
CONTEMPLATING GOD
FROM THE MIRROR OF THE
SOUL: THE FIRST LEVEL
OF ST. BONAVENTURE'S
INTROSPECTIVE AESTHETICS
FROM ITS INSPIRING
SOURCES

José María Salvador-González

Introduction¹

Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1221–1274) was a Franciscan thinker whose immense doctrinal prestige earned him the well-deserved privilege of being named a Church Doctor, known as a “Seraphic Doctor.” Among his abundant writings, the philosophical,² theological,³ exegetical,⁴ ascetic and mystical, and those on common Franciscan

¹ I sincerely thank the copyeditor of *Poligrafi* for the extensive and very professional work carried out in editing my article, as well as for the numerous and appropriate corrections and suggestions that she made.

² On the philosophy of Saint Bonaventure, see Johannes Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía, Tomo I: Antigüedad, Edad Media, Renacimiento* (Barcelona: Herder, 1981), 368–371; and Étienne Gilson, *La philosophie au Moyen Âge. Des origines patristiques à la fin du XIVe. Siècle* (Paris: Payot, 1962), offer brief synthesis. José Antonio Merino Abad, *Historia de la filosofía franciscana* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1993), 29–105 is much broader and more explicit. The most comprehensive study on this subject is Étienne Gilson's monograph, *La philosophie de Saint Bonaventure*, 2nd ed., 3rd print (Paris: Vrin, 1948).

³ His theological works are recorded in León Amorós, Bernardo Aperribay and Míguel Oromí, *Obras de San Buenaventura. Edición bilingüe. Tomo I. Dios y las criaturas* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1968), 43–44.

⁴ His theological works are indicated in Amorós, Aperribay and Oromí, *Obras de San Buenaventura*, 45.

themes⁵ stand out. This extensive opus has generated a broad set of studies both on his philosophy as a whole and on some of his thematic treatises or specific theses.⁶

Saint Bonaventure, although he enjoys much universal recognition for his theological, exegetical, mystical, catechetical, and religious writings, he is not generally valued as a philosopher. This devaluation as a genuine philosopher is due, above all, to the fact that for him, philosophy lacks autonomous validity if it tries to place itself beyond theology, that is, of revelation and faith. However, there are many scholars who give a prominent place to the Seraphic in the field of philosophy, and more specifically as the founder and undisputed leader of Franciscan Scholasticism.

Now, in addition to writing extensive philosophical treatises on metaphysical, cosmological, epistemological, anthropological, and ethical issues, Bonaventure was also interested in formulating his own Aesthetics, in which he knew how to integrate a complex accumulation of philosophical and theological ideas. Despite his preference for theological, exegetical, spiritual, and mystical themes, Saint Bonaventure did not neglect Aesthetics (with its valorization of the sensible, material world),⁷ considering it a valuable way of attaining spiritual access to God.

In his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Bonaventure constructs the essential elements of his Aesthetics, building upon the central thesis that contemplation of the material world allows us to rise contemplatively

⁵ His works on Franciscan themes are listed in Amorós, Aperribay and Oromí, *Obras de San Buenaventura*, 46–49.

⁶ You can see a part of the extensive bibliography on St. Bonaventure in Amorós, Aperribay and Oromí, *Obras de San Buenaventura*, 43–70; in the registered by Pietro Miranesi, “Per una bibliografia bonaventuriana,” in *Dizionario Bonaventuriano: filosofia, teología, spiritualità*, ed. Ernesto Caroli (Padova: Editrici Francescane, 2008), 25–46; or in recently (2016) collected by Isabel María León Sanz, *El arte creador en San Buenaventura. Fundamentos para una teología de la belleza* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2016).

⁷ For a brief exposition of Seraphic’s Aesthetics, see Étienne Gilson, *La Filosofía en la Edad Media. Desde los orígenes patristicos hasta el fin del siglo XIV* (Madrid: Gredos, 1999), 432–443; Edgar de Bruyne, *Estudios de Estética medieval, Vol. III: El siglo XIII* (Madrid: Gredos, 1959), 201–240; and Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética, vol. II: La estética medieval* (Madrid: Akal, 2007 [1970]), 244–252. Much deeper is the study done by León Sanz, *El arte creador en San Buenaventura*.

to God. According to him, the ascent to God from the material world must take place in three steps:

- a) The first step consists of contemplating God *outside* of us, by appreciating corporeal, temporal, and external beings as *vestiges* of deity. This constitutes the stage that we have called the immanent phase of the Aesthetics of the Seraphic. In this *immanent* stage, Bonaventure already establishes two possibilities of contemplating God *outside* of us: that of contemplating him *through* his *vestiges*, and that of contemplating *in* his *vestiges* in created things.
- b) The second intermediate stage, which we have designated as the *introspective* phase of the Bonaventurian Aesthetics, offers two other more profound possibilities of contemplating God entering *within* us: that of contemplating him *through* his spiritual *image* imprinted in the powers of our soul, as a mirror of the Trinity; and that of contemplating it *as through a mirror* and *as in a mirror*.
- c) The third step of the ascent towards God, which we have designated as the *transcendent* stage of the Aesthetic of the Seraphic, consists of raising ourselves *above* us to God himself, contemplating and revering Him as the *First Principle*, highly spiritual, eternal, and superior of all creation, and rejoicing to know God and revere his divine Majesty.

Now, among the complex universe of Bonaventurian Aesthetics, our focus in this paper is exclusively concentrated on the *first* contemplative modality of the *immanent* stage of Bonaventurian Aesthetics: that of contemplating it *through* his spiritual *image* imprinted in the powers of our soul, as a mirror of the Trinity.⁸

With this we will try to vindicate the epistemic value and the conceptual originality of such Aesthetics in the face of those who deny or undervalue them. Our research contribution will be substantiated here in two aspects: firstly, in the intrinsic analysis of the Seraphic theses on the aspect under study; secondly, in the extrinsic comparative analysis of these Bonaventurian theses with ideas of other philosophers, to try to specify some possible influences on our thinker. Lastly, this article will

⁸ Neither de Bruyne, *Estudios de Estética medieval*, Vol. III, nor Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética*, vol. II, explain this introspective Aesthetics.

complement what we have discussed in other papers regarding the first two levels of these Aesthetics.⁹

The introspective stage of Bonaventure's Aesthetics

The Seraphic Doctor expressed his aesthetic ideas¹⁰ in a somewhat scattered way, through numerous isolated thoughts in writings of various kinds, although he managed to systematize them in a relatively coherent, complete manner in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259).¹¹ In this book, he exposes the intricate details of the ascent that the human being must embark upon from the created world to God, whom he can contemplate through six successive degrees or levels. According to our author, in the first two levels—the nucleus of what we have called the “immanent,” “material,” or “empirical” stage of the Bonaventurian Aesthetics—, man achieves an embryonic contemplation of the Creator by considering His signs or vestiges upon objects. Our Franciscan philosopher develops the intermediate stage of that contemplative ascent—which we have called the “introspective” stage of Saint Bonaventure's Aesthetics—in Chapters 3 and 4 of *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. Chapter

⁹ See the papers of José María Salvador-González, “Per imaginem et in imagine: El estadio introspectivo de la estética de San Buenaventura en su *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, un discurso barroco avant la lettre,” in *Del Barroco al Neobarroco: Realidades y transferencias culturales*, ed. R. de la Fuente Ballesteros, J. Pérez-Magallón, and J.R. Jouve-Martin (Valladolid: Universitas Castellae, 2011), 295–309; José María Salvador-González, “Ascensio in Deum per vestigia et in vestigijs: La Estética inmanente de S. Buenaventura y sus posibles reflejos en la iconografía de la Basílica de San Francisco,” *Mirabilia Journal* 16 (2013): 79–117, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/2.1.4150.6245>; José María Salvador-González, “La Estética inmanente de San Buenaventura desde sus fuentes de inspiración,” *Revista de Filosofía* 48 (2022) (in press); José María Salvador-González, “The concept *vestigium* in the immanent Aesthetics of St. Bonaventure” (under revisión in an academic journal). We have also partially studied the “transcendent” phase of Bonaventurian Aesthetics in the article José María Salvador-González, “The second level of St. Bonaventure's Transcendent Aesthetics: Speculating the divine Trinity through the good,” *Mirabilia Journal* 31 (2020): 741–755, https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/mirabilia/mirabilia_a2020n31/mirabilia_a2020n31p741.pdf.

¹⁰ On the aesthetic scope in the writings of Saint Bonaventure, see Orlando Todisco, “Dimensione estetica del pensare bonaventuriano,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 54 (2007): 17–76.

¹¹ Bonaventura de Balneoregio, «*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*,» in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi): Q V, 285–316. In the text of this article, we will cite this work with the abbreviation “It,” followed by the chapter in Roman numerals, and its section or epigraph in Arabic numerals.

3 deals with how man speculates on God by the imprinted image of Him in his natural human potencies; Chapter 4 discusses how man speculates on God through his image of Him, reformed by grace.¹² In the last two levels of the contemplative ascent towards God, which constitute what we could call the “mystical” phase of the Bonaventurian Aesthetics, man can achieve “mental excesses” through ecstatic contemplation of God by meditating on His essential attributes as Supreme Being (fifth level) and His personal properties as absolute Good (sixth level).¹³

Unable to explain in this brief article each of these complex six levels established by our author, we will now specify the details of the first level of the introspective stage of Bonaventure’s Aesthetics.

This first level of the introspective stage is indeed the third level of the contemplative ascent to God in the Bonaventurian system. It consists of entering into our soul to see the Creator through a mirror.

At the beginning of Chapter 3 of *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, the Seraphic Doctor recalls that in the two preceding contemplative levels – which constitute what we have called the “immanent” phase of his Aesthetics¹⁴—created beings are seen as vestiges of God; and through these vestiges man, after entering his mind, “where the divine image shines forth,”¹⁵ has already made a rudimentary contemplation of the Creator (It, III, 1). The Franciscan mystic adds that in climbing the third step

¹² On the Bonaventurian idea of man as the image of God, see Manuel Barbosa de Costa Freitas, “A doutrina bonaventuriana do homem-imagem e a coexistência da fé e do saber,” in *San Bonaventura Maestro di vita francescana*, Vol. II, ed. Alfonso Pompei (Roma: Pontificia Facoltà teologica S. Bonaventura, 1976), 441–453.

¹³ On the third level of the Aesthetics of Bonaventure, see Cornelio Fabro, “Contemplazione mística e intuizione artistica del Seraphicus,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 9 (1962): 5–13; and J. E. Arias Rueda, “Conocimiento de lo bello desde una perspectiva estética de la sensibilidad trascendental en los capítulos VI y VII del *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* de San Buenaventura,” *Franciscanum* 44 (2002): 137–220.

¹⁴ Edgar De Bruyne, *L’Esthétique du Moyen Âge* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1947), 101–109, employs the term “immediate Aesthetic” (*Esthétique immédiate*) when referring to this Aesthetic based on the sensitive beauty of bodily beings, which he studies above all in the thinkers of the Saint-Victor School.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Beschin, “La creatura simbolo del Creatore in S. Bonaventura alla luce della ragione e della fede,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 47 (2000): 46–47, explains this Bonaventurian thesis of the analogy of creatures with respect to the Creator, highlighting the differences between material creatures that are only distant vestiges of God, and creatures composed of matter and spirit,

of the ascent towards the Supreme Being,¹⁶ we must see God through a mirror, entering our mind,¹⁷ in which the light of truth¹⁸ and the image of the Trinity shines (It. III, 1).

Now, our author has no qualms about invoking the Christian dogma of the divine Trinity. He considers it evident that if entering within himself, man reflects on the operations of his three spiritual powers (*memory, intellect, and will*),¹⁹ he will be able intellectually contemplate God as by an image,²⁰ “which is to see Him as through a mirror and as in an enigma” (It. III, 1). As you can see, here our author begins to draw not a few theological presuppositions, quite problematic from the perspective of a purely rational, secular philosophy. In later paragraphs, we will discuss some of these a-rational assumptions.

What we have outlined so far is the part of the Bonaventurian Aesthetics that we could define as his “introspective” phase. To better understand it, one may find it helpful to follow step by step the complex and twisted—at times somewhat obscure—reasoning of our author about the skills that each of these three spiritual aptitudes (memory, intellect, and will) have to allow us to contemplate God intellectually.

such as men, who are close images of God, for they have attributes common to the three divine persons.

¹⁶ Numerous commentators, among whom we can mention Giovanni Santinello, “S. Bonaventura e la nozione dell’essere,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 10 (1983): 69-80, and Orlando Todisco, “Esse. Esentia,” in *Dizionario Bonaventuriano: filosofia, teologia, spiritualità*, ed. Ernesto Caroli (Padova: Editrici Francescane, 2008), 345-346, explain this thesis of Saint Bonaventure on the need to be in and of itself, which is the first essential attribute of God.

¹⁷ On the third level of the Aesthetics of Bonaventure, see, among others, Fabro, “Contemplazione mística,” 5-13, and Arias Rueda, “Conocimiento de lo bello,” 137-220.

¹⁸ On the philosophical, theological, anthropological and moral projections that according to the Seraphic Doctor are derived from that illuminating presence of God in the human soul, see Elisa Cuttini, *Ritorno a Dio. Filosofia, teologia, etica della mens nel pensiero di Bonaventura da Bagnoregio* (Soveria Manelli (Catanzaro): Rubbetino Editore, 2002).

¹⁹ Jacques Guy Bougerol, “San Bonaventura: il sapere e il credere,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 22 (1975): 12-13, explains accurately the Bonaventurian thesis according to which man, by his three powers of the soul, memory, intelligence and will, is a true analogous image of the Word of God.

²⁰ Chavero Blanco, *Imago Dei. Aproximación a la antropología teológica de san Buenaventura* (Murcia: Espigas, 1993), goes on to extensively explain this anthropological-philosophical thesis of Saint Bonaventure according to which the human being, due to his essential mental qualities, is a clear image of God.

- a) According to Bonaventure, memory—being able to retain and represent both present things, which are corporeal and temporal, and successive things, which are simple and eternal (It. III, 2)—has three fundamental skills:²¹
1. to retain past things by recollection, present things by suspicion and future things by foresight (It. III, 2);
 2. to retain simple things, such as the principles of discrete and continuous quantity, namely, the point, the instant, and the unit, which are three essential elements to understand everything derived from them (It. III, 2);
 3. to retain the principles and axioms of the sciences as eternal cognitive contents and eternally, since we neither forget them nor deny them, since reason accepts them as something familiar and connatural (It. III, 2).

The Bagnoregio philosopher adds that thanks to his first retention of temporal things past, present, and future, memory is an image of eternity whose indivisible present encompasses all times (It. III, 2); thanks to its second retention of things past by recollection, present by suspicion, and future by foresight, memory is not only capable of being informed of what exists outside of man through phantoms, but it can also receive simple forms from above. Elusive by the senses or through representations of sensible objects (It. III, 2); thanks to its third retention of scientific principles and axioms, memory has an immutable light in the mind, in which it is capable of remembering immutable truths (It. III, 2). Hence, the Seraphic infers that by memory operations the human soul is the divine image and likeness, capable of having God present and knowing in action and participating in Him in potentiality (It. III, 3).

Now, it is evident that our Franciscan scholastic introduces several free presuppositions here, hardly acceptable to a rationalist mind. To refer to only one of them as an example, to pretend that by retaining things past, present, and *future*, memory is an image of eternity is entirely gratuitous: in fact, no memory can keep at the present moment

²¹ On this point, see, among others, Prini, “‘Ars aeterna’ e ‘memoria’ nel pensiero di S. Bonaventura,” *Doctor Seraphicus* 22 (1975): 21–29.

(in which supposedly it would be an “image of eternity”) *future* things, which have not yet happened and we do not even know if they will or will not happen one day.

- b) After analyzing the *intellect*, Bonaventure points out that his power consists of knowing the meaning of the terms, the propositions, and the sentences (It, III, 3).

According to him, the intellect knows the meanings of the terms when it understands what each of them is by definition (It, III, 3). As the definition is necessarily given by more general terms, and these must be defined by even more general terms, until reaching the supreme and most general terms, the Seraphic concludes that if we ignore the latter, we will never be able to define the lower terms (It, III, 3). Therefore, if we do not know Being by itself, we will not fully define a particular being; nor can we know Being by itself, without knowing it with its three essential properties: *unity*, *truth*, and *goodness* (It, III, 3).

The Seraphic again incurs gratuitous presuppositions: since from the knowledge of some terms and definitions (a *gnoseological* status), it is impossible to jump without more to the existence of being by itself (an *ontological* status of the *Supreme Being*). From the simple *definition* of an entity, we cannot necessarily go on to its effective *existence*. For example, the definition of “the number infinite” is clear and precise, without implying that we can specify it by the existence of a specific number. As if that were not enough, nor can we admit that this alleged Being by itself essentially possesses the transcendental properties of unity, truth, and goodness. Where does the author get such characteristics?

Our author adds that, on the other hand, the intellect is capable of thinking of being according to antithetical possibilities, namely, as diminished or complete, as perfect or imperfect, as being in potentiality or being in the act, as conditioned or unconditioned, as partial. or total, as changing or permanent, as being by another or by itself, as mixed with non-being or as pure being, as dependent or absolute, as anterior or posterior, as changeable or immutable, as simple or compound (It, III, 3). Hence, he believes he can affirm that as denials and defects are known only through the corresponding affirmations, our understanding cannot fully know any created being without knowing the purest, complete and absolute Being, an unconditioned and eternal Being,

which in its purity possesses the reasons for all things;²² in fact, the intellect cannot know that something is defective and incomplete without knowing in some way the Being exempt from all defects (It, III, 3).

Without stopping now to discuss each of the various gratuitous statements made here by the Seraphic, let us insist only on the idea that the possibility of thinking that there could be a “very pure, complete and absolute Being” does not allow us to affirm that it really exists: thinking or defining a centaur or a Martian does not necessarily imply that one or the other exists.

Analyzing the ability to know the *propositions*, Bonaventure asserts that the intellect understands the meaning of these when it knows with certainty that they are true and that such truth is absolute and immutable (It, III, 3); but, because it is changeable, our intellect cannot see the truth shine in such an immutable way if it is not thanks to another immutable light, which is Christ (It, III, 3).

Regarding the competence to know the *inference*, the author asserts that our intellect perceives the meaning of this inference by seeing that the conclusion necessarily derives from the premises (even if they are formed by contingent terms), a necessary relationship that the intellect discovers both in existing things and in non-existent ones (It, III, 3). In his view, the need for this inference does not derive from the existence of being in matter, since such existence is contingent, nor from the existence of things in the soul, since they do not really exist in it (It, III, 3), but it derives from the “exemplary nature of eternal art, in which things have mutual aptitude and relationship, as they are represented in eternal art.” (It, III, 3). Our author highlights the indissoluble link of our intellect with eternal truth²³ since nothing true can be known without it (It, III, 3).

²² In this respect Gilson, *La Filosofia en la Edad Media*, 439, points out that according to Saint Bonaventure, man can reach eternal reasons or ideas as they are in God, only as his reflection and also in a confused way. Despite this, divine Ideas or eternal reasons are the immediate rule of our knowledge, so that we see the truth not simply for eternal reasons, but in eternal reasons.

²³ As do many other commentators, Davide Riserbato, “Bonaventura e il fondamento di ogni conoscenza certa,” *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 109, no. 4 (2017): 879–888, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26477238>, highlights the Bonaventurian theory on the role of divine illumination to enable man to know the truth.

Again, you can find here a *petitio principii*: from the necessary inference between the conclusion that my cat, because it is an animal, will die one day, because every animal is mortal, neither the “exemplary nature of eternal art” is necessarily inferred, nor is our intellect necessarily linked to “eternal truth.”

- c) Saint Bonaventure then considers the *will*, the operation of which he appreciates in *advice*, *judgment*, and *desire*. Regarding the *advice* to suggest the best among several alternatives (It, III, 4), the Seraphic states that nothing can be qualified as the best except by resemblance to the optimal: “nobody knows if one thing is better than another without knowing that is closer to the optimum” (It, III, 4). Hence, he deduces that whoever advises on the best necessarily carries the notion of the highest good (It, III, 4).

Again, it is worth asking how our scholastic can justify that the good, the best, and the optimum in contingent and relative beings necessarily require the existence of the highest and absolute Good.

Regarding the operation of the will in the *judgment*, Bonaventure believes that the true judgment about something that the advice appreciates necessarily derives from a law whose absolute rectitude is known with certainty by the person issuing the judgment. That is why this law is superior to our mind, and it judges by this law, as it is imprinted on it (It, III, 4). He concludes that since there is nothing superior to the human mind but its Creator, our will, when it thoroughly judges and decides, touches “the divine laws” (It, III, 4).

Finally, explaining the third operation of the will, *desire*, the author claims that it tends towards what it loves in the highest degree, that is, the supreme happiness which is only achieved by possessing the optimum and the ultimate end (It, III, 4). As a result, he concludes that the human desire for the will only craves the highest Good, or what is ordered to the highest Good, or what has the appearance of the highest Good (It, III, 4). In his opinion, so great is the force with which the highest Good attracts us,²⁴ that just by wanting it, the creature can love something (Cf, It,

²⁴ Orlando Todisco, “Bonum,” in *Dizionario Bonaventuriano: filosofia, teologia, spiritualità*, ed. Ernesto Caroli (Padova: Editrici Francescane, 2008), 221–227, explains with clarity and abundant documentary apparatus that ontological or transcendental category of God according to the Seraphic.

V, 1), to the point of committing a serious error when it accepts as true what it is a simple image or simulacrum of good (It, III, 4).

Not very different is the level of gratuity that Saint Bonaventure shows when exposing the capacity of the will to *judge* and *desire*: it is not seen why appreciating the rectitude or correctness of a judgment necessarily implies “touching the divine laws”; nor is it explained why wanting some good and some happiness necessarily implies the existence of supreme happiness and the highest and last Good.

In any case, from what has been stated so far it is clear that for the Seraphic—firmly based on the foundations of his unshakable Christian faith—our soul maintains great proximity to God, taking into account that “memory leads us to eternity, the intelligence to the truth, and the elective power [the will] to the utmost goodness, according to their respective operations” (It, III, 4).

After exposing that third degree of the contemplative ascent of man towards God, Saint Bonaventure concludes that by speculating in its principle one (a single substantial entity) and triune (through its three powers), which make it the image of God, the human soul is aided by the lights of philosophy and science, which, by perfecting and informing it, represent the Trinity in three ways (It, III, 6). Taking his primordial theological presuppositions to the last consequences, the mystic Doctor states that all philosophy is natural, rational, or moral. On this basis, he asserts that natural philosophy, which deals with the cause of existence, leads to the power of God the Father; rational philosophy, which studies the reason for understanding, leads to the wisdom of the Word of God; and moral philosophy, by taking care of the order of living, leads to the goodness of the Holy Spirit (It, III, 6).

Our mystical author thus confirms with absolute frankness the significant theological-trinitarian presuppositions that solidly sustain his entire philosophical-aesthetic system, not only in its central parts but also in each statement derived from those.

After these disquisitions, Bonaventure develops the second level of the introspective phase of his Aesthetics,²⁵ which consists of the human

²⁵ According to Bonaventure’s theoretical approach, the second level of the introspective phase of his Aesthetics constitutes the fourth degree of man’s ascent to God.

being having to contemplate God from within his soul as an image of God (It, IV, 1).²⁶ According to him, this is only achieved through Christ (It, IV, 2), for which man needs to clothe himself with the faith, hope, and charity of Christ to enjoy the absolute divine Truth (It, IV, 2). As if that were not enough, he asserts that to reach the fourth degree of contemplation,²⁷ the human being needs an abundance of devotion and the support of the grace of God, reformed by the theological virtues, by the delights of the spiritual senses, and by ecstatic suspensions (It, IV, 3).²⁸ Furthermore, the Seraphic argues that in this fourth degree of contemplative ascent to God, the means of the argument are the Holy Scriptures (and not Philosophy), which hierarchically illuminate the works of reparation, especially on faith, hope, and charity, all virtues—above all, charity—that must repair and reform the soul (It, IV, 3).

It is thus evident that Bonaventure introduces in this fourth contemplative degree a plexus of gratuitous religious assumptions and complex Christocentric reflections, which enter fully into Christian dogmatic theology, entirely outside of natural and non-confessional philosophy. So, due to the theological presuppositions and the dogmatic—almost mystical—corollaries that it contains, we will not develop this fourth degree of the intellectual ascent towards divinity, which, as previously mentioned, is the second level of the introspective phase of the Seraphic's Aesthetics.

²⁶ Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 264, considers that in this thesis Saint Bonaventure is inspired by Plotinus. According to this historian Plotinus, he affirms that the metaphysical return to the one, that is, to God, is carried out in an ethical way in the individual soul when man frees himself from his fall and transcends his individuality that distances him from the original unity, and tends towards new to the one, transcending matter, the principle of multiplicity, and becoming more and more spiritual.

²⁷ This Bonaventurian topic of the aesthetic contemplation of the human being in his ascent is analyzed by among others Macario Oflada Mina, "St. Bonaventure: Aesthetics and Contemplation in the Journey towards God," *Studies in Spirituality* 16 (2006): 151–164, <https://doi.org/10.2143/SIS.16.0.2017796>.

²⁸ In this thesis Bonaventure is doubtlessly inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, whose thought at this point Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 326, synthesizes. According to this historian, Pseudo-Dionysius maintains that if every movement is a yearning and tending towards the beautiful and the good, it turns out that the whole world is animated by a movement towards God; And in the concrete case of the human soul, this return to God is made through faith and prayer until reaching the ecstatic union with the One.

Background to the first level of the introspective phase of Bonaventurian Aesthetics

It is now time to analyze some philosophical sources in which our author bases three essential theses of the introspective stage of his Aesthetics. He proposes these theses after subtly reformulating specific theories consolidated as traditional doctrine under the aegis of conspicuous ancient and medieval philosophers.

In the paragraphs that follow, we do not pretend to exhaust all the sources that inspire the Seraphic in the subject analyzed. We believe, however, that what we present below could reflect some influences which may have inspired the Seraphic when proposing his central thesis in this field.

Fundamental presupposition

As previously mentioned, Bonaventure bases his introspective Aesthetics on the postulate that if a man enters within himself and considers the operations and habits of his three powers, memory, intellect, and will, he will be able by himself to see God as though an image, “as through a mirror and as in an enigma” (It, III, 1).

Such a consideration of the three powers of the human soul (*memoria, intellectus, voluntas*) seems to be taken from Saint Augustine, who, according to Johannes Hirschberger,²⁹ is inspired in turn by Plotinus, when he highlights as essential attributes of the One (God) intelligence, freedom, and will.³⁰

From this basic assumption, the Seraphic derives these three core theses, whose sources of inspiration we are now trying to elucidate.

²⁹ In this respect, Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 264, points out that according to Plotinus, in the One freedom and will develop in all their fullness. Hirschberger adds that these voluntarist concepts of Plotinus “will help [Saint] Augustine to see God as love and the Holy Spirit, within the Trinity, as the substantial bond that unites the Father and the Son, also as will and love (*memoria - intellectus - voluntas*).” (Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 264)

³⁰ According to Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 262, Christian speculation on the Trinity is inspired by the system of Plotinus, for whom Trinitarian speculation must refer only to God who is identical with the one, endowed with intelligence, freedom and will in all its fullness.

Memory as a means of contemplative access to God

In Bonaventure's opinion, thanks to *memory*, in its ability to retain the principles and axioms of science as eternal knowledge and in an eternal way, the soul is the image and divine likeness (It, III, 1), capable of knowing God in the act, and able to participate in Him in potentiality (It, III, 2).

In proclaiming such a momentous theophanic role to memory, the Franciscan mystic seems to have no background influences. It only occurs to us to partially relate this Bonaventurian proposal with Plato in his theory of reminiscence or anamnesis (*ἀνάμνησις*). According to this Platonic theory, man, when seeing in this material world the individual entities (each of them a fictitious shadow of the corresponding universal, abstract idea subsisting in *hyperuranium* (*ὑπερουράνιος τόπος*), recalls the true ideas which he knew in hyperuranium when his soul had not yet been imprisoned in matter (the human body).

Now, although Plato and Bonaventure put memory as the central axis here, the differences between the conceptions of each one are substantial, to the point of making them practically incompatible. To begin with, the Seraphic completely rejects the Platonic thesis of the preexistence of the soul in contemplation of the real and true ideas in *hyperuranium*. As a logical consequence, he also discards the *a priori* and innate knowledge of the truth on the part of man, since, according to him, everything that man knows, he knows through his sensory and intellectual experience, without any innateness.

The intellect as a means of contemplative access to God

As we have seen before, another basic thesis of Bonaventure is also that the *intellect*, thanks to its ability to know the meaning of terms, propositions, and statements (It, III, 2), maintains an indissoluble link with the eternal truth (God), because without it, human understanding cannot know anything true (It, III, 3). In this centrality of the intellect in its contemplative ascent towards God and relation to relative similarity or concordance between God and the human intellect, the Seraphic

seems to be inspired by some ideas of Plotinus, Saint Augustine, and Hugh of Saint-Victor.

For Plotinus (205-270), in effect, the source of beauty is only spirit, never matter, to the point that the sensory world is beautiful only thanks to the idea, to the model or archetype, to the inner form of the spirit.³¹ Tatarkiewicz explains this thesis of the Neoplatonic master, saying that “Only the spirit is capable of recognizing the spirit and, therefore, only he can perceive beauty, precisely managing to capture and receive it because of their mutual kinship.”³² In that order of ideas, Plotinus expresses:

What he sees must be applied to contemplation after having become akin and similar to what is seen. For no eye would have ever seen the sun if it had not become similar to the sun, and no soul could see beauty without having become beautiful. Make yourself, then, first everything deiform and beautiful if you intend to contemplate God and beauty.³³

And in another passage Plotinus raises his transcendentalist and almost mystical approach even more, stating: “Inner contemplation and communion not with the statue or with the image, but with the divinity itself [...] and this may not be a contemplation, but another way of seeing, an ecstasy.”

However, much more than in Plotinus, it is in Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) that Bonaventure bases his thesis on the theophanic capacity of human understanding. For Augustine, ideas remain immutable and eternal in the mind of God, in which they give true form to created things. This is how St. Augustine points it out:

Ideas are given, which are permanent, essential, immutable forms of things; They were not themselves formed but remain eternally identical and are in the mind of God. And while they are neither born nor perish, everything that has a beginning and an end and is really born and dies is configured according to them.³⁴

³¹ Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética*, I: *La estética antigua* (Madrid: Akal, 2000), 329, explains the significant spiritualist thesis of Plotinus in a synthetic way.

³² Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética*, I, 330.

³³ Plotinus, cited in Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética*, I, 337.

³⁴ Augustinus, *De div. Quaest.* 83, qu, 46, 2, cited in Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 303.

For Saint Augustine, man can apprehend true ideas through spiritual intellect from this original source in God's mind. In his treatise *De vera religione*, when wondering where to find the necessary, absolute, and eternal value of truth, he affirms that it is not found in sensory experience but in the spirit of man. This is how he puts it: "Don't go outside, come back to yourself; in the inner man dwells the truth; and if you find your nature to be changeable, transcend yourself".³⁵

In an earlier passage in the same book, he notes: "I delight in the utmost equality, which I do not perceive with the eyes of the body, but with those of the mind; for this reason, I judge that the things that I perceive with the eyes are so much better the closer they are by their nature to those that I perceive with the spirit".³⁶

The bishop of Hippo complements this thesis with his theory of enlightenment, a theory according to which God radiates truth into the spirit of man, not through supernatural revelation, but natural illumination. In his opinion, even in the case of being blinded by lust, every rational spirit, when he thinks and reasons, can arrive at the truth, but this should not be attributed to himself, but in the light of the truth, which enlightens in your capacity so that you can feel the truth by reasoning.³⁷

Similarly, Saint Bonaventure, by necessarily linking the capacities of the human intellect with God, who illuminates it, also seems to be inspired by some theses of Hugh of Saint-Victor (c. 1096–1141), such as the one he formulates as follows:

Our spirit cannot ascend towards the truth of invisible entities, unless it is illustrated by the consideration of visible things, that is, in such a way that it judges that visible forms are images of invisible beauty.³⁸

And a few lines later, Hugh of Saint Victor adds:

³⁵ Augustinus, "De vera religione, XLI, 77," J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 34, col. 151.

³⁶ Augustinus, "De vera religione, XLI, 77," J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 34, col. 147.

³⁷ Augustinus, cited in Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 295.

³⁸ Hugo de Sancto Victore, *Exp. in Hierarchia Coelesti S. Dionysii, Liber II*, J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 175, col. 949..

there is some similarity between visible beauty and invisible beauty, according to the similarity or emulation that the invisible creator [God] constituted to one and the other, similarity in which both configure, as in a mirror, a single image of different proportions.³⁹

The will as a means of contemplative access to God

As previously explained, Saint Bonaventure maintains that the *will* expresses itself in *advice* (which necessarily implies the notion of the highest Good) (It, III, 4), in *judgment* (which requires having the divine laws printed) (It, III, 4), and in *desire* (which is only achieved by possessing the optimum and the ultimate end (It, III, 4), since man only desires the highest Good, or what is ordered to the highest Good, or what has the appearance of supreme Good) (It, III, 4).

Plotinus, by granting the will a leading role in the face of the primacy of intellect in Greek intellectualism, may have been able to inspire the Franciscan mystic. This is how Plotinus expresses his thesis: “The works of the one are the manifestations of his will since he does nothing without wanting to. But his actions are in a way his substance. His will and his substance are therefore the same”.⁴⁰

However, at this point, the Seraphic is inspired above all by Saint Augustine, whose voluntarism is reflected in lapidary phrases like this: “You made us, Lord, for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”.⁴¹ Or this other sentence: “The will is always present; even the movements of the soul are nothing but will”.⁴² Or when the bishop of Hippo states:

Just as, before being happy, the notion of happiness is already imprinted in our minds; and through it, we already know, and with faith and without any doubt, we say that we want to be happy; so also before being wise, we have

³⁹ Hugo de Sancto Victore, *Exp. In Hierarch. Coel.*, PL 175, 949.

⁴⁰ Plotinus, *Enneada VI*, 8,13, cited in Hirschberger, *Historia de la Filosofía*, 264.

⁴¹ Augustinus, “Confessiones, I, 1,” in *Obras completas de San Agustín* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1998, col. II), 73.

⁴² Augustinus, “De civitate Dei, XIV, 6,” J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 42, col. 1040.

already imprinted in our spirit the notion of wisdom, by which each one of us, when asked if he wants to be wise, answers yes, without a shadow of a doubt.⁴³

Nor can it be ruled out that Saint Bonaventure had at this point been influenced by Johannes Scotus Eriugena (c. 810–c. 877), for whom “visible forms [...] are figurations of invisible beauty, through which Divine Providence guides the human soul towards the pure and invisible beauty of its truth”.⁴⁴ Or, as Gilson puts it, interpreting Eriugena: “everything is *essentially* a sign, a symbol, through which God makes himself known to us: *nihil enim visibiliuum rerum corporaliumque est, ut arbitror, quod non incorporale quid et intelligibile significet* (De div. Nat., V, 3).”⁴⁵

Conclusions

We could synthesize what we have highlighted thus far about the introspective phase of Bonaventurian Aesthetics in these brief assertions:

1. At the third level of his contemplative ascent to God, man can see Him as in the mirror image of his soul by considering the operations of his three spiritual powers, his memory, intellect, and will.
2. As these three spiritual powers, totally different from each other, are proper to a single substance (the individual human soul), they are analogous images that reveal God one in substance and triune in Persons.
3. Bonaventure has no qualms here about mixing rational philosophy with Christian dogmatic theology. For him, reason and revelation are not two separate or antithetical elements but integrate the same human way of thinking. For him, man’s rational intelligence needs to know the truth, to be illuminated by God.
4. In formulating the various theses that structure the first level of the introspective stage of his Aesthetics, Bonaventure draws inspiration from more than a few statements by other pagan and

⁴³ Augustinus, “De libero arbitrio, Liber II, 9, 26,” J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 32, 1254–1255)

⁴⁴ Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *In Hierarchia Coelesti Dionysii I*, PL 122, 138–139.

⁴⁵ Cited in Gilson, *La Filosofia en la Edad Media*, 210.

Christian authors. In one or another of these Bonaventurian aesthetic theses, we believe we have seen some traces of Plato, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, and Hugh of Saint-Victor.

5. Apart from these foreseeable influences, the Seraphic—even granting himself numerous unjustified theological-dogmatic presuppositions—shows in his aesthetic theory unquestionable originality, in which he succeeds in balancing the intellectual and volitional dimensions.

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