Poetry and the Eternal Art  
A Note on the Work of St. Bonaventure

Just as the poem takes on the forms through which theology considers sacred history and just as the poet, united to his audience through the Church, seeks to refashion both himself and his audience through the sacred history he relates, so the object of poetry itself is transformed by theology. Poetry, when it comes into relationship with medieval theology, is not an autonomous art, but is assumed as part of the endeavor of the Christian soul into being a means by which he may reach eternal delight. An aesthetic theory appropriate to the nature of the medieval religious lyric, including the religious lyrics composed in the ancient classical tradition, can be formed only when beauty is defined in its relationship to the Eternal Art. If this is not attempted, then the aesthetic proportions will always remain hidden, as they have been, in what seems to the modern reader to be the non-poetic activities of the commentator and theologian. The possibilities can only be adumbrated here by using the work of one medieval theologian to suggest the direction such a study might take.

The theology of St. Bonaventure provides an excellent example of how an aesthetic theory appropriate to the medieval religious lyric might be defined, for his theology is a definition of the Eternal Art. According to Bonaventure the end of the Eternal Art in its relationship to man is delight, or union with God in the beatific vision. In discoursing about the Eternal Art, Bonaventure works in a way that corresponds to the aesthetician who discourses about the art of poetry. At the same time, in discoursing about the
Eternal Art, Bonaventure works in a way analogous to the poet, because, like
the poet's poem, his theological work provides a figure which is proportion­
ate to the delight he defines and which is the means by which he moves the
mind and affections of his reader to God.

Bonaventure's Breviloquium is a summa of sacred history in the objective
mode of theology. In it the theologian defines the breadth, length, height and
depth of Holy Scripture, that through this knowledge his reader may "arrive
at the fullness of knowledge and plenitude of love for the Most Blessed
Trinity whence the desires of all holy men tend and in whom is found the end
and complement of all truth and goodness." As he defines the dimensions of
Holy Scripture, Bonaventure orders his discourse according to the beauty of
the plan of sacred history, to consider first the Holy Trinity, then the
creation, fall, redemption, sanctification and last judgment of man; thus the
structure of the work is proportionate to the subject matter of the work, in
the same way as we have seen the structure of the religious lyric to be
proportionate to its subject.  

An example of the subjective mode of theology can be seen in Bonaven­
ture's Itinerarium mentis in Deum, where he formulates by a hierarchy of
value the seven stages of the soul's contemplation of God. The first three
ways of perceiving God are in the mirror of creation: (1) considering
creatures outside of man as the vestiges of God; (2) considering God within
creatures in the way the world enters man's soul; and (3) seeing the image
of God in man's natural powers, his memory, intellect and elective faculty.
After these first three steps of the journey of the mind to God, Bonaventure
introduces sacred history, and in the fourth he describes how man's ability to
see God through His image imprinted on our natural powers was dimmed
by original sin. Man's soul could not be perfectly lifted up had not Christ
become a ladder restoring the first ladder that had been broken by Adam. In
the last three steps Bonaventure describes the restoration of the soul's spiritual
senses through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, by
which the soul may mount up to contemplate the unity and trinity of God.
The proportion basic to Bonaventure's discourse is that of man as he beholds
and is lifted up to God, a proportion similar to that which we found in
"Leuedy, for þare blisse/ þat þu heddest at þe frume." Bonaventure's work,
organized into six corresponding ascending parts and a seventh that speaks
of how the mind must pass over not only the visible world, but even beyond
itself into God, is the proportioned figure of the ascent of the mind to God.  

The proportion basic to the Itinerarium is analogous to the proportionate
relationship of the poem to its audience. And like the poet, the theologian
CONCLUSION

Bonaventure is both the forming agent of his work and united to the audience whom he seeks to refashion through it.

In the Breviloquium the categories Bonaventure uses to discourse about theology are those which consider the Eternal Art as a source of delight, and he summarizes theology (the work of the Eternal Art) in terms of three proportionate correspondences which he explains in his Itinerarium mentis in Deum are necessary for a work to cause its beholder delight. These principles given in the Itinerarium, which I will describe briefly, are strikingly analogous to the general principles of form in the religious lyric as I have shown them above, and it is in the Itinerarium's definition of Beauty as it leads to Eternal Delight that we can find the outlines of a theory which might provide the basis for an aesthetic theory of the medieval religious lyric.

The definition is put forth in Chapter II of the Itinerarium, which concerns the second stage of the journey of the mind to God, "The Consideration of God in His Footsteps in this Visible World." Bonaventure uses man's apprehension of created beauty as the foundation for his theory of beauty in the Eternal Art. (1) The first proportion causing delight is that of formal beauty, a proportionate correspondence between the original and the similitude which emanates from it. In the Eternal Art, Christ is the image of the Father, Who generates Him. (Christ is beauty—speciositas.) What we have called the figure of the poem, the proportion of a poem to its theological subject—the coming of the Son of God into history and His redemption of man—can be seen to be defined by this first proportion. (2) The second proportion is that of the fitness of the similitude generated to the one who beholds it. In the Eternal Art, Christ becomes man in order to refashion man to share the life of God. (Christ is sweetness—suavitas.) We saw this sweetness of Christ embodied in the "style" falling of the dew on the flower in "I syng of a myden hat is makeles." It was embodied also by the Child's tale widening Mary's comprehension of sorrow and joy in "Als i lay vp-on a nith" and by the other poems in Friar Grimestone's preaching book which meditate on Christ's love for man through His suffering the mortality and frailty of His humanity. The religious lyric itself, as it is shaped for and reshapes its audience, demonstrates this proportion. (3) The third proportionate correspondence is a proportion of power, the capacity of the similitude generated to satisfy the needs of its beholder. Christ satisfies man’s deepest need, for in Him man experiences Eternal Delight. (Christ is nourishment—salubritas.) The representation of Christ as the fruit of Mary’s womb expresses this proportion. The proportion was reflected in the petitions
of the poems and their power as prayer to achieve for the poet and his audience “eune blis,” “loye þat is endeles,” the final union with Christ in heaven. And it was reflected in the apprehension of the poem itself in so far as the poem was a figure of delight.

Finally, the work of St. Bonaventure can provide us not only with a theoretical framework, but with a specific illustration of how poetry relates to the Eternal Art. In his meditation *Lignum vitae* he composes a poem through which to meditate on the Tree of Life. The work begins with a Prologue in which the author explains the purpose of the meditation and which also includes an explanation of a visual diagram of the Tree of Life that accompanies the meditation. The Prologue is then followed by the poem, which Bonaventure uses as his table of contents. Using the “wood of the Holy Gospels,” the poem describes the mysteries of the origin, passion and glorification of Christ through the figure of the Tree of Life with its twelve fruits, which are aspects of the virtue of Christ. It moves from the past to the present and figures the future, concluding with a prayer for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The meditation itself then follows. This consists of a line by line interpretation of the poem. The principle of *Lignum vitae* suggests our modern method of textual explication, only the poem is conceived to have a far different function; and Bonaventure’s conception of poetry will serve to recall again the general points about the relationship of theology to poetry drawn from the preceding study of the Middle English religious lyric.

In his Prologue, describing the purpose of his meditation and his reason for using poetry, Bonaventure says that he works so that man will not be forgetful of the Lord’s passion, nor ungrateful. He intends through his meditation to awaken the affections and the senses to God: to vivify the memory, to sharpen and form the intellect, and so to fill the will with love that the soul can truly say the words of the bride in the Canticle: “Fasciculus myrrhae dilectus meus mihi, inter ubera mea commorabitur.” For the modern exegete the goal of his work is to discover the meaning of the poem. For the theologian of the Eternal Art the goal is beyond the work. The poem and the meditation are a means to bring the soul to God. For St. Bonaventure the endeavor of poetry and theology is single. His poem is incorporated into and becomes the form and the source of the theology with which he explicates and meditates on the Tree of Life. And his poem is used as the proportionate figure of the subject, analogous in sacred history to the created universe reformed by Christ, through which the affections and the mind are raised to God.