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THE MEDIEVAL BRAIN

Tears for Fears: Alienation and Authority in the World of Benedict of Aniane

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In this article, we will take a closer look at the role played by the depiction of weeping and tears in the story of the conversion of Benedict of Aniane. According to his hagiography, Benedict, seen as one of the most important intellectuals at the Carolingian court in the late eighth and early ninth century, started his career as a secular aristocrat before undergoing an inner conversion and subsequently pursuing a monastic lifestyle. As presented by the contemporary hagiographer Ardo, the tears, rather than denoting any kind of 'abnormal' behaviour, were among the first external signs of this conversion. As such, they should be analysed not only in terms of the behaviour of a historical figure, but also as a narrative trope with many layers of meaning that would have presented themselves to a contemporary audience familiar with the same traditions as the author of Benedict's *vita*. Rather than simply denoting the emotionality of the protagonist, they signalled the author's concerns about the state of the world as well, and as such should be seen as a way of 'normalising' rather than exoticising Benedict's conversion against the broader backdrop of Carolingian court culture in the early ninth century.

'Some people believe that the word for tears (*lacrima*) comes from an injury of the mind (*laceratio mentis*). Thus wrote the seventh-century bishop Isidore of Seville in his famous encyclopaedic work known as the *Etymologies*, as he was explaining the various characteristics of the human eye. The implication, given his tendency to associate 'tears' with effusions of fluids after a cut is made, is that crying is what happens when the mind receives a wound so grievous that water is being expelled through the eye sockets (ed. Lindsay, 1911).¹ Odd theories about anatomy aside, Isidore's pithy remark indicates he was aware that tears are not just the result of an outburst of emotion, but that they may actually be caused by what might be called a mental illness. This is an interesting take. While the link between expressions of emotions and the mind or brain (Isidore actually distinguishes between the two) is already visible in the Hippocratic Corpus (Adams, 1868: 138–41) and medieval intellectuals thinking about the 'medieval brain' were certainly aware of mental illness existing, Isidore here implies that it is sometimes taken into account that tears have an external cause – that they can be triggered by a 'laceration' and thus be indicative of a mind that is hurt and in need of healing.

The core of this article will be the *Vita Benedicti Anianensis*, or Life of Benedict of Aniane, a hagiographical narrative composed in the early 820s by Ardo, a monk and teacher at the monastery of Aniane near present-day Montpellier in Southern France.² Specifically, we will focus on Ardo's description of Benedict's emotions at the time of his conversion and the saint's almost incessant crying during this phase.³ The *Vita Benedicti Anianensis* (VBA) provides an excellent position from which to make more general points about the perception of monastic emotions in the early

¹ For tears as a 'tearing of the mind', see 11.1.39, 11.1.108–109. For tears as a liquid formed after a cut see 12.6.50, 16.8.6.

² There are several editions of this text available. The most recent one, which will be used throughout this article, was made by Walter Kettemann as part of his PhD dissertation (2000). Another edition with accompanying German translation prepared under the supervision of Gerhard Schmitz may be found at <http://www.rotula.de/aniane/index.htm> (last accessed 13 July 2019). The most readily accessible English translations are Cabaniss (1979) and Noble & Head (1995).

³ In this, we are also latching onto the ever-expanding field of the History of Emotions. On this, see for instance Stearns & Stearns (1985), Matt (2011) and especially Rosenwein (2002).

ninth century.⁴ First of all, it depicts the life of one of the main players at the court of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious, whose immediate influence stretched well beyond the confines of the monastery he had founded. Moreover, his fame and reputation, combined with the proximity of the *vita* to his actual death meant that the author had to expertly anticipate the expectations of his potential audience, many of whom might have known the protagonist in life and who would thus expect a veneer of plausibility to hold together the *topoi* so characteristic of the hagiographical genre. What should also be taken into account is that Ardo deliberately wrote for the Carolingian court of Louis the Pious in Aachen with a view towards establishing a cult around the saint – which in turn implies that he would latch onto courtly conventions to the extent that his narrative fit with the expectations of his readers, eliciting a positive response in the process. While the sum of these observations thus situates the *VBA* securely between the monastic and courtly life in the early ninth century, the relative weight accorded to Benedict of Aniane in present-day scholarship makes it a text worthy of scrutiny. His name is often still closely associated with the ecclesiastical reforms undertaken from the Carolingian court and, although his reputation is undoubtedly deserved, it also means that we should take care not to take his life story at face value, as it feeds into a myth that may not be supported by additional source material. Therefore, although the immediate impact of Ardo's narrative was actually quite low, the authorial intent behind it and the subsequent reputation of its protagonist in modern scholarship makes it all the more important to be aware of the choices made while composing the *vita*.

The basic story of Benedict's conversion narrates how, after attempting to save his brother from drowning in a fast-flowing river in 774, 'the year that Italy was made subject to the sway of glorious King Charles' according to the author, Benedict left the world and committed to the ascetic life. Ardo painted a picture of a man who, shunned by his colleagues, wept so much and so profoundly that he could only be imitated by a select few (ed. Kettmann, 2000: 146–48). But what did these tears mean to Ardo? What did he hope his audience might learn from them? Combined

⁴ A more elaborate analysis of the *VBA*'s 'social logic' may be found in Kramer (2019b).

with other topical signs of holiness mentioned by Ardo, the passage, when taken at face value, suggests that Benedict was suffering from a major depressive disorder. Consequently, his conversion could perhaps be seen as a response to a traumatic near-death experience. Indeed, this view has coloured interpretations of this scene. For instance, Walter Kettemann, in his dissertation (2000) and a subsequent article (2016), offered a political reading of Benedict's conversion, arguing that the saint opted for a monastic life primarily as a result of the turmoil and altered political dynamics between the death of Karloman in 771 and the conquest of Lombard Italy by Charlemagne in 774. Felice Lifshitz, in her monograph *The Name of the Saint*, highlights the fact that Benedict even changed his name from the Visigothic 'Witiza' following his experience – a change that indicates how deeply the event had affected him (2006: 23, 57–72).⁵

Both these readings, as well as the work of their predecessors, agree that Benedict's conversion decidedly changed the history of Western Monasticism, and that understanding how it came to pass is vital to understanding the monastic reforms that characterised the early reign of Louis the Pious (de Jong, 1995; Kramer, 2019a). However, this makes it equally important to deal with the writing strategies employed by Ardo to describe this event regardless of what actually transpired. It is his depiction, after all, which allows us to dwell on Benedict's conversion in the first place; the saint himself never dwells on this event in great detail in his own writings. The dating added by Ardo, for example, need not indicate that Benedict was involved in Franco-Italian politics at the time, but could simply be a way to connect Benedict's conversion to Charlemagne's successes in empire-building (Claussen, 2015; McKitterick, 2008; Kramer, 2019b). Similarly, it should be noted that the idea that 'trauma' leads to 'transformation' is as much a (modern) narrative trope as an actual observation. Ardo draws a clear connection between Benedict's brush with death and his conversion, but as modern research has pointed out, responses to such experiences are varied and complex; rather than seeing this as an insight into

⁵ Interestingly, in his 2016 article, Kettemann points out on pp. 55–59 that the name 'Witiza' does not occur in contemporary sources but is only mentioned in later traditions.

Benedict's psychology, the pretext given by Ardo could be seen as a narrative device to spur Benedict into action and turn his fear of death into an ultimately positive experience (Farrell, 1998: 21–23; Noyes, 1984; Lindy, 1996).⁶

This article will provide an alternative interpretation, one which is not based on explicating Benedict's behaviour but rather on the way(s) Ardo helped his audience make sense of it; in this sense, this article owes its methodological approach to a large extent to the methodology pioneered by Rosenwein (2006). Our suggestion is that Benedict's conversion need not be the consequence of a traumatic experience and that his tears did not straightforwardly reflect sorrow or depression. As such, we should be cautious when applying modern diagnostic tools to medieval texts. Indeed, in the context of Carolingian hagiography, the question should not be if or why he wept. Rather, the question is why Ardo chose to depict this the way he did (Poulin, 1975: 14–18; Isaïa, 2014). In his representation of Benedict weeping, Ardo communicated coded messages about the sanctity of his subject and, significantly, his relationships with God, his aristocratic peers and the other inhabitants of the monastic world he sought to enter.⁷

Tears can mean many things to many people. As Thomas Dixon highlights in his study of British history through the lens of tears from the later middle ages to the end of the twentieth century: 'a tear is a universal sign not in the sense that it has the same meaning in all times and places. A tear is a universal sign because, depending on the mental, social and narrative context, it can mean almost anything' (2015: 7). Shed behind closed doors, they are often seen to be a sign of undesirable and overwhelming sorrow. Shed in public, they are part of (expected and acceptable) performances of grief, or are interpreted as signs of more excessive disorders.⁸ Tears are even used as evidence for a Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) in the DSM-5, one of the major diagnostic

⁶ Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1996: 66) posit that there exists an 'intimate connection between cultural, social, historical, and political conditions on the one hand, and the ways that people approach traumatic stress on the other'.

⁷ For other discussions about the relationship between tears, sanctity and monastic life see Susan Kramer (2015) Cooper (2012), and Dilley (2017).

⁸ In certain circumstances, public weeping is not only acceptable, but is expected. For more on the performative nature of this behaviour see Gross (2015: 69–73).

manuals for psychotherapists and psychiatrists in Europe and North America (APA, 2013: 160–61; Guarnaccia & Martinez Pincay, 2008: 49–50). However, because of the cultural meanings applied to tears, this also highlights one of the major criticisms of the DSM, namely the observation that it effectively reifies various mental afflictions, which reduces the complexities of the mind of a patient to a list of criteria formulated by a panel of European and American experts, which moreover changes with each new iteration (Hoff, 2017). Instead, symptoms associated with mental distress ought to be understood first and foremost in their cultural context. The extent to which certain behaviours were considered to be problematic or evidence of a disorder, changes from society to society. Without minimising the suffering which can be associated with many such symptoms, this view suggests that instead of placing sets of symptoms into ill-fitting boxes associated with disorders, the focus should be on reintegrating individuals into society and improving their quality of life (Bhaskar, Danermark & Price, 2018: 93–95; Kirmayer, Guzder & Rousseau, 2014: 337).

In the present, the goal is to treat people with due diligence and care for the context within which they are required to function. A similar approach can be discerned in the study of behavioural norms in the past. This becomes an especially salient issue when dealing with those about whom we only have descriptions that were not necessarily written with accuracy in mind. Retrospective diagnosis is problematic in the best of cases, but when dealing with narratives which were aimed at providing their audiences with moral lessons or perspectives on their own lives, it becomes all but impossible to separate the intentions of the author from the way a person is described (Trenery & Horden, 2017: 62–63; Wallis, 2010: xxvii). Rather than take a description, apply a modern list of criteria and attempt to pin down what may have ailed a person, the task usually is to figure out how and why an author chose to describe aberrant behaviour, and what that meant for his or her intended audience.⁹

For the Middle Ages, the clearest examples of this are hagiographical narratives (Wood, 1999; Gouillet, 2005; Palmer, 2018). To the extent that they deal with real, historical figures, they should not be seen as psychological case studies in the modern

⁹ See also methodological remarks in Edge (2018).

sense of the word. Instead, these texts would aim to show the development of the protagonist from a flawed human being to a holy man or woman with Christ-like qualities – confirmed by miracles performed by God through the agency of the saint. Often highly topical in and of themselves, they are lessons in sanctity, in which the life story of a known historical actor is retold in such a way as to attain a moral and religious meaning for its audience – who would subsequently be encouraged to heed the lessons provided and follow in the footsteps of the saint. In that sense, reading saints' lives with a view towards understanding their behaviour – the way they walked, talked, laughed and cried – ends up being counterproductive, skewed as it inadvertently is by the inclinations of modern researchers.¹⁰ However, when viewed as reflections on the human condition, or as idealised depictions of the potential for sanctity present in everyone, they do provide interesting insights in the way the authors dealt with the perceived imperfections and illnesses of their protagonists – protagonists who, it should not be forgotten, invariably ended up being sanctified rather than committed.

In this article, we argue that Ardo, like so many authors of medieval hagiographies, would describe the development of his protagonist not merely with a view towards setting him up as a paragon of holiness, but also as a reflection on what made him human. Often described as engaging in rather extreme behaviour by today's standards, early medieval saints and ascetics (as well as their lives) were nonetheless 'normalised' to a certain degree. After all, just like psychologists in the 21st century, authors of saints' lives had a set of criteria against which the holiness of their protagonists would be judged; they dealt with audience expectations and genre conventions, and had to make sure they conformed to the 'actual' lives described. Put differently: the idealisations occurring in hagiographical narratives were as much about integrating the saint into their world, as it was about explaining their behaviour in the first place.

As such, the tears in the *VBA* ought to be understood in light of the circles in which Ardo moved. In 814, Charlemagne's youngest son – the king of Aquitaine – ascended to the imperial throne. He had been prepared for this role during his tenure as

¹⁰ See for instance Mazzoni (1996).

king of Aquitaine, and his actions in the first decade of his reign show that he was aware of the burdens of authority and the wages of the empire he had inherited. While the early reign of Louis the Pious was all but defined by the impulses given to the political, cultural and ecclesiastical movements under Charlemagne, the court culture that developed around the new emperor appeared to have a greater sense of urgency. The pragmatic, almost reactionary, style of government practiced by Charlemagne was supplanted by the more proactive, idealistic politics of Louis and his entourage – among whom featured Benedict of Aniane. Most notably, a series of reform councils held at the palace between 816 and 819 set the tone for the years that followed. Aimed at creating clarity about the hierarchies and orders within the Carolingian church, the texts that emerged from these councils confronted everybody in a position of (religious) authority with the responsibilities they carried for the faithful under their wing, heightening the emotional atmosphere of the Carolingian court and among the intellectual elites. This was the time that Benedict of Aniane composed his most lasting legacies, the *Codex Regularum* and the *Concordia Regularum*, both works that aimed to celebrate the many varieties of monastic life that could exist under the overarching authority of the sixth-century Rule of Benedict. It was, however, also a time when power went hand in hand with an increased awareness of the risks involved in adhering to this new ideology. The community of Saint-Denis reeled under the pressure of needing to reform (Rembold, 2020). Conflicts over property management within the communities of Fulda and Moyaumontier attained eschatological overtones, causing the monks involved to seek guidance from the imperial court, which had set itself up as the ultimate arbiter in cases where religious concerns clashed with worldly interests (Semmler, 1958: 268–97; Raaijmakers, 2012: 99–131; Kramer, 2019c). If the tension created by these new responsibilities was not enough to establish what Mayke de Jong has aptly called a ‘penitential state’ (2009a), the fact that Louis the Pious himself did penance twice surely emphasised the point that nobody with a stake in the Frankish government would be exempt from these ideals.¹¹ Louis wept before his court, once spontaneously in 822 and once in 833 at the instigation of his bishops. Texts written in this period

¹¹ On the legacy of Louis’ kingship through the lens of these ‘crises’, see Booker (2009).

describe rulers, abbots and prominent courtiers publicly weeping over the deaths of those close to them, their sins and the sins of those around them (Einhard/ed. Pertz, 1811: 24; Thegan/ed. Tremp, 1995: 480; Paschasius/ed. PL: 1619A–B).¹² This was an ecclesiastical community interested in weeping.

Ardo's narrative fits neatly in this general context. Consequently, explaining the story of Benedict's lachrymose conversion in terms of its topicality and the expectations of its intended audience will serve a twofold purpose. Firstly, it will demonstrate how the author of the *VBA* was aware that Benedict's tears had a narrative as well as a religious goal: that the saint's personal emotions could and indeed should be harnessed for the edification of the audience rather than as an explanation of his behaviour *per se*. In so doing, we will also show how Ardo's narrative stood in the service of establishing Benedict's reputation as a monastic reformer, and not the other way around. This conversion story has been looked at from various angles, all of which agree to the basic observation that it marked a momentous event in the history of Western Monasticism in that it was what spurred him to become a reformer as well as a monk (Kramer, 2019b: 173–84; Choy, 2017: 76–97). Highlighting Ardo's use of Benedict's weeping as a narrative device shows how, as far as the author was concerned, Benedict's teaching had already begun before he became an abbot and therefore before his saintliness was publicly recognised: it was Ardo's conscious choice to include them, and in doing so he tapped into the cultural meaning of tears to make a point about Benedict's saintliness. Going beyond this literary approach, however, we also aim to show how Ardo represented and explained the social anxiety and the feelings of alienation experienced by Benedict and expressed in his tears, and how he made them acceptable to a lay audience – how he narrates the saint's re-integration into his old life (Noble, 2007: 30–34; Stone, 2012: 27–67). The *VBA* thus not only allows us a glimpse of the inner workings of Ardo's brain, but also how he imagined his audience would pick up on his arguments (see, for instance, Heene (1991) and Spiegel (1990)).

¹² A new translation of the *Epitaphium Arsenii* by de Jong and Long is due to appear in 2019. De Jong's monograph (2019) appeared too late to take into account for this article.

The Life and Times of Benedict of Aniane

Benedict's story starts in the eighth century, in the realm of the Frankish king Pippin the Short (c. 714–768).¹³ He was the son of the count of Maguelone, near present-day Montpellier in the Southern reaches of the kingdom. In the course of his education, he became a student of Queen Bertrada (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 144–45), a cupbearer to the king and a soldier under Pippin's heir, Charlemagne (r. 768–814).¹⁴ He had everything a young courtier could want, but felt there should be more to life than to chase after 'that perishable honour, which, he realised, one could attain with effort, but once gained could quickly lose' (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 144). While he did not tell anyone about his doubts, he started to abstain from food, deprived himself of sleep and spoke less and less (Romig, 2017: 134–38). For three years he thus went through life aimlessly, until, in the year 774, he had a near-death experience. An attempt to save his brother from drowning led to such a dangerous situation that 'the one who wanted to save the dying man barely escaped the clutches of death himself' (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 146; Kettemann, 2000: 50–51 and 243–49).¹⁵ In the wake of this experience, Benedict resolved to leave the service of Charlemagne, and 'bound himself with a vow to God not to fight battles in the world any more' (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 146).¹⁶ He intended to fulfil his long-standing wish of adopting a monastic or ascetic lifestyle, which, with the help of a blind hermit, he accomplished when he escaped to the monastery of Saint-Seine in Burgundy to start his monastic adventures 'in the habit of a true monk'.¹⁷

¹³ Generally on Benedict of Aniane, see Depreux (1997: 123–29).

¹⁴ On the Carolingian court in the late eighth century, and the role of Queen Bertrada in it, see McKitterick (1995) and Nelson (2004). On the reciprocal relation between the state and its aristocrats, see Airlie (2006). On the difficult position of Aquitaine and the South within the Carolingian realm see Wolff (1978) and more generally, Costambeys, Innes and MacLean (2011: 43–65).

¹⁵ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti*, c. 2, p.146: 'Eo namque anno quo Italia gloriosi Karoli regis ditioni subiecta est, cum frater eius incaute fluvium quemdam transfretare vellet et a tumentibus raperetur undis, hic equo sedens periculum conspiciens fratris, sese inter undas precipitem dedit, ut pereuntem a periculo redderet extorrem, atque natante equo, fratris attigit manum; quem cum tenuit, tentus est; vixque qui eripere morientem voluit mortis evasit periculum'. For an early attempt at gauging the various reasons why Ardo chose to link Benedict's conversion to Charlemagne's Italian campaign, see Paulinier (1870).

¹⁶ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti*, c. 2, p.146: 'Tunc se voto Deo constrinxit seculo deinceps non militaturum; patriam petit, set hoc patri non patefecit'. Tr. Cabaniss, p. 219.

¹⁷ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti*, c. 2, p.146: 'Preparatis itaque omnibus, iter quasi Aquis iturus arripuit; set ubi sancti Sequani ingressus est domum, redire suos ad patriam iubet, seque in eodem coenobio Christo

As described in the *VBA*, Benedict's career as a monastic thinker would be very successful: his conversion process culminated in the foundation of the monastery of Aniane, which became an important regional intellectual and economic centre. Benedict, building on his authority as an abbot, thereupon rose through the ranks of the Carolingian court once more – this time as an adviser of Louis the Pious, the king of Aquitaine at the time. When Louis succeeded to the Frankish imperial throne in 814, Benedict became a courtier again, this time working from a nearby monastery founded for the purpose of allowing Benedict continue to live up to his monastic ideals (Kramer, 2016: 314–18). His 'internal cloister' had grown strong enough for him to withstand the quest for earthly glory that had driven him away in the first place (de Jong, 2000a).

From this position, Ardo narrates, Benedict became one of the architects of the Carolingian monastic reform movement, serving everybody's best interests for the greater good of the empire as well as his own foundation (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 168).¹⁸ It was a powerful narrative, rich enough in biographical and incidental details to convince its audience that Benedict was as influential as described.¹⁹ While his influence on the creation and consolidation of a 'monastic ideal' in the early ninth century remains undeniable, subsequent research has cast doubt on the assertion that Benedict was the sole instigator of this movement, or that the main thrust of the Carolingian reforms was to reinstate the *Regula Benedicti* as the main rule for monastic communities (Geuenich, 1998; Diem, 2011; Diem, 2016). In the end,

Deo servire velle indicavit. Postulat ingrediendi licentiam; qua adepta, mox capitis comam deposuit et veri monachi abitum sumpsit'. Note the double meaning of *habitus* in this sentence, which signals the change in Benedict's outward appearance (making it public he is now a monk by means of his clothing), and in his behaviour, in a way similar to the way it was used by Pierre Bourdieu (Gorski, 2013: 348–49) On the importance of clothing for the early medieval aristocracy, see Stone (2011: 235–39), Heene (1997: 231–33), Alexander (2002) and Leyser (2000: 90–91, 170–71).

¹⁸ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti*, c.17, p. 168: 'Cognoscat, quisquis ille est qui hanc cupit legere vel audire vitam, cunctorum hoc capud esse coenobiorum, non solum quae Gotiae in partibus constructa esse videntur, verum etiam et illorum quae aliis in regionibus ea tempestate et deinceps per huius exempla hedificata atque de thesauris illius ditata, sicut inantea narratura est scedula'. Generally, see de Jong (2000b: 191–226; 2009b). On the expression 'capud coenobiorum' see Kettemann (2000: 123–29).

¹⁹ The standard overview of Benedict's career as a reformer is given by Semmler (1983); see also Severus (1999). For a broader interpretation of the implications of Benedict's influence see Noble (1976).

Benedict was a teacher, himself in search of the 'essence of Carolingian monasticism', and carried a message that found its way to the hearts and minds of many of his peers (Choy, 2013; Claussen, 2013). Ardo, in composing his story, ensured his legacy endured, while simultaneously explaining the essential relation between cloister and court as seen from Aniane (Kramer, 2014).

Yet, even the *VBA* does not hide the fact that Benedict's first steps on the road to sainthood had been anything but easy. Following this narrative, Benedict's conversion entailed much more than one dramatic – or even traumatic – experience. Even after he had made up his mind, he still had to be accepted by his social world, which held the monastic ideal in high esteem but could hardly afford to turn the empire into a monastery writ large (de Jong, 2005; Noble, 1976). Ardo's goal was not to explain Benedict's decision or even justify it. His task was instead to describe this process in such a way as to make the saint's behaviour, his self-imposed loneliness, an example to the imperial court his own community of Aniane. Added to Ardo's challenge was that he dealt with the deeds of a public figure that had been politically active within living memory of the majority of his intended audience – and Ardo could ill afford to alienate them by extolling the virtues of renunciation too much.²⁰ After all, he needed them to continue sponsoring his community (and for a comparable case, see Innes (1998)).

The narrative path chosen by Ardo reflects this conundrum. Benedict, he writes, had already made his decision three years earlier and had started to withdraw from the ways of courtly life. He only performed the bare necessities of his duties, all the while contemplating how he might relinquish the world completely.²¹ This 'saintly' behaviour deliberately subverted the common expectations of male aristocrats with their mind set on a career at court. After his conversion to the monastic life, Benedict (and by extension Ardo) was not out of the woods yet: for two and a half years after his escape, his asceticism reached such an extreme that even his abbot at Saint-Seine told him to take it easier: he 'took scant food and water [...] to avert death but

²⁰ Cf. the remarks on the issues surrounding the memory of the audience in Fouracre (1990). Commenting on similar tropes and implied criticism in narratives of ascetic conversion in the eleventh century is Smith (2008).

²¹ For more on subverting the common tropes of aristocratic identity, see Reuter (2000).

not hunger'; deliberately fatigued himself; wore threadbare clothing; let personal hygienic standards fall to the point that 'a colony of lice grew on his filthy skin' (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 146–47).²² Most importantly:

he submitted to the grace of compunction and divine power to such a great extent that he could weep as often as he wished; in fear of Gehenna, he was sustained by his daily tears and groans as he sang lovingly the Davidic words 'I ate ashes for bread and mingled my cup with tears' [Ps 102:9] (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 147).²³

Benedict's renunciation had grown so outspoken by this point that external signs marked him out as being unacceptable to his surroundings. This is where the challenge of retrospective diagnosis rears its head. By modern standards, Benedict's behaviour shortly after his conversion would have been more than enough to obtain a diagnosis of a mental disorder, perhaps MDD, according to the criteria outlined in the DSM-5. He demonstrates tearful behaviour, diminished pleasure in previous life, weight loss, insomnia, worthlessness and recurrent thoughts of death. Indeed, this behaviour was a cause for concern for the abbot of Saint-Seine, who perhaps sought to minimise his 'symptoms' and reintegrate him into the monastic community. This was ultimately achieved: Benedict became an active and productive member of his monastic communities and the Carolingian empire. As much as this was a cathartic process, aided by Benedict's newfound appreciation for the Rule of Benedict, this does not mean that the saint's breakdown and self-imposed suffering needed to

²² Ardo, *Vita Benedicti*, c. 2, p. 146–147: 'cybum permodicum sumens, pane videlicet et aqua corpus sustentans, [mortem] pocius quam famem arcens, vinum siquidem ceu pestiferum virus devitans'; 'Quapropter copia pediculorum in squalenti surgebat cute, a quibus ieiuniis adtenuata depascebantur membra'.

²³ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti* c. 2, p. 147: 'Compunctionis gratia, ope divina concedente, tanta ei largita est, ut quoties vellet fleret. Cotidie lacrimis, cotidie gemitu ob geennae metum alebatur, illud Daviticum amabiliter canens: Cinerem sicut panem mandui et poculum meum cum fletu miscebam.' In Cabaniss' translation, the phrase 'geennae metum' is connected to Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, but as will be explained, a more likely reference is to *Regula Benedicti*, c. 5.3, where the first step towards total obedience is explained as a function of a fear of Hell.

be included. Ardo did not seek to represent Benedict suffering in this way because it was true. Instead, Ardo's account of this behaviour communicated complex messages about Benedict's sanctity, communion with God and concern for the sins of Carolingian society.

Following the narrative of the *VBA*, and taking into account Ardo's own status as part of the intellectual elite of the era, it becomes clear that it would have been Benedict's own convictions which led him to actively pursue this level of alienation and social isolation.²⁴ The beliefs attributed to him in this phase, especially his assumption that worldly, courtly life put his soul in too much danger, had made him so anxious about life that he had chosen to withdraw from it completely. And this, paradoxically, turned his alienation into a virtue again. Following chapter five of the *Regula Benedicti*, Ardo's reference to Benedict's 'fear of Gehenna' signals his first step on the path towards the total obedience that characterises a good monk (ed. De Vogüé, 1971–7: c. 5.3). Through his anxiety about the state of his soul and his feelings of responsibility for the salvation of others, his withdrawal became a necessity (Choy, 2013: 79–83). The example provided by his extreme saintliness would eventually make people more amenable to his advice (Leyser, 1998), at least those who were able to understand his weeping and who appreciated that Benedict could probably see them better through his tears.

Fast, Pray, Love

Narrating the period of isolation and alienation which followed Benedict's conversion was necessary for Ardo. In doing so, he showed how his protagonist managed to see the world for what it really was and to unequivocally express the fears for mankind that would inadvertently follow, albeit in such a way as to also show his love for Creation. His alienation is a learning experience (Beaudette, 1998). His anxiety becomes a concern for the empire in its entirety.

²⁴ Alienation should in this regard also be taken as a social condition or even a form of commentary resulting from individual interaction with the environment (Ludz, 1976); in their introduction to the collected volume *Theories of Alienation*, Geyer & Schweitzer (1976) warn against the 'overpsychologization' of the concept and stress that alienation should not be seen as a deviation from anything but a malleable societal norm. On the equally complex concept of 'isolation', see the contributions to Coplan and Bowker (2014), especially the articles in that volume by Fong and Barbour.

The fact that Benedict's behavioural shift is presented as a problem concerning the entire empire is apparent in the Psalm verse Benedict is mentioned as intoning: 'For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink' (ed. Kettemann, 2000).²⁵ It was used by Ardo to illustrate how Benedict was not merely able to cry at will, but was actually sustained by his sorrows. To understand what is meant by this scene, we must turn to exegetical explanations of this verse. Given the importance of Scripture to the medieval mindset, authors took exegesis seriously as a tool to comment on the world around them (Smalley, 1983; Contreni, 2002; van Uytvanghe, 1987). As such, Biblical commentaries would often contain highly original viewpoints and, underneath their seemingly derivative exterior, present sharp analyses of the social, political and religious situation in the world they inhabited (Staubach, 1993: 5–17; Heil, 2003; Heydemann, 2016). They provide a valuable body of source material through which the intellectual culture of a given society can be observed.

The exegetical traditions surrounding this verse are rich, something which is not surprising given the centrality of the Psalter to the monastic way of life (Choy, 2017: 78–97). While this makes it difficult to gauge with certainty what image Ardo meant to invoke, it appears that his goal was once again to establish Benedict's resolve and his self-awareness by taking apparently aberrant behaviour and implying that it actually prefigured the saint's later authority. This juxtaposition is already visible in the highly influential *Explanation of the Psalms* by the sixth-century intellectual Cassiodorus, a commentary which was widely known in the Carolingian empire (Olsen, 2017: 274–304). Commenting on his verse, he feels compelled to explain that 'we must not imagine that [...] wood-ash is food' and that it might be possible for tears to fall into one's drink 'we must seek the spiritual sense for this as well' (trans. Walsh, 1990: 8–9). The sense he finds is in the observations that the ashes are in fact remnants of sins, which need to be digested 'so that nothing should be left over to prevent his deserving of the kingdom of Heaven'. The tears in his drink reflect his continued awareness of his sinful state: it is a 'heavenly drink' poured out by Christ,

²⁵ Psalm 101, quoted by Ardo in c. 2 of the *Vita Benedicti*: 'Cinerem sicut panem mandui et poculum meum cum fletu miscebam.'

which may only then 'enter the recesses of the soul when it is watered down with devoted tears'. God's love, he implies, cannot be imbibed in its full strength.²⁶

Neither should it be forgotten, however, that merely deciding to convert is insufficient in itself. Augustine expresses this view in his commentary on the Psalms. In his exegesis of this complicated verse, he explains that it would be 'by means of this banquet that [one] shall reach the table of God' (trans. Coxe, 2017: 171). This diet is a constant reminder that acknowledging sinfulness is but the first step towards salvation – just like Benedict's fear of Hell was a first step towards obedience (Bernstein, 2000: 183–205). Man has been given 'room for repentance', the Church Father explains, which is symbolised by the ashes and the tears mixed into otherwise pleasurable nourishments. Consuming them was a stand-in for penance. The reason this should be a state of mind, however, is that one's moment of death – and subsequent salvation – was not set; the only certainty one had was that forgiveness, when freely and wilfully offered, would be granted. Augustine asks us to imagine a rich man at the beginning of his explanation, who nonetheless chose to subject himself to such seemingly unpleasant food.²⁷ He explained that God's grace worked equally well for the poor and the wealthy alike. Worldly riches are no substitute for 'those greater riches, faith, piety, justice, charity, chastity, good conduct', he writes, but these are in turn meaningless if they are not reinforced by continual penance (trans. Coxe, 2017: 168). Augustine even extends this admonition to the audience's behaviour towards others: they should not care about their reputation by shunning their enemies, but eat with them all the same. Maybe this would help convince them to let go of their prideful ways. The menu would, of course, consist of ashes and tears (trans. Coxe, 2017: 171).

Augustine's interpretation of Psalm 102 persisted into the Carolingian age and may be found for instance in the work of the monk Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841–908) (Pollmann, 2009). It is easy to image that Ardo had access to a similar strain of thought, which posited that Benedict's resolution to turn away from his previous way of life

²⁶ On Cassiodorus and his place in history, see Heydemann (2015) and O'Loughlin (2014).

²⁷ On Augustine's and his contemporaries' ideas about wealth, see Brown (2012).

need not necessarily entail a complete and total withdrawal from the world. Rather, he should also confront his enemies, seek out sinners and attempt to put them on the straight and narrow as well, as indeed he would. Ardo's narrative includes confrontations with thieves, women who made fun of the monastic life and especially Benedict's enemies at the court of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious – people who sought to discredit his mission and his reputation (Kettemann, 2000: 161, 187, 188; Nelson, 1999). Most egregious, however, was the constant battle with the sins in the world at large, and the lethargy that could follow from being worn out by this struggle (Jehl, 2005). This could lead to *acedia*, or indifference, which would in the course of the early Middle Ages gain connotations of sloth as well.²⁸ It was a challenge Benedict could only confront head-on, by embracing his weaknesses, moving back to the palace he had once left and using his new-found self-awareness as a tool to improve the empire around him so that his experience countering *acedia* could be an example to all (Williams, 2012). This was no job for the lazy or the faint of heart, but even if Benedict was aware of the risks represented by *acedia* for his vision of an active monastic life, Ardo's narrative makes it clear that his protagonist was never afflicted with it himself. He just needed to ensure it did not take root in the minds of his fellows and students. Benedict was able to do this because he had built up his 'internal cloister' (a term borrowed from de Jong, 2000) to such an extent that he would be safe from the temptations of the world without needing to stray from the path set out in the *Regula Benedicti*. Benedict's 'fear of Gehenna' was only the first step towards becoming the perfect monk. His first-hand experience with courtly life had given him a taste of the ashes he would have to eat and the tears he needed to cry into his drink as a constant reminder not to slip back into his old habits.

So Many Tears

We have seen how biblical commentaries on Psalm 102 can shed light on Ardo's account of Benedict's conversion. Discussions of tears in other exegetical sources are equally illuminating in demonstrating how tears were central to the formation of

²⁸ On the original meaning of *acedia* see Giangiobbe (2016). On its further development, see Wenzel (1966).

Benedict's 'internal cloister'. Of particular interest are commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, in particular on the Sermon on the Mount. There are two reasons why this is the case. Firstly, the Gospel of Matthew was well-known to ninth-century intellectuals as one of the entryways into intellectual life for many aspiring scholars. This gospel is fundamental to Carolingian intellectual life and commentaries on it are numerous. Additionally, intellectuals quoted extensively from the gospel in other works, including hagiography (Matter, 2003). Specifically, the Sermon on the Mount is a particularly fertile subject for thinking about weeping. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Christ is described giving this sermon, in which he pronounced the eight beatitudes. The second of these – 'blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' (Mat 5:4) – was often glossed with a systematic analysis of benefits of weeping by Carolingian exegetes.

Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856) was one of these exegetes.²⁹ He completed his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in 822 – the same year as Ardo finished his *VBA* – and dedicated this work to Archbishop Haistulf of Mainz (ed. PL: 727C). A prolific biblical commentator, Hrabanus was also abbot of Fulda from 822 onwards and a prominent figure associated with the court of Louis the Pious throughout the 820s and 830s (de Jong, 2000b). He thus moved in similar circles to Ardo and especially Benedict. As such his commentary on Matthew 5.4 can be used to shine a light onto this particular discourse community.³⁰ Hrabanus began his exegesis on this verse by quoting from the *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, composed by the Church Father Jerome around 398:

the mourning described here is not the mourning of those who have died in accordance with the common law of nature, but the mourning over those who have died in their sins and vices. Thus did Samuel weep for Saul because he had made the Lord regret that he had anointed him king of Israel. Thus

²⁹ On this influential figure see Depreux (1997) and Fleckenstein (1982).

³⁰ On the concept of the 'discourse community', see Van Renswoude (2011: 14). The authors would like to thank Van Renswoude for allowing us to view her dissertation, which is due to be published as a monograph with Cambridge University Press. See also Wuthnow (1989), Evans (1998) and Swales (1998).

did the apostle Paul claim to weep and mourn for those who did not do penance after committing fornication and uncleanness (Jerome/ed. Hurst & Adriaen, 1969: 445/tr. Scheck, 2008: 75–76).

Hrabanus provided his own interpretation of this verse – denoted by an ‘M’ for Maurus – in early manuscripts of the commentary. He identified four different contexts in which sorrow could be felt (*lugere*) and tears could be shed (*flere*): when mourning previous sins, when in hell, when considering current sins and out of desire for the heavenly kingdom (ed. PL: 123).³¹

Although the identification of these four motivations was apparently Hrabanus’ own interpretation, he drew on earlier sources. Among these were Irish exegetical traditions, which present a tripartite interpretation of tears: for one’s own sins, the sins of one’s neighbours or out of desire for heaven (Stoll, 1988; Stoll, 1991).³² As argued by Brigitta Stoll, Hrabanus took inspiration from these commentaries and expanded upon these by adding a fourth: tears shed in hell (1988: 183). Finally, in addition to the interpretation found in Jerome’s commentary, or the systematic treatment of religious weeping in Irish sources, Hrabanus’ list of motivations for weeping could be inspired by a story recounted in John Cassian’s *Collationes*, a fifth-century text which outlined how monastic life ought to be lived (Stewart, 1999). Composed around 420 in the form of a collection of dialogues conducted with Egyptian abbots, the ascetic Cassian intended his *Collationes* for the benefit of monks in Gaul. The ninth dialogue, with Abbot Isaac, is on the topic of prayer. During the conversation, a young monk bemoaned the fact he could not produce tears at will. His abbot thereupon told him that tears were not produced for one single feeling or virtue, but four: one’s own sins, the contemplation of God and desire for heavenly

³¹ Hrabanus, *In Matthaem*, Lib. 2, p.123: ‘Notandum autem quod quatuor modis fit planctus sanctorum, cum priora peccata deplorant, cum in infernum cadentes plangunt, cum in peccatis viventes, cum pro desiderio regni coelestis admodum tristes fiunt’.

³² Examples used by Stoll include pseudo-Jerome’s commentary (Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 14514), an anonymous commentary (Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 14469) and an anonymous fragment of a commentary (Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 6302). On Irish influences in Europe, see Stansbury (2016) and Meeder (2016).

glory, the fear of hell and the sins of others (ed. Petschenig, 1886: 275–76). All of these were considered holy: they were not expressions of man's free will, but instead came from God.

An important distinction between the Irish list and those by Hrabanus and Cassian is the addition of despair by the latter. The warning about tears cried after the sinner has been irreversibly cast into Hell is therefore a warning about letting things go too far, but also a reflection on the poor souls for whom there is no hope left (Angenendt, 2014: 290–91). The specific wording differs between Cassian's *Collationes* and Hrabanus' commentary on Matthew. Hrabanus refers to tears shed *in infernum* whilst Cassian uses the term *gehanna*, but both refer to the same concept (ed. Petschenig, 1886: 275).³³ Similarly, Heaven is referred to by Hrabanus as '*regnum coelestis*' (Heavenly Kingdom) and as '*aeternus bonus*' (eternal good) by Cassian, but both concepts signify the same thing (ed. Petschenig, 1886: 274). Cassian occupied a prominent role in ninth-century intellectual life, especially in monastic circles, and his works were used extensively in Hrabanus' exegesis (Cantelli Berarducci, 2006: 201). His works should therefore be added to the Irish influences. Hrabanus' fourfold model of weeping represented an almost programmatic approach to the phenomenon, inspired by late antique monastic thought, but aimed at giving a nuanced view of the many ways an individual Christian could shed tears.

Three commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew were written by Otfrid of Wissembourg, Sedulius Scottus and an anonymous author who was thought to be Bede in the Carolingian era (pseudo-Bede) in the middle of the ninth century. Each of these authors sticks closely to Hrabanus' wording (Pseudo-Bede/ed. PL: 24D; Otfridus/ed. Grifoni, 2003: 32; Sedulius/ed. Löfstedt: 1989: 134).³⁴ The Carolingian

³³ Cassian's use of 'gehenna' may have influenced Benedict (and by extension Ardo): in the *Regula Benedicti*, Cassian's works are among the recommended readings for advanced monks. However, given the ubiquity of both terms it would go too far to read a connection into this without taking the full semantic context into account.

³⁴ Otfrid was taught at Fulda by Hrabanus, and completed a number of glossed biblical books. Sedulius Scotus wrote his commentary at Liege between 848 and 855 (Huber, 1969: 89). Otfrid quotes directly from Hrabanus. Sedulius clearly uses Hrabanus (Huber, 1969: 66), but tends to paraphrase more than Otfrid does. For Otfrid's use of Hrabanus see Haubrichs (2010).

reception of the explanations for weeping suggests that tears were conceived of as a relatively coherent four-fold model. Yet within this framework, there was a lot of leeway still for understanding individual motivations as commentators assigned moral judgement to the motives of those crying. Most importantly, tears should not be shed for mundane reasons like grief, but should only be provoked by spiritual concerns. The distinction between worldly and spiritual concerns can be found in later commentaries on Matthew 5.4. Sedulius Scottus, for example, draws directly from the distinction between tears shed over those who have died 'in accordance with the common law of the world' and those shed over 'those who have died in their sins and vices' found in both Hrabanus and Jerome's commentaries (ed. Löfstedt, 1989: 134). A similar sentiment is given both in a gloss by Otfrid of Wissembourg and the work of pseudo-Bede: they emphasise that the grief they will discuss is *not* the 'the common grief of the world' but instead 'following God in repentance of sins, the instigation of, or even the fear of eternal damnation, or the love of desire for heavenly things, that is, by compassion for his neighbour, as being eternal joy shall be comforted'.³⁵

Thus, we can see how, for ninth-century exegetes, the virtuous tears of the blessed were not directly linked with mundane matters. It is reasonable to assume, however, that tears of love or grief were part of the normal emotional repertoire for elite figures all the same.³⁶ They were, after all, only human. A number of narrative sources describe tears in this context. For example, in his life of the emperor Charlemagne, written at some point between 817 and 829, the courtier Einhard described how the emperor wept twice. Both times his tears were provoked by earthly matters: he tearfully lamented the deaths of his children, as well as that of

³⁵ *Beati qui lugent*. Videlicet non communi luctu saecularis tristitiae, sed secundum Deum poenitentiae peccatorum instinctu, vel etiam aeternae damnationis metu, aut amore coelestium desideriorum, seu per compassionem proximorum, quia aeterna laetitia consolabuntur. Sunt namque lacrymae his quatuor speciebus distinctae: sunt humidae ad abluenda peccata, et restituendum perditum baptismum; sunt salsae et amarae ad restringendam carnis luxuriam; sunt calidae contra frigus infidelitatis, et ad accendendum ardorem charitatis; sunt purae ad restituendam vitae munditiam: horum est Spiritus scientiae, et merito, quia semetipsos in sacris Scripturis didicerunt esse lugendos.

³⁶ On the problems of disentangling descriptions of emotions from their actual expressions, see Rosenwein (2006: 1–31) and Scheer (2012).

Pope Hadrian I (ed. Pertz, 1811: 24). Similarly, Thegan, the bishop of Trier, completed his biography of Louis the Pious in 836 and in it Charlemagne and his son and heir Louis, were described crying and embracing one another 'on account of the joy of their love' (ed. Tremp, 1995: 184).³⁷ Anecdotes such as these suggest that, to the elite court audiences for whom Ardo wrote the *VBA*, tears provoked by love – whether in the context of bereavement or a farewell – were a familiar form of behaviour.

Carolingian exegetes went out of their way to exclude such worldly motivations from their consideration of tears. Yet, these 'common tears of the world' are essential to understanding the tears described by Hrabanus and Ardo; they were, after all, tears that could be seen by everybody. Tears could be shed over mundane matters on the one hand or over spiritual concerns on the other. They were similarly shed in the context of different relationships, both mundane and spiritual. Tears of grief or tears shed out of love for friends or family members can only be understood in the context of a relationship between different people. The tears we see in the *VBA* or Hrabanus' *Commentary on Matthew*, however, are of a different sort. They are about the important relationship between the individual soul, and God. Focusing on the individual and their salvation remained a prime concern for authors at the time, even superseding the collective emotions of an entire community. Inhabitants of monasteries were sometimes described weeping together: Ardo described Benedict weeping with his brothers in the *VBA*, for instance (Kettemann, 2000: 153–54). Nevertheless, as far as Carolingian authors were concerned, these tears are both outnumbered and overshadowed by those shed alone – far more often when a saint wept and prayed, he or she did so alone.

We can therefore see two distinct groups of tears. Unlike the tears of the world, the ones we see in hagiographic and exegetical texts show a weeper approaching God, an act that not only reflects the holiness of the weeper, but also says something about the relationships the weeper is most invested in. Benedict's tears – shed over sins – should also be seen in this hagiographical context. In describing Benedict crying

³⁷ Cap. 6: '...amplexantes enim se et osculantes, propter gaudium amoris flere caeperunt.' On the emotions (and lack thereof) of Louis the Pious in Thegan's *Gesta*, see Innes (2002).

alone whilst praying, Ardo rejected the importance of earthly bonds and represented his subject isolating himself to communicate with God. Thus, the audience would understand how Ardo was rejecting, on Benedict's behalf, one 'emotional community' for another. In doing this, Ardo demonstrated that Benedict possessed something which looked a lot like the stability (*stabilitas*) the sixth-century pope, Gregory the Great, praised in saints. Benedict's tears showed he cleaved to God in his mind and would not be swayed by the changing and tempestuous world (Gregory/ed. A de Vogüé, 1978: 2.16, 2.30).³⁸ Thus, Ardo effectively made Benedict's tears, which in the universe created by the narrative were a matter between him and God, a public expression of faith for the audience of the text.

Tears played a central role in Ardo's desire to represent Benedict as a man apart: he had rejected the norms and customs of aristocratic and later monastic society in favour of a close relationship with God. They were not evidence of a depressive mood. Instead, they were used to construct an image of Benedict as someone who stood alone: Ardo used tears to alienate his subject from his milieu.

The Tears of a Monk

In view of this nuanced approach to weeping, Ardo's account of Benedict's tears reads like an emotional journey. Shortly after his conversion, Benedict was as described weeping on account of his own sins. He was described 'pouring out laments of penitence', he recited the penitential Psalm 102 as he wept and he cried out of a fear of Hell (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 147). This was not the only time that Benedict was represented weeping in his *vita*, however. Ardo described how, shortly before his death, Benedict could often be found praying as 'drenched with sighs and tears, his soul burned as it desired to be released and to be with Christ'³⁹ (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 211). In each case, the parallels between the language used in the *VBA* and in Hrabanus' expansion on Matthew 5.4 are striking: his tears were associated with yearning, provoked by a desire for heaven. Thus, Hrabanus' programme for virtuous

³⁸ For a discussion of this idea, see Straw (1988).

³⁹ Cap. 41: 'O bone Iesu quibus suspiriis fletibusque perfusus aestuabat animus cupiens dissolvi et esse cum Christo'.

tears may illuminate the rationale behind Ardo's use of them in the *VBA*. Benedict's tears were caused by three of the four motivations outlined by Hrabanus: fear of Hell, penance and desire for Heaven. In providing these accounts of Benedict's tears, Ardo did not describe a man hampered by sorrow or depressive thoughts. Instead, these references were carefully judged statements which demonstrated Benedict's adherence to a specific form of sanctity that was, paradoxically, very much aimed outwards, in the direction of the onlookers. Benedict's tears were shed as both Cassian and Hrabanus recommended and demonstrated that he was one of the 'blessed' identified in the second beatitude. The main addition from a hagiographical point-of-view was that Benedict would not only be comforted – he would also comfort others.

As Benedict continued to develop his monkish qualities, his communion with God was still, in the modern sense of the word, a 'private' matter, according to Ardo. The saint prayed in silence and kept his desires secret. It was this sense of solitude that conformed to the ideal described in the *Regula Benedicti* – the goal to which Ardo's Benedict aspired. God would be more likely to heed one's prayer not if they were saying a lot, but rather due to their 'purity of heart and their tears of compunction' (ed. De Vogüé, 1971–7: 20.3).⁴⁰ In either case, the *Regula Benedicti* continues, such prayers should be 'short and pure', unless they were 'prolonged by an inspiration of divine grace' (ed. De Vogüé, 1971–7: 20.4).⁴¹ Given the central place the *Regula Benedicti* took in monastic life at the start of the ninth century, an audience composed of monks and other ecclesiastical figures would most likely have picked up on the implication that Benedict was indeed divinely inspired almost constantly (Diem, 2016: 243–61). Even the emperor Louis might have seen it – he was, after all, portrayed as 'monkish' in the *vita*, in a way made it clear this was a compliment (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 215).⁴² However, the protagonist in Ardo's *vita* should speak to more people. Benedict's unspoken connection to God needed to be expressed in a way that went beyond the text, which made him relatable while simultaneously emphasising his saintly qualities. Tears served just this purpose.

⁴⁰ *Regula Benedicti*, 20.3: 'sed in puritate cordis et compunctione lacrimarum'.

⁴¹ *Regula Benedicti*, 20.4: 'nisi forte ex affectu inspirationis diuinae gratiae protendatur'.

⁴² Cap. 42 ('Epistola Indensium'). On this epithet, see Noble (1976) and Booker (2009).

The otherworldly aspect of tears becomes even more obvious when we take a brief detour to two commentaries on the *Regula Benedicti*, composed by two leading intellectuals who had taken it upon themselves to adapt the reforms proposed by the Carolingian court to the practicalities of day-to-day life in a monastery. Although both of these, the *Expositio in Regulae Sancti Benedicti* by Hildemar of Corbie and the *Commentarium in Regulam Sancti Benedicti* by Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, were intended to suit the needs of specific communities, the fame of their composers as well as the general appeal of the adaptations allowed these commentaries to reach an audience well beyond what was originally intended.⁴³

In the mid-ninth-century *Expositio Regulae Sancti Benedicti* by the monk Hildemar, the above-quoted passage on prayer and compunction is connected to a remark by the sixth-century pope Gregory the Great in his famous *Moralia in Iob*, where he states that 'to truly pray means [...] to sound forth bitter groans and not contrived words'.⁴⁴ The implication is that prayer is between the sinner and God, so there really is no need for human understanding at all. Closer to Benedict, and arguing in a similar vein as Hildemar, is the abbot Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, who in the later 820s commented on this passage by adding a lengthy quotation from the *Regula Magistri* – a longer iteration of the monastic rule formulated by Benedict of Nursia. Speaking with God, this commentary reads, is a mental exercise and one that ought to fill the faithful with fear: 'For it is not the prolixity of long prayer that arouses the compassion of the indulgent Judge, but rather the attention of an alert mind', Smaragdus wrote, channelling the *Regula Magistri* (ed. Spannagel & Engelbert, 1974; tr. Barry, 2007: 335). Tears, to him, are an expression of this fear, which in turn is a *conditio sine qua non* for proper prayer.

This idea recurs more often in the works of Smaragdus. In his *Diadema Monachorum*, which deals more extensively with the moral aspects of being a monk, a sinner's realisation that he is in fact sinful is accompanied by tears prompted by

⁴³ On Smaragdus and his commentary, see Depreux (1997) and Ponesse (2006). On Hildemar, see de Jong (1983).

⁴⁴ Text and translation from the open access 'Hildemar Project', http://hildemar.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=34&catid=15&Itemid=102 [Last accessed 23 August 2019]. 'veraciter orare est [...] amarus in compunctione gemitus et non composita verba resonare'.

the experience of singing the Psalms together (ed. PL: 596D). On the other hand, Smaragdus also warns against hypocrisy, recognising that 'some people shed tears to perform penance, but that penance has no effect' because their heart is not in it (ed. PL: 615C).⁴⁵ Later, he elaborates that the soul may be watered in equal measure by tears resulting from a longing after Heaven and a fear of Hell, although he does add that there is progress to be made here as well: 'Those who used to weep out of fear for being brought to eternal punishment, later start to cry bitter tears because their entrance into the realm of God is being delayed' (ed. PL: 674D–675C).⁴⁶ Both go hand in hand: love for God is strengthened by fear of His wrath and fear for one's own sinfulness may be assuaged through a genuine love for God.

Both Hildemar's and Smaragdus' ideas about tears are rich and complicated, but these examples should suffice to give an impression of the specifically monastic way of thinking about tears. For those living a life that was all but defined by the paradox of personal piety strengthened by living together in a closed-off community, tears became shorthand for a monk's connection with God at the expense of engagement with society more broadly (Diem, 2011: 53–84). They essentially became an expression of their beliefs, fears and love – their undying care for the world. Viewed through Ardo's narrative, Benedict's tears should also be seen in this context.

Epilogue: A Cry for Attention?

To Ardo, Benedict's tears were a comment upon the sins of the world. They might only subside if everybody changed their ways. His seemingly unacceptable behaviour, including excessive fasting, self-punishment and alienation from courtly life, were mitigated and made acceptable by the tears he shed: they signalled his intentions and gave attentive readers a sneak preview of things to come. From the decision to quit the aristocratic lifestyle, to becoming an ascetic, to embracing the *Regula Benedicti* as a teaching tool: his conversion story took place in several steps. In a narrative sense, Benedict's withdrawal from the world and his alienation from his previous

⁴⁵ Smaragdus, *Diadema Monachorum*, c. 19, 615C. On penance and the dangers of hypocrisy in the Carolingian world, see Meens (2014).

⁴⁶ Smaragdus, *Diadema Monachorum*, c. 80, 674D–675C.

behaviour – exemplified in his tears – thus were a cry for attention in both the literal and the figurative sense, but as the author makes clear it was the audience that should be paying attention to themselves. Rather than ridiculing the saint-to-be, there were lessons to be learned from his tears. By exploring exegetical and monastic texts, we can offer an alternative approach to this highly important passage (both for our understanding of the *VBA* and for ninth-century monastic thought more generally) which does not seek to explain away the circumstances surrounding Benedict's actual conversion. Rather, we focus on the choices Ardo made when narrating this event. In doing this, we can learn something from the way Ardo understands human experience in his account of Benedict's incessant weeping and fasting.⁴⁷

This article has emphasised the importance of considering the cultural meaning attached to behaviour like weeping. Benedict was not afflicted with his excessive tears, but the feelings which provoked them were considered a blessing in disguise. His alienation was an expression of his piety and thus marked his transition to a more spiritual or contemplative way of life. His behaviour, whilst isolating him, was not a problem, but should be seen as a sign of divine favour, an external marker of his internal transition. It thereby conferred authority upon Benedict, which in turn provided Ardo with an example from which his audience could learn. While the *VBA* as well as the sources cited to provide a context for the narrative do stem from a distinctly 'monastic' milieu, weeping in and of itself was not the purview of monks exclusively. As an expression of fear, uncertainty, hope for salvation and indeed piety, shedding tears could be framed as acceptable behaviour in any narrative regardless of the mores prevalent among a courtly – and de facto male – audience of a text like the *VBA*. They signalled piety and invited onlookers to reflect on their own emotions.

If tears are a symptom, it should be noted that symptoms, and collections of symptoms, are not universal. Thus, tears should be understood in the context of the society in which they are experienced and narrated. Benedict never completely stopped behaving in such an extreme way, but Ardo's account shows how Benedict was able to successfully reintegrate into society, to return to the courtly life he had

⁴⁷ See also the concluding remarks in Treney (2016).

previously shunned and even to change the behaviour of those around him so as to make his own habits more acceptable.

Ardo's Benedict had proven his worthiness as a member of the Carolingian court, thereby anchoring his place at the supposed centre of the realm.⁴⁸ To an aristocratic audience of his *vita*, it would be important to establish his acceptance, as it also showed how he obtained his position and regained his willingness to work within the system, not rail against it. But more importantly for the narration of his *conversio*, it gave him something acceptable to react against: to monastic readers, his alienation from the life of an aristocrat was a first step to becoming a monk (Coon, 2010). What seemingly starts out as a deviation from the norm is thus changed into the more desirable option: Benedict's tears reflect his epiphany that everybody else is on the wrong track and that it would be up to him to 'correct the manners of some, to scold the negligent, exhort beginners, admonish the upright to persevere, and upbraid the wicked to turn from their ways' (ed. Kettemann, 2000: 146).⁴⁹ Before that can happen, however, Ardo plays with his audience's expectations one more time by describing how the saint at first wept only for himself and castigated only his own body. It would take him a while longer still to reach a level of severity that could make him both an example *and* a teacher. He still had a lot to learn.

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⁴⁸ The central court existed more in the imagination of its members, for which see Airlie (1998, 2009).

⁴⁹ Ardo, *Vita Benedicti* c. 2, p. 146: 'Interea coepit aliorum corrigere mores, negligentes arguere, exortare tyrones, ut proficerent ammonere probos, ut corrigerentur increpare improbos'.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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