Early Cistercian writings have been much debated in relation to the artistic and architectural developments of the twelfth century. In particular, Bernard’s rightly famous polemical treatise, the *Apologia ad Guillelum Abbatem* (c. 1123–24) continues to play a prominent role in discussions of what has been called the twelfth-century ‘controversy over art’. Bernard’s text has thereby played a crucial part in one of the leading historiographic debates in medieval art history, namely, how we might define and conceptualise the complex shift from Romanesque to Gothic modes of representation. It is somewhat paradoxical, therefore, that this prominence has also led to the marginalisation of Cistercian material culture from both the great variety of interpretations of the ‘Romanesque’ world of Cluny up to the early twelfth century and the ‘Gothic’ world of the cathedrals from the mid-twelfth century. The earlier isolationist iconology within Cistercian studies is of course partly responsible for this, since it tended to posit a dualist opposition between Cistercian art and architecture and its wider cultural and social context. In this way, the relationships between Cîteaux and Cluny on the one hand, and Bernard and the ‘father of Gothic’, abbot Suger of St. Dénis, on the other, have on the whole been interpreted as strongly oppositional, even contradictory in nature. Recent studies have undermined this dualistic interpretation. However, scholars have on the whole somewhat neglected to return to Cistercian architecture itself in order to explore more closely, and beyond merely formal connections, how the white order may have engaged with certain monastic ‘Romanesque’ traditions and ongoing ‘Gothic’ developments. This may be partly due to the fact that the revisionist tendency has generally been

---

1 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia* 28–29. Other sources sharing the same spirit as the *Apologia* are Aelred of Rievaulx, *Speculum Caritatis* 2.24 and the writings of the Benedictine monk, William of St. Thierry, who entertained a close friendship and dialogue with Bernard; see his *Epistula ad Fratres de Monte Dei* 147–149.

2 Meyer Shapiro, Erwin Panofsky, Otto von Simson, and Hans Sedlmayr all drew on Bernard’s writings, to name just some of the most influential scholars in the narratives of Gothic and Romanesque. On the persistence of the Romanesque and Gothic as inconvertible categories in medieval art history, even though the terms are increasingly contested, see Kidson (2004).
advanced more by historians than by art historians. If we complement the *Apologia* with other Bernardine sources relating to building practices, a more nuanced picture also emerges in relation to spatial aspects. Certain tensions were left unspoken or simply unresolved in the *Apologia*. As powerful as it is, this text cannot function alone as the definitive theory of Cistercian architecture, and of Cistercian attitudes to representation more broadly. A more contextual reading of the *Apologia* therefore allows us to discover cultural and social dimensions in what scholars have identified as prominent ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ trends in Cistercian architecture.

* * *

Recent studies have emphasised that Bernard’s *Apologia* needs to be understood as a highly rhetorical text written for propagandistic purposes, and one that addressed a whole range of monastic rivals. The text certainly targeted Cluniac customs, but as Conrad Rudolph has pointed out, in certain passages Bernard may even have had his own order in mind. Bernard was therefore as much concerned with the defence of his order’s way of life as imposing his own views on them, and this reveals that his polemic was the source of contestation within the Cistercian order. Like other leaders of religious reform from the late eleventh century monastic milieu, Bernard was guided by an overriding concern with the enactment of the paradigm of evangelical poverty. The new orders of the twelfth century integrated this revived emphasis on the voluntary refusal to possess worldly goods in imitation of Christ, and turned it into a key motif of their commitment to reinstatе a stricter observance of the Rule of St. Benedict. During the so-called ‘crisis of coenobitism’, congregations such as Cluny to some extent became victims of their own success, falling prey to criticisms decrying their un-monastic worldliness and hubris. In the course of the eleventh century, Cluny had effectively developed into a

---


6 The monastic notion of poverty in the twelfth century did not relate to institutional wealth, which was perceived as a necessary guarantor of the monastery’s self-sufficiency. Only the mendicants in the thirteenth century attempted, for a time, and more radically, to refuse collective property; see Constable (1996: 146–47) and Grundmann (1995: 231–35).

7 Van Engen (1986).