words with their (lifeless) letters lack the melody (*wise* / *stimme*; *melody* / *voice*, FL 134,6 and 20; FT 95,38 and 96,14) of love and *sůsser herzeklang*, i.e., that which together constitutes the spirituality of the song of the virgins (FL 134,5; FT 95,37). Here, the earthly, physical conditions are limiting fetters. But even when it is not the corporeal speaker herself but her soul whose voice is raised, the adequate articulation of lack or fullness[92] is obviously hard to find. And so the Soul's shuddering sounds are like the loud roar of a hungry lion: powerful but unbalanced and inarticulate (FL 132,6f.; FT 95,3f.). Even at the very end, just before the voice will begin to sing from the *einunge*, it still describes itself negatively as inadequate and *hoarse* (*heiser*, FL 134,11; FT 96,5).

This skepticism surely points to a theological problem that is not per se gender-specific: No speech of any sort can capture the overwhelming experiences of God's withdrawal or God's engagement, as the beginning of the *lamentatio* already announces: *das můhten dir alle creaturen nit vollesagen* (*This all creatures would not be able to express to you fully*, FL 126,14; FT 92,32). Nevertheless, in the specifics of these repeated utterances, we recognize above all a perspective that reappears again and again in the *Flowing Light*:

91 Köbele 2004, p. 122, clearly states this "paradox of representation" with which all scholarship on mysticism struggles.

92 Kiening 2019, esp. pp. 1–29, and on the *Flowing Light* pp. 144f., provides an introduction to this fundamental tension from the perspectives of theology, anthropology, and media studies.

Because of her femaleness and her lack both of learning and the right to be speaking, she seeks to disappear into the staging of her text.[93] This bringing herself to disappear is at the same time the precondition for the speaker to become the pure medium for God's revelation and for the text written by her inadequate hand to become the flowing light of the godhead itself. On the heterological level, the result is that the speaker receives a veritable legitimation for utterances that would be precarious in an institutional context. On the autological level, it seems equally important that her radical, selfless, completely transparent "speaking from the other"[94] represents the only possible way to complete the transformation from *nit vollesagen* to *vollesagen*.

Such a transformation seems possible after the transition from complaint to a calmer question, and from the question to the beloved's request *nu sing an* (*Beloved, begin the song and let me hear how well you sing*, FL 134,10; FT 96,3). As with the assignment from God to make the *buoch* a revelation of divine flowing light, the initiative again comes from the divine partner. And here too, it is not the singer's own ability but God's *kindness* (*miltekeit*, FL 134,13; FT 96,5) that opens her throat to song. Nor is the resulting song her own, but a merging with *der megde sang* (*the song of the virgins*, FL 134,5; FT 95,37) which thus also means its actualization.[95] Only in this complete transferal of self does the "I" of the singer achieve the status of a cognitive medium for grasping God in both senses of the word: to *begrîffen* God (*catch*, FL 128,16; FT 93,18) and to understand the other in the self. The hallmark of complete comprehension is a synesthetic, sensuous sweetness (*süeze*) transcending all sensuousness: *das zuker diner sůssen miltekeit* (*the sugar of your sweet kindness*, FL 134,13; FT 96,5), the *sůssen klang* of *wort* and *wise* (*The melody, the words, the dulcet sounds*, FL 134,6; FT 95,38) and the *sůsse herzeklang* ([*sweet*] *melody of the heart*, FL 134,20; FT 96,14) become one. Only in this *sůssen einunge* (*sweet union*, FL 132,28; FT 95,25) can the *vollesagen* ([the act of] *express*[*ing*] [...] *fully*, FL 126,14; FT 92,32) succeed as a speaking in which representation and presence, *signum* and *res* merge in the lyric song that now begins.

Even if this *vollesagen* – only to be accomplished performatively and emphatically – has no end in eternity (*etc.*, FL 134,18),[96] in the *hic et nunc* of the religious audience it cannot be permanently established. Thus the return to the limitations of the written word (FL 134,21; FT 96,15) does not mean that unity cannot be comprehended and expressed in immanence,[97] but as per the entire chapter, it refers from a new perspective

93 In addition to the declarations of inability, the formulae of humility, and the "disappearance" of the "I" behind the concept "Soul," one could also adduce the dissociation of the "I" into various body parts; cf. Gerok-Reiter 2023.

94 Hasebrink 2006.

95 Linden 2011, pp. 373 f. explicitly emphasizes this.

96 With a somewhat different reading Linden 2011, pp. 374, cf. there also footnote 35.

97 See Seelhorst 2003, pp. 102–104 and 124 f.; Hasebrink 2007, pp. 104 f. Cf. Mechthild: Lux divinitatis, Liber IV,7, 30 f. (p. 232).

to the conditions under which a *vollesagen* can be achieved. The semantics of *bliben* (*be left unrendered*, FL 134,20; FT 96,14) can definitely be understood as ambiguous, i. e., not only as failing to appear (ausbleiben). In order again and again to call *dú wort des sanges* back to life and experience them as the flowing light of the Godhead, love's desire – the *sůsse herzeklang* – must remain (verbleiben) in the memory of the audience, at least as a trace of what they have just heard or read. Especially for imparting the knowledge of salvation in the everyday contexts of the writer's fellow sisters, this pragmatic retrospection is necessary. And it shows again how firmly the presentation is embedded in concrete pastoral ministry and the preaching of salvation.

Returning to Eckhart's thoughts, they begin characteristically not with his own physicality or dissatisfaction, but more fundamentally with the nothingness of creatureliness itself. Thus it is significant for the idea of aesthetic negotiation, in Sermon 57 that Eckhart contrasts, in a metaphysical-ontological sense, the somethingness of God with the nothingness of the creaturely being. The sin of this being consists in physicality itself, while the return to God, the mystical uniting, redirects the outflowing into physicality back to its beginning (EP 610,25 f.). That corresponds to the ontological approach Eckhart developed in his Latin works, in which Eckhart famously advocated the thesis, *Esse est deus*[98] and drew the consequence for creatures:

> [...] everything made by someone is nothing without him. For obviously anything without being is nothing. How could something be without being? But all being and the being of all is from God alone.[99]

Thus the creaturely world can be described as existing at best in a derivative sense. And since language is a part of this deficient, physical world, it necessarily participates in the inadequacy and temporariness of the creatureliness that must be discarded in favor of *vrîheit* and *lûterkeit*. Yet this one-sided and radical rejection falls short. This can be seen in what follows, in that Eckhart – at first almost in opposition to the theme of Sermon 57 – comes to speak about the fundamental necessity of medial communication, which is as firmly inscribed in the Christian intellectual horizon as the creatureliness of man, God's incarnation, and Christian revelation. For in his transition to the closing passages of the sermon, Eckhart repeatedly points out that on the ontological level, even the body is God-given and that it is to be loved as the carrier of the soul and thus

98 Meister Eckhart: Prologus generalis no. 12, p. 8; Meister Eckhart: Prologus in Opus propositionum no. 1, p. 16 and passim; cf. Manstetten 1993.

99 Meister Eckhart: Expositio in Iohannem no. 53, p. 44,12–15: *omne factum a quocumque sine ipso est nihil. Constat enim quod omne, quod est sine esse, est nihil. Quomodo enim esset sine esse? Esse autem omne et omnium a deo est solo,* [...].

as an indispensable precondition and aid to the ascent to God.[100] Indeed, even God's light can only be perceived if it is "shrouded", as Dionysius says: *ist, daz daz götlîche lieht in mich schînet, sô muoz ez bewunden sîn, als mîn sêle bewunden ist* (Whenever the divine light shines in me, it must be shrouded just as my soul is shrouded, EP 612,9–11). If one takes into account the allusion to John 1, then the light stands for the Divine Word or its revelation through Jesus Christ. Thus even the Word of God had to become engaged with an embodied medium in order to reach the world. Correspondingly, it must use human speech to bear fruit. Or the other way around: Because God's message becomes engaged with the limited conditions of a deficient creatureliness, even the Divine Word needs a medium in which to be conveyed.

If while preaching the preacher adapts and actualizes the work of revelation, his speech also remains indebted to the dichotomy between a communication always contained in (and annulled by) the being of God and its necessary realization. Eckhart had already pointed out this dichotomy in his explanation of the contradiction between beginning and eternity and interpreted it as a difference in identity. Thus, his homiletic efforts are placed in the dichotomy. Nevertheless, the preacher's goal, which he strives for and promises through the mediation of the sermon's words, is immediacy to God. In this immediacy, the soul overcomes the conditions of creatureliness and becomes itself God's temple, in which God is present in *volkomenheit* (EP 614,20). And so Eckhart must confront the fundamental paradox of communicating revelation: to make the experience of transcendence possible under the conditions of immanence, i. e., to ensure the realization of salvation in verbal representation.

In line with the discursive tradition of preaching, Eckhart proceeds step by step: Unlike what the mystical verbal gesture in Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* demands, the learned preacher seeks no emotional participation and does not pile up metaphors or use evocative lyrical techniques. In the foreground is not the "application of the senses,"[101] but scholastic argumentation and explication. The figures of speech support rather than carry out the exposition of content. The image counts less than its meaning.[102] However, Eckhart also considers it important to make the hermeneutical process more dynamic in intellectual discussion. From this standpoint he develops the explanatory progressions (*stat*, *vride*, *heilic*, *niuwe*; city, peace, holy, new) within the art of allegorical explication of the fourfold sense of the Scripture, a constantly recurring level

100 He emphasizes this *intermediary* aspect again in the metaphor of a ship, EP 612,1–3: *Hân ich die liebe, daz ich über mer wil, und hæte ich gerne ein schif, ez wære aleine, daz ich gerne über mer wære; und als ich über mer kume, sô enbedarf ich des schiffes niht* (If I want to cross the sea and would like to have a ship, then only because I wanted to cross the sea, and as soon as I get across, I need the ship no longer).

101 Largier 2007.

102 Nevertheless, Köbele 1993, pp. 171–191, shows how much differentiation between "the concreteness of images" and "abstract-conceptual content" is possible (quotations from p. 190).

shift between the literal and the spiritual sense, and multiple appeals to the authorities and Biblical quotations.[103] As Sermon 57 shows, however, his homiletic struggle can also be seen in the fact that the learned academic explications and the dynamic passages sometimes slide into a vivid, performative style.[104]

A comparison with the closing passage of Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* once again reveals differences that even here, in these sensitive moments, point to differences in the speakers' respective heterological surroundings. While the speaking "I" in the *Flowing Light* seeks to make herself disappear – indeed, *must* structurally disappear – to become a pure medium of God's voice, the respected and admired preacher *in persona* (in the pulpit) remains visible – even if for a moment his voice and the voice of Jesus cannot be told apart. It is as if his voice fills itself with the divine voice, whereas the voice of the speaker in the *Flowing Light* spiritualizes itself and is completely subsumed in God. The relationship to their listeners is just as different. Whereas the audience for the *Flowing Light* is drawn into the process of transformation by the performative offer of identification so that in the best case, they themselves adopt the stance of the speaking

103 From this point, we also see developing the basic adaptation of those patterns of thinking that Dionysius especially brought into Christianity and which give preference to a *theologia negativa* on the basis of the inadequacy of concepts vis-à-vis God's omnipotence and glory. If appearance cannot be an adequate link to God's being, if expression is not a suitable *signum* of that appearance that points to God, then equality in the face of an ever larger inequality can only be attained by way of negation. Meister Eckhart's position is striking when compared to contemporary efforts to reach verbally logical precision in suppositional logic, which interrogated very precisely the relationship between concepts and the reality for which they stand (*supponere*) and thus in its own way included significant skepticism about language, which in the following decades would emerge in the form of nominalism and conceptualism. Meister Eckhart is far removed from such efforts but also arrives at skeptical reflections on language through the neoplatonic horizon of his thought. See, e.g., Kaufmann 1994.

104 This spectrum in Eckhart's work might be due to an ambivalence toward *schoene rede* (eloquence), as seen for example in Sermon 29 (EP 29, p. 330, 5f.). On the one hand, especially through the use of tropes, *schoene rede* can obscure or even distort. On the other hand, Eckhart uses these methods again and again, especially speaking in similes (see Sermon 9: EP 9, p. 112, 24–27). This appears to repeat the tension that Haug 1997b, pp. 18f., claims for the entire Christian tradition and already discerns in St. Augustine: "What Augustine juxtaposes in this way – on the one hand a recommendation not to dispense with the literary and rhetorical means placed at the disposal of Christianity by the classical cultural tradition, and on the other a programmatic *volte face* to the new aesthetics of the *sermo humilis* – is only a more intense form of the contradiction fundamental to the Christian attitude to the Word and the World which becomes manifest early on in both literary and theoretical documents of the new religion. On the one hand, [there are] attempts to present the articles of Christian faith as the greatest good and thus in the highest artistic form[...]. On the other hand, this was countered by the conviction that no significance should be attached to the formal aspects of the work; content should enjoy absolute precedence over form. *Simplicitas* and *rusticitas* become guarantors of sincerity."

"I," the distance between the promulgating preacher and his audience is maintained to the end. And even at the moment when their vision is freed by the opening of a *venster*, there remains the guidance of the learned man, the scholastic, the preacher (*daz ist: âne hindernisse*, EP 614,6). In the *Flowing Light*, the break begins only after the performative consummation, as a return to an unavoidable attitude of *humilitas*.

7. Between Autology and Heterology III: Aesthetic Negotiations – Summary

On the basis of the preceding discussion, we will now return to the paradox of a Christian aesthetics. The insights gained so far should by no means be taken to stand for the broad and varied spectrum of Christian aesthetics in all Middle High German texts. Different kinds of texts establish their own criteria according to their time, concrete function, and discursive situation, which even within the Christian framework covers an extensive range.[105] Yet thanks to their heterological embeddedness in devotional practice and their claim to offer a religious didactics with the goal of performative kerygma, both our texts are especially suited for fundamental reflections on the criteria of aesthetic understanding in a medieval Christian context. Our thoughts on this question are set out below in seven theses.

(1) *Aesthetics and Religious Devotional Practice*: The consensus among scholars is presumably that "a transcendent connection is specific for the understanding of medieval aesthetics,"[106] at least for texts located in the field of religious discourse and expressly referring to it.[107] This transcendent connection in aesthetic practices is especially evident in texts concerning religious practices of piety, i. e., in texts that, as a rule, have a concrete function in liturgical, homiletical, or pastoral practice. To the extent that texts have an aesthetic form and structure, it remains deeply embedded in the pragmatic and contextual claims of religious devotional practice. The consequence is that the aesthetic form of the text is crucially determined, designed, shaped, and critiqued by the requirements of its individual socio-historical context;[108] in

105 Cf. the contributions of Sandra Linden and Daniela Wag in this volume, pp. 227–264, and Mireille Schnyder in this volume, pp. 413–431. Especially the chapter by Mireille Schnyder shows how various the approaches can be.

106 Hasebrink 2007, p. 105.

107 On the field's breadth and heterogeneity and the methodological handicap that follows from this, see Braun 2014, pp. 422–425. It is noticeable that the incorporation of Christian perspectives is currently again in sharper analytical focus in medieval studies, especially from the point of view of aesthetics: see Benz / Nowakowski / Rippl 2020.

108 The claim of aesthetic perception can also lead to conflict: cf. applied to mystical speaking: Largier 2014, pp. 366–368; applied to concepts of edification in a broad sense: Köbele / Notz 2019.

the best case, it should have a practice-oriented effect on religious teaching, experience, and kerygma. This is exactly what the compositional methods and language-conscious approaches display in the *Flowing Light* and Eckhart's sermon. Such texts make it unmistakably clear that their aesthetic form in appearance, effect, and quality cannot be adequately described using criteria and concepts that arise from the literary standards that – in their historical context – demand or have completed a disengagement from pragmatic goals[109] or that link the "poetic function" of language to self-referentiality.[110]

(2) *Art versus Aesthetic Negotiation:* As a consequence, this insight raises the question: What terminology is *adequate* for both literary and religious history in working with premodern artifacts of religious devotional practice? If the emphatic and exclusive idea of the work of art in the historical process – for which Lessing's remarks are paradigmatic – is tied to the emancipation of artifacts from their heteronomous purposes, that explains why the modern concepts of the work of art or art in fact cannot be projected back onto devotional texts like the *Flowing Light* and Eckhart's sermon without serious misunderstandings. This is the sense in which Hans Belting speaks of the "history of the picture before the age of art" or Christian Kiening of "texts before the age of literature."[111] One must be just as cautious in referring to the concept of aesthetics that has only gained programmatic shape since Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* and then only under specific historical circumstances.[112] Two things are incontestable, however. One is that the texts which analysis shows to be part of a religious practice deploy an abundance of means, together with complex reflections on language, that go beyond the purely rhetorical application of *ornatus* and justify in full the concept of aesthetic negotiation. The other is even more consequential: These devotional texts, embedded in their heterological functionality, are intent on achieving the "greatest effect" and "perfection"[113] in their *vollesagen* (FL 126,14). According to their own self-conception, this implies that their aesthetic structure aims for a highly demanding effect and evaluation.

109 On the historicity of the claim to autonomy in the arts, as well as on the historicity of the concept of aesthetic autonomy, cf. Robert 2024, pp. 26–28 and 31–33. He stresses that "aesthetic autonomy," in the period around 1800, is not an elaborate theory but a figure of aesthetic reflection. The latter goes back to traditional arguments and motifs (such as the topos of poetic truth and the *licentia poetica*) which combine, under the influence of the idea of "freedom," to form a systematic set of arguments. On the historicity of the resulting structural contradictions: Kablitz 2012.

110 Jakobson 1981, pp. 27–29. Even an analysis as nuanced as that of Hasebrink 2007, p. 105, has recourse to a statement like this: "To that extent, it could be precisely the complaint in which the aesthetic can free itself from heteronomous purposes because in its pragmatism, the sublime expression of pain, it is above any suspicion of autonomy."

111 Belting 1994; Kiening 2003.

112 Cf. the contribution by Annette Gerok-Reiter and Jörg Robert in this volume, pp.3–48.

113 Lessing: Laokoon, p. 80, and the discussion in section 2 of this chapter.

(3) Vollesagen – *Criteria for Aesthetic Effect and Evaluation*: If concepts like "aesthetic negotiation" make plausible the use of artistic means as well as reflection on the options of verbal expression, a *vollesagen* that encompasses aesthetic experience, effect, and appreciation in the context of mystical speech obviously goes much further. The criteria that now come into play are much more difficult to grasp. However, it is obvious that the texts follow a practice in which *freedom* from functional integration – especially with regard to aesthetic experience, effect, and evaluation – plays *no* role. The texts under discussion assume the opposite: that there is intractable interference between pragmatic integration and aesthetic effect and evaluation. *Vollesagen* is only fulfilled by way of and within this interference. In this sense, we needed to begin with the tension – thematized in the texts – between immanence and transcendence and how it is conveyed in the kerygma of the unity of God and man in Jesus Christus. Only when the reenactment of that mediation – already completed in Christ – succeeds in performative realization under the given socio-historical conditions is a *vollesagen* in the sense of the *sůssen einunge* – the homiletic goal of the reenactment of the divine and of salvation – realized in the here and now. Precisely here is where the aesthetic dimension becomes an epistemic[114] dimension with great religious claims.

(4) *The Structural Analogy Between Religion and Aesthetics*: The precondition for opening this vast epistemic dimension is the experience of transcending the sensual, or the shift from the sensual to the extrasensory. The tension in this relationship is known to belong to the fundamental constituents of aesthetic experience.[115] It vouches for – and aims at – the revelatory power of that experience. Because of the structure of this relationship or the aforementioned shift, religious and aesthetic experience are at first analogous. But this analogy favors their merger; indeed, it can bring religious and aesthetic experience into congruence.[116] From this structural analogy one can, as it were, turn Lessing's logic on its head and explain the *privileged status* of religious themes for aesthetic presentation and the fact that religious conceptions[117] serve to describe aesthetic experience right up to the present.[118] But even this relationship becomes eloquent only in its historical and cultural variance. Our texts discuss it on a human level

114 In this context, this concept is used in the broad sense of the Berlin CRC *Episteme in Bewegung* (Episteme in Motion): Cancik-Kirschbaum / Traninger 2015, pp. 1 f.

115 From an art-historical point of view, this is especially clearly formulated by Gottfried Boehm 2006, p. 30: "[The image belongs] indissolubly to material culture [...], [is] in a completely unavoidable way inscribed in material [...], [but allows] a significance to appear there in [...] which at the same time surpasses the merely factual." It remains open to discussion the extent to which the significance that appears can be understood as transcendental.

116 On the "reciprocal perspectives" of religious and aesthetic experience: Krüger, K. 2016, pp. 7–19.

117 E.g., Krüger, K. 2016.

118 Danto 1981, for example, uses the concept of "transfiguration," Mersch 2002 that of the "aura," Seel 2005 the concept of "appearing."

in connection with the body and soul – or one's own actions and God's mercy – and on a linguistic level in the *aptum* between on the one hand the medium of expression (language and its aurality and implicit images) and on the other hand the allegorically interpreted levels of meaning of the fourfold sense of the Scripture, the "sacred knowledge" (*heiligen bekantheit*, FL 132,30) of God, or the *unio*, as the *Song of Solomon* conveys in its mystical interpretation.

(5) *The Incomprehensibility and Comprehensibility of Salvation*: The tension between immanence and transcendence, the sensual and the extrasensory, has extremely variable justifications and manifestations, not just diachronically and culturally but even within the confines of 13th- and 14th-century Christianity. In that period, the spectrum begins on the one hand with the formulation chosen by the Lateran Council in 1215: "Between the Creator and the creature, one can discern no similarity great enough that no greater dissimilarity would not be discernable."[119] But the range stretches from the eucharistic use of Psalm 34:8 (33:9 in the Vulgate), "O taste and see that the Lord is good,"[120] to those manifestations of the culture of Christian piety in which the sacred is gained by walking a pilgrimage route, is discovered in pictures, or is touched in reliquaries or other sacred locations.[121] According to this understanding, the synesthetic – and even haptic – tangibility of the divine in the here and now is not excluded on principle; on the contrary, it is the Christian experiential reality that is to be captured. In the history of salvation, this concept finds its basis in the incarnation of Christ. From the "materialism of God's incarnation," Klaus Müller trenchantly says, "right up to the present, there is no religion more sensuous than Christianity."[122] Accordingly, one could say that, in the incarnation, the "paradox of representation"[123] comes to rest in its "performative self-contradiction."[124] This characterizes the liturgy, especially in the concept of transubstantiation in the celebration of the eucharist, and also finds expression in the history of piety in the assumption that in the sacred object, the *virtus* of saints and of God himself is present.[125]

119 Denzinger: Compendium, no. 806: *inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda.*

120 On the liturgical use, see Jungmann 1962, pp. 486 f.

121 Numerous examples in Leppin 2021a, esp. pp. 109–197. Kirakosian 2021 has a detailed discussion on the approach to mystical experience via "material objects" (p. 211) in the vernacular tradition of the visions of Gertrude of Helfta. Cf. also Bynum 2011.

122 Müller, K. 2012, p. 219, previously explained: "It goes without saying that this characteristic aesthetic feature of the Christian faith – established by the materialism of incarnation – must have fundamental consequences for the understanding of religion and aesthetics."

123 Köbele 2004, p. 122.

124 Cf. Müller, J.-D. 2001, in relation to *Minnesang*; cf. Hasebrink 2007, pp. 105 f.

125 Leppin 2021a, pp. 112 f.

In the two texts under discussion, the variations in this spectrum form no fundamental oppositions; in many ways, they are mutually dependent – at least in the logic of the way they are presented[126] – and can be expressed in one and the same text. Thus the logic of difference, which relies on the lack of similarity with and the incomprehensibility of God despite all convergence, predominates in Eckhart's interpretive practice of the fourfold sense of the Scripture, which is palpable in the basic structure of his sermon. It appears unmistakably in the *Flowing Light* in the repeated display of the writer's nullity and in the emphasis on the lifeless letters her merely *irdenschú hant* (FL 134,21) can produce. Not until the end of their deliberations, when both the writer and the preacher – to different degrees, as if neutralized in their personalities – emerge as permeable mediums, does the difference appear cancelled. This experience of mercy in the cancellation of difference is the goal of the reactualized dialogue of the *Song of Solomon* at the end of Eckhart's sermon as well as the performatively staged song of the Soul in the *Flowing Light*, in which the song of the virgins becomes presence *in actu*.

(6) *Historical Alterity – Beyond Difference*: Scholars of both theology and German studies have dealt with this spectrum,[127] but in contrast to the discourse among church historians, which is oriented more toward the history of piety, scholars of German literature have trouble with an approach that assumes participation of the temporal in the transcendental world. Recently, however, the emphasis on an irreconcilable difference between immanence and transcendence has been exposed to stronger criticism among Germanists,[128] especially among scholars studying legends. For our mystical texts, these ideas can be very fruitful. It is especially Hartmut Bleumer who has taken aim at the system-theoretical approach: "The primacy of difference in systematic thought" assumes that in the end, the sacred is in principle "excluded from immanence and systematically unavailable," which construes the experience of salvation as a "dilemma" and leads to the conception of an "endless" and "futile," as it were asymptotic narrative process.[129] Bleumer counters that "despite these system-theoretical assumptions," legends believe "in the accessibility of salvation."[130]

126 On the gradual procedure in the *Flowing Light*: Gerok-Reiter 2017.

127 From the point of view of German studies, what is most important is the debate about the efficacy of metaphor: Haug 1986; Köbele 1993, pp. 64–68; Haug 1997a.

128 Hammer 2015, p. 4; Bleumer 2020, p. 153.

129 Bleumer 2020, pp. 152 f.

130 Bleumer 2020, p. 153. "That is why, from a religious point of view, before modern, enlightened rationality there was no calculated descriptive dilemma between transcendence and immanence, postulated for the narrative system" (pp. 153 f.). – However, one must consider whether a solution on the ontological, theological level completely solves the dead-end on the level of medium. Just as the experience of always present salvation can become precarious for the individual soul in the face of God's withdrawal, not every sign is effective in making salvation available.

> The logical claim as valid that transcendence is what is excluded from immanence and rests on an "unbridgeable hiatus" suggests a primacy of the temporal in which the sacred is subsequently encountered as the other. But in religious communication, salvation is anything but secondary. Nor is transcendence excluded in principle. It is only invisible and thus always already present in immanence.[131]

Against this background, the "miracle" does not appear as a "technically impossible event."[132] Mercy, i. e., the "border-crossing of transcendence into immanence," is thus "at any time [...] possible" in the discovery of an always existing, invisible salvation and is the "expressive momentum of salvation at any time."[133] One should, it is true, not completely exclude the idea of a difference between transcendence and immanence in the mystical texts; at least on the verbal level, they both struggle too much with that idea. But Bleumer's caveat made from a literary studies perspective converges with insights by historians of religion into the medieval culture of piety, which found expression especially in ideas touching, grasping, and tasting the divine that were meant quite concretely. While Eckhart's philosophically saturated, speculative mysticism does not propagate precisely this haptic, synesthetic concretion, one often finds it, especially in late medieval works of piety for women, in sacramental ideas, and in the cultic use of images.[134]

This concrete and sensuously intended tasting of transcendence[135] is probably what is meant in the *Flowing Light* when the concept of *sůsse* advances in the emphatic closing passage to the central, key word (*sůssen einunge*, FL 132,28; *das zuker* of the *sůssen miltekeit*, FL 134,13; the *sůsse klang* of *wort* and *wise*, FL 134,6; the *sůsse herzeklang*, FL 134,20), but also beyond this proves to be the leading lexeme of fulfilled religious experience.[136] In his sermon, Eckhart obviously does not exploit the means of rhetorical *ornatus* in the same way as the *Flowing Light*. In view of the fact that the divine in the temporal can only be seen through a "chink," (*schranz*, EP 612,26 f.), as his sermon says, the *süezichkeit*

131 Bleumer 2020, p. 154; with the reference to the "unbridgeable hiatus," Bleumer is quoting Strohschneider 2000, p. 105.

132 Bleumer 2020, p. 155.

133 Bleumer 2020, pp. 154 f.

134 Bleumer 2020, p. 155, locates the experience of salvation in a similar sense, but also in a learned context: "The occurrence of salvation is in this way a self-discovery in the sense of an integumental self-exposure of clerical semantics, which is always already given and invisibly present."

135 On the coincidence of sensuousness and spirituality in this tasting: Trînca 2019, pp. 35 and 46 f. Largier 2007 has emphasized that the meditative *lectiones*, as they also represent the *Flowing Light*, can be described "as artificial self-affection in spiritual exercise" (2014, p. 364); they offer a "phenomenology of rhetorical affects" that aim to open the soul via affective and sensuous "application" to spiritual meaning.

136 More precise quantitative analysis is offered in the work on annotations directed by Marion Darilek in the component project B3 of CRC 1391 "Semantics of the Aesthetic in Medieval German-Language Literature"; cf. also Gerok-Reiter 2022a, pp. 48–53.

(EP 612,31) of the experience, as a "sweetness" of expression, may possibly not be able to reach the *himelrîche* (EP 612,31 f.), but instead, as Eckhart says in another sermon while using the terminology of *süeze*, only the "environs of eternity" (*umberinge der êwicheit*; Q 86; EP 2, 86, S. 216,20). Even in his emphatic ending, the explicative *daz ist* [...] still remains an intellectual element that at least keeps control of the offer of immersion. For that reason, while conceding that the sermon has breathtaking intellectual energy, one must adjudge its aesthetic energy[137] to be less than that of the *Flowing Light*, though their goal remains the same.

(7) *Aesthetic Energy – Alternative Evaluative Concepts*: Finally, through comparison and scaling, we must again address, from a heuristic perspective, the question of judging aesthetic quality. Because of CRC 1391's wide array of source material and its praxeological approach, this question is a particular challenge and especially consequential. At this point, it is too soon to attempt to provide applicable transdisciplinary answers, but certainly we would agree with the theoretical positions of Georg Bertram, who emphasizes that the "value" of art is derived from "negotiating the definitions of human practices in its own specific way."[138]

Against this background, the concerns of this chapter come into better focus. We have tried to show the inadequacy of attributing the aesthetic energy in both texts only to the quantity or expressive power of their rhetorical figures and tropes or to their rhythms and networks of images, thus making only the autological side – the formal means – responsible for that energy. But just as inadequate would be a purely religiohistorical or sociohistorical reconstruction of the background of the genesis and functions of the texts. Such reconstructions are essential but remain as mere background, only a non-binding offer of connection. Neither the urgency of the homiletic goal of Eckhart's sermon, nor the dimension of the *Flowing Light*'s *lectio contemplationis* that opens up Salvation – both aesthetic "practice," according to Bertram – can be derived from such background. It was thus all the more important to bring to light how concretely the means of verbal composition as well as the focus of the verbal reflections themselves have recourse to or are functionally determined by aspects of the heterological side – down to sublime details that elude intentional staging. The amplitude of this exchange in

137 On the concept of energy or intensity cf. Kiening 2015, pp. 11 f. In conceptional elaboration: Gerok-Reiter 2022b. Compared to formulations like aesthetic evaluation, this concept has the advantage of not judging in dichotomies but rather on a descriptive scale. It also not only includes the standpoint of the observer but also assumes the interplay – so central to aesthetic experience – of what the artifact offers and the attentiveness of its recipients; cf. Seel 2005, pp. 21 f. and 112 f.

138 Bertram 2019, p. 233. Bertram understands these "definitions" as the outlining of the significance, function, or epistemic potential of those practices that constitute a society in any historical period: "Artworks always develop a demand for proper definitions of this practice in relation to the historical and cultural state of human practice in general, and in this respect they struggle with other artworks" (pp. 201 f.).

Chapter II,25 of the *Flowing Light* seemed to be more extreme than in Eckhart's sermon – more intense in its exchange of tension; more dynamic in its movement between the radiance of its project and the worry that it may be hubristic, or the fear of falling prey to all too beautiful language;[139] more fraught between the hope to effect a direct message of salvation by the *buoch* (e.g., FL II,26, p. 136,10–22) and the fear that doing so might jeopardize one's own salvation (e.g., FL II,26, p. 136,1–10); between an expressive abundance for which no rhetorical flourish seems adequate to the task at hand and the pronounced *diemůtekeit* (e.g., FL IV,2, p. 236,32–238,3) of the writing "I" that presents itself as not male, not learned, and not backed by an institution and that repeatedly describes itself with the metaphor of a dog (e.g., FL II,3, p. 82,24–27). The result of the *performative cooperation* of these extreme tensions right down to semantics and motifs – indeed, to the syntax, rhythm, and phonetics – is the specific aesthetic energy of the *Flowing Light*.

Our conceptual suggestion is that today, aesthetic evaluations that seek to do justice to historical variance must take as their criteria, firstly, the dynamics and intensity of the performative exchange between the autological and the heterological side from the perspective of the time[140] and secondly the epistemic reach communicated via this exchange in historically and culturally varied offerings.[141] Instead of searching for a timeless conception of art or for the genuine artist, we need to explore historically deployable criteria of aesthetic energy. It is with regard to these criteria that the praxeological model of the CRC should continue to be developed. Only with this approach, which changes the structure of the aesthetic itself, can an evaluation do justice to the aesthetics of artifacts embedded in contexts of practice.[142] Conversely, only when one decisively frees evaluative aesthetic judgments from one-sided, anachronistic ideas of autonomy, self-reflection, or a mere play of forms can one understand why artifacts that are constituent parts of religious practice often encompass especially complex aesthetic negotiations to each attain its own particular "[V]ollkommen seyn" (perfection).[143] From the perspective of such a concept, it would then also be possible to establish why premodern contexts of practice such as "liturgical arrangements"[144] could have the potential to become not an adversary but a promoter of outstanding aesthetic negotiations.

139 The danger of "aesthetic pleasure for its own sake" derives from the "aspects of sensuous-affective production of experience that must always be newly evoked and dramatically intensified in aesthetic experiments," but in the process "raise a number of ethical problems whose solution is a discernment of spirits"; Largier 2014, pp. 367 f.

140 Cf. the contribution of Johannes Lipps und Anna Pawlak in this volume, pp. 433–510.

141 From this perspective too, there are points of contact to philosophical arguments in Bertram 2019, esp. pp. 201 f., 204–225.

142 In this regard, the difference from artifacts without a direct practical context is only one of degree and not kind.

143 Lessing: Laokoon, p. 80.

144 Lessing: Laokoon, p. 82.

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