Sweetness

By Mary Carruthers

This essay offers a provisional charting of an aesthetic term so familiar from medieval writing of all sorts, in Latin and all vernaculars, that most scholars have tended to overlook it as self-evident. That term is "sweetness." No word is used more often in the Middle Ages to make a positive judgment about the effects of works of art. Indeed one can seem close to drowning in vats of glucose when one reads late-medieval aesthetic encomia of (for example) Chaucer's sugared eloquence and honey-sweet words. As a term of value, "sweetness" seems to have lost any definite meaning at all in such judgments. To try to recover some of the complexity of the concept, I'm going to take something of a Cook's Tour through it—you might think of what follows as a very discursive, lengthy lexical entry in a dictionary of medieval aesthetic terms.

In this essay, the word "aesthetic" carries its pre-Kantian, pre-Romantic meaning of what we ordinarily now call "sense-based knowledge," what we perceive and know through our senses. Greek *aisthesis* is translated by Latin *sensus,* as in the title of Aristotle's treatise *De sensu et sensato,* "feeling" but also "knowing." As understood by medieval writers, "sweetness" was not in the first instance a theoretical category of "beauty" or "pleasure" but referred to a definable sensory phenomenon. We perceive the products of art through our senses, visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile; these human experiences were transferred as well to artistic judgments. Certainly *dulcis* was used for judgments that we now would call "aesthetic," to refer to the pleasing effects of an artistic style, for example. It is frequently found with words like *iocundus* and *dilectus.* Its antithesis, *amarus,* meaning both "bitter" and "harsh," is also used often in this way, to indicate an unpleasant sensation, without also making a moral judgment. For example, Notker writes in the prologue to his *Liber ymnorum* of a priest from Jumièges, fleeing the devastation of the Normans, who brought his antiphoner with him to St. Gall. The verse it recorded did not fit Notker's familiar melodies well, and so, Notker judges, "Quorum, ut visu delectatus, ita sum gustu amaricatus" (While pleased by their appearance, at the same time I found them bitter to my taste).[1] Notker is not making a moral judgment about the verses from Jumièges, but the sort of judgment we now would recognize as aesthetic, a judgment about how his senses perceive something. In other words, medieval aesthetic judgments are not always

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[1] Notker, *Liber ymnorum,* PL 131:1003C; my translation. Thanks to Calvin M. Bower for bringing this passage to my attention during his seminar on Notker in All Souls College, Oxford, March 16, 2006.

also moral judgments (as so often we have misunderstood them). Moreover, the object is perceived to be at the same time both pleasant and harsh, delectable and bitter. This is not an unusual medieval sensory judgment. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, the most interestingly medieval aspect of "sweetness"—as with many other medieval aesthetic terms—is that it is not just one thing, but has a contrarian nature that includes within itself its opposites: bitter, salt, and sour.

This sensory paradox is often played on in medieval invocations of sweetness as an aesthetic response. We can see it clearly in the following passage from Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the *Canticum canticorum* (number 19). He is commenting on the *oleum effusum* referred to in 1.2, "Thy name (*nomen tuum*) is as oil poured out." Bernard glosses this oil with reference to Psalm 33.9, making a firm connection between tasting and knowing. He says to his maiden monks: "Ergo ex uberibus sponsae opus sumere habent unde diligant. Habet oleum effusum sponsa, ad cuius illae excitantur odorem, gustare et sentire quam suavis est Dominus." (Thus from the breasts of the *sponsa* they [the maidens] are able to comprehend the work whence they are able to love. The *sponsa* has the expressed oil, by whose odor they are aroused to taste and perceive/know that the Lord is sweet.)[2] Collating his texts, Bernard concludes that the oil is "Thy name" and "Thy name" is "sweet," as Psalm 33 states.

This comment is only part of Bernard's extended meditation on the oil which is God's name. He also says, in sermon 15: "Aridus est omnis animae cibus, si non oleo isto infunditur; insipidus est, si non hoc sale conditur. Si scribas, non sapit mihi, nisi legero ibi Iesum. Si disputes aut conferas, non sapit mihi, nisi sonuerit ibi Iesus. Iesus mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde iubilus." (Every food of the mind is dry if it is not spread with that oil; it is tasteless if not seasoned by that salt [*si non hoc sale conditur*]. If you write something, it has no taste for me/I do not know it [*non sapit mihi*], unless I may read there "Jesus." If you dispute or argue, it has no taste for me/I do not know it [*non sapit mihi*], unless "Jesus" should resound there. Jesus is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, a jubilee in the heart.)[3] Notice how pervasively, how persuasively, Bernard emphasizes the connection of tasting and knowing that inheres in the meanings of the Latin verb *sapio, sapere*. Notice also the elegance of Bernard's rhetoric, not just the measures and internal rhymes of his cola and clausulae ("infunditur/conditur," the construction "Si . . . non sapit mihi, nisi . . . ," which is repeated in the following sentence) but also the beautifully rendered chiasmus of "Iesus mel in ore, in aure melos" in the last sentence of this quotation. This is language that demonstrates the aesthetic effect of *dulcis* even as it defines it.

Nor is this oil only "sweet." Indeed, Bernard calls it a condiment, and specifically a salt (*sal*)—the opposite of "sweet." And notice that without that "salt"—which is at the same time also a sweet oil—no food for the soul is fruitful or can be tasted: it is "dry" and "without flavor" (*aridus, insipidus*). That Bernard invokes the "dry" element here is, I think, important, for Aristotle says that flavor requires moisture in order to develop at all.[4] So not only is an Aristotelian physiology of experiential knowledge (if I can call it that) invoked here through the sensory poles of salt and sweet, but so also are the opposing elements of dry and moist. The whiff of Aristotelianism in Bernard's analysis of taste could perhaps have been introduced through medical practice as well, for the concept of a nature based upon four elements with four contradictory qualities was basic. It is more important to note that even in these most ecstatic sermons of Bernard's, human knowledge is created through natural psychological processes and sensory experiences, because tasting flavors is also a means of knowing, even knowing God.

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[2] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* 19.7, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, in *S. Bernardi opera,* 1 (Rome, 1957), p. 112. The translations from Bernard are mine, after consulting those of Kilian Walsh, *Bernard of Clairvaux, On the Song of Songs,* Cistercian Fathers Series 4, 7, 31, and 40 (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1971–80).

[3] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* 15.6, 1:86, commenting on Song of Songs 1.2, "oleum effusum nomen tuum."

Bernard continues concerning the oil: "Sed est et medicina. . . . Cui aliquando stetit ante faciem salutaris nominis duritia, ut assolet, cordis, ignaviae torpor, rancor animi, languor acediae? Cui fons forte siccatus lacrimarum, invocato Iesu, non continuo erupit uberior, fluxit suavior?" (But it is also medicine. . . . In whom has the hardness of heart that is our accustomed experience, the apathy of our indolence, our bitterness of spirit, the languor of our sloth ever stood firm faced with that saving name? In whom, having invoked "Jesus," has the source of tears, [though] completely dried up, not immediately burst forth more plentifully, flowed more sweetly [*fluxit suavior*]?) The medical principle of curing diseased conditions through applying their contraries is plainly at work: the sweetness and wetness of the oil alleviate hardness and bitterness, as the dry heart flows more sweetly in tears (tears, being both bitter and salt, carry away the excess of those qualities, leaving mind and heart sweeter, *suavior*).[5] Certainly, Bernard is thinking of Christ as the great leech of souls, in keeping with Christ's nature as *suavis*. But perhaps there is also an allusion in these words to the ancient trope of the orator as physician. Aristotle and Cicero both liken the art of oratory to that of medicine, with the best orator serving as a kind of physician to the body politic. And, as Jean Leclercq has noted, Bernard earned the epithet *Bernardus noster Tullius* from his contemporaries.[6]

Of all the items in the mixed lexical bag of Latin bequeathed to medieval Europe, "sweetness"—*dulcedo, suavitas*—is among the most mixed and the trickiest of concepts. It is encountered everywhere in medieval literature. That Roman snob turned Merovingian courtier, Venantius Fortunatus, writes how his poems, offered up in the wilderness like those of Orpheus, with their sweetness tame the savage woods and enrapture the feral beasts (those being the sixth-century nobles of

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[4] See Aristotle, *De anima* 2.10 (422b), and especially the commentary of Roger Bacon, *Liber de sensu et sensato* 7 ("de instrumentis gustus"), who cites Avicenna in particular as authority for the crucial role of saliva: *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi,* 14, ed. Robert Steele (Oxford, 1937), pp. 23–25.

[5] Tears are another aesthetic phenomenon that profit from being considered historically, as well as anthropologically and theologically; see Mary Carruthers, "On Affliction and Reading, Weeping and Argument: Chaucer's Lachrymose Troilus in Context," *Representations* 93 (2006), 1–21, and the bibliography therein.

[6] "Bernardus noster monachorum Antonius et Tullius oratorum," cited by J. Leclercq, "L'art de la composition dans les sermons de S. Bernard," *Studi medievali,* 3rd ser., 7 (1966), 6.

Poitou).[7] The effects of *dulce carmen* remained a favorite medieval trope. At the end of the Middle Ages, another Italian, Dante, writes of another band of rough courtiers—this time dead ones, penned in together at the very boundary of Purgatory's mountain in the Valley of Princes. Dante has been talking to Sordello when all become silent, a crowd seated in meditation. Then one signals the rest to listen and stands with his hands clasped in a traditional prayer posture:

> . . . una de l'alme
> surta, che l'ascoltar chiedea con mano.
> Ella giunse e levò ambo le palme,
> ficcando li occhi verso l'oriente,
> come dicesse a Dio: "D'altro non calme."
> "*Te lucis ante*" sì devotamente
> le uscìo di bocca a con sì dolci note,
> che fece me a me uscir di mente;
> e l'altre poi dolcemente e devote
> seguitar lei per tutto l'inno intero,
> avendo li occhi a le superne rote.
>
> (*Purgatorio* 8.8–18)[8]

> [. . . one of the souls, (had) uprisen, who was signing with his hand to be heard. He joined and lifted both his palms, fixing his eyes on the East, as if he said to God, "For naught else do I care." "*Te lucis ante*" came from his lips so devoutly and with such sweet notes that it rapt me from myself. Then the rest joined him sweetly and devoutly through the whole hymn, keeping their eyes fixed on the supernal wheels.]

The leader is unnamed, ostentatiously so, in a poem where seemingly everybody wants to be identified. The group begin the evening hymn, *Te lucis ante terminum,* with such sweet notes ("dolci note"), sung sweetly and devoutly ("dolcemente e devote"), that Dante exits his own mind ("che fece me a me uscir di mente") along with the rapt singers, in contemplative gaze upon the circling heavens. Sweetness here is the vehicle of harmony and of ascent to the divine. In the poem this sounding sweetness comes as a stark, if welcome, contrast to the disjointed harshness and abrasiveness with which Dante is ushered into Hell:

> Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
> parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
> voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
> facevano un tumulto, il qual s'aggira
> sempre in quell' aura sanza tempo tinta
> come la rena quando turba spira.
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> (*Inferno* 3.25–30)

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[7] On Venantius, see Peter Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 1–37; see also John Block Friedman's seminal study, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

[8] Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* ed. G. Petrocchi (Milan, 1967); my translation, taking into account those of Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), and John D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy* (Oxford, 1948). The citation of the *Inferno* is also from Petrocchi's edition, with my translation indebted to the same English works.

> [Strange tongues, horrible outcries, words of woe, accents of anger, voices shrill and hoarse, and among these the sound of hands were making a tumult that swirls unceasingly in that dark air without change, like sand when a sand-devil blows.]

Indeed "sweetness" is one of God's own names, an essential predicate. In the words of Psalm 33 (in the Gallican Psalter): "Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus" (Taste and see that the Lord is sweet).

But sweetness is not all good, as Adam and Eve discovered. The fruits of Eden were lovely to look upon and "ad vescendum suave," and we all know what came of that. A seducer's words are always sweet, like those of the serpent. Though the Vulgate does not cast the serpent's words explicitly as persuasion, commentary soon identified him as a persuader. Marius Victorinus, Augustine's good friend, does so specifically: as a former rhetoric master himself, he was in a position to appreciate a successful performance. Honorius Augustodunensis refers to him as *serpens persuadens.* The second great persuader in this narrative was, of course, Eve. Indeed, this story in Genesis can serve as an exemplar of the aesthetic and moral ambivalence posed by "sweetness."[9] For like the tree itself, like the sweet apple ("malum") it bears, "sweetness" is both *in bono et in malo.* From the very start, "sweetness" was profoundly ambivalent and morally difficult, as is apparent in the comments of both Jerome and Augustine upon the Latin translations of the Bible that made use of such words. Yet they continued in use, notably by both Jerome and Augustine. Moreover their use is characteristic of the Latin church more than the Greek, and in the early church, perhaps especially of North Africa, a phenomenon demonstrated by Joseph Ziegler, the Old Testament editor, in a seminal 1937 study of how the concept was translated from the Hebrew and Greek into Latin.[10] Augustine, who was acutely aware of the ambiguity of *dulcedo/suavitas,* even counseling against using these words in translations of the Bible in favor of less morally troublesome words like *bonitas,* nonetheless called in rapture to his God, "vera tu et summa suavitas" (*Confessions* 9.1). For all its ambivalence, sweetness seems to have been a necessary term, worth risking for the sake of some greater expressive good.

What this good might be is the subject of this essay, which explores "sweetness" in three areas: as knowledge, as persuasion, as medicine. First, knowledge.

The Genesis story exploits an ancient association of taste with knowledge, evident as well in the derivation of Latin *sapientia* from *sapiens,* the present participle of the verb *sapio, sapere.*[11] Most commentators in the Aristotelian tradition regarded taste as touch of a kind, though the two senses have distinct media through which they operate, flesh in the case of touch and the tongue in that of taste (the tongue is a touching instrument and experiences heat and cold, but it is moisture as saliva that develops flavor).[12] Unlike the cerebral senses—vision, hearing, and smell, all of which operate out of the brain—touch and taste both connect directly to the heart, either the heart itself (Roger Bacon noted that Avicenna thought the flesh of the heart was itself sentient) or somewhere close to it. There is variation on this matter. All agreed, however, that touch and taste are vital to nutrition, hence to life itself (though Aristotle pointed out that, strictly speaking, animals can survive without taste but none can without touch, for it is touch that makes a creature sentient).

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[9] Marius Victorinus, *De physicis* 11 (PL 8:1301C); Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium* 2.13 (PL 172:1144), on the question "Quid est concupiscentia?"

[10] See Jean Châtillon, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité,* s.v. *Dulcedo, dulcedo Dei:* "La spiritualité chrétienne, *et plus particulièrement celle de l'Occident,* n'a jamais cessé de faire une très large place à l'idée de la douceur et aux termes qui servent à l'exprimer" (my emphasis). In his seminal study, Joseph Ziegler went further and identified a fashion especially North African by the fourth century: *Dulcedo Dei: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie der griechischen und lateinischen Bibel,* Alttestamentliche Abhandlungen 13/2 (Münster, 1937), pp. 16–22.

[11] Isidore of Seville wrote, "Sapiens dictus a sapore; quia sicut gustus aptus est ad discretionem saporis ciborum, sic sapiens ad dinoscentiam rerum atque causarum; quod unumquodque dinoscat, atque sensu veritatis discernat" (*Sapiens* is from *sapor;* for as taste is able to distinguish the flavor of foods, so knowing is to analyze matters and causes, for whoever analyzes also discerns the truth by sense): *Etymologiarum libri* 10.240, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911).

What taste distinguishes is "savors," or "flavors," *sapores.* All the senses have limits beyond which they do not operate, and these limits are expressed as the extremes of a scale of "intermediate" colors, flavors, and smells. We perceive colors and flavors (and also smells) in a similar manner, always as mixtures of the two opposite qualities, and not—notice—as singular qualities in themselves. Colors are mixtures occurring between the two limits of black and white; when we perceive different colors—even "black" and "white"—what we are perceiving are differing proportions of a mixture of black and white. What we perceive as distinct flavors are various mixtures of sweet and bitter (or sour or salt), as separate odors are varying mixtures of sweet and rank. Thus, in ordinary human perception, all that we can taste is a mixture of sweetness and bitterness. As an activity of knowing, tasting is directly experiential: acting upon the heart as well as the mind, basic to eating and necessary for elemental growth, *sapientia* is also *sapor,* "flavor," thus a varying mixture of bitter and sweet.

The close link of taste to knowing was often exploited in biblical literature as well as in the Greco-Latin tradition.[13] For example: "Vinum et musica laetificant cor et super utraque dilectio sapientiae; tibiae et psalterium suavem faciunt melodiam et super utraque lingua suavis" (Wine and music gladden the heart yet more so the pleasure of knowledge; flutes and the harp make a sweet melody yet more so a sweet tongue [Sirach 40.20–21]).[14] The metaphoric *translatio* from gladdening the heart via song to the delight of learning, and from the sweetness of melody to the sweetness of oratory, is an ancient commonplace, as is the linkage of *suavitas* with *dilectio*. In many of the Psalms, "sweetness" is linked with speaking the name of God himself. "Quam dilexi legem tuam: tota die haec meditatio mea . . . quam dulce gutturi meo eloquium tuum super mel ori meo" (Oh, how I have loved your law! It is my meditation all day long. . . . How sweet are your words to my taste, more than honey to my mouth! [Psalm 118.97, 103]). Or Psalm 18.11, in which the fear of the Lord and his judgments are said to be "dulciora super mel et favum" (sweeter than honey and the honeycomb).[15]

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[12] On the organs and objects of the senses, see Aristotle, *De anima* 2.5–8 and *De sensu et sensato,* esp. 2–4 (441a–445b). On touch and taste, see esp. *De anima* 2.9–11 (421a, 422a–424a) and 3.12–13 (434b, 435b), where Aristotle argues that touch and taste are closely linked and that both are essential to life itself in ways the other senses are not. The medieval commentaries I have found most useful specifically on taste and touch are those of Averroes, *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis de anima libros,* ed. F. Stuart Crawford, Mediaeval Academy of America Publication 59 (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), and Roger Bacon, *Liber de sensu et sensato* (see n. 4, above). In addition to his commentaries on *De anima* and *De sensu et sensato,* Aquinas discusses five external senses in *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 78, art. 3, but says there that taste is a particular sort of touch.

[13] Intellectual historians have mostly explored sweetness in the theological concept of *dulcedo Dei.* The most important studies include those by Jean Châtillon and Joseph Ziegler referenced in n. 10, above; Heinrich Lausberg, *Der Hymnus "Jesu dulcis memoria,"* Hymnologische und hagiographische Studien 1 (Munich, 1967); and Friedrich Ohly, *Süsse Nägel der Passion: Ein Beitrag zur theologischen Semantik,* Saecula Spiritalia 21 (Baden-Baden, 1989). A recent essay by Rachel Fulton, "'Taste and See That the Lord Is Sweet' (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West," *Journal of Religion* 86 (2006), 169–204, adds many excellent quotations to the ones in my essay. Fulton's approach to the topic is anthropological rather than philological, and the fundamentally paradoxical nature of sweetness as, in the Western intellectual and lexical traditions, an experience always involving its contraries is not so clearly brought out.

This persistence of *suavis,* enjoying even a sort of prominence among the divine names, is all the more peculiar since, as I said earlier, both Jerome and Augustine commented negatively on the use of *suavis* and *dulcis* to translate the Greek and Hebrew concepts.[16] In his article on *dulcedo Dei* for the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité,* citing Joseph Ziegler, Jean Châtillon remarks that the Hebrew root for what is sweet, like the Greek *glukus,* never developed the extended meanings of the Latin: words used in the Hebrew Bible that are based on the root *mthq* are directly predicated of things that taste sweet like honey or manna, but of other things and persons by means of simile ("sweet as honey").[17] Most often, those words used of persons or abstractions in the Greek and Hebrew Bible that are translated in the Latin by *dulcis/suavis* are based on roots that mean something other than "sweetness": they mean "goodness" (Hebrew *tob* and Greek *agathos*) or "beautiful" (Greek *kalos*) or "kind, noble hearted" (Greek *chrestos*) or "agreeable" (Hebrew *ʿareb, noʿem*). By contrast, both *dulcis* and *suavis* have greatly extended meanings, applicable in Latin to persons and abstractions—as Origen observed of both, they have multiple signification, ideal for conveying textual *obscuritas* and *difficultas*. In biblical Latin, sweetness is often directly predicated of words, eloquence, and voice. For example, amid all the lush sensory language of the Song of Songs, all the tastes and smells and touching, the Vulgate describes only three things as *dulcis:* One is the Bridegroom's fruit, which is *dulcis* to the Bride's taste (Song 2.3). The other two occurrences both concern language: the *vox dulcis* (Song 2.14) of the Bridegroom and the *dulce eloquium* (Song 4.3) of the Bride.[18]

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[14] It is the Greek that speaks of the pleasure of wisdom; the Hebrew speaks of the delight of friends. See Ziegler, pp. 53–54, for the problems encountered in translating this verse.

[15] Origen wrote of this text, "Candoris autem et dulcedinis habet plurimum . . . quid dulcis, quidve suavius eloquiis Domini" (There are several meanings of *candor* and of *dulcedo* . . . what is sweet, what sweeter than the eloquence of the Lord), associating "sweetness" specifically with eloquence, as it commonly was; see Ziegler, p. 76.

[16] In the New Testament *dulcis* and *suavis* are found very seldom. One of very few instances is in 1 Peter 2.3, quoting Psalm 33.9. Another is 2 Corinthians 6.6, where in a list of virtues of the servants of God, *suavitas* is used to translate Greek *chrestos,* though the *Vetus Latina* had used *bonitas*. Yet a third is Matthew 11.30, "iugum enim meum suave est" (my yoke is sweet); again the Vulgate adopted *suave* where the *Vetus Latina* had *bonum*. Given Jerome's own concern about this word (see below), these adoptions are curious. On Jerome's changes, see the table and comments in Ziegler, pp. 41–43.

[17] Châtillon, "*Dulcedo Dei,*" citing Ziegler's work as well.

[18] Two things are described in the Song of Songs as *suavis:* the Bridegroom's *guttur suavissimum* (Song 5.16), usually understood to mean his speech, and the beauty of the Bride "suavis et decora sicut Hierusalem" (Song 6.3). *Pulcher* and *dilectus* are the predicates of choice.

Latin *dulcis* and *suavis* were used by the *Vetus Latina* translators and by Jerome to translate Greek *chrestos*. In a letter (number 106), Jerome commented extensively on his decisions, including in Psalm 105.1: “Confitemini Domino quoniam bonus” (Let us praise the Lord, for he is good). “For which, you say, in the Greek [that is, the Septuagint] we have read ‘for [he is] *chrestos,*’ that is *suavis* [as in the *Vetus Latina* text]. But it is known that *chrestos* can be translated either as *bonus* or as *suavis*. But in the Hebrew is written ‘chi tob,’ which all with an equivalent word have translated ‘for [he is] *bonus*.’ Wherefore it is best advisable that *chrestos* be understood as *bonus*.”[19] Jerome justifies his decision on philological grounds. But there was another serious objection to the overuse of *suavis* and *dulcis,* an objection on moral grounds. Augustine articulates this objection most strongly. In his commentary on Psalm 118, responding to the same problem in translating *chrestos* that Jerome considered, Augustine says, of the *Vetus Latina* use of *suavis* in verse 65, that *bonitas* is better for the Greek. “We have to remember that sweetness (*suavitas*) can be found in something evil (*in malo*), for unlawful deeds can be enjoyable, and it can occur even in legitimate carnal pleasure. We must therefore understand the sweetness, the *chrestoteta* of the Greek text, to be that afforded by the good things of the spirit. To avoid ambiguity, some of our translators therefore preferred to call it *goodness*.”[20]

Given this patristic ambivalence, it is remarkable that the proof text for the conception of God’s sweetness, Psalm 33.9, was known in two Latin versions continuously in the Middle Ages: “Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus” in the Gallican and, in the Hebrew, “Gustate et videte quoniam bonus Dominus.” The word Jerome was translating was Septuagint *chrestos,* Hebrew *tob*. Both Latin versions of this verse were thought correct: indeed both were sometimes written out side by side, particularly in manuscripts containing Psalter glosses. The problem is not why Jerome changed his translation from *suavis* in the Gallican to *bonus* in the Hebrew (he explained that in his letter) but why *suavis* was continued at all. Châtillon suggested that Jerome was conceding to the expectations of his audience, who had memorized the Psalms as they had no other text and would recoil from having their accustomed language violated. Perhaps, though elsewhere in the Psalms Jerome showed no such scruple.[21]

Châtillon, like Ziegler and many others before him, was concerned with the theology of sweetness, which he understood in a contemporary psychological context (though he does not specifically recognize this in his article). For Châtillon, "sweetness" describes the *affect* of God within an individual, using *affect* as modern psychology uses it, where it is distinguished from "emotion" and related entirely to an individual's experience. The danger in understanding it this way is that it limits or disregards the rational aspect of "sweetness," that "sweetness," like any sensory experience, is a way to knowledge of the sort that can be articulated, shared with others, and determined to be true or not. *Sapientia,* which I would translate as "intelligent belief based upon experience of the world," can truly know God's *sapor* or flavor. But how? This brings me to the second of my topics, sweetness as persuasion.

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[19] Jerome, *Epistolae* 106.67, ed. I. Hilberg, rev. ed., CSEL 55 (Vienna, 1996), pp. 282–83: “pro quo in Graeco legisse uos dicitis: quoniam χρηστός id est *suauis*. sed sciendum, quod χρηστός et in ‘bonum’ et in ‘suaue’ uerti potest. denique et in Hebraeo ita scriptum est: ‘chi tob’, quod omnes uoce simili transtulerunt: quia bonus. ex quo perspicuum est, quod et χρηστός ‘bonus’ intellegatur.” Jerome purged many uses of *dulcis* and *suavis* from the *Vetus Latina,* replacing them with forms of *bonus* and *bonitas:* see Ziegler’s tables of Jerome’s changes, pp. 39–43.

[20] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmis* 118.17.1, ed. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 40 (Turnhout, 1956), pp. 1718–19: “Verum quia suauitas potest esse et in malo, quando illicita quaeque et immunda delectant, potest etiam esse et in ea quae conceditur uoluptate carnali; sic debemus intellegere *suauitatem,* quam χρηστότητα graeci uocant, ut in bonis spiritalibus deputetur; propter hoc enim eam et *bonitatem* nostri appellare uoluerunt.” The translation is that of Maria Boulding, *Expositions of the Psalms, 99–120,* Works of Saint Augustine 3/19 (Hyde Park, N.Y., 2003).

[21] See Ziegler, pp. 41–43. Ziegler comments that Jerome very rarely used *suavis* for Hebrew *tob;* this is one of the very few instances.

The affective aspect of sweetness has been much commented on over the past century, largely, at least by literary historians, as a matter of aesthetics in the late-eighteenth-century sense—that is, of "sentiment" and "taste." The prevailing twentieth-century idea was well expressed by Frederic Raby, following Émile Mâle: the medieval taste for sweetness was due to lay-inspired Gothic pathos, and the emotion noted especially in the poetry of the Cistercian and Franciscan orders expressed an individualistic aesthetic. Personal experience and individual empathy thus replaced what Raby described as "the old calm theological symbolism" with "a terrible and sorrowful realism of detail," a Gothic "new emotionalism," the second (or even third) wave of that "affective piety" ushered in after the millennium by Anselm and his contemporaries.[22] The details of this analysis are no longer in vogue, but its narrative structure still dominates. The explanations for medieval "emotionalism" that are prevalent now remain insistently focused on the individual, oriented this time toward the psychology of the liminal and strange, the excessive, peculiar, and queer. In other words, to an even greater emphasis on individual affect and personal taste.

There is another set of Latin words rooted in the concept of "sweetness" that is just as important to its ubiquitous medieval usage. These show its link to persuasion, to rhetoric, which refocuses the concept from the individual onto the social, for rhetoric is as essentially social as sensory affect is individual. I can best illustrate this with a story, told by the twelfth-century chronicler Hugh of Fleury.

It is an apocryphal story made up well after the purported facts it tells, about the great Carolingian abbot of Fleury (and bishop of Orléans), Theodulph. The story's inaccuracies are not important for my purposes, for, like most fictions, it speaks another sort of truth. Theodulph fell from grace after the death of Charlemagne, in the revolt of Bernard of Italy against Louis the Pious. Though he probably did not participate in the revolt, his enemies at court took advantage of the uncertainty and denounced him to the king. Theodulph was deposed as bishop in 818 and sent to exile, first to the monastery of St. Aubin at Angers and then (probably) to Le Mans, where he died.[23] An accomplished poet and architectural patron, a major contributor to the intellectual vitality of the Carolingian court, an important imperial adviser—Theodulph was all of these, but the only thing you need to know about him for the story I am about to tell is that he wrote the Palm Sunday hymn *Gloria, laus, et honor.*

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[22] F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1953), p. 419.

[23] On Theodulph's real life and poems written in exile, see Godman, *Poets and Emperors,* pp. 93–106.

In Hugh of Fleury's story, Theodulph has been imprisoned unjustly by the king in a tower within the city walls of Angers. Like other medieval cities contemporary with the chronicler, Orléans developed an elaborate Palm Sunday procession that involved citizens and clergy with palms marching from outside the city to the gates (which were closed for the occasion), holding a ceremony of civic blessing at the gates, and then, the gates being opened, processing through and to the cathedral, carrying their branches and singing *Gloria, laus.* Adopting details of this procession, the Fleury legend continues that one Palm Sunday in Angers, the procession halted below the tower where Theodulph was imprisoned, and the king (who happened to be visiting) heard the most beautiful verses ("pulcherrimos versus") of the *Gloria, laus,* sung from the tower in concert with the procession below. Softened ("emollitus") by the verses, the king asked who it was who sang and, told it was Theodulph, had him therefore at once released.[24] What the story describes is an act of persuasion, which softens and dissolves the hard heart of the king as he is touched by the sweet song. Therein resides the communal energy of sweetness, not alone in the individual affects that we so strongly associate with later medieval affective piety. The quality of sweetness, which is at the linguistic root of persuasion, functions rhetorically to persuade another person to an action—in this case, it enables the emperor Louis, by being merciful, to make what is also the just decision. The tale also illustrates the occasional nature of persuasion, the need for continual reinforcement and strength of will, because, the story goes on, just as he was returned to his own people ("ad sua") Theodulph was poisoned, at whose instigation the narrator leaves unclear. A tale of sweetness turned to bitterness, indeed, and an apt *historia* of the powers and pitfalls of imperial decision making for Hugh's noble patron, the countess Adela of Blois.

Suavis is cognate with the verbs *suadeo* and *persuadeo,* "to persuade," literally "to sweeten." Persuasion is the goal of rhetoric. In book 3 of his *De oratore,* Cicero speaks of an "ornatus et suavis" orator. He tries as well to distinguish *suavis* from *dulcis* with respect to style: a properly *suavis* orator will have substantial and austere *suavitas,* not extra sweetened ("dulcem") or syrupy ("decoctam," cooked down).[25] In Quintilian and some later rhetoric books, *dulcis* is said to be a characteristic flavor of the middle style of oratory ("flavor" like "color" being terms applied to varieties of rhetorical style), but that is not a universal teaching.[26] In Latin, successful oratory is always *suavis,* however: by definition it must be, however one defines that quality. For, as Aristotle defined rhetoric, it is "the ability for every occasion to see the available means of persuasion." And what is persuasive is determined with respect to a particular audience: "the persuasive is persuasive to someone."[27]

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[24] The story is told in Raby, *Christian Latin Poetry,* p. 175, who got it from Charles Cuissard, *Theodulphe d'Orléans* (Orléans, 1892), pp. 134–48. Cuissard quotes a fifteenth-century French version from an Orléans manuscript, but a similar story is told by the chronicler Hugh of Fleury, writing c. 1115 (PL 163:854D); he dedicated his *Libri sex historiarum ecclesiasticarum* to Adela of Blois. Hugh concludes (in the narrative present), "Sed dum ad sua revertitur, veneno, sicut fertur, extinguitur" (But when he was returned to his own, as he was bring transported, he was assassinated by poisoning). There is no other evidence that Theodulph was poisoned—or indeed that any of this happened as Hugh says it did, and much to indicate it did not. It is evidently a local legend that enjoyed a long currency in the vicinity of Orléans; interestingly as well, it is a legend about the efficacy of a favorite hymn and the persuasive effect of *dulce carmen.*

[25] "Ita sit nobis igitur ornatus et suavis orator . . . ut suavitatem habeat austeram et solidam, non dulcem atque decoctam" (Consequently while we secure that our orator shall have ornament and charm . . . at the same time his charm must be severe and substantial, not sweet and luscious): Cicero, *De oratore* 3.26.103, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1942). Subsequent references are to this edition and translation.

This social, communal emphasis remained at the heart of rhetoric. Dialectical proof alone is not persuasive, for action involving the will, an assent, must result from any genuine persuasion. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle uses a group of words deriving from Greek *pistis* for what we now call persuasion. These have to do with belief—in the Latin New Testament, such words are translated with *fides* and with forms of *credere.* So it is interesting that in rhetoric, Latin translates "persuasion" as it does, as *suasoria,* with such an evident link to an ambiguous concept. From its very beginnings in fifth-century Greece rhetoric enjoyed (and still does) much the same morally ambivalent reputation that sweetness itself did. So I wonder if the choice of s*uadeo* was intended to convey some of that ambivalence. As did his master, Cicero, Augustine frequently plays on the associations of *suavitas, eloquentia,* and *(per)suadere,* notably in *De doctrina Christiana.* Playing on a favored debate in ancient rhetoric concerning the relative importance of wisdom and eloquence, Augustine observes that those who speak eloquently are heard more pleasantly ("suaviter"), those who speak wisely are heard more beneficially ("salubriter"). He concedes that Scripture says, "multitudo autem sapientium sanitas est orbis terrarum" (a multitude of wise men is the health of the world [Wisdom 6.26]). Yet things wholesome but bitter ("amara salubria") sometimes have to be swallowed, and perniciously sweet things ("perniciosa dulcedo") always be shunned. "[But] what better than sweet things that give health, or medicines that are sweet (*salubri suavitate, vel suavi salubritate*)?" Wisdom with eloquence is best, for there are churchmen who have commented on God's eloquent words not only wisely but with eloquence.[28] *Dulcis eloquentia, verba dulcia, vox suavis* are medieval tropes as commonly in use as *dulce carmen,* and indeed the phrase "voces dulces/suaves" can refer to voices singing or speaking, to the words spoken or sung, and especially to the well-crafted words of oratory. Sweet-talking is "sweet" because it persuades, by reason (one hopes), but essentially persuasion must invigorate the will, enabling it to act. That is of course its great power.

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[26] Quintilian discusses the styles, *genera dicendi,* in *Institutio oratoria* 12.10, where he associates *dulcis* with the middle style. But the characterization is not consistent, and, as all rhetoric masters counseled, a good orator varies his styles as appropriate with the occasions and audiences of his speeches. Compare *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.8–11 and Cicero, *Orator* 5–6 and especially 21–28.

[27] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* 1.2.1 and 11, trans. George A. Kennedy, *Aristotle on Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1991).

[28] "Qui enim eloquenter dicunt, suauiter, qui sapienter, salubriter audiuntur. . . . Sicut autem saepe sumenda sunt et amara salubria, ita semper uitanda est perniciosa dulcedo. Sed salubri suauitate, uel suaui salubritate quid melius? . . . Sunt ergo ecclesiastici uiri, qui diuina eloquia non solum sapienter, sed eloquenter etiam tractauerunt": *De doctrine Christiana* 4.5.8, ed. J. Martin, CCSL 32 (Turnhout, 1962). The translation is that of R. P. H. Green, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford, 1997). Thanks to David Ganz for reminding me of this passage.

But persuades to what? The seducer, the teacher, the lawyer, the preacher, and the statesman are uncomfortably close in their profession, as indeed every writer on oratory acknowledged. Quintilian predicated his ideal orator *dicendi peritus* (accomplished in speaking) upon the prior condition that he be *vir bonus* (a good man).[29] Moral goodness is something an orator brings to his rhetoric, not something he acquires from it. Like rhetoric as well, sweetness characteristically occasions and exploits irony, oxymoron, paradox. Its very essence is ambiguous, just as excessive sweetness of flavor rebounds to its opposite, producing the sensations of bitterness and rankness. In rhetoric, sweetness is not limited to one sense alone but can be a property of our experience more generally, using the persuasive tool of metaphoric transference, medieval *translatio* or *transumptio* (adoption). In *De oratore* Cicero commented: "Quin etiam gustatus, qui est sensus ex omnibus maxime voluptarius quique dulcitudine praeter ceteros sensus commovetur, quam cito id quod valde dulce est aspernatur ac respuit! . . . Sic omnibus in rebus voluptatibus maximis fastidium finitimum est." (Taste is the most voluptuous of all the senses and more sensitive to sweetness [*dulcitudo*] than the rest, yet how quickly even it dislikes and rejects anything extremely sweet [*dulce*]! . . . [I]n all things the greatest pleasures are only narrowly separated from disgust.)[30] Medieval writers did not need to hear this from Cicero. The experience of the prophet John, eating the scroll that is sweet upon his tongue but embitters his stomach (Apocalypse 10.9–11; cf. Ezekiel 3.2–5), encapsulates this essential feature of what is sweet.

A third property of medieval sweetness derives from this last. Sweetness is medicinal; it heals and restores. But it does not work in human bodies like a pill. Medieval medicines were given in order to restore what a Middle English translator of the fourteenth-century papal physician Guy de Chauliac called "þe swete accorde"—in Galen the concept of *eucrasia,* the wholesome balance and blending of the body's qualities and humors.[31] Since the principle of growth and life was founded on nutrition, the first medical goal was to redress excess, typically through purgation—which is not a pleasant, agreeable experience. To this end were administered various sugars, including honey, milk, syrups, treacles, and the potions called "letuaries" in English (from Latin *electuaria*), mixed from a combination of herbs and other medicaments. Not all these potions contained sugars (garlic was also an important medicinal), but a great many of them did, so much so that sugar itself, like honey, "sweet" wine, and licorice, is spoken of as medicine.

For instance, in the Harley lyric now called "Annot and John," the fair lady is described as follows:

> Muge he is ant mondrake þourh miht of þe mone,
> trewe triacle ytold wiþ tonges in trone;
> such licoris mai leche from Lyne to Lone;
> such sucre mon secheþ þat saneþ men sone;
> bliþe yblessed of Crist, þat bayþeþ me mi bone

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[29] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 12.1, in which Quintilian attributes the maxim to Cato.

[30] Cicero, *De oratore* 3.25, 99–100.

[31] The quotation from the Middle English translation of Guy de Chauliac can be found in the online *Middle English Dictionary,* s.v. *swete* (adj.), 7(b).

when derne dedis in day derne are done.
Ase gromyl in greue grene is þe grone,
ase quibibe ant comyn cud is in crone,
   cud comyn in court, canel in cofre,
   wiþ gyngyure ant sedewale ant þe gylofre.

He is medicine of miht, mercie of mede.

[She is nutmeg and mandrake through the power of the moon,
reckoned true medicine by tongues on the throne;
such a medicine may heal from the river Lyn to the river Lune;
such sugar a man seeks which heals men at once;
a happy one blessed of Christ, who grants me my prayer
when secret deeds are done discreetly during the day.
As gromwell in a thicket green is the seed
As cubeb pepper and cumin famous for its corona,
cumin famous in court, cinnamon in a box
with ginger and setwall and clove-gillyflower.
She is a medicine in her power, mercy in reward.][32]

Though never described as sweet in this lyric, Annot is every kind of sweet there is, sweet smelling, sweet singing, sweet in action, sweet tasting: the poet sums her up, "He is medicine of miht, mercie of mede." In other words, her very name is Sweet, perhaps in contrafactal parody of the God whose name is *suavis* and who is (as Langland wrote) "leche of lif" by reason of that sweetness.[33] To be sweet is to be wholesome, without excess of bitterness and salt: thus water and wine both are called "sweet" when they are pure, whether or not they are also sugared. Things are also "sweet" when they are wholesome—Plautus can speak of a *suavis piscis,* a fish bought at market that is not yet putrid.[34] Yet sweet turns bitter with excess, and so has potentially unpleasant effects even as it restores. Galen had noted that honey, when boiled, turns bitter and that it could have deleterious effects in various circumstances.[35] Cicero, as I noted earlier, applied this material quality to rhetoric's sweetness as well, which readily turns to disgust, as a sweet fish quickly rots. Sweetness is a paradox in nature, a sensory oxymoron. But then, God (at least so Augustine thought) is a master not only of nature but of rhetorical art as well: recall that he governs history itself through the figure of antithesis: "Neque enim Deus ullum, non dico angelorum, sed uel hominum crearet, quem malum futurum esse praescisset, nisi pariter nosset quibus eos bonorum usibus commodaret atque ita ordinem saeculorum tamquam pulcherrimum carmen etiam ex quibusdam quasi antithetis honestaret. Antitheta enim quae appellantur in ornamentis elocutionis sunt decentissima." (For God would never have created any men, much less any angels, whose future wickedness He foreknew, unless He had equally known to what uses He could put them on behalf of the good, thereby adorning the course of the ages like a most beautiful poem set off with antitheses. For what are called antitheses are among the most elegant figures of speech.)[36]

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[32] *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS. Harley 2253,* ed. G. L. Brook (Manchester, Eng., 1964), no. 3.

[33] *Piers Plowman,* B 1.204, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1995). *Suavis* and *sweet* are cognate in the same Indo-European root, as is the multicompounded Greek root *edu-; (per)suadeo* is cognate with these. *Dulcis* and *glukus* are cognate in a different Indo-European root: see Carl Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (Chicago, 1949). Despite the efforts of many historical linguists to rationalize their various uses, *dulcis* and *suavis* evidently overlapped to a large extent, and distinctions between them in medieval writers are more a matter of personal style and the literary conventions within which someone composed than of any demonstrably consistent distinctions.

[34] In Plautus's *Asinaria (The Comedy of Asses),* the brothel madam, Cleareta, says that her clients are like fish, the fresher ("recens") the better, for such fish "habet sucum, is suavitatem" (1.3.178–79, ed. and trans. Paul Nixon, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, Mass., 1916]). Cicero uses the same idiom (without the sexual innuendo) of fresh fish teeming in the sea: "Quid multitudinem suavitatemque piscium dicam?" (Why should I speak of the teeming swarms of delicious fish?): *De natura deorum* 2.64.160, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1933).

[35] Galen, *On the Natural Faculties* 2.8.121–25, ed. and trans. A. J. Brock, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1916).

Venantius Fortunatus, with whom I began, is best remembered not for his Orphic poems among the barbarians of Poitiers and Tours but for his hymns, among them the original version of *Pange lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis,* sung to the glory of a triumphant God, whose body was stretched on the cross, whose viscera were pierced with iron. It is one of the earliest Christian poems to exploit the terrible paradoxes inherent in the aesthetic quality of *dulcis/suavis.* Consider the following stanza:

> Crux fidelis, inter omnes arbor una nobilis
> nulla silva talem profert fronde flore germine;
> Dulce lignum dulce clavo dulce pondus sustinens.
>
> [Faithful Cross, among all others a unique unchanging tree
> no woodland brought forth such a leaf, flower, shoot;
> Sweet tree sustaining a sweet burden with a sweet nail.][37]

The single, noble tree recalls the trees of Eden whose fruits were wholesome and sweet to eat—all save the one whose fruit proved both sweetest and bitterest of all. Like those trees, this one also bears fruit that is sweet to taste, sweetness that is knowledge of God, medicine both for the single soul and, through the liturgy within which this hymn was intended, for the whole community of humankind, and yet that—by a frightening paradox—is most sweet when it is most deadly. This sweetness has killed twice over, first when Eve and Adam tasted/knew the sweet apple, and then when the sweet nails fastened the sweet body to the sweet wood. The sweet paradox is invoked as well in an elegantly compact version of a Ciceronian maxim, cited in a different context by Bernard of Clairvaux: "Sit suavis et dulcis affectui tuo Dominus Iesus, contra male utique dulces vitae carnalis illecebras, et vincat dulcedo dulcedinem, quemadmodum clavum clavus expellit" (Let the Lord Jesus be pleasurable and sweet in your affection, especially against the wickedly sweet enticements of sensual life, and sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another).[38]

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[36] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 11.18, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 48 (Turnhout 1955); trans. R. W. Dyson, *Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998).

[37] This stanza has become a refrain for the whole hymn in liturgical usage, though it is unclear how soon during the Middle Ages this occurred.

Venantius composed his hymn before 600, long before the usual dates assigned to medieval affective piety. The concentrated series of oxymorons that focus the poem—"dulce lignum dulce clavo dulce pondus sustinens"—emerged from interwoven philological, theological, philosophical, rhetorical, and medical traditions that fully recognized and exploited, if with some justified apprehension, the powerful dimensions *in bono et in malo* of the adjective *dulcis* with which Venantius measures his verse.

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[38] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* 20.4, 1:117. The maxim is in Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.35.75, ed. and trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1927): "etiam novo quidam amore veterem amorem tamquam clavo clavum eiiciendum putant" (Some think, too, that the old love can be driven out by a new, as one nail can be driven out by another). Thanks to Marcia Colish for bringing this quotation to my attention.

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