

# The World as Symbol of Divine Beauty in the Thought of St. Bonaventure

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In his treatise *On the Tracing Back of the Arts to Theology*, the great Doctor of the Church St. Bonaventure takes as his theme the nature of art and the activity of an artisan.<sup>1</sup> In the course of his discussion he makes this remarkable claim: we shall be able to discern “the eternal generation and Incarnation of the Word, the pattern of human life, and the union of the soul with God” if we meditate prayerfully on “the production, the effect, and the advantage”<sup>2</sup> of any work of art. In this article we will look at each of these aspects of art in order to see more clearly the theological truths the Seraphic Doctor himself discerns in them. Our brief study of this key element in his theology will make manifest the foundations and implications of a doctrine of artistic analogy.<sup>3</sup>

## *I. The Production of Art*

All productions of art, as of nature, require not merely some matter to be worked upon, but matter suitable to the *form* it will receive, and a *source* of that form, an agent by whose activity the form will be enmattered or “incarnated.” Form holds pride of place; it explains the *why* of matter. The artist masters the materials of his art because he brings to them a plan, a figure, a purpose, through which the lower nature of the artifact can partake in some way of the higher nature of its artificer. Whether his purpose be delighting an audience, satisfying an innate love of beauty, honoring a beloved, or worshipping God—often all of them at once—the artist seeks to produce a work that will fittingly achieve its end by making manifest the conception in his mind. The work exists *for the sake of* the conception it is meant to display or convey. “In

art the reasons are nothing other than the likenesses of the objects that are to be produced as they are known by the artist.”<sup>4</sup> The underlying conception is the “soul” of the work of art, animating its features and functions. In this sense, the work necessarily pre-exists in a higher form in the mind of the artist himself.

If we consider the *production*, we shall see that the work of art proceeds from the artificer according to a model existing in his mind; this pattern or model the artificer studies carefully before he produces and then he produces as he has predetermined. The artificer, moreover, produces an exterior work bearing the closest possible resemblance to the interior model.

It is not enough, however, to point out the congruity of the product with the intention behind it. Art seeks, to the extent possible, to reproduce something of the *nature of the producer*, that through his works the maker thereof might be known. The best work of art does more than stand by itself. By exemplifying some perfection that the intelligence possesses, the work continually draws the beholder back into the intelligence from which it originally came.

All great works of art exhibit a wondrous power to evoke and lead the mind back to the original reality from which their beauty is derived. With respect to its essential condition of having-been-made, the beauty of the artifact is always secondary or derivative. Unable to confer beauty or, for that matter, truth or goodness upon itself, it hearkens back to what is *per se* beautiful, true, and good. The better the artwork, the more active and potent will it be in leading back to that original, so as to illuminate the fount of undivided beauty which the imitation divides into streams by presenting various aspects or parts of it. The “mechanical arts” (Bonaventure includes under this title what we call the fine arts), which impose a form upon suitable matter, may thus be ranked according to the degree of their perfection in imitating the source from whence they arise. For example, painting imitates the colored form without its full dimensionality; sculpture, the form as it appears in nature; drama, the actions and passions of living men, represented by actors on the stage. Just as living and knowing are

superior to mere existence, so too the work of art that imitates the life and knowledge of the artist is superior, in a sense, to an image that furnishes a lesser token of human presence. By this standard, drama in its fluid progression of deeds and words may be considered as representing more of man's nature than portraiture, which selects and freezes some aspect of human appearance.

But one should go further. If the artist could make not only a *representation* of human life in the mode of drama, but could make other *beings* like himself—sharing in actual existence—he will have done a far greater work. We see the chief example in the procreation and rearing of children, by which parents assist in bringing forth new persons, images who are inclined to love, and are capable of friendship with, their origin. In order to assist the offspring in reaching maturity, father and mother lower themselves for a time, as it were, to the level of children, in order to lead them to maturity. In this work of human birth and development, we may catch a faint glimpse of the perfect and eternal begetting of the Word in heaven by the Father “of whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named” (Eph. 3:15). Nevertheless, even when the love of man and woman bears fruit in a child who is like themselves, the likeness is far from perfect, the artistry far from absolute. The parent is not the absolute cause of his child; the soul of parent and child alike emanate from and return to a higher spiritual cause, who stands to them as artist to clay.

Conceive now of a supreme artificer with infinite perfection of mind, infinite love, and infinite power, whose causality extends to the whole being of his effect and not to some particular disposition in it. This universal architect would be able to exercise his artistry over every aspect of the work, including its materiality and even the essence of the form to be enmattered. “The more perfect and prior-in-being the producing principle, the greater its influence on reality. From this we may conclude that the First and most perfect principle influences everything and flows into everything.”<sup>5</sup> Not stopping at the mere production of an artifact, so powerful a maker would extend his creation to the powers and operations of his creature, guiding and regulating it according to the archetype by which it had been designed.

If it were in his [the artificer's] power to produce an effect which would know and love him, this he would assuredly do; and if that creature could know its maker, it would be by means of a likeness according to which it came from the hands of the artificer; and if the eyes of the understanding were so darkened that the creature could not be elevated to things above, in order to bring it to a knowledge of its maker, it would be necessary for the likeness according to which the effect was produced to lower itself even to that nature which the creature could grasp and know.

Bonaventure envisages the radical causality implicated in the creation of man—the first man and every successive man—and the radical condescension manifested in his redemption and sanctification. To this end, he explains the best and truest mode of artistic production, the one according to which all human artistry deserves its name:

In like manner, understand that no creature has proceeded from the Most High Creator except through the Eternal Word, “in Whom He ordered all things,” and by which Word He produced creatures bearing not only the nature of His *vestige* but also of His *image* so that through knowledge and love, they might be united to Him. And since by sin the rational creature had dimmed the eye of contemplation, it was most fitting that the Eternal and Invisible should become visible and take flesh that He might lead us back to the Father and, indeed, this is what is related in the fourteenth chapter of St. John: “No man cometh to the Father but by Me”; and in the eleventh chapter of St. Matthew: “Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him.” For that reason, then, it is said, “the Word was made flesh.”<sup>6</sup>

This passage carries us directly to the foundation of a *semiology of art*, an understanding of art as the language of signs evoking recollection. If the work, when contemplated, acts as a signpost pointing to its original, and if the relation of original to image is one of exemplar to exemplared, any adequate under-

standing of the created world around us must have reference to the Creator, according to whose Word all things were made and from whose fullness we have all received life. Otherwise, we should be looking at the paintings and players of this world as though they were beauties and persons sufficient unto themselves, independently real and significant, without understanding that a painting is not truly the thing in its own right but rather a *sign* of a reality greater than itself, and a player is not villain or victor in his own right but, again, a *sign* of the reality.

With respect to its “general conditions,” Bonaventure argues, a creature may be known in two ways, even as a picture may be regarded in two ways: either as *picture*, so that one rests in its beauty, which is “the way of error,” or as *image*, so that one tends by it to something else, which is “knowing by superexcellence,” for every noble quality in the work must be attributed in the highest degree to its maker.<sup>7</sup> The need to “refer to the Creator,” i.e., to refer to the exemplary idea in the Creator’s mind, is at the core of the Anselmian notion of *rectitudo*. For St. Anselm, “rectitude” signifies the necessary condition for true knowledge, a right proportion or direct link between man’s concept of a thing and God’s creative idea of it. Truth consists precisely in this relation of man’s temporal cognition to God’s eternal knowledge. When God illuminates the mind in the activity of cognition, the mind is rendered capable of knowing the inner essence of a thing. This, much too briefly stated, is the doctrine of illumination as it was embraced by most Augustinian and Franciscan theologians of the High Middle Ages.

Artistry, exemplarity, rectitude of mind and will—all of these elements are woven by the masterful hands of Bonaventure into a *dramatic vision* of the universe. As he tells us early on in the *Tracing Back*, the dramatic art aims “to afford consolation and restful play.” The universe as a whole is meant to afford the consolation of the knowledge of God (the ultimate *signatum* or signified being) through a true apprehension of his “shadows, footprints, and images” (the varying degrees of *signum* or sign-being). Though hard-won, knowledge is sacred play, the joy of union with Him who inspired David’s dance. Those who fail to see the Di-

vine Artist in the work of His hands neglect the one path to understanding all things rightly; they fail to hear the melody of the sun and the lamentation of the storm. "We have piped to you, and you have not danced: we have lamented, and you have not mourned" (Mt. 11:17).

Because creation is the primordial paradigm of artistry and artistry itself is a distant echo of creation—a parallel that holds true so long as we are careful, when speaking of man, to remember the pre-created confines within which a finite agent must work, and when speaking of God, to negate the imperfections necessarily accompanying a limited human artificer—we shall understand both creation and artistry better by thinking about the centrality of the *exemplar* or exemplary likeness in the activity of a maker. This brings us to the crucial doctrine of exemplarism, profoundly explored by St. Bonaventure but no less important in the theology of his contemporaries St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas.

In his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure distinguishes between two kinds of likeness: the likeness of imitation which is "the way in which a creature is a likeness of the Creator," and the *exemplary likeness*, "the way in which the exemplary Idea in the Creator is a likeness of the creature." The former likeness, as the cause of knowledge in a mind that receives sensible species and abstracts the intelligible content from the sensible, "involves some degree of imperfection" because it "involves a sort of composition or addition in the knowing intellect." For the rational creature, *things* are the cause of *knowledge*. The latter likeness, however, "causes things *to be*" and "does not come from outside"; consequently, no imperfection is implied. Such exemplars of things subsist in the mind of God; they are none other than His very nature, and are perfectly expressive of the realities they cause to be. The Creator's *knowledge* is the cause of *things*.

The divine intellect is the supreme light, the full truth, and pure act. So, as the divine power to produce things is sufficient in itself to produce everything, so the divine light and truth is sufficient in itself to express all things. And since this

expression is an intrinsic act, it is eternal. Because an expression is a form of assimilation, the divine intellect—expressing all things eternally in its supreme truth—possesses from eternity the exemplary Ideas of all creatures.<sup>8</sup>

The ‘relationship’ of Creator to creature, though it is a logical and not a real relation (the creature depends utterly on God for its existence, but God in no way *depends* on the creature), may nevertheless be styled a relation of exemplar to exemplared. Indeed, to speak of the Ideas in God as expressive of things is to speak of His absolute causality with respect to the creature expressed: the total making, or creation *ex nihilo*, of the creature, according to its eternal pattern in the mind of the divine Artificer.<sup>9</sup> “The eternal Ideas are the productive principles of all things.”<sup>10</sup>

That sort of likeness by which one being is said to be the exemplar of another is posited in the Creator with respect to creation. Such a likeness does not require that the two beings agree by participation in a common third. It is sufficient that there be a harmony of order whereby they are related as cause and effect, or as expressive principle and object expressed.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Ideas in the mind of the Creator are other than the Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, there is an intimate connection between Idea and Word which Bonaventure does not fail to remark. Just as the Word is the expression of the Father, the Word to which the Father gives rise by an intrinsic procession of knowledge, so too the Ideas in the mind of God, many in connotation but one in the divine essential reality, are the fullest and truest expression of all creatures.<sup>12</sup> The Ideas of created things are expressed *through* the Word of God, as the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel teaches, and to this Word is attributed the exemplarity of creation. “Since the Son proceeds as the Word, to which is appropriated the notion [*ratio*] of declaring,” Bonaventure writes, “the notion of exemplar is appropriated to him, and consequently that of truth.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the extrinsic procession of all creatures from the First Principle, as well as the intrinsic procession of the Second Person from the First, is lik-

ened in Holy Scripture to speech. “So shall my word be, which shall go forth from my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please, and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11). “By the word of the Lord the heavens were established; and all the power of them by the spirit of his mouth” (Ps. 32:6). Creation itself is patterned after the communication of love within the Trinity of Persons, and finds its highest perfection in the Incarnation, whereby the divine and the natural orders are united in Christ, who is both the Chief Exemplar and the most perfect exemplar, the model for all intelligent creatures. No creature proceeds from the Most High Creator except through the Eternal Word.

In a true and proper sense, God is Word. But a word is the likeness of that which is spoken. Therefore, if the Son of God is the Word in whom all things are spoken, it is necessary that the likenesses of all things that are expressed be present in that Word.<sup>14</sup>

St. Augustine, speaking more forcefully still, says that “the Son is the art of the omnipotent God, full of all the living Ideas, and all things are one in this art.”<sup>15</sup> As the Word is the necessary expression of the Father, so creation is the free artistic expression of the divine Ideas, brought into being through the Art of the Word, “by which, through which, and according to which all beautiful things are formed.”<sup>16</sup> Creation is not called a book only metaphorically, as though one were indulging a poet’s fancy for comparisons; in its innermost reality it truly *is* a book, an incomparably rich expression of infallible dramatic art.

It must be said that other creatures can be considered as *things* or as *signs*. In the first way they are inferior to man, in the second way they are middle steps [*media*] in becoming or on the way, not at the end, because they do not reach to the end, but through them man reaches God, having left them behind him.<sup>17</sup>

The universe is an illuminated manuscript, containing innumerable signs of the omnipotent loving God who produced the book



in order to communicate His goodness and truth to other intelligent beings patterned after Himself. Certain ultimate truths are manifest in creation, others are hidden, but the purpose of the whole is to lead the soul back to her maker, and to unite the soul with Him who is her completion. Ascent to God is not a futile attempt to reach infinity by finite steps, but a fruitful striving to discern the infinite *through* its finite signs, even as the eye which is too weak to behold the sun sees everything else in its light, or the soul too weak to see God “face to face” may nevertheless see Him dimly “as in a mirror” (see 1 Cor. 13:9). Hence, although the number of steps from creature to Creator is infinite if taken with respect to “equality of equivalence” (no creature can be equivalent to God), yet if we consider creatures with respect to “the sight of the presence” of God, every creature is fashioned naturally to lead the beholder to God.<sup>18</sup>

From the foregoing, we will also realize that the Word of God is *more* than the source and archetype of all creation, as if we were to call Him a ‘blueprint.’ He is the *perfect expression* of creatures, who pre-exist in Him in the highest clarity and integrity. “A likeness of exemplarity and expression is found in its supreme form in the Creator with respect to the whole of creation, because that which is truth itself, being the supreme light, expresses all things in the most perfect way.”<sup>19</sup> Creatures are refracted light, divided by a medium and differentiated by matter. The Eternal Art by which the Father creates—“that Eternal Art which is the form that not only produces all things, but also conserves and differentiates them, for this is the Being that contains the form in all creatures, and is the rule that directs all things”—is the undivided light of pure act, in whom all distinct forms subsist in absolute simplicity.<sup>20</sup> In his discussion of the two different meanings of *truth* (“the entity of a being” and “the expressive light in intellectual knowledge”), Bonaventure shows the way in which the truth of a thing is found more fully in the exemplary Idea than in its existence as a being in the world:

In the first instance [“truth is whatever exists”], truth is the remote principle of knowledge. In the second instance [“truth

is a rightness perceptible only to the mind”], it is the proximate and immediate principle of knowledge. Therefore, when it is said that truth is found more fully in the real existence of a being than in its likeness, this is true if truth is taken in the first sense, but not if it is taken in the second sense. But that truth which is the proximate and immediate principle of knowledge is found more fully in that likeness which resides in the intellect. It is found particularly and in the supreme degree in that likeness which is the exemplar of creation. Such a likeness expresses the creature more perfectly than the created being itself can.<sup>21</sup>

Just as the mind of one making a judgment about something earthly must conituit (simultaneously intuit) its eternal reason in order to attain the immutability of divine truth, so the mind that would rightly read the book of creation must somehow see into the unchangeable exemplary likeness according to which the creature is constituted. Only through some such contact with the original Idea can we embrace the full truth of the Idea’s concrete expression. Knowledge is more than book learning; it requires one to penetrate beneath the surface of the letters to the authorial intention, in which is contained the true nature and purpose of the words employed. To know the truth of a work of art, one must attain the intention and conception of the artist responsible for producing it. This insight into the artist’s mind ensures the *rectitudo* necessary for *scientia*, and more importantly, for *sapientia*. “God is truly the eternal mirror which makes possible the knowledge of every intelligible being.”<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, we must learn to value the Idea above its manifestation, the Word above the whisper, if we are to secure any genuine knowledge of creatures. *Scientia* without reference to *signum* is inadequate, because it lacks foundation in God who is Truth. To be complete, understanding must be hermeneutical, for the world in its most fundamental structure is *signum*, a sign of God. As Bonaventure writes in *The Soul’s Journey*:

All creatures in this visible world lead the spirit of the contemplative and wise man into the eternal God. For creatures

are shadows, echoes, and pictures of that first, most powerful, most wise, and most perfect Principle, of that eternal Source, Light, Fullness, of that efficient, exemplary and ordering Art.<sup>23</sup>

A contemplative glimpse of the divine artistry is essential to any knowledge (*scientia*) worthy of the name. Augustine and his medieval followers particularly insist upon this point. Because the Word is the Exemplar through whom and in whom all things are made as witnesses to His glory, it follows that knowledge “in the Word,” the blessed or divine science, is superior to knowledge of the actual reality of things such as they are accessible to the empirical researcher. “Knowledge in the Word is like the light of day, while knowledge of the actual reality of things is like evening because every creature is dark in comparison with the divine light.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, argues Bonaventure, in order to read the book of creation rightly, we must contemplate “the Word begotten and made incarnate,” the very Word through whom and for whom all things are. Conversely, too, by looking upon the world with a vision purified in prayer, we shall see ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ’s divinity and humanity, and the integrity of the Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> One might even speak here of the difference between “unregenerate intellect” which takes things to be things and nothing more— things dead, empty, pointless—and “baptized intellect” which perceives the superluminous darkness and unreachable closeness of God in everything upheld by the word of His power and illuminated by His living presence. It is this profoundly *sacramental* understanding of the world that runs throughout Bonaventure’s theology. Every creature of the provident God is in itself, and can become for us, a road to the Father, an icon of Christ, and an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

## II. *The Effect of Art*

Bonaventure next examines the *effect* intended by the artificer in his work of art, as well as the lesson the believer may draw from this aspect of artistry.

If we consider the *effect*, we shall see therein the *pattern of human life*, for every artificer, indeed, aims to produce a work that is beautiful, useful, and enduring, and only when it possesses these three qualities is the work highly valued and acceptable. Corresponding to the above-mentioned qualities, in the pattern of life there must be found three elements: “knowledge, will, and unfaltering and persevering toil.” *Knowledge* renders the work beautiful; the *will* renders it useful; *perseverance* renders it lasting. The first resides in the rational, the second in the concupiscible, and the third in the irascible appetite.<sup>26</sup>

The works of God are beautiful, useful, and enduring. The goal for man is to make his own works similarly worthy. Aristotle, we recall, states not only that art imitates nature, but that nature, were it voluntary, would act in the manner of the artist; nature is like a doctor doctoring himself. Man behaves according to nature when he observes in it and takes to heart the models that emanate from the Creator and act as messengers of the divine goodness. The only preparation for supernature is nature gratefully welcomed and cultivated. By climbing the ladder of sensible and intelligible realities, we may rise to the contemplation of the Creator Himself, imperfectly in this life and perfectly in the next.

The decisive work entrusted to us, therefore, is none other than the making of *ourselves*. The life of virtue is the art which, when executed with knowledge, will, and persevering toil, suitably disposes us to be clay in the Potter’s hands (see Jer. 18:4-6; Rom. 9:21). This self-making takes place when we attend to habits of virtue and prayer, and seize one rung of the ladder after another to climb higher towards the eternal goodness. To reach God through His creatures is in itself a work of art, which has as its completion the New Man patterned after Christ, a state attainable only by the inward help of divine grace. To unmake oneself, on the contrary, is to neglect virtue and prayer, to walk blithely past the ladder with our eyes trained on the ground.

The Creator’s great work of art, the universe, now begins to reveal its *purpose* to us: it is meant to be an aid, a roadmap, by which the rational creature can escape from his impoverished condition of self-enclosure. It is certainly not an end in itself, nor

could knowledge of it be worthy of pursuit for its own sake, if that knowledge does not proceed further to embrace the ultimate reason behind the skein of proximate causes and effects. "The trace or creature is like a ladder for ascending to, or like a road for arriving at, God; but when one has arrived at the end, there is no further use for the way: therefore similarly, when man is high up, he does not need a ladder."<sup>27</sup> The world of created things is enduring in its own way. It has stability and an intrinsic order; and through the glorious Incarnation of the Word, God has sanctified the whole of visible created reality. But in their primordial essence, creatures are designed to illustrate, above all else, the knowledge, will, and labor of the Creator, His wisdom, love, and providence. They demand our active response by turning us towards their divine craftsman, who emits through them a call to worship and thanksgiving; they do not stand apart, as though on display for spectators.

Indeed, we have to take at face value Bonaventure's insistence that the world itself is abused and God sinned against when the "Maker of all things visible and invisible" is not actively sought in and through the things He has made. Although he unfolds many new insights into the symbolic-sacramental nature of reality, Bonaventure is content simply to reiterate the warnings of Church Fathers and medieval masters against the vice of *curiositas*. Christian thinkers—from the monks of the desert to the scholastics of the universities—regarded curiosity as an intellectual defect characterized by the desire to probe into what cannot or need not be known—vain, unprofitable, self-glorifying knowledge of worldly things for its own sake or for man's satisfaction, unreferred to the divine source which is our final end, the one end that gives purpose and meaning to all other things. St. Augustine laments: "There are some who, forsaking virtue and ignorant of what God is, or of the majesty of that nature which ever remains the same, imagine that they are doing something great if, with surpassing curiosity and keenness, they explore the whole mass of this body which we call the world. So great a pride is thus begotten, that one would think they dwelt in the very heavens about which they argue."<sup>28</sup> St. Jerome asks: "Is it not evident that a man who day and night wrestles with the dialectic art, the student of natural science whose

gaze pierces the heavens, walks in vanity of understanding and darkness of mind?”<sup>29</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux takes up the theme: “There are some who want knowledge for the sole purpose of knowing, and this is unseemly curiosity; and there are some who seek knowledge in order that they themselves may be known, and this is unseemly vanity. . . . But there are also those who seek knowledge in order to edify, and this is charity; and there are those who seek knowledge in order to be edified, and this is prudence.”<sup>30</sup> The appetite for knowledge becomes inordinate, says St. Thomas Aquinas, “when a man is withdrawn by a less profitable study from a study that is an obligation incumbent on him.”<sup>31</sup> The desire to learn is also inordinate, Thomas adds in the same place, “when a man desires to know the truth about creatures, without referring his knowledge to its due end, namely, the knowledge of God.”

True knowledge of the world leads inward to self-knowledge and upward to the beatific knowledge of the Creator. This theme is taken up by St. Augustine: what good is knowledge of anything else unless it leads me to understand who and what I myself am, and what good is self-knowledge unless it leads me to understand Him in whose image I have been made and towards whom I am journeying? The beauty of each thing in the world announces that it is not God but rather comes from God, who is Beauty Itself, the goal of our every longing. The knowledge of worldly things has its entire value and justification as a stimulus to worship, a furnace of purification, an enrichment of spiritual wisdom. Bonaventure expresses the same insight when he speaks of the world as a book in which the devout soul can read, albeit dimly, the wisdom of God. The book of the world is thus placed beside the book of Scripture as one of two routes for the soul’s journey into God (the *itinerarium mentis in Deum*). The whole point of reading a book is to get at the *meaning* it contains within and beyond the printed letters; the word is a sign of something real and points to that reality. Imagine reading a book in one’s own language, not in order to know something *other* than letters and syllables, but just in order to linger over the little black dots and lines. This would be somewhat perverse. Yet if Bonaventure is right in saying that all of creation is a *signum* upon which the divine signature is inscribed, if all of creation is

a vast intelligible *opus* meant to raise the soul above itself to the author of all things, then the only proper way for a Christian to approach the natural world is to use it as the basis of spiritual exercises. It would also follow that the study of natural things “for their own sake” is nearly as perverse as staring at the little black dots and lines in a book. There would be no point in getting caught up in the motions and dispositions of bodies, when their ultimate purpose is to point beyond themselves to their Creator, whence all things come and whither they must return.

Although it may be customary for some to think of heaven in isolationist terms—“God and me”—Bonaventure teaches that the *whole* of God’s creation culminates in the beatific vision, where all good things reach their ultimate fruition, their peak of harmony with each other. Beatitude does not destroy created nature but completes it by enabling the mind cleansed of sin to perceive the divine presence permeating the universe God has made. “The blessed know the creature, yet they do not remain in the creature, but return to God.”<sup>32</sup> While the Christian wayfarer comes to know God *through* His creatures, which is an imperfect state of knowledge, the blessed who have attained the end of their journey see all lower and higher beings *in* the God who is “all in all.” This is the difference of vision between the *viator* and the *comprehensor*; the pilgrim and the blessed.

To know God *in* the creature is to know his presence and influence in the creature. And this is proper half-fully to wayfarers, but perfectly to those who comprehend [in heaven]. . . To know God *through* the creature, however, is to be elevated from knowledge of the creature to knowledge of God as by the means of an intermediate ladder. And this is properly the possession of wayfarers.<sup>33</sup>

The world around us is a sign, a meaningful image, but it also *does* something for us: it assists us in our journey, functioning as a ladder, a road, a mirror, by which we may rise to a knowledge of the greatest and best, the God and Father of all, that we may not be left orphans, strangers in a strange land, but rather may be guided as by the hand to a better place.

It must be said that as the cause shines forth in the effect, and as the wisdom of the artificer is manifested in his work, so God, who is the artificer and cause of the creature, is known through it. And the reason for this is double, one is because of *agreement*, the other because of *need*: because of agreement, for every creature leads to God more than to anything else; because of need, for, since God as the supremely spiritual light could not be known in his spirituality by the understanding, which is almost material, the soul needs to know him through the creature.<sup>34</sup>

Philosophers speak of the *manuductio* (leading by the hand) used in the course of an argument to make a difficult point clearer with appropriate examples or simpler concepts. For Bonaventure, the entire universe is a *manuductio* given by God to lead man into the upper reaches of contemplation and beatitude. The ‘argument’ or meaning of human life is not easily discovered and followed, and there are many who miss it or despair altogether of finding it. The loving condescension of the Creator has made it possible to find the road, climb the ladder, see faintly into the eternal mirror, and attain the end for which we were brought into being. The Psalms burst with refrains in praise of a world that leads us back to the Maker, in whom, as King Solomon learned after much tribulation, the only explanation for *being* is to be found. With the advent of the Incarnate Word, the *manuductio* has become infinitely more tangible and palpable. When the world’s beauty failed to serve its purpose due to human blindness, God sent His only Son, the Word in whom that beauty is inscribed and from whom it emanates, to lead captivity captive, to teach men *how* to read the book of creation rightly, how to ascend through it to reach its Author. As St. Athanasius in *On the Incarnation* and St. Anselm in *Why God Became Man* had done before, so too Bonaventure demonstrates the sublime fittingness of the Word’s becoming flesh to lead men back to the Father from whom they are estranged by the darkness of sin and error. God’s greatest work of art is the New Creation, the Second Adam, through whom mankind can return to its original purpose in the artistic economy of creation.



The pattern for human life, then, is to be located in the structure of creation as a whole, both in what is accessible to sensation, and in what is accessible to the penetrating gaze of mind. The work *man* must make of himself unto the glory of God is emblazoned in the world under his fingertips, glowing in his eyes, resounding in his ears. In the mechanical and fine arts over which man has dominion, and in the divine art according to which man is made and directed, the pattern of human life is exhibited for our instruction and imitation.

Now since it is necessary to ascend before we can descend on Jacob's ladder, let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, setting the whole visible world before us as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the Supreme Creative Artist. Thus we shall be as true Hebrews passing over from Egypt to the land promised to the fathers; we shall be Christians passing over with Christ from this world to the Father; we shall be lovers of the Wisdom Who calls to us and says: "Pass over to me all ye that desire me, and be filled with my fruits. For by the greatness and the beauty of the creature, the Creator of them may be seen so as to be known thereby."<sup>35</sup>

The world is a theater of instruction. We need only take heed of the playwright's purpose, and not lose ourselves in the flourishes and lights of theatricality. The best use we could make of the drama of the world is to endeavor to write our own lives worthily with virtuous deeds, to seek out the will of the divine playwright in whose script we are meant to play a vital role.

### *III. The Advantage of Art*

Describing the fruits of a work of art, Bonaventure draws our attention to three elements sought by the craftsman:

If we consider the advantage, we shall find the union of the soul with God, for every artificer who fashions a work does so that he may derive praise, benefit, or delight therefrom—a threefold purpose which corresponds to the three formal

objects of the appetites, a noble good, a useful good, and an agreeable good. It was for this same threefold reason that God made the soul rational, namely, that of its own accord, it might praise Him, serve Him, find delight in Him, and be at rest; and this takes place through charity. "He that abideth in it, abideth in God and God in him"; in such a way that there is found therein a kind of wondrous union and from that union comes a wondrous delight, for in the Book of Proverbs it is written, "My delights were to be with the children of men."<sup>36</sup>

Just as the best craftsman orders his actions to producing the utmost nobility, usefulness, and delight of which his art is capable, in order that through his works the artist may be honored and the recipient benefitted, so too the Almighty has ordered the whole of creation to show forth the supreme nobility of the Creator, the necessity of following Him, and the delight of dwelling in His courts. The Divine Artificer produced all lower creatures for the sake of man, and man for the sake of Himself. Our natural appetites, far from being a stumbling block along the journey, are the very threads the Maker suspends from heaven in order to lead us and bind us to Himself in friendship. Man's desire for the noble, the useful, and the agreeable are components of his one abiding desire to rest in beatitude, and may be seen as a threefold path to the attainment of perfection, as well as a threefold reflection of the Creator's goodness. God made the soul rational, not only that it might return to Him, but also that it might bring with it the whole of the lower creation, which attains to its final purpose in the inner life of man, the summit of the material universe. The world follows us in our journey; it too reaches perfection in and through us when we have used it rightly. And even as sensible objects are exalted through the knower's spiritual (immaterial) reception of their forms, the soul of man is exalted through his journeying back to God in whom alone the soul can rest. Whatever is noble, useful, or pleasant in the world is traceable to man's provident Maker; whatever is noble, useful, or pleasant in the works of human hands is a distant reflection of the all-sufficing goodness of God.<sup>37</sup> As St. Paul admonishes: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever

lovely, whatsoever of good fame . . . think on these things” (Phil. 4:8). It may even be said that this Bonaventuran (and Pauline) appreciation of the good things of God’s creation and man’s artistry is what underlies the Catholic conception of a liberal education, where the light of supernatural revelation infuses and perfects natural experience, skill, and wisdom.

This continual activity of returning to the source of nature and of grace effects an ecstatic union of Creator and creature, lover and beloved, Bridegroom and Bride. “If you wish to know how these things may come about, ask grace, not learning; desire, not the understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligence in reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher,” Bonaventure counsels.<sup>38</sup> No *reading* of the book of creation or the book of Scripture will of itself effect that union of the soul and God which is the crowning completion of man. One might even say that God provides the books of nature and Scripture for the sake of awakening man to an end beyond everything he is capable of seeing or knowing in this life (“eye hath not seen, nor ear heard”), an end beyond the letter, hidden in the depths of the Spirit, the Dionysian darkness of God, with which Bonaventure concludes his last meditation in *The Soul’s Journey*. The Book serves a recollective end: it is the *Author* whom we must recollect, for nothing other than the beatifying vision of God—not the words of ambassadors or emissaries—will satisfy the human heart. To the holy man, the world in its fiery splendor is but the outskirts of the *real* world, his heavenly inheritance.

And I heard a voice from heaven again speaking to me, and saying: Go, and take the book that is open, from the hand of the angel who standeth upon the sea, and upon the earth. And I went to the angel, saying unto him, that he should give me the book. And he said to me: Take the book, and eat it up: and it shall make thy belly bitter, but in thy mouth it shall be sweet as honey. (Rev. 10:8-9)

The world is sweet to the taste but bitter to the stomach, because it is infinitely less than the supreme Good for which man hungers, the sole Good in whom his appetite can rest. The words of the two books God has entrusted to man must be transformed into the flesh

of the believer, that the commandments written on stony tablets may be inscribed on the fleshy tablets of the heart (see 2 Cor. 3:3). Bonaventure implores Christians to imitate the Apostle Paul, who held all things as naught, save Christ crucified; who sought not earthly wisdom, but the folly of the Cross (see 1 Cor. 1-3; Gal. 2:19-20 and 6:14).

To the extent that His reasons have been made known to us, we profess truly that God creates in order to manifest His glory and communicate His goodness. St. Augustine saw deeply into the mystery of God's power over the world: while man can make signs to point to things, God alone can create a world in which *things* are *signs* pointing towards Himself. Because the final cause of each being is the First Being, nothing in the universe lacks an appointed place in showing forth the glory and goodness of God: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows forth His praise" (Ps. 18:1). Should the creature be man who is *capax Dei*, 'capable of [receiving] God,' he will have a higher calling still: to partake of the divine blessedness, the wedding feast of the Lamb.

As we have seen, Bonaventure teaches that the main purpose of the world is to lead the soul to God. Without the illumination of faith, however, we would not necessarily discover that the world points beyond itself. In the realm of unaided reason, we can have but limited knowledge of the way things are in themselves. With the eyes of faith, we can begin to understand the way things truly are in the mind of their maker, what they are intended to signify and accomplish. For example, our reflections may lead us to see that the higher powers of the human soul form a triad (memory, will, and intellect), without yielding any indication that they are an *image* of a triune deity. "It may be said that knowing the soul is either according to that which it *is*; and this knowledge is of reason; or else it is according to that of which it is an *image*, and that knowledge is of faith alone."<sup>39</sup> If we need faith in order to discern the image of God in the *soul*—that which is, in a way, closest to us—all the more do we need faith to recognize the full purpose of the universe at large. In fact, faith is needed no less urgently for the right use of the book of creation than for the right understanding of Holy Scripture. To the eye unilluminated by grace, the world's

beauty will be seen, not as a mirror or ladder, but as an end in itself. Perhaps it will be approached as though it were a museum for the collector of curiosities or a public bath for the devotee of pleasure, but it will not be appreciated as an extension of the hand of God inviting man to return to his origin and destiny. "I wish to warn them," Bonaventure says to his readers, "that the mirror of the external world put before them is of little or no avail unless the mirror of our soul has been cleansed and polished."<sup>40</sup> Why must we bear this warning in mind?

For as long as our reason is turned towards higher things, it is illuminated, cleansed, and perfected; as long as it gazes upon the eternal laws and the unchangeable character of divine power and equity, it is strengthened and made whole in the good. Yet whenever our reason is turned toward lower things, namely to sensibility and the flesh, it is dragged about and becomes soft.<sup>41</sup>

Those who heed the warning and strive to purify the mind's eye will see and be guided by the manifold presence of God in the world and its daily activities, from the constitution of plants and animals, to the highest reaches of meditation and discourse, to the humblest tasks of homemaking, craft, and labor. As Bonaventure rapturously declares,

All creatures, whether they are viewed in terms of their defects or in terms of their perfectibility, in voices most loud and strong, cry out the existence of God whom they need because of their deficiency and from whom they receive their completion. Therefore, in accordance with the greater or lesser degree of fullness which they possess, some cry out the existence of God with a loud voice; others cry out yet louder; while still others make the loudest cry.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I say “artisan” instead of “artist” because the latter word in English has come to be applied almost exclusively to the so-called fine arts (drama, music, painting, sculpture, architecture), whereas Bonaventure intends to treat of all arts without exception, including “manual arts” (e.g., agriculture and metallurgy) and “intellectual arts” (e.g., the seven classical liberal arts, logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). In fact, the medieval meaning of “art” can include what we now distinguish into arts, crafts, and sciences, insofar as a certain process of making—whether making boots, making poems, or making arguments—can be found in all of them.

<sup>2</sup> *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, trans. Sr. Emma Thérèse Healy, in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973), §11, p. 465.

<sup>3</sup> For other valuable studies of this aspect of Bonaventure’s thought, see Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure* (Paterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965); Ewert Cousins, “Myth and Symbol in Bonaventure,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 45 (1971); David E. Ost, “Bonaventure: The Aesthetic Synthesis,” *Franciscan Studies* 36 (1976); Clara Stuart, “Seeing God in the World: The Symbolic Spirituality of St. Francis,” *The Catholic Faith* 3.5 (September/October 1997).

<sup>4</sup> *Quaestiones disputatae de scientia Christi*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute of Saint Bonaventure University, 1992), qu. 2, arg. 2, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> *In II Sent.*, d. 1, art. 1, qu. 1, arg. 1, trans. Timothy B. Noone, in manuscript.

<sup>6</sup> *De reductione*, §12, p. 465.

<sup>7</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 2, ad 1, trans. Richard McKeon, *Selections from Medieval Philosophers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), vol. ii, pp. 131-132.

<sup>8</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, body, pp. 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> See the formula of creation in *Breviloquium*, II, §1, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 3, arg. neg. 10, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, ad 2, pp. 91-92.

<sup>12</sup> Answering an objection about the multiplication of the Word, St. Bonaventure indicates an important difference between the divine Word and a divine Idea: “To the objection that the Word ought to be multiplied in the same way that the Ideas are multiplied by reason of the object connoted, it must be said that there is no parallel, because the term *Word* signifies that power in God which is expressive and efficacious and which, viewed both in terms of its own being and as a principle of knowledge, refers to the reality of God. But an *Idea*, or a reason, signifies the expression or likeness” (*De scientia Christi*, qu. 3, ad 19, p. 113).

<sup>13</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, dub. iv, McKeon p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, arg. aff. 10, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> *De Trinitate*, VI, c. 10, n. 11, quoted in *De scientia Christi*, qu. 3, arg. neg. 3, p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., *The Soul's Journey into God* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute of Saint Bonaventure University, 1956), cap. ii, §9, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 3, ad 2, McKeon pp. 137-138.

<sup>18</sup> See *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 2, ad 4, McKeon pp. 132-133.

<sup>19</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, ad 5, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> *Itinerarium*, cap. ii, §9, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, ad 9, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, arg. aff. 9, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> *Itinerarium*, cap. ii, §11, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Bonaventure in *De scientia Christi*, qu. 2, ad 9, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> *De reductione*, §12, p. 466.

<sup>26</sup> *De reductione*, §13, p. 466.

<sup>27</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 3, ad opp. 2, McKeon p. 136.

<sup>28</sup> *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Super epistolam ad Ephesios*, 4.17.

<sup>30</sup> *In Cantica*, Sermon 36.3.

<sup>31</sup> *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae qu. 167 a. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *In I Sent.*, *ibid.*, arg. 1 regarding the state of blessedness, McKeon p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> *In I Sent.*, *ibid.*, body, McKeon p. 136.

<sup>34</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 2, body, McKeon p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> *Itinerarium*, cap. i, §9, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> *De reductione*, §13, p. 466.

<sup>37</sup> “The agent and the end are correlative causes; that is why what is not produced by means of another is not ordered to something else. But all things are ordered to another according to the totality of their being, since they seek the perfection of the good according to the totality of their being. And one finds no end to this process except in the Highest Good” (*In II Sent.*, d. 1, art. 1, qu. 1, arg. aff. 5, trans. Noone).

<sup>38</sup> *Itinerarium*, cap. vii, §6, p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 3, pt. 1, qu. 4, McKeon p. 141.

<sup>40</sup> *Itinerarium*, Prologue, §4, pp. 33-35.

<sup>41</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 24, art. 2, qu. 2, body, trans. Noone.

<sup>42</sup> *Quæstiones disputatæ de mysterio Trinitatis*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute at Saint Bonaventure University, 1979), qu. 1, art. 1, body, p. 116.

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