Fascination with contradiction, admissions of bafflement, even hints of exasperation mark some of the most insightful guides to the work of Bernard of Clairvaux. G.R. Evans, for instance, begins and ends her treatment of this twelfth-century Cistercian by emphasizing how paradoxes (ultimately resolved) conditioned not only Bernard’s mode of thought but also his way of life.¹ More telling is Thomas Merton’s succinct articulation of the central problem facing Bernard-scholarship. In a sentence revealing both the frustration with and the acceptance of gaining, at best, an imperfect knowledge of his subject, Merton opens his treatment of Bernard on a cautionary note: “The enigma of sanctity is the temptation and often the ruin of historians.”² Perhaps Bernard would concur, for his own assessment of his place in the history of his time conveys the anxiety of a person so perplexed by his disparate activities that he likens his conflicted roles in life to the figure of a mythical beast composed of mismatched parts: “I am a kind of chimera of my age, neither cleric nor layman. I have long stripped off the way of life, but not the habit, of the monk.”³

The great attraction among contemporary scholars to Bernard the chimera and to the several writings comprising his extensive literary corpus has itself drawn the attention of one of the leading monastic researchers in our time. Jean Leclercq notes how the study of Bernard’s complex life has led to the discovery of multiple Bernards. There is, for instance, a Bernard of theology and another of politics; one of psycho-analysis, another of sociology; even a Bernard of Marxist

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³ On Bernard as chimera, see Caroline W. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), 81.
In addition to these Bernards, along with several others that could be mentioned, the title of this paper raises the question of whether it is fitting to offer a Bernard of postmodernism, specifically a Bernard viewed through the lenses of a postmodern ethics.\(^5\)

To address the issue within the limited scope of my discussion, let me stress at the outset that, instead of treating the question in either/or terms, as opposing alternatives of interpretation, I propose to try to utilize the postmodern literature in a way that builds on the more specialized scholarship of medievalists. In other words, I do not intend to “bracket-out” the twelfth century, to reinterpret Bernard’s thought only for the sake of making him palatable to postmodern tastes, much as certain Neo-scholastics had once sought an existential retrieval of Thomas Aquinas’s thought.\(^6\) I maintain that

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5 The very notion of a “postmodern ethics” is problematic and requires explanation. Addressing the issue is Edith Wyschogrod, Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy (Chicago, 1990), xiii: “A postmodern ethics? Is this not a contradiction in terms? If postmodernism is a critical expression describing the subversion of philosophical language, ‘a mutant of Western humanism,’ then how can one hope for an ethics when the conditions for meaning are themselves under attack? But is not this paradox—the paradox of a postmodern ethic—just what is required if an ethic is to be postmodern? Does not the term postmodern so qualify the term ethics that the idea of ethics, the stipulation of what is to count as lawful conduct, is subverted? And is a postmodern ethics then not an ethics of the subversion of ethics so that ethics turns into its opposite, a nihilism that is unconstrained by rules? Yet if postmodernism succeeds modernism as the term implies, nihilism in not postmodernism in any straightforward chronological sense because it flourished in the nineteenth century and, as a species of antinomianism, has ancient roots in Greek Sophism and Roman Cynicism. The matter therefore is not simple. The word postmodern prefixed to ethics as its qualifier becomes neither the mere negation of what has, at various times, been interpreted as lawful conduct nor the sign of a dialectical reverberation between normative ethics and its opposite, the negation of the defiance of norms. This is because the term postmodern is not an innocuous modifier, a word that is subordinated to the word it modifies. The relation between ‘ethics’ and ‘postmodernism’ is complex and requires a radical rethinking of the syntactic and semiotic possibilities of each. A postmodern ethics must look not to some opposite of ethics but elsewhere, to life narratives, specifically those of saints, defined in terms that both overlap and overturn traditional normative stipulations and that defy the normative structure of moral theory.”

6 Redressing the negative reception of postmodernism among certain scholars is Philipp W. Rosemann, Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault (New York, 1999), ix: “... despite its characteristic emphasis upon methodology and theory, the postmodern approach does not at all neglect the ‘facts.’ Its ‘reliance on theory’ is not at the expense of the ‘evidence.’” However, note that the question of historical con-