

## Isidore of Seville, his Mode of Writing and the Metaphor of Taste

### Isidoro de Sevilla, su modo de escribir y la metáfora del gusto

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**Abstract:** The writings in which an author expresses his thought are actually the product of certain cultural practices of his age. The article considers how such practices are manifested in the writings of Isidore of Seville, particularly with respect to the meaning of the metaphor of taste. Isidore borrows this metaphor from texts that explain the process of understanding Scripture and applies it to the achievement of wisdom. On the one hand, the metaphor stresses the transformative aspect of understanding (rather than the informative, *scientia*). It focuses on the special experience of the reader who senses the sweetness of the text, and not on the application of the text to one's life. On the other hand, reading and writing were imagined in terms related to food. The text was food that had to be prepared, to 'read' meant to 'taste', to 'meditate' on it meant to 'ruminate'. Against this background, the writings of Isidore seem to appeal to the memory of the reader and his ability to meditate upon the text and, finally, to ex-

perience the taste of wisdom. Only the outermost level of texts was intended to inform the reader.

**Keywords:** Isidore of Seville, Gregory the Great, rumination, contemplation, reading, wisdom, brevity.

**Resumen:** Los escritos en los que un autor expresa su pensamiento son en realidad el producto de ciertas prácticas culturales de su época. El artículo examina cómo se manifiestan tales prácticas en los escritos de Isidoro de Sevilla, en particular en lo que se refiere al significado de la metáfora del gusto. Isidoro toma prestada esta metáfora de textos que explican el proceso de la comprensión de las Escrituras y la aplica a la consecución de la sabiduría. Por una parte, la metáfora subraya el aspecto transformador de la comprensión (más que el informativo, *scientia*). Se centra en la experiencia especial del lector que percibe la dulzura del texto, y no en la aplicación del texto a la propia vida. Por otra parte, en la época la lectura y la

escritura se imaginaban en términos relacionados con la comida. El texto era un alimento que había que preparar, “leerlo” significaba “saborearlo”, y “meditarlo” significaba “rumiarlo”. En este contexto, los escritos de Isidoro parecen apelar a la memoria del lector y a su capacidad para meditar a partir del texto y, fi-

nalmente, experimentar el sabor de la sabiduría. Sólo el nivel más externo de los textos estaba destinado a informar al lector.

**Palabras clave:** Isidoro de Sevilla, Gregorio Magno, rumiación, contemplación, lectura, sabiduría, brevedad.

To understand the thought of any author usually means to understand the sense of his texts. In the case of Isidore, this is especially important, because the content of his works is intentionally similar to that of Gregory the Great, Augustine, or others. Isidore did not claim to be an original author, nor did he try to hide his originality behind the words of authoritative quotations, in the manner of a free-thinker in an authoritarian state. Much less did he compile elementary textbooks for simple-minded students, in the style of many university professors. This means that Isidore’s specific thinking is reflected not only in the content, but also in the mode of making of his writings, because this very process was framed by spiritual exercises, much like philosophical discourses for Plotinus or poems for Eugenius of Toledo<sup>1</sup>.

Like most Late Antique authors, Isidore left us very few theoretical reflections about the process of creating his texts. His etymology of the word *compilator* explains only the positive connotations of using other texts to make one’s own (a phenomenon known to us—and to the ancients— as plagiarism<sup>2</sup>) and the process of making the *compilator’s* text as

<sup>1</sup> See Pierre HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris, Études augustiniennes, 1981; Annemarie PILARSKI, *Der Libellus Carminum des Eugenius von Toledo. Poesie als Lebensbewältigung und spirituelle Praxis* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 133), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. HIERONIMUS, *Qaest. in Gen. Praef.: Qui in principiis librorum debebam secuturi operis argumenta proponere, cogor prius respondere maledictis, Terentii quippiam sustinens, qui comoediarum prologos in defensionem sui scenis dabat. Urgebat enim eum Luscius Lanuinus, nostro Luscio similis, et quasi publici aerarii poetam furem criminabatur. Hoc idem passus est ab aemulis et*

mixing<sup>3</sup>. Other metaphors for creating texts allow us to see at least two more features of the *compiler's* work: it has much in common with the reading of the *prudens lector* and possesses the function of representing the authority of the tradition<sup>4</sup>.

These features mean that the process of making a text presupposed the virtue of prudence to discern and select useful utterances and the virtuousness of the author in general (in order to represent the tradition). However, these features do not tell us much about the relation of the text to spiritual practices and exercises. To explore this question, I shall turn to the metaphors of taste and tasting<sup>5</sup> that Isidore uses to

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*Mantuanus uates, ut cum quosdam uersus Homeri transtulisset ad uerbum, compiler ueterum diceretur. Quibus ille respondit, magnarum esse uirium, clauam Herculi extorquere de manu.* See also Bernard LEGRAS, "La sanction du plagiat littéraire en droit grec et hellénistique", in Gerhard THÜR – Francisco Javier FERNÁNDEZ NIETO (hrsgs.), *Symposium 1999: Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte* (Pazo de Mariñan, 6-9 septembre 1999), Cologne – Weimar – Vienne, Böhlau, 2003, 459.

<sup>3</sup> Martin IRVINE, *The Making of Textual Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 242-243.

<sup>4</sup> Сергей Ворошинов, "Цветы и монеты: некоторые образы авторитета текста в произведениях Исихора Севильского", *Диалог со временем* 76 (2021) 36-37 (31-40).

<sup>5</sup> On the medieval metaphor of taste see, e.g. Rachel FULTON, "'Taste and See that the Lord is Sweet' (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West," *The Journal of Religion* 86 (2006) 169-204 (<https://doi.org/10.1086/499638>). There is a rich tradition of studying the "spiritual senses", inspired by the series of essays by K. Rahner. The spiritual sense of taste plays a prominent role in the patristic and medieval representation of religious experience, especially in relation to reading, meditating, and praying. See Niklaus LARGIER, "Inner Senses-Outer Senses: The Practice of Emotions in Medieval Mysticism", in C. Stephen JAEGER – Ingrid KASTEN (eds.), *Codierungen von Emotionen im Mittelalter / Emotions and Sensibilities in the Middle Ages*, Berlin – Boston, De Gruyter, 2003, 7 (3-15) (<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110893977.3>). This work also contains references to fundamental literature on this topic, see LARGIER, "Inner senses", 4-6. The modern trend of research into the history of senses also touches the topic of the taste of sense; see, for instance: Priscilla FERGUSON, "The Senses of Taste", *The American Historical Review* 116 (2011) 371-84 (<https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.116.2.371>); Béatrice CASEAU, "The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation", in Richard G. NEWHAUSER (ed.) *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2014, 109 (89-110) (<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107300000.005>).

explain his understanding of textual meaning and its relation to wisdom.

## I

I shall begin with a particular passage from Isidore's *Sententiae*, in which he explains who is really able to tell apart a good, wise sermon:

2, 29, 9. *Qui de sapientia se laudari affectant, loquentem prophetam ad-tendant: Vae qui sapientes estis in oculis uestris, et coram uobismetipsis prudentes (Is 5:21).*

2, 29, 10-11. *Recte ex sententia dicit (Sap 7:15), qui ueram sapientiam gustu interni saporis sentit. A sentiendo enim sententia dicitur. Ac per hoc, adrogantes qui sine humilitate dicunt, de sola scientia dicunt, non de sententia. — Ille enim sapit qui recte et secundum Deum sapit.*

Isidore then turns to the opposition between wisdom and eloquence<sup>6</sup> and various modes of speaking<sup>7</sup>. The *sententiae* in question form a separate passage that consider the problem of wisdom. The central part of this passage is framed by the motif of arrogance, which results only in a semblance of wisdom (*in oculis uestris / de sola scientia*). At the core of the passage, Isidore opposes one who speaks *ex sententia* to an arrogant person who is able to speak only according to his knowledge (*scientia*). The key metaphor in the passage is that of taste: in order to speak *ex sententia*, one should “feel the wisdom through the inner sense of taste”.

At the same time, Isidore does not explain why arrogance prevents one from experiencing wisdom, making the passage come across as somewhat elliptical. To reconstruct this relation and fill in the lacunas, one has to locate the source of this passage. The main source text of *sent.* 2, 29, 10-11 is a passage from the *Moralia* of Gregory the Great in which

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org/10.5040/9781474233156.ch-004); Béatrice CASEAU, “Tastes of danger and pleasure in early and late antique Christianity”, in Kelli C. RUDOLPH (ed.), *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, New York – London, Routledge, 2018, 237-242 (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315719245-14>).

<sup>6</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 2, 29, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 2, 29, 14-22.

Gregory explains the difference between the understanding and the knowledge of God by the arrogant and the humble (see Table 1).

Table 1. The main source of ISID. *sent.* 2, 29, 10–11

ISIDORUS, <i>Sent.</i> 2, 29, 10-11	GREGORIUS M., <i>Moral.</i> 23, 17, 31
<p><i>Recte ex sententia dicit, qui ueram sapientiam gustu interni saporis sentit. A sentiendo enim sententia dicitur. Ac per hoc, adrogantes qui sine humilitate dicunt, de sola scientia dicunt, non de sententia. — Ille enim sapit qui recte et secundum Deum sapit.</i></p>	<p><i>Obstaculum namque ueritatis est tumor mentis, quia dum inflat obnubilat. Qui et si quando scientiam uidentur adipisci, quasi de quadam rerum cortice, et non de secretae dulcedinis medulla pascuntur; micantibusque ingeniis saepe exteriora tantummodo attingunt, sed interni gustum saporis ignorant, uidelicet foris acuti, sed intus caeci sunt. Neque id de Deo sentiunt, quod dulce interius sapiat, sed quod excussum exterius sonet. Qui etsi secreta quaedam intellegenda percipiunt, eorum dulcedinem experiri non possunt; et si nouerunt quomodo sunt, ignorant, ut dixi, quomodo sapiunt. Et fit plerumque ut fortiter dicant, sed tamen iuxta ea quae dicunt uiuere nesciant. Vnde bene quidam sapiens dixit: Mihi autem det Deus haec dicere ex sententia. Sententia quippe a sensu uocata est. Et recta quae intellegit, non ex sola scientia, sed etiam ex sententia dicere appetit, qui nequaquam tantummodo sciendo dicere, sed sentiendo desiderat experiri quod dicit.</i></p>

Gregory states that pride is an obstacle to wisdom, and then develops the metaphor of tasting the outer bark and the inner sweet marrow of wisdom and the difference between them. Here, Gregory compares *scientia* with the outer level

and opposes it to the secrets of God, which are likened to the marrow. They ignore the taste of this marrow, thus possessing only outer but not inner vision (see Table 1). Interestingly, in the same sentence, Gregory mixes the metaphors of taste and vision and the classic opposition between outer and inner understanding.

Developing the metaphor further, Gregory opposes sound to taste, in order to explain the difference between knowing and understanding (or experiencing) the secrets of God. To understand God and his secrets, it is necessary to sense the sweetness, and not only to hear the sounds, which means to live according to those 'sounds' (see Table 1).

Only at this point does Gregory turn to the Biblical phrase that served as a starting point for Isidore's *sententia*: *Mihi autem det Deus dicere ex sententia [secundum sententiam] et sentire digna horum, quae mihi data sunt, quoniam ipse sapientiae dux est et sapientium emendator* (Sap 7:15). For Gregory, the right endeavor is to experience knowledge before communicating it, which means in the case of wisdom to live according to the precepts of the law of God (see Table 1). Gregory then explains the significance of humility for this inner understanding. While the outward orientation of the arrogant man's self prevents him from understanding God<sup>8</sup>, the humble man perceives his own misery through true knowledge and his humility ultimately opens up the way to understanding the sublime secrets<sup>9</sup>.

Isidore does not simply abridge Gregory's eloquent speech: he omits the metaphor of vision and the opposition of the inner/outer (bark/marrow). The correlation between the righteous life and experience is also cut out by Isidore, as is the

<sup>8</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 23, 17, 31: *Sed mens arrogantium dictorum suorum sensum non penetrat, quia ab interno gustu, recto iudicio in eos fauores relicitur, quos foris amat.*

<sup>9</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 23, 17, 31: *Vera autem scientia afficit, non extollit; nec superbientes quos impleuerit, sed lamentantes facit. Qua quisque cum repletus fuerit, primo loco se scire appetit; et iam sui conscius, tanto per illam robustius sapit quanto se infirmum in illa uerius recognoscit; atque ampliorem uiam huius scientiae ipsa ei humilitas aperit; dumque imbecillitatem suam conspicit, ipsa ei cognitio secretorum sublimium absconditos sinus pandit, qua cognitione pressus, subtilior redditur, qui ad occulta capiatur.*

explanation of the epistemic value of humility. His *sententia* thus focuses on a person's sense of taste, and on the taste of wisdom itself.

This reaccentuation of the general idea of the source text is consonant with another passage from the *Moralia*. In it, Gregory develops a similar distinction between sound and taste, stressing the diverse possibilities of these senses. Here, too, food appears as the metaphor of Scripture: to hear about food and to taste it is not the same thing. The elect taste the words of wisdom (*uerba sapientiae*) through the internal love of their hearts, while the coldhearted *reprobi* and the arrogant possess only *scientia* of them<sup>10</sup>. The difference between Job and his arrogant friends consists in the fact that they only hear the doctrine of wisdom, while he feels it through the inner taste of understanding<sup>11</sup>. Here, the ability to taste wisdom (and not only to hear it) is stressed, just as in the text of Isidore.

In this passage of the *Moralia*, Gregory interprets a phrase from the Book of Job (34:3): *Nonne auris uerba diiudicat et fauces comedentis saporem?* Interestingly, Isidore uses the exegesis of the same phrase to master his etymological definition of the word *sapiens*. Isidore derives *sapiens* from *sapor* (this etymology has a history of its own<sup>12</sup>) and adds his commentary

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<sup>10</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 11, 6, 9: ...*uerba sapientiae quae reprobi audiunt, electi non solum audiunt sed etiam gustant, ut eis in corde sapiat quod reproborum non mentibus sed solummodo auribus sonat. Aliud namque est nominatum cibum audire solummodo, aliud uero etiam gustare. Electi itaque cibum sapientiae sic audiunt ut degustent, quia hoc quod audiunt eis per amorem medullitus sapit. Reproborum uero scientia usque ad cognitionem sonitus tenditur, ut quidem uirtutes audiant, sed tamen corde frigido qualiter sapiant ignorent.*

<sup>11</sup> GREGORIUS, *Moral.* 11, 6, 9: *Quibus uidelicet uerbis beatus lob amicorum suorum imperitiam, et eorum qui de doctrina sapientiae inflantur arrogantiam reprobant; quia aliud est de Deo aliquid scire, aliud uero hoc quod cognoscitur fauce intelligentiae gustare. Recte ergo dicitur: Nonne auris uerba diiudicat et fauces comedentis saporem? Ac si aperte arrogantibus diceretur: Doctrinae uerba quae uobis usque ad aurem ueniunt, mihi etiam per saporem intimum intelligentiae faucem tangunt.*

<sup>12</sup> Cf. PORPHYRIUS, *Hor. sat.* 2, 4, 44: *Fecundi leporis sapiens. fecundum leporem ait ideo, quia semper praegnans dicitur. Sapiens hic a sapore, non a sapientia.* See Lucie PULTROVÁ (ed.), *Isidor ze Sevilly, Etymologie X, Praha, OIKOYMENH, 2010, 282.*

to the above-mentioned phrase from the translation of Basil's Monastic Rule by Rufinus of Aquileia (see Table 2).

Table 2. The source of Isidore's etymological interpretation of *sapiens*

RUFINUS, <i>Basil. reg.</i> 110.	ISIDORUS, <i>Etym.</i> 10, 240.
<p><i>Quid est Psallite sapienter?</i>            1. <i>Quod est in omnibus cibis gustus quo unumquodque dinoscitur cuius saporis sit, hoc est et in verbis sanctae scripturae prudentiae sensus;</i> 2. <i>fauces enim, inquit, escas gustabunt, sensus autem verba discernit. Si quis ergo ita animam suam intendat in singula verba psalmorum sicut gustus intentus est ad discretionem saporis ciborum, iste est qui complet hoc quod dicitur Psallite sapienter.</i></p>	<p><i>Sapiens, dictus a sapore, quia sicut gustus aptus est ad discretionem saporis ciborum, sic sapiens ad dinoscentiam rerum atque causarum, quod unum quodque dignoscat, atque sensu veritatem discernat.</i></p>

Rufinus uses the metaphor of taste to illustrate the virtue of prudence and the ability to understand the meaning of Scripture (notably, Isidore, in his *Differentiae II*, defines this virtue in the same way, albeit without the metaphor of taste<sup>13</sup>). Isidore borrows only the general idea —that the sense of taste means the ability to discern— and applies it to the classical objects of wisdom and philosophy: the cognition of things and causes. Defining the word *insipiens* in the same line, Isidore again refers to the same notions: taste, discernment and understanding<sup>14</sup>.

Symptomatically, while his source texts speak first and foremost about reading Scripture, Isidore applies the metaphor of taste (and the chain *sapor – sapiens – sapientia*) to the broader context of wisdom. To put it differently, reading Scripture became a paradigm for the process of acquiring

<sup>13</sup> ISIDORUS, *Diff.* 2, 40, 154: *Prudentia est agnitio uerae fidei et scientia Scripturarum, in qua intueri oportet illud trimodum intelligentiae genus...*

<sup>14</sup> ISIDORUS, *Etym.* 10, 240: *Cuius contrarius est insipiens, quod sit sine sapore, nec aliquis discretionis uel sensus.*



wisdom as a whole<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, Isidore's texts are substantially briefer and more condensed in comparison to his sources. To unpack the meaning of this metaphor for Isidore, we must consider the metaphors of food, eating and tasting in his works.

## II

Elsewhere in his *Sententiae*, Isidore uses the metaphor of the 'taste' of Scripture, which was so important for his source texts discussed above. Following tradition, he interprets various tastes of manna as meanings of Scripture. According to him, just as the taste of manna depended on the faculty of taste, the meaning of Scripture depends on the intellectual ability of the reader<sup>16</sup>. It is possible that in this case, too, Isidore was also drawing upon the passage from the *Moralia*. However, Gregory correlates taste and intellectual ability in a slightly different way. While, for Gregory, the understanding of Scripture '*iuxta modum suum*' is voluntary at least for the elect<sup>17</sup>, for Isidore, the differentiation of faculties is crucial (somewhat in tune with his accent on the sense of taste as standing for the capacity for understanding).

If Scripture has taste, then it should be food. For instance, Isidore explains the difference between the milk and the solid food of the divine law (Heb 5:13-14). The solid food of Scripture

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<sup>15</sup> It was relevant for Gregory: George DEMACPOULOS, "Gregory the Great", in Paul GAVRILYUK – Sarah COAKLEY (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 73.

<sup>16</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 1, 18, 5: *Scriptura sacra pro uniuscuiusque lectoris intelligentia uariatur, sicut manna quae populo ueteri pro singulorum delectatione uarium dabat saporem; iuxta sensuum enim capacitatem, singulis sermo dominicus congruit; et dum sit pro uniuscuiusque intellectu diuersus, in se tamen permanet unus.*

<sup>17</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 6, 16, 22: *Manna quippe omne delectamentum atque omnis saporis in se suauitatem habuit quod uidelicet in ore spiritalium, iuxta uoluntatem edentium, saporem dedit quia diuinus senno et omnibus congruens et a semetipso non discrepans, qualitati audientium condescendit; quem dum electus quisque utiliter iuxta modum suum intellegit, quasi acceptum manna in uoluntarium saporem uertit.*

is to be chewed with the teeth, i.e. the preachers, and in the form of milk is to be given to the ordinary people<sup>18</sup>.

Isidore compares the process of understanding the Scripture with the digestive process, explaining the distinction between clean and unclean animals. He considers those *who parteth the hoof and cheweth the cud* (Lev 11:3) as the spiritually pure people, who always have in their mouth the divine precepts (similarly to the food)<sup>19</sup>. Unlike them the heretics do not ruminate the divine truth and the Jews, though ruminate the Law, do not base on both Testaments<sup>20</sup>. This metaphor was widely used to describe the process of meditation on the words of Scripture that are extracted from in one's memory<sup>21</sup>. Augustine even

<sup>18</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Gen.* 31, 28-29: *Et dentes lacte candidiores. Dentes praedicatores sunt sancti, qui praecidunt ab erroribus homines, et eos, quasi comedendo, in Christi corpore transferunt. Nomine autem lactis doctrina legis significatur, quae carnalem populum, tamquam paruulos, poculo lactis alebat, cuius quidem candidiores effecti sunt doctores ecclesiae, quia fortem et ualidum uerbi cibum mandunt atque distribuunt. De quibus dicit Apostolus in epistola ad Hebraeos, Perfectorum autem est solidus cibus. Et bene candidiores lacte dentes eius dicit. Omnes enim qui perfecti sunt, et qui scripturarum cibos, explanantes subtilem et minutum intellectum, qui spiritalis dicitur, corpori subministrant, candidi debent esse, et puri, atque ab omni macula liberi.*

<sup>19</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Leu.* 9, 3: *Nam in animalibus mores pinguntur humani, et actus, et uoluntates, ex quibus ipsi fiunt mundi uel immundi. Haec itaque munda esse dicit. Omne, inquit, quod habet diuisam unguam, et ruminat, in pecoribus comedetis. Quod cum diceret, non pecora, sed mores hominum discernebat. Denique hi homines mundi sunt qui ruminant, qui in ore semper portant, quasi cibum, diuina praecepta.*

<sup>20</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Leu.* 9, 4-5: *Hi et unguam findunt, quia duo Testamenta legis et Euangeliorum credentes, firmo gressu innocentiae iustitiaeque incedunt. Item Iudaei ruminant quidem uerba legis, sed unguam non findunt: hoc est, quod nec duo Testamenta recipiunt, nec in Patrem Filiumque fidei suae gressus statuunt... Haeretici quoque licet unguam findant, in Patrem, et Filium credentes, et duo Testamenta recipientes, sed quia doctrinam ueritatis in ore non ruminant, nihilominus et ipsi immundi sunt.*

<sup>21</sup> E.g. AMBROSIVS, in *psalm.* 118 *serm.* 7, 25: *sed etiam, cum abest codex manibus, tamquam animantia, quae probantur et munda habentur in lege, etiam quando non pascuntur ruminare consuerunt, ex semet ipsis alimenta sibi recondita proferentia, ita et nos de nostrae memoriae thesauro, de interioribus nostris ruminandum nobis pabulum spiritale promamus.* AUGUSTINUS, in *psalm.* 96, 1: *Nam et ipsa ruminacione, in qua significat Deus munda animalia, hoc uoluit insinuare, quia omnis homo quod audit sic debet in cor mittere, ut non piger sit postea inde cogitare: ut quando audit, sit*

describes the *ruminatio* as a recollection of the sweetness of the text<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, Aulus Gellius designates the practice of commenting the text, recalled by memory and, thus, separated from reading, by the verb *ruminare*<sup>23</sup>. Augustine writes about special spiritual organ that allows to enjoy the sweetness of Scripture, the *palatum cordis*. This organ could be healthy or sick and consequently the reader could sense or not sense the taste of the divine law<sup>24</sup>. Gregory the Great mentions this organ in the context of the opposition of inner – outer senses<sup>25</sup>. Isidore does not speak of the spiritual organ of the *palatum cordis*, but he defines the organ of the mouth through the dialectical actions

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*similis manducanti; cum autem audita in memoriam reuocat, et cogitatione dulcissima recolit, fiat similis ruminanti.* RUFINUS, *Hist.* 11, 7: *Cum uero post lucubrationis laborem somnus, ut fieri solet, legentibus aduenisset, Didymus silentium illud non ad quietem vel otium datum ducens tanquam mundum animal ruminans cibum quem ceperat ex integro reuocabat et ea, quae dudum percurrentibus alus ex librorum lectione cognouerat, memoria et animo retexebat, ut non tam audisse quae lecta fuerant quam descripsisse mentis suae paginis uideretur.*

- <sup>22</sup> AUGUSTINUS, *c. Faust.* 7: *Quod enim utile audieris, velut ab intestino memoriae, tanquam ad os cogitationis, recordandi dulcedine reuocare, quid est aliud, quam spiritualiter quodam modo ruminare?*
- <sup>23</sup> AULUS GELLIUS, 19, 7: *Atque ita molli quodam tempestatis autumnae die ego et Iulius Celsinus, cum ad eum cenassemus et apud mensam eius audissemus legi Laeui Alcestin rediremusque in urbem sole iam fere occiduo, figuras habitusque verborum nove aut insigniter dictorum in Laeviano illo carmine ruminabamur et, ut quaeque uox indidem digna animaduerti subuenerat, qua nos quoque possemus uti, memoriae mandabamus.* See Joseph A. HOWLEY, *Aulus Gellius and Roman Reading Culture: Text, presence, and imperial knowledge in the Noctes Atticae*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 75-76.
- <sup>24</sup> Franz POSSET, “The ‘Palate of the Heart’ in St. Augustine and Medieval Spirituality”, in Frederick van FLETEREN – Joseph SCHNAUBELT (eds.), *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, New York, Peter Lang Verlag, 2001, 255-256. See also Georgiana HUIAN, “*Gustauit et esurio et sitio*: Augustine and the Spiritual Taste”, in Alin TAT (ed.) *Homo viator. Perspective ecumenice în antropologie*, Cluj-Napoca, Napoca Star, 2018, 73-92.
- <sup>25</sup> POSSET, “Palate”, 257-258. E.g. GREGORIUS M., *in euang.* 36, 1: *Sed cibum uitae ex palato cordis tangite, ut probantes eius dulcedinem amare ualeatis... Et quia gustare intus nolimus paratam dulcedinem, amamus foris miseri famem nostram.* Importantly, this passage is quoted by Taio of Zaragoza, a younger contemporary of Isidore, see TAIIO CAESARAUGUSTANUS, *Sent.* 3, 41.

of swallowing food and expressing speech<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the image of rumination accumulates the connotations of extracting the true meaning from the text, meditating on it and keeping it in mind.

To taste something means also to touch it. In the part of the *Sententiae* called "On the arrogant readers", Isidore exploits the image of touching the marrow, which is clearly borrowed from the passage from Gregory that inspired Isidore's reflection on taste and *sententia*. According to Isidore, those readers who believe that they are wise do not touch the core of truth (*medullitus ueritatis*), because the veil of their pride prevents them from doing so<sup>27</sup>. This metaphor of 'touching' during the digestive process is important for Gregory the Great. In the *Moralia*, he interprets saliva in the context of touching the truth, and Isidore must have been familiar with this interpretation. Saliva goes down from the mouth to the belly, as does divine contemplation, so that the believer can experience the taste of it without being filled<sup>28</sup>. This interpretation has obvious neo-platonic shades. Therefore, at least for Gregory, the idea of tasting the truth and touching the marrow of it means that that it is not possible to stay continually in touch with wisdom; in this life, this relation is only brief and occasional.

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<sup>26</sup> ISIDORUS, *Etym.* 11, 1, 49: *Os dictum, quod per ipsum, quasi per ostium, et cibos intus mittimus, et sputum foras proiicimus; vel quia inde ingrediuntur cibi, inde egrediuntur sermones.*

<sup>27</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 11, 2: *Numquam consequuntur legendo perfectam scientiam adrogantes. Nam quamuis sapientes in superficie uideantur, medullitus tamen ueritatis arcana non tangunt, quia superbiae nube praepediuntur. Semper enim superbi legunt, quaerunt et numquam inueniunt.*

<sup>28</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 8, 30, 4: *Quid ergo saliuae nomine nisi sapor intimae contemplationis accipitur? Quae ad os a capite defluit quia de claritate conditoris adhuc in hac uita nos positos uix gustu reuelationis tangit. Vnde et Redemptor ueniens saliuam luto miscuit et caeci nati oculos reparauit, quia superna gratia camalem cogitationem nostram per admixtionem suae contemplationis irradiat et ab originali caecitate hominem ad intellectum reformnat. Nam quia a paradisi gaudiis expulsum in hoc iam exsilio natura edidit, quasi a natiuitate harno sine oculis processit. Sed sicut uir sanctus insinuat, haec saliuua ad os quidem labitur, ut uero ad uentrem usque perueniat non glutitur; quia diuinitatis contemplatio sensum tangit, sed plene mentem non reficit, quoniam perfecte animus conspiceret non ualet quod adhuc, quia caligo corruptionis praepedit, raptim uidet.*

Gregory here uses the phrase *sapor contemplationis*. Elsewhere, he renders it as *gustus contemplationis* to express the sense of belonging to the eternal fatherland<sup>29</sup>. Julian Pomerius, whom Isidore also read, applies the metaphor of the taste of wisdom to stress the change: a believer who tries contemplation and wisdom turns away from earthly things and the foolishness of this world<sup>30</sup>. We already find this metaphor functioning similarly in the works of Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian says that the 'inebriation' from the Chalice averts the believer from the taste (*sapor*) of this world and gives him wisdom (*sapientia*)<sup>31</sup>. In the same way, Isidore comments on the consumption of blessed salt during the baptism. The tasting of salt by the catechumens (he is speaking about the *sacramentum salis*) is tied to the 'tasting' of wisdom and the taste of Christ<sup>32</sup>. Isidore combines these two sources and the phrase *sapor Christi* from the *De opere monachorum* of Augustine, who uses it in the context of monastic conversion<sup>33</sup>. The correlation between wisdom, Christ, and salt

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<sup>29</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral.* 23, 21, 41: *Neque enim quis praesentis uitae mala sicut sunt conspiciere praeualet, si bona aeternae patriae per contemplationis gustum contingere necdum ualet.*

<sup>30</sup> JULIANUS POMERIUS, 1, 13: *...sed illi qui se ab omnibus implicamentis negotiorum saecularium remouentes, non torpent otio, sed insistunt perfectionis suae negotio, et ab stultitia sapientiae saecularis auersi, uerbo Dei infatigabiliter uacant, sapientes ueraciter fiunt, coelestia sapiunt, terrena despiciunt, contradicentes sanae doctrinae redarguunt, obedientes instituunt, sanctis uirtutibus, quibus in dies singulos fiant Deo propinquiore, incumbunt, et tam suis quam omnium qui per eos erudiuntur, profectibus clari, hic quidem uelut gustum quemdam contemplatiuae uitae, quo ad eam feruentius prouocentur, accipiunt.*

<sup>31</sup> CYPRIANUS, *Epist.* 43: *Sic autem calix Dominicus inebriat ut et Noe in Genesi uinum bibens inebriatus est. Sed, quia ebrietas Dominici calicis et sanguinis non est talis qualis est ebrietas uini saecularis, cum diceret Spiritus sanctus in Psalmo, Calix tuus inebrians, addidit perquam optimus, quod scilicet calix Dominicus sic bibentes inebriat ut sobrios faciat, ut mentes ad spiritalem sapientiam redigat, ut a sapore isto saeculari ad intellectum Dei unusquisque respiscat.* On the taste in the context of the Eucharist see CASEAU, "Tastes of danger", 237-242.

<sup>32</sup> ISIDORUS, *Eccl. off.* 2, 21, 3: *Sales autem in ministerium catechumenis dandos a patribus ideo est institutum, ut eorum gustu condimentum sapientiae percipiant, neque desipiant a sapore Christi.*

<sup>33</sup> AUGUSTINUS, *Op. monach.* 32: *si enim ad hanc uitam ex diuite quisque conuertitur et nulla infirmitate corporis ineditur, ita ne desipimus a sapore Christi, ut non intellegamus quantus prioris superbiae tumor sanetur, cum*

is present elsewhere in Isidore's writings, though not in the context of tasting<sup>34</sup>.

Gregory the Great calls the spiritual sense of Scripture 'the salt of the letter' —a taste not obtainable for the carnal men<sup>35</sup>— as well as the sweetness of it. Isidore repeats the words of Augustine, explaining the origins of singing in the Church: words are not sufficient to touch the hearts of carnal men, so the sweetness of music must make up for it<sup>36</sup>. In his *Sententiae*, Isidore expresses quite similar ideas<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the carnal men do not possess the sense of taste that allows them to feel the sweetness of the liturgical and sacred texts. Gregory the Great expounds on the deviations of taste among sinners: same things are bitter to the *electi* and sweet to the perverted taste of *reprobi*<sup>38</sup>.

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*circumcisis superfluis, quibus ante animus exitiabiliter inflabatur, ad modica quae restant huic uitae naturaliter necessaria etiam opificis humilitas minime recusetur?* Another source is EUCHERIUS, *form. 7: Sal condimentum sapientiae; in euangelio: uos estis sal terrae.*

<sup>34</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Reg. IV 2, 1-2: Postulatur Eliseus a populo, ut aquas Iericho steriles, et malignas sanaret. Accepit uas rude fictile, et adiecit in eo salem, et demersit illud in flumine, et statim sanatae sunt. Quo facto praenuntiabat propheta quod Verbum caro fieret, et habitaret in nobis: inde in similitudinem Verbi salem, id est, sapientiam dedit; in uas fictile, in corpus scilicet humanum, immittens in aquam demersit, quod quidem significabat quia omnes populi, qui sub figura aquarum in toto mundo steriles erant, per Christi incarnationem fecunditatem et benedictionem accepturi essent.*

<sup>35</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral. 7, 8, 8: In lege sal litterae est uirtus intellegentiae occulta. Quisquis ergo, obsequiis carnalibus intentus, hanc intellegere spiritaliter noluit, quid aliud quam insulsum cibum, comedit? Sed hoc in cibo sal cognita Veritas misit, cum latere, in lege saporem occultae intellegentiae docuit dicens: Si crederetis Moysi, crederetis forsitan et mihi: de me enim ille scripsit. Et rursus: Habete sal in uobis et pacem habete inter uos.*

<sup>36</sup> ISIDORUS, *Eccl. off. 1, 5, 2: Primitiua autem Ecclesia ita psallebat, ut modico flexu uocis faceret resonare psallentem, ita ut pronuntianti uicinior esset quam canenti. Propter carnales autem in Ecclesia, non propter spirituales, consuetudo cantandi est instituta, ut qui uerbis non compunguntur, suauitate modulaminis moueantur.*

<sup>37</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent. 3, 7, 30: Nam quamuis dura sint carnalium corda, statim ut psalmi dulcedo insonuerit, ad effectum pietatis animum eorum inflectit.* ISIDORUS, *Sent. 3, 7, 32: Multi enim reperiuntur qui, cantus suauitate commoti, sua crimina plangunt, atque ex ea parte magis flectuntur ad lacrymas, ex qua psallentis insonuerit dulcedo suauissima.*

<sup>38</sup> GREGORIUS M., *Moral. 15, 60, 71: Et quia antiquus hostis suum uas illum reprobum hominem ingressus, dum dona peruersis ribuit, dum eos in hoc*

The metaphor of food and tasting builds a connection between the practices of reading Scripture and the receiving of Holy Communion<sup>39</sup> as well as the symbolical consumption of salt during Baptism. This connection is well reflected in the writings of Isidore. Moreover, these practices were associated with both the notion of wisdom and the figure of Christ. For instance, Isidore uses the metaphorical table of Wisdom (Prov 9:1) —traditionally identified as Christ— to show the prefiguration of Eucharist<sup>40</sup>. Against this background, the metaphor of taste of contemplation and Scripture should stress this connection and allows to specify the practice of reading and meditating through the image of touching, feeling and ruminating. Finally, this metaphor accentuates the healthy or unhealthy sense of taste that allows (or does not allow) the reader to find the sweetness in the text of Scripture. Now, let us turn to the representation of the practices of reading and writing through these digestive images.

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*mundo honoribus extollit, dum eorum oculis prodigia ostendit, fluxae mentes hunc in suis prodigiis admirantur et sequuntur, bene de eo dicitur: Dulcis fuit glareis Cocyti. Cum enim hunc electi despiciunt, cum mentis calce contemnunt, illi eum sequentes diligunt, qui uelut ab aqua uoluptatis ad perpetuum luctum trahuntur, qui per terrenam concupiscentiam more glareae quotidianis lapsibus ad ima dilabuntur. Aliis namque gustum suae dulcedinis per superbiam, aliis per auaritiam, aliis per inuidiam, aliis per fallaciam, aliis per luxuriam porrigit; et ad quanta uitiorum genera pertrahit, quasi tot suae dulcedinis potus propinat. Nam cum aliquid superbum in mente persuadet, fit dulce quod dicit, quia uideri praelatus caeteris homo peruersus appetit... Bene ergo dicitur: Dulcis fuit glareis cocyti, quia amarus electis, et suauis est reprobis.*

<sup>39</sup> Traditionally, the reflection about the sense of taste and taste itself was related to the Eucharist, see Paul GAVRILYUK – Sarah COAKLEY, “Introduction”, in Paul GAVRILYUK – Sarah COAKLEY (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 8.

<sup>40</sup> ISIDORUS, *Fid. cath.* 2, 27, 3: *Dei ergo sapientia Christus constituit sibi domum sacrosanctam Ecclesiam, in qua mactauit sui corporis hostias, in qua miscuit uinum sui sanguinis in calice sacramenti diuini, et praeparauit mensam, hoc est, altare Domini, mittens seruos suos apostolos atque doctores ad insipientes, id est, ad omnes gentes uerum Deum ignorantes, dicens eis: Venite, comedite panem meum, et bibite uinum quod miscui uobis; id est, sancti corporis escam sumite; et bibite uinum quod miscui uobis, id est, poculum sanguinis sacri percipite.*

## III

Some fifty years after Isidore's death, Julian of Toledo described the process of reading and writing in the preface to his *Prognosticon futuri saeculi*, addressed to his fellow bishop Idalius. Julian widely uses the metaphors of food and meals. Firstly, he describes how he and his addressee read Scripture and how they were overcome with emotions (*concutimur, gemimus, suspiramus*). These emotions prevented the bishops from reading, but contemplation and conversation (*collatio, colloquium*) brought them joy. Julian speaks about contemplation in terms of taste and the sweetness that their minds felt<sup>41</sup>. He uses the images of food (*cibus, daps*) to signify the information that one receives in the process of reading and subsequently considers in the process of contemplation (of the latter, he uses the verbs *ruminare* and *satiare*)<sup>42</sup>. Gregory the Great, as one of Isidore's authorities, applies the metaphor of food to his own text, characterizing his *Homiliae in Euangelium*, which circulated unedited, as "undercooked food"<sup>43</sup>.

Importantly, Julian writes that he has created his work not only to explain the unclear matter of the future life, but also to provide "food" (*cibus*) for meditation in the form of texts

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<sup>41</sup> IULIANUS TOL., *Progn. praef.: Dominicae tunc passionis secreta, congesti euangeliorum concordia, scrutabamur. At ubi uentum est ad quandam lectionis desiderabilem locum, quem nunc recordari non ualeo, concutimur, gemimus, suspiramus. Sublime quoddam iubilum in nostris mentibus nascitur, et subito in quadam contemplationis arce pertrahimur. Obortae lachrymae conatum lectionis auertunt; communis moeror reicit librum et solius mutuae collationis fecundari munere opperitur. Quis ibi diuinus sapor nostrorum animos attingit, quae supernae caritatis dulcedo mentibus mortalium se illapsa diffuderit, quis. aut scriptis explicet, aut relatu condignae uocis sufficiat explicare?*

<sup>42</sup> IULIANUS TOL., *progn. praef.: His igitur ferculorum dapibus inuitati, coepimus inter nos quaerere... ut iam in perquisitione talium quaestionum, numerositas librorum quaerenti animae laboriosa non esset, sed multiplicem lectoris sitim haec collecta breuitas satiaret...* See also n. 38.

<sup>43</sup> GREGORIUS M., *in euang. praef.: Sed quidam fratres, sacri uerbi studio feruentes, antequam ad propositum modum ea quae dixeram subtili emendatione perducerem transtulerunt. Quos recte ego quasi quibusdam famelicis similes dixerim, qui prius escas edere appetunt, quam plenius excoquantur.*



that are brief and, consequently, easy to grasp<sup>44</sup>. This *topos* of brevity also occurs in Isidor's *Sententiae*. Brief sentences, he states, are easy to retain in one's memory and to mull over, while longer texts blot out the reader's remembrance<sup>45</sup>. Elsewhere, he says that brief speech gives pleasure, while longer speech disgusts the reader<sup>46</sup>. In this way, the brevity—and aphoristic Isidorian style—of the text provides the reader with material for the spiritual practice of meditation and gives him pleasure.

Speaking about the spiritual practices of using the text, it is worth noting that Julian compares the text to a mirror. The mind of the reader ought to look into the mirror of the text<sup>47</sup>. Isidore uses the same image to describe the practice of imitation: the reader should compare himself to the image in relation to the virtue that he has chosen to exercise<sup>48</sup>. The text was necessary to the practice of constructing the self, both for Julian and for Isidore.

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<sup>44</sup> IULIANUS TOL., *progn. praef.*: *Hoc igitur opus, non ad hoc tantum formari mihi perplacuit ut quasi incognita legentibus demonstrarem, cum multos esse non dubitem harum rerum scientiam multiplicium librorum uoluminibus didicisse; sed potius, ut sub uno collecta hic futurorum ratio mentes mortalium et uehementius tangeret, quod sine labore hic posita perlegissent, et no eo compuncta mens redderetur ad tempus, quo facillime hic illicibus occurrisset oblati. . . Nam si id quod futuri sumus sedula meditatione ruminauerimus, credo quod aut raro aut numquam aliquando peccabimus.*

<sup>45</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 14, 8: *Saepe prolixa lectio longitudinis causa memoriam legentis obliterat. Quod si breuis sit, submotoque libro sententia retractetur in animo, tunc sine labore legitur, et ea quae lecta sunt recolendo memoria minime exciduntur.*

<sup>46</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Gen. praef.*: *Breui enim expositione succincta non faciunt de prolixitate fastidium. Prolixa enim et occulta taedet oratio, breuis et aperta delectat.* Here it should be briefly noted that the speech should give sweet pleasure goes back at least to Cicero and is repeated by Augustine. See CICERO, *Orat.* 21: *is qui in foro causisque ciuilibus ita dicet, ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat. Probare necessitatis est, delectare suauitatis, flectere uictoriae.* Cf. AUGUSTINUS, *Doctr. christ.* 12, 27.

<sup>47</sup> IULIANUS TOL., *progn. praef.*: *Haec ergo librorum formatio ordinata, pro notitia collecta sufficiat, ut et in hoc speculo noster sese animus recognoscat.*

<sup>48</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 2, 11, 10: *Qui sanctum uirum imitatur, quasi exemplar aliquod intuetur, seseque in illo, quasi in speculo, praespicit, ut adiciat quod deesse uirtutis agnoscit. Minus enim seipsum homo ex semetipso considerat, sed dum alterum in tendit, id quod minus est luminis adicit.*

Another important point in the description made by Julian is the change of emotions from grief to joy that is correlated with the transition from reading to meditation. Isidore opposes the bitterness of the letter of the law to the sweetness of the spiritual understanding thereof, which is made possible by the passion of Christ<sup>49</sup>. However, this metaphor explains not only the general shift from the verbal to spiritual understanding, but also the experience of the reader. Gregory the Great explains that the more obscure a sacred text is, the more sweetness it brings as a result of the work of the mind to understand it<sup>50</sup>. In the same passage, Gregory explains why an arrogant reader cannot understand Scripture properly. This kind of reader does not seek the sweetness of beatitude, but material for formulating questions to show off his intellect<sup>51</sup>. It is this sweetness, however, that turns the mind away from terrestrial things and gives one a temporal experience of eternal life; and

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<sup>49</sup> ISIDORUS, in *Exod.* 21, 1-2: *Egresso populo de mari Rubro, occurrit eremus, in qua tribus diebus ingredientibus non habuerunt aquam, et peruenerunt ad fontem Marah, qui ex amaritudine nomen accepit. Murmurat populus uidentis aquas, et potare non sustinens. Mittit lignum Moyses in aquas, et factae sunt dulces. Intellige amaras aquas occidentis litterae et legis habere figuram. Quibus si immittatur confessio crucis, et passionis dominicae sacramentum iungatur, tunc efficitur aqua Marae suauis, et amaritudo litterae uertitur in dulcedinem intelligentiae spiritualis.*

<sup>50</sup> GREGORIUS M., in *Ezech.* 1, 6, 1: *Magnae uero utilitatis est ipsa obscuritas eloquiorum Dei, quia exercet sensum ut fatigatione dilatetur, et exercitatus capiat quod capere non posset otiosus. Habet quoque adhuc aliud maius, quia Scripturae sacrae intelligentia, quae si in cunctis esset aperta uilisceret, in quibusdam locis obscurioribus tanto maiore dulcedine inuenta reficit, quanto maiore labore fatigat animum quaesita.*

<sup>51</sup> GREGORIUS M., in *Ezech.* 1, 4, 4: *Et qui idcirco in sacro eloquio ea quae diuinitatis sunt contemplatur, ut per hoc quod intelligit occupari ad quaestiones possit, quia non dulcedine quaesitae beatitudinis satiari appetit, sed doctus uideri, iste nimirum intellectus sui pennas desuper non extendit; sed quoniam sensus sui uigilantiam in terreno appetitu occupat, pennas quas subleuare in altum et quibus subleuari ipse potuit in imis deponit.* GREGORIUS M., in *Ezech.* 1, 4, 4: *Et qui idcirco in sacro eloquio ea quae diuinitatis sunt contemplatur, ut per hoc quod intelligit occupari ad quaestiones possit, quia non dulcedine quaesitae beatitudinis satiari appetit, sed doctus uideri, iste nimirum intellectus sui pennas desuper non extendit; sed quoniam sensus sui uigilantiam in terreno appetitu occupat, pennas quas subleuare in altum et quibus subleuari ipse potuit in imis deponit.*

this sweetness should be kept in remembrance, because one feels it only for a short time<sup>52</sup>.

This description of ‘tasting’ a text matches the passage from the *Sententiae* that was reproduced above, and allows us to clarify its sense. The point is that *tasting* here does not mean ‘roughly understanding’; there is, rather, a whole epistemological practice behind it. The aim of reading was not only to grasp the literal meaning of the text —i.e., ‘knowledge’ of it (*scientia*)<sup>53</sup>— but to achieve a special condition of ‘sweetness’ that causes the reader to turn away from this world<sup>54</sup>. The meaning deduced from a text was a product of the individual reader and his situation<sup>55</sup>. Isidore’s *sententia*, for its part, stresses the importance of the second aspect. While reading Scripture leads to a love for wisdom<sup>56</sup>, it is the feeling of taste—which is correlated to *sententia*— that unites the reader with wisdom (*recte ex sententia dicit, qui ueram*

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<sup>52</sup> GREGORIUS M., in *Ezech.* 1, 5, 12: *Dulcedinem quippe suauitatis intimae, quia utcumque possunt, uelut quodam ex corusco, praegustando tangere, eius memoriam student recolendo semper et loquendo eructare. Unde et apte nos psalmista admonet, dicens: Lux orta est iusto, et rectis corde laetitia. Laetamini iusti in Domino, et confitemini memoriae sanctitatis eius. Qui rursus ait: Quam magna multitudo dulcedinis tuae, Domine! Quae uidelicet quam magna esset nullo modo cognosceret, nisi hanc aliquatenus contemplando gustasset. Hinc iterum dicit: Ego dixi in ecstasi mea, proiectus sum a uultu oculorum tuorum. Nisi enim in mentis excessu subleuatus dulcedinem suauitatis aeternae cognouisset, in hoc adhuc mundo retentus non discerneret quam longe proiectus iaceret.*

<sup>53</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 8, 6: *Lector strenuus potius ad implendum quae legit, quam ad sciendum erit promptissimus.*

<sup>54</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 8, 4: *Geminum confert donum lectio sanctorum scripturarum, siue quia intellectum mentis erudit, seu quod a mundi uanitatibus abstractum hominem ad amorem Dei perducit.*

<sup>55</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 8, 5: *Geminum est lectionis studium: primum quomodo scripturae intellegantur, secundum qua utilitate uel dignitate dicantur. Erit enim antea quisque promptus ad intellegendum quae legit, sequenter idoneus ad proferendum quae dicit.* See Raymond J. STARR, “The Flexibility of Literary Meaning and the Role of the Reader in Roman Antiquity”, *Latomus* 60 (2001) 433-445.

<sup>56</sup> ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 8, 4: *Excitati enim saepe illius sermone, subtrahimur a desiderio uitae mundanae, atque accensi in amore sapientiae, tanto uana spes mortalitatis huius nobis uilescit, quanto amplius legendo spes aeterna claruerit.*

*sapientiam gustu interni saporis sentit. A sentiendo enim sententia dicitur*). Moreover, as W. Law observes, wisdom literature — which presupposed “developing the inner capacities of the listener” — among other things, challenged the reader with obscurity that had to be penetrated<sup>57</sup>. Gregory the Great might have added that it ought to be penetrated to achieve the sweetness of wisdom.

As the case of Julian of Toledo demonstrates, the creation of texts (which was often an act of pastoral care and of the authority of the Church<sup>58</sup>) in the 7<sup>th</sup> cent. was embedded in the spiritual practice of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *collatio*. The author, after reading and collating the raw material of his sources, had to choose brief phrases that would serve as the starting points for the memory of the reader. For memory was a device for meditation and an instrument of thought<sup>59</sup>, as well as, as we have seen, a reservoir for accumulating the experience of the heavenly fatherland and the love of wisdom. This is simultaneously the reason why the author had to speak *ex sententia*.

It is worth noting that the passage about the taste of wisdom seems to have been written according to these “rules”. It has a compact and even elliptical form. To understand its meaning, the reader has to engage his memory and contemplative faculty. The reader had to keep in mind at least some passages from the *Moralia* of Gregory the Great, making use of the medieval art of memory and, generally, ‘la lecture intensive’. The brevity of its text thus allows the

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<sup>57</sup> Vivienne LAW, *Wisdom, Authority and Grammar in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 24.

<sup>58</sup> See Dolores CASTRO, “The Bishop and the Word: Isidore of Seville and the Production of Meaning”, in Elenora DELL’ECLINE – Céline MARTIN (eds.), *Framing Power in Visigothic Society. Discourses, Devices, and Artefacts*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 57-74. On the *ordo lectorum* as the device for introducing the Christian tradition to the masses, see Michel BANNIARD, “Le lecteur en Espagne wisigothique d’après Isidore de Séville: de ses fonctions à l’état de la langue”, *Revue d’Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 21 (1975) 143 (112-144).

<sup>59</sup> Mary CARRUTHERS, *The Craft of Thought. Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 4.

reader to 'ruminate' on it and, possibly, to feel the sweetness of its meaning in the end<sup>60</sup>.

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Spiritual exercises related to texts were an inherent part of Christian orthopraxy. This is why nobody articulated them explicitly: they were self-explanatory for those who undertook them<sup>61</sup>. It is no wonder that in a culture that hoped to reach the contemplation of God and his law through the text of Scripture, reading and writing evolved into spiritual exercises. Viewed through this light, the compilations of Isidore and other authors from Visigothic Spain reflect their specific 'thought' not so much in their content as in their form.

For the contemporary reader, the text primarily serves to inform; religious and literary texts are additionally supposed to influence the behavior and even to transform the self of the reader<sup>62</sup>. Of course, these functions were important for Isidore, too, but in applying the metaphor of taste, he especially stressed the aspect of pleasure (of a kind utterly unlike the sexual metaphor suggested by R. Barthes), that of the *ecstasis* required to approach wisdom. Much like the taste of the chalice, this inner pleasure is ought to avert the reader from outer things and the pleasure of sin.

Isidore's rendering of the metaphor borrowed from the texts of Gregory the Great and Rufinus, roughly speaking, comprises two points. The first is that Isidore generalizes the pattern that these authors used specifically for understanding Scripture. On the one hand, he extends it to the wisdom that was the goal of spiritual exercises. On the other hand, he applies the idea of discerning meanings to the subject of philosophy, i.e. all things and causes. This is telling: it means

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<sup>60</sup> Guiglielmo CAVALLO, "Du volumen au codex. La lecture dans le monde romain", dans Guiglielmo CAVALLO – Roger CHARTIER (éds.), *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*, Paris, Éditions de Seuil, 1997, 107.

<sup>61</sup> CARRUTHERS, *The Craft of Thought*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> See Yuri LOTMAN, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London, Indiana University Press, 1990, 33.

that reading —and subsequent meditation— became for Isidore the general paradigm of achieving wisdom.

The second point is that Isidore shifts the focus of the metaphor from the taste of wisdom or sweetness of Scripture to the sense of taste of the man pursuing wisdom. This may allow Isidore to stress the difference between “wise” and “unwise” people in a situation where the food of wisdom is accessible to both groups. The sense of taste should be sane and proper, because carnal and arrogant people find sweetness in inappropriate things, and cannot sense the taste of wisdom<sup>63</sup>. It is the virtue of humility that provides the reader with a healthy sense of taste. The arrogant reader does not get a sense of the sweetness of Scripture, because his self prevents him from doing so. At the same time, the humility of the wise man seems to be many-faceted and may enable him to fulfill the precepts in the passage read or interiorize its meaning.

Isidore does not expound on his ideas, neither about the taste of wisdom, nor about the taste of the reader. He expresses it in a very condensed form, briefly, in no more than two lines. This brevity should give pleasure to the reader *per se*, and also because it has to be penetrated to grasp its meaning<sup>64</sup>. At the same time, the form results from the practice of spiritual exercises: one has to keep the phrase in mind to meditate on it. Importantly, this very practice was imagined in terms of food, ruminating and tasting.

To some extent, the form of the *sententia* depends on the practices of achieving wisdom. And Isidore’s *sententiae* might appear as very straightforward and simple utterances. W. Law opposes the orthodox and moral understanding of wisdom by Isidore with the multiform conceptualization of it by his enigmatic younger contemporary, Virgilius Maro Grammaticus<sup>65</sup>. However, Virgilius borrows —and thus

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<sup>63</sup> See ISIDORUS, *Sent.* 3, 11, 2; *Sent.* 3, 12, 1-2: *Nequaquam legem intellegit qui carnaliter uerba legis percurrit, sed is qui eam sensu interioris intellegentiae praespicit. Nam qui litteram legis intendunt, eius occulta penetrare non possunt. — Multi enim, non intellegendo spiritaliter scripturas, nec eas recte sentiendo, in heresim deuoluti sunt atque in multis erroribus defluerunt.*

<sup>64</sup> See LAW, *Wisdom*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> LAW, *Wisdom*, 99-101.

shares— the metaphor of taste in relation to wisdom. *Sapientia*, he writes along with Isidore, is derived from *sapor*, because of the sense of taste that the soul possesses; this sense allows her to feel the sweetness of the liberal arts and to discern the meaning of words and phrases<sup>66</sup>. In this respect, Isidore and Virgilius may thus not be so different after all, with the former's apparent simplicity evincing unexpected commonalities with the seemingly parodical style of the latter.

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<sup>66</sup> VIRGILIUS GRAMM., *Epit.* 1: *Sapientia autem ex sapore sic nominatur, quia, sicut in corporis fit gustu, ita et in animae motu quidam sapor est, qui artium dulcedinem gustet, qui uerborum sententiarumque uim discernat, amara quaeque refutans, suauius uero consecrans.* See Vivienne LAW, "Learning to read with the *oculi mentis*: Virgilius Maro Grammaticus", *Literature and Theology* 3 (1989) 162-163 (159-172) (<https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/3.2.159>).