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Hugh of St. Victor's *De tribus diebus* on beauty, image, and the divine

Abstract

The paper examines Hugh of St. Victor's De tribus diebus as one of the earliest medieval attempts at a theology of beauty. In this treatise, Hugh reframes the image not as a deceptive imitation but as a medium of divine revelation. Created beauty is portrayed as a trace of the Creator, guiding the soul toward contemplation and union with God. Against (radically) dualistic tendencies that entirely dismissed the physical world and its beauty, Hugh affirms its philosophico-theological significance, situating it within a Christocentric framework in which the visible world participates in divine Wisdom. By comparing Hugh's vision with Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's philosophy of images, the study highlights a continuity across time: both affirm the key value of images; not merely as objects to behold, but as channels through which humans perceive, engage with, and are drawn toward the transcendent source of reality and meaning.

Keywords

Beauty, Hugh of St. Victor, J.-J. Wunenburger

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1. Introduction: why Hugh of St. Victor and his *De tribus diebus*?

In *De tribus diebus*, more than in any other text of his corpus, Hugh of St. Victor presents a theologically charged understanding of the image – not as a false imitation, but as a spiritual medium that enables the soul's ascent to God. While Hugh of St. Victor's other major works likewise affirm that creation is imbued with traces of God's majesty and that the soul must ascend a ladder toward Him – whether in an eminently epistemological mode (*Didascalicon*) or a more theological and contemplative one (*De sacramentis*, *De archa Noe*, *De vanitate rerum mundanarum*) – no treatise is as aesthetically significant as *De tribus diebus*. It is there that Hugh reclaims the image's ontological value by grounding it in creation's participation in divine Wisdom. For him, visible beauty – especially in nature – is not (only) a distraction but a revelation: a material trace of the Creator that draws the soul toward contemplation and union with the divine. Central to this view is the *simulacrum*, the term predominantly used by Hugh to convey the idea of image in the *De tribus diebus*¹: a reflection that leads rather than misleads, shaped by a Christocentric vision in which the visible world is oriented toward transcendence.

Although brief and often overlooked, *De tribus diebus* represents one of the earliest medieval attempts to develop a theology of beauty. In the vast intellectual landscape of the early twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor emerges as a distinctive voice, particularly for what De Bruyne considers to be “the first treatise on aesthetics of the Middle Ages” (De Bruyne 1998: 203). His work is remarkable not only for its intrinsic value, but because it stands as one of the earliest attempts to describe in such detailed terms the various ways in which beauty manifests itself in nature (Liccaro 1969: 39). Dominique Poirel repeatedly emphasises that Hugh stands apart from his contemporaries, for, although in Hugh's view beauty serves the purpose of leading the soul to God, he does not “hastily overlook” the beauties of creation. Rather, he lingers over them, offering “loving descriptions of beautiful things found ‘here, in the created part of the universe’”. It is no coincidence, Poirel notes again, that half of the text is

¹ In *De tribus diebus*, Hugh of Saint Victor consistently employs the term *simulacrum* (plural *simulacra*) as his principal designation for “image”, especially in reference to the created world as a representation of the divine attributes. While other cognate terms – such as *imago*, *representatio*, *speculum*, and *signum* – are attested elsewhere in Hugh's corpus, they do not serve as his preferred lexical choices in this treatise, each carrying distinct semantic nuances and theological resonances.

dedicated to a continuous sense of wonder at the beauty of creation – light, sky, sun, stars, and colourful flowers (Poirel 2018: 96).

It is precisely in these meticulous descriptions that Poirel identifies Hugh's particular sensitivity, his willingness to dwell at length on things others often pass over. This is where Hugh of St. Victor's uniqueness lies: he believes that even at this early (and mundane) level of reflection and experience, fundamental theological issues are already being addressed. As Liccaro affirms, "such a broad praise of the beauty of nature deserves to be taken into account in the history of medieval thought" (1969: 59).

In this essay, I analyse how Hugh's conception of the image in *De tribus diebus* challenges (radically) dualistic tendencies that entirely dismiss material beauty and instead affirms its theological significance. I place his thought in conversation with contemporary perspectives, namely that of J.-J. Wunenburger, who similarly argue that images have an ontological – not merely representational – function, which is deeply imbued with theological (specifically Christological) significance. By recovering Hugh's account, I show how theological reflection on beauty and the image in the early twelfth century offers a valuable framework for understanding how material forms can disclose and bear transcendent meaning.

2. Medieval "pansemioticism" and the book of nature

During the Middle Ages, up to the 12th century, nature was imbued with profound symbolic significance: it was seen as the keeper of divine mysteries. That epoch perceived nature not merely as a tangible entity but rather as an allegorical construct wherein each phenomenon and constituent element served as a symbolic conduit, often transcending the bounds of the corporeal world². John Huizinga articulates this thematic paradigm by clarifying that in the medieval cognitive framework, the pursuit of understanding pertaining to the essence or foundation of phenomena did not entail a scrutiny of its intrinsic composition nor an investigation into its historical genesis. Rather, it entailed a gaze heavenward, conceptualising nature as a manifestation of a realm of ideas (Huizinga 2016: 184), or again:

² Umberto Eco (2016) refers to this tendency as *pansemioticism*.

The Middle Ages never forgot that all things would be absurd, if their meaning were exhausted in their function and their place in the phenomenal world, if by their essence they did not reach into a world familiar to us as well, independently of religious convictions: as an indefinite feeling which may be called up at any moment, by the sound of raindrops on the leaves or by the lamplight on a table. (Huizinga 2016: 172-3)

To grasp the essence of the medieval cultural milieu, it is imperative to start with an elucidation of the religious symbol. The term “symbol”, originating from the Greek *symballlein*, “to put together” and the correspondent noun *symbolon*, was employed by early Christian theologians, such as Origen in his *De principiis* (Origen 1980: 305), to denote enigmatic or unforeseen elements intrinsic to the Sacred Scriptures, surpassing the confines of empirical perception and sensory experience. This conceptual framework assumes paramount significance in the theological treatises of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, wherein the symbol emerges as a pivotal instrument for elucidating the ineffable nature of the transcendent deity through the mediation of mundane phenomena, which he sees as “veils”.

Ladner, analysing the contribution of the medieval Christian tradition, illustrates the use of symbols as bridges connecting sensory experience with the divine dimension (Ladner 1979: 223). According to him, the Christian Middle Ages create a symbolic universe in which everything has meaning or refers to something else (Ladner 1979: 224-5). Paul Tillich, in addition, defines the symbol as an element that represents something other than itself, but whose meaning opens otherwise inaccessible levels of reality. He distinguishes two fundamental levels in any religious symbol: the transcendent level, going beyond empirical reality, and the immanent level, which is found in the encounter with reality (Tillich 1955: 191).

However, there is a danger that religious symbols, by participating in what they refer to, tend to replace what they represent (Tillich 1955: 193)³. This risk of symbol idolatry is mitigated by Umberto Eco, who sees the medieval symbol as an access to the divine but not as an absolute revelation (Eco 2016: 109)⁴. Pseudo-Dionysius is in this case the most in-

³ Taliaferro (2012: 99) remarks that both in Old and New Testament there are warnings against a certain kind of beauty (*Prov.* 31:30; *1 Sam.* 16:7; *1 Pet.* 3:3-4), which is not innocent.

⁴ Although an English translation of this work exists, I refer to the original Italian text because the translation omits certain passages relevant to this discussion, such as Eco's

fluent source (Otten 2016: 259-60; Poirel 2013: 380-2; d'Alverny 1953: 42-5). He provides a formal scheme for understanding theological or mystical transcendence (Von Balthasar 1984: 154), closely paralleling the view of Plotinus of the cosmos as an image of its transcendent archetype. For pseudo-Dionysius, everything refers to a vision, but this vision is always veiled, both in the world and in the Church and its sacraments (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite 1991: 8, 195-6). This veil is not seen as negative but as a protection for the divine mysteries that man cannot hope to fully comprehend in this earthly life (Von Balthasar 1984: 169, 179). John Scotus Eriugena, who comments on the texts of pseudo-Dionysius, emphasises the importance of veils as necessary to perceive divine revelation, a dynamic called *manuductio materialis* (Baron 1963: 184, 186), an adaptation to the limitation of the human mind. God, despite being incomprehensible, chooses to manifest himself in a manner suited to human imperfection and weakness, through *theophanies*. In Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, the world is to be understood as a divine metaphor (Iohannes Scotus Eriugena 1996: 9, 12, 70-1)⁵.

The idea of theophany is again central in the theory of pseudo-Dionysius, since "the whole of reality, all that is, is theophany, the manifestation or the appearance of God" (Perl 2007: 32)⁶. The view of the world as an image of God, or of God's attributes, is fundamental in the philosophy of Hugh of St. Victor since he will build his entire Trinitarian aesthetics – as Boyd T. Coolman (2014) defines it – on this very concept.

In both Scotus Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor, theophanies and symbols are to be found both in nature and in the Scriptures (Poirel 2013: 393-410). Both these dimensions are necessary to get to know, within the limits of our finitude, God. Indeed, they are complementary, since nature reflects God's light, but "it is through reason" – namely, through the reading of the Scriptures – "that one ascends to the source of this light, valuing the display of the invisible through visible creation" (Baron 1963: 212).

conception of the symbol as a vestibule, an access to divine realities, which is nonetheless "not an epiphany of the numinous" (Eco 2016: 109).

⁵ In this regard Werner Beierwaltes (1977: 147) declares: "[...] this means that all created being and consequently everything which exists as a symbol, image, or sign is not a light which subsists by its own means, but a light which exists only 'by participation in a true, substantial light, which shines intelligibly everywhere and in all things'".

⁶ As De Bruyne comments on Eriugena's *Expositiones in hierarchiam coelestem*, II, 1203-5: "God is so transcendent that everything we say about him has to be intended literally, but figuratively: *non tamen proprie, sed translative*" (De Bruyne 1946: 351).

The conceptualisation of the cosmos as perpetually alluding to a realm beyond the natural constitutes the foundational premise upon which the metaphorical construct of the “book of nature” is based. Nevertheless, the genesis of this motif predates the onset of the Middle Ages, with antecedents discernible in the ancient Mesopotamian worldview, wherein celestial bodies were construed as manifestations of “heavenly writing” (Rochberg 2004: 1-2; Sherman 2022: 96). Later, through the scriptural narratives expounded in the Gospel of John and the epistolary corpus of Paul, the Christological dimension emerges as the linchpin for deciphering and comprehending the intricacies of the created order that is “encountered through a complex tissue of meanings and symbols” (Sherman 2022: 98).

The ascent towards the divine is articulated as a journey facilitated through the act of *reading*, wherein engagement with both the Book of Nature and the Scriptures becomes imperative, especially within the context of the post-lapsarian condition. This theological perspective finds resonance in the writings of Hugh of St. Victor, for whom reading signifies a pathway to knowledge. Central to Hugh’s framework is the notion that the process of comprehension commences with an exploration of proximate realities, serving as foundational stepping stones toward the apprehension of more elusive truths: *Doctrina autem ab his quae magis nota sunt incipit, et per eorum notitiam ad scientiam eorum quae latent pertingit* (Hugo de Sancto Victore 1939: 59). Hugh does not stop at reading the Scriptures but also glimpses a multiplicity of overlapping senses – according to the tradition of the multiple senses found in the Scriptures (de Lubac 1959; Gargano 2009) – in the book of nature: the aim of Hugh’s texts, especially the *Didascalicon* and the *De tribus diebus*, is therefore to invite anyone who observes creatures to overcome the state of superficial admiration in order to experience a profound and, Poirel notes, more theological admiration, instead (Poirel 2011: 377).

3. *The role of beauty in Hugh of St. Victor's De tribus diebus*

In Hugh of St. Victor’s *De tribus diebus*, the idea of image occupies a central position in the theological exposition concerning the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and divinity. This centrality stems from the foundational premise of a cosmos wherein every constituent element maintains an inherent reference to its Creator. Moreover, Hugh contends that the

terrestrial realm of creation serves a pedagogical function, guiding individuals toward comprehending the divine, while acknowledging their inherent limitations. More specifically, Hugh delineates a methodology for contemplating the eternal mysteries by discerning their manifestations within the temporal realm, as already done by pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite 1990: 115, 149; 1991: 198-9).

3.1. *Creation and salvation*

A foundational aspect of Hugh of St. Victor's theological framework concerns the dual authorship of God, delineated within two primary narratives: the *opus conditionis* (work of creation) and the *opus restaurationis* (work of restoration). The former encompasses the narrative of creation as depicted in the six-day account, while the latter pertains to the incarnation of the Word and the salvific narrative of humanity (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2008: 24-5; Sicard 1993: 183). Both these divine works employ visible phenomena as mediums for representing invisible realities, whether through the *simulacra of nature* or the *simulacra of grace* (Coolman 2003: 178).

The difference presented by Hugh of St. Victor between the divine works of creation and restoration serves as a redemptive response to the predicament engendered by the post-lapsarian condition. The latter condition, for Hugh, entails a loss of the ability to perceive God clearly in the world, as encapsulated in the line *Videmus nunc per speculum et in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem (I Cor., 13:12)*. Within his theology, the simulacra of nature, discernible even to the obscured eye of humanity⁷, serve as symbolic manifestations of the divine and signify the presence of God. The simulacra of grace, by contrast, directly disclose the Creator's presence and possess the capacity to illuminate and infuse truth and understanding into the human consciousness. As Hugh states in his *Super hierarchiam Dionysii*, a fundamental difference between the two lies in their respective function: while the simulacra of nature can merely demonstrate, lacking the capacity to impart enlightenment, the images of grace possess the trans-

⁷ The idea of the clouded eye is drawn by the theory of the three eyes that Hugh presents in *Super hierarchiam Dionysii* and *De sacramentis christianae fidei* (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2015: 427; 2008: 225).

formative ability to instil truth and intelligence within the human heart (Hugo de Sancto Victore, 2015: 402-3).

Nonetheless, every endeavour to commune with the divine must commence with the contemplation of the *visibilia*, that is, the simulacra of nature, as the foundational step towards spiritual ascent: *Impossibile enim est invisibilia, nisi per visibilia demonstrari: et propterea omnis theologia necesse habet visibilibus demonstrationibus uti in invisibilibus declarationem* (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2015: 403). Hugh of St. Victor's theological discourse underscores the trajectory towards God and the nuanced apprehension of His manifestations, notably through an aesthetic paradigm. Informed by the Augustinian tradition, Hugh advocates for a re-evaluation of the affection and gratification elicited by the diverse forms of creation, redirecting them towards an encounter with the divine. This conceptual framework finds its roots in Augustine's distinction between *frui* and *uti*, wherein individuals are encouraged to employ material realities as conduits for the attainment of spiritual ends (Augustinus 1962: 8).

Building upon this foundation, Hugh of St. Victor delineates a hierarchy of realities, wherein God occupies the apex as the sole fount of tranquillity, while the material realm assumes the role of an intermediary conduit towards spiritual realms. However, Hugh cautions against an immoderate affection for the world's beauty, cautioning that such attachment may divert one's devotion away from the love for God. While acknowledging the instructive value of the created as a pathway to God, Hugh advocates transcending the mere contentment with worldly phenomena, urging individuals to pursue the ultimate origin of beauty inherent within God Himself⁸.

Hence, he refrains from ontologically condemning the world yet consistently cautions against the peril of succumbing to a form of idolatry towards mundane realities. While Hugh acknowledges the positive aspects of earthly phenomena, he underscores their inability to assuage the inner longing of humanity. In his treatise *De Archa Noe*, he identifies the love for the world (*amor mundi*) as the root cause of human instability, positing that only the love for God (*amor Dei*) can engender genuine peace, albeit initially fraught with bitterness (Zinn 2009: 48). Although Hugh depicts the

⁸ Cf. *De substantia dilectionis et Charitate ordinata*, PL 176, c. 15-18; c. 16A; c. 17A, the authorship of this text is still debated, as it also appears in the volume of the PL dedicated to Augustine (Poirel 2011: 370-1).

tumultuous journey of the human heart in extricating itself from worldly entanglements, he does not advocate for a renunciation of the world *per se* (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2001: 6-7, 110); rather, he advocates for a reorientation towards an understanding of the world as a conduit to higher spiritual realms. Hence, Hugh advocates for the appreciation and interpretation of the world as a guiding force in the ascent towards God (Zinn 2009: 48).

3.2. *Beauty and Image: created beauty as divine simulacrum*

What, in Sofia Vanni Rovighi's opinion (Vanni Rovighi 1967: 297), makes Hugh of St Victor's *De tribus diebus*⁹ particularly admirable is its detailed analysis of the manifestations of beauty in nature. Written between 1123 and 1126 (Poirel 2002: 131-54, 458-60), it aims to reveal the mystery of the Trinity in nature¹⁰; to do so, Hugh structures the text in twenty-seven chapters that guide the reader towards a deeper understanding of the Divine through and in its earthly manifestations. Hugh of St. Victor designs a journey that starts from the created and sensible realities and goes up to the invisible ones in God, *potentia, sapientia et benignitas*. The Victorine defines the visible realities as *simulacra* of the invisible ones¹¹.

Furthermore, beauty, *decor creaturarum*, holds a special place in the exposition of Hugh:

The representation of beauty precedes both immensity and utility in cognition. It is first in cognition because it is more evident in manifestation. Therefore in this representation we must situate the first step of contemplation, so that when we

⁹ Note that in the PL by Migne, this is indicated as *Liber septimus of Didascalicon* (PL 176, c. 737-812), hence, Migne introduces the text by stating: "Hunc in Didascalico non comperi, sed quasi illius appendicem: tractat enim de meditatione, qua ex visibilium cognitione ad invisibilis etiam divinae Trinitatis assurgimus agnitionem."

¹⁰ "Quae tamen tria sicut in Deo ineffabiliter unum sunt, ita in operatione omnino separari non possunt. Potentia par benignitatem sapienter creat. Sapientia per potentiam benigne gubernat. Benignitas per sapientiam potenter conservat" (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 4).

¹¹ "Simulacra autem invisibilium ipsa visibilia dicuntur, utpote invisibilis potentiae simulacrum est, creaturarum immensitas. Invisibilis sapientiae simulacrum est, creaturarum immensitas. Invisibilis sapientiae simulacrum est, creaturarum decor, benignitatis simulacrum est, creaturarum utilitas" (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 34).

have properly undertaken the first step of inquiry, with it as the guide we seek, we may with sure step advance to the rest. (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 35)¹²

In Hugh of St. Victor's theological framework, beauty assumes primacy as the initial *simulacrum* to be contemplated, serving as the necessary starting point of the pursuit of God and His attributes. Among the manifold attributes of created realities – utility, grandeur, and beauty – beauty stands forth as the most evident (as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 250d-250e), at least for us humans and our rational capacities. Poirel emphasises the importance of beauty in Hugh's spirituality, which he sees as an ideal way to get closer to God (Poirel 2018: 94). Despite the arduous task of describing beauty, Hugh finds it necessary to speak of it harmoniously, albeit with doubt as to its expressibility: "I know that whatever we say will be lacking, but still it is no fitting that we be completely silent especially there where, if it were possible, we ought especially to speak in a suitable way [*maxime decenter loqui deberemus*]" (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 11; Coolman, Coulter 2010: 64-5).

The crucial distinction is between sensible beauty and divine Beauty. Nonetheless, Hugh does not overlook the beauty of creation but explores it with "amiable descriptions" (Poirel 2018: 96), finding deep symbolic meanings that lead to an understanding of nature as a book written by the finger of God. This reading of beauty leads to greater wonder and pleasure, extending the meaning of the perception of beautiful things through a Christian interpretation (Poirel 2018: 96).

Another pivotal aspect underpinning the centrality of beauty within Hugh's spiritual framework is its richness of significance: since the Victorine's cosmos is strongly symbolic, he finds in nature a meaning that these realities carry within themselves and by which they are at the same time surpassed (Poirel 2018: 96). This conception parallels the analogy drawn in the opening lines of his work, wherein creation is likened to a book written by the finger of God, its comprehension ranging from superficial to profound.

Hugh proposes two modes of readings, illustrated by two possible readers, namely, the wise and the illiterate. These readers are united by the fact that they both experience great awe towards nature, but the wise

¹² The English translation used here and in the subsequent quotations is by H. Feiss (Coolman, Coulter 2010: 76). For a deeper analysis of the role of beauty in Hugh of St. Victor see Karfikova 1998.

man differs from the illiterate because he does not stop at the stage of appearance.

For this whole sensible world is a kind of book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power [*virtus*], and each creature is a kind of figure, not invented by human determination, but established by the divine will to manifest and in some ways signify the invisible wisdom of God. However, just as when an unlettered person sees an open book and notices the shapes but does not recognise the letters, so stupid and carnal people, who are not aware of the things of God, see on the outside the beauty of these visible creatures, but they do not understand its meaning. On the other hand, a spiritual person can discern all things. When he considers externally the beauty of the work, he understands internally how wondrous is the wisdom of the Creator. Therefore, there is no one who does not find God's work wonderful, but the foolish person admires only the appearance, whereas the wise person, through what he sees externally, explores the deeper intent of the divine wisdom, just as in one and the same writing, one person notices the colour or the shapes of the figures, whereas another praises their meaning and signification. (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 9; Coolman, Coulter 2010: 63)

The spiritual reader, characterised by their discernment, not only notices the external aspect – at which the gaze of the unlettered stops – but also grasps the underlying foundation behind such beauty. This comprehension engenders within them a conviction regarding the wisdom inherent in God's creation. Conversely, the superficial reader, tethered to the realm of appearances, lacks the capacity for inward reflection, thereby failing to apprehend the divine wisdom latent in the external world.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that both readers are stirred by the beauty of God's creations: "Therefore, it is good carefully [*assidue*] to contemplate and wonder at the divine works, but this applies to the one who knows how to turn the beauty of physical things to spiritual use" (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 10; Coolman, Coulter 2010: 63). The admiration, then, is expressly deemed virtuous and should be pursued *persistently* (I suggest this translation, rather than Feiss's "carefully", for the Latin *assidue*), albeit with a spiritual orientation and intent.

4. *Theological significance of the image*

And we, who think of ascending joy,
would feel the emotion,
that almost dismays us,

when a joyful thing falls.
(R.M. Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*)

4.1. *The Christological dimension of Hugh of St. Victor's aesthetic*

The prominence of the figure of Wisdom, emphasised through the interplay between beauty and *sapientia*, is further reinforced by its identification with the Second Person of the Trinity, namely the Son, Christ. The centrality of the figure of Christ in Hugh's aesthetics is also and especially evident when Hugh recalls the text of Matthew 3:17, which the Victorine considers a testimony of the Father's love for creatures:

This is my beloved Son in whom I am pleased. Whatever pleases me does so in Him and through Him. For He is the Wisdom through whom I made all things. In Him I have eternally arranged whatever I have made in time. And the more perfectly I see each work of mine to be in harmony with that first arrangement, the more fully I love it. Do not think that He is only the mediator in the reconciliation of humankind, for through Him also the creation of all creatures becomes praiseworthy and pleasing in my sight. (Hugo de Sancto Victore 2002: 58; Coolman, Coulter 2010: 88-9)¹³

In this passage, the Platonic and Neo-Platonic influence of the cosmic order and the arrangement of creation according to the original divine plan makes itself felt again.

Coolman thinks he can place this reflection by Hugh within a category he calls "Trinitarian aesthetics", in which the Father's delight derived from the Son's beauty acts as a paradigm for every aesthetic experience, and – he adds – in which salvation in a certain sense includes a participation in this Trinitarian act, which also implies the capacity to enjoy with the Father for the beauty of the Son and of all the creatures in which this is reflected (Coolman 2014: 333).

Again, the quoted passage brings to the fore the question of the two works that according to Hugh constitute the result of divine action, *condi-*

¹³ Wanda Cizewski remarks that immediately after, Hugh exhorts humanity to love the divine salvation incarnated: "Si ergo vultis mihi placere, ei similes estote, ipsum audite. Et si forte ab ejus similitudine male agendo discessistis, ipsum imitando ad ipsum redite. In ipso datur praeceptum; in ipsum datur consilium. Praeceptum ut persistatis, consilium ut redeatis. Utinam tenuissetis praeceptum, sed quia transgressi estis praeceptum, saltem audite consilium, ipsum audite! [...] Ipse Conditor, ipse est redemptor; ipse Deus mecum vos condidit, qui vobiscum homo, solus ad vos venit" (Cizewski 1977: 79).

tionis and *restaurationis*. What Hugh insists on is the fact that *per ipsum*, Christ, the whole of creation becomes pleasing to God's gaze: the work of creation, therefore, is reread in the light of the work of restoration that re-establishes the order set up by the Creator, which was lost after the Fall. Indeed, it is only thanks to the figure of Christ – and therefore of the *opus restaurationis* – that man can once again see the divine beauty in creation: if, in fact, the work of creation "imply declares" that this beauty exists, the work of restoration "heals, reveals, illuminates and demonstrates" (Coolman 2014: 336).

A final question is asked by Coolman with reference to the centrality of the second Person: "What role does Christ play in the journey the creature makes to cross the distance between mere existence, *esse* – now deformed by sin – and the beautiful existence, *pulchrum esse*, that is its ultimate goal?" (Coolman 2014: 337). Coolman again points out how Hugh's attention to beauty is disproportionate to that reserved by him for *utilitas* and *immensitas* – representing divine Goodness and Power respectively: it is clear, therefore, that there is a privileging of the Christological element in his exposition. Not only in *De tribus diebus*, but also in *De arrha animae*, where the figure of Christ will be central to the restoration of the beauty of the soul, formerly ruined by sin.

4.2. *The philosophico-theological relevance of the image in J.-J. Wunenburger*

To grasp the philosophical-theological stakes of the image in medieval and modern eras, it is essential to consider the semantic transformation and cultural resonance of the term *eidolon* in Greek thought, especially during the critical transition from the fifth to the fourth century B.C., under the decisive influence of Plato.

According to Vernant, Plato's philosophical framework, particularly his re-examination of Xenophon's theory of *mimesis*, marks a pivotal transition "from the presentification of the invisible to the imitation of appearance" (Vernant 2010: 54). Vernant emphasises that after this transformation, the symbol through which an otherworldly, invisible power manifests itself in the world becomes merely a fictitious image, belonging more to the realm of figurative illusionism than to that of religious realities (Vernant 2010: 55).

Consequently, Suzanne Saïd highlights the negative connotations of the *eidolon*¹⁴, characterising it as a “mere copy of sensible appearance.” In contrast, Saïd attributes greater dignity to the *eikon*, defining it as the embodiment of the essence of the image’s referent (Saïd 1987: 313). However, Vernant diverges from Saïd’s perspective, suggesting that the prevailing negativity surrounding the *eidolon* should be mitigated. He contends that the *eidolon* possesses inherent ambiguity, and he rejects the notion of its intrinsic negativity. Vernant articulates this ambiguity by describing the *eidolon* as simultaneously precise and elusive, substantial yet insubstantial, thereby signifying the presence of an absent being.

On the one hand, as a simulacrum, it is so precise, concrete, complete, that one cannot help but be fascinated by it, but at the same time it is elusive: when one wants to reach out to touch it, it subtracts and dissolves. It is insubstantial, evanescent, empty, like a shadow, a dream, smoke. It is indeed appearance, but the appearance of one who is not there; its presence is the presence of an absent one. The absence inherent in the *eidolon* is not, however, all negative: it is not the absence of what does not exist, of a nothingness, but that of a being who is not of here [...]. In the very moment, it shows itself to our eyes and even in its presence in this world, it bears the sign of that other world in which it resides. (Vernant 2010: 76)

Vernant’s insights challenge the notion of the *simulacrum* as inherently deceitful.

Against this backdrop, the present section seeks to explore the theological-philosophical relevance of the image, thus shifting the focus from an eminently historic-philological perspective to a theoretico-philosophical one.

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, in *Philosophie des images*, observes that philosophy historically regards the image with suspicion (Wunenburger 1997: XI), echoing Plato’s caution (*Republic* X, 595a-608b). This concern comes from the fact that the image is puzzling since it stands halfway between “concrete and abstract, reality and thought, sensible and intelligible” (Wunenburger 1997: XII). However, Wunenburger argues that images possess deep philosophical and theological significance. He emphasises the relationship between the image and its model, noting that being

¹⁴ Thomas Pfau (2022: 84) remarks: “*Eidōlon*, thus tends to foreground the ephemeral visibility and apparitional character of appearance, for which reason Allan Bloom frequently renders it as “phantom,” a decision justified by the Greek use of the diminutive (-ōlon)”.

an image implies *dependence* on an original (Wunenburger 1997: 101). Wunenburger explores different approaches to interpreting images; in what he calls *herméneutique amplifiante*, amplifying hermeneutics (Wunenburger 1997: 82) – which can be attributed to Hugh, too – he notes the intention to unveil a deeper, hidden sense through the *reading*¹⁵ of the image¹⁶. The other theologically poignant observation of Wunenburger is the following:

By becoming an image, a form is called upon to exist a second time, at once the same and another, for it must be its own likeness, but also sufficiently distinct from its model so that it can appear as an image and not as the original being itself. *Hence the image is always inseparable from an understanding in terms of filiation.* (Wunenburger 1997: 101, italics is mine)¹⁷

Wunenburger examines the ontological status of the image, extending the Platonic theory of *methexis* (Wunenburger 1997: 153) and linking it to a relationship of participative filiation (*rapport de filiation participative*) in which the image is always dependent on the Form, and in which the image holds an anagogic orientation which leads to its origin (Wunenburger 1997: 150)¹⁸.

Building upon this theory, he highlights how the idea of filiation in the framework of the Christian doctrine has originated an ontology of the image based upon the idea of Incarnation (Wunenburger 1997: 154), wherein Christ serves as the ultimate image through which God manifests in creation: “Monotheistic theology seeks to attest, through the image relationship, an ontological proximity” (Wunenburger 1997: 155). Hugh of St. Victor’s theology further explains this concept by interpreting created beau-

¹⁵ The term *reading* is wholly in accordance with Hugh’s theory. We can say that reading is the experiential paradigm through which the Victorine approaches reality, both the mundane dimension and the divine one.

¹⁶ “The image, better than the concept, is presented as a symbolic configuration that retains a reserve of meaning, in a form hidden in the signs or figures, and makes it available for reactivation by an interpreting subject” (Wunenburger 1997: 82).

¹⁷ See also the idea of “dissimilar similarity” in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite’s *De Coelesti Hierarchia* (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita 1991: 12-13); in John Scotus Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* (Iohannes Scotus Eriugena 1996: 95); in Hugh of St. Victor (Cf. Baron 1963: 186-7).

¹⁸ Wunenburger is adamant in stating that Plato confers to the image a certain ontological dignity (*dignité ontologique*), p. 149. According to Lechte, in the *Sophist* (240a 10-11; b 1-16), Plato cannot but accord a “kind of undeniable presence to the image” (Lechte 2012: 20).

ty as the image of divine Wisdom (that in a trinitarian perspective is to be understood as Christ, the second person – who is in turn the incarnated and living image of the Father) emphasising a chain of images with the task of leading humanity to salvation and to the union with God.

4.3. *From above*

The image holds significance in facilitating convergence between the realms of the visible and the invisible, the human and the divine. Within this dynamic, the power of the image is manifest, and the image itself can be characterised as follows:

To be *image* means: I. that created things, under the category of image, can be taken *as a whole* as intermediate entities, simultaneously inhabited by distance and by the origin; II. that the images making up for our world – the world of visibility and of the Word – constantly deal with an always crossable margin of nothing [...]; III. being an entity (the image) which is constitutively relation, and which can somehow also be taken as constitutive relation; IV. being an entity, inasmuch as it *is* an image, which is intrinsically effectual, or better, virtual, that is to say, ontologically hybrid: object-event, space-time connection or knot of an incommensurably dense network. (Diodato 2021: 48)

The function of the image, therefore, and concomitantly the aesthetic encounter therewith, resides in its capacity to serve as a nexus between different dimensions, revealing hints of a metaphysical realm typically precluded to us. When we engage with beauty, however, we get cues of significance and a depth of meaning not conferred horizontally by humans onto reality, but rather emanating from a transcendent source. As explained by Mariagrazia Portera (2021: 80), we find ourselves confronted with an alterity endowed with agency.

The case of the theophanic value of nature is an instance of this: the tension is vertical. Something complex to imagine – and to accept – for us children of Modernity; an age in which, according to Peter Sloterdijk, all transcendent destinations and ambitions have been eradicated:

The stairway is to continue existing, even if there is no longer anything above it to lean against. The old world's most powerful symbol of verticality mysteriously survives the atheistic crisis. It continues to indicate a tension coming from the heights, even though it is no longer consolidated by any transcendental opposing camp. (Sloterdijk 2013: 127)

The goal of Modernity, according to Sloterdijk, is the *de-verticalisation* of existence¹⁹. The vertical tension, nonetheless, serves to “[reorient] the confused existence of modern humans” (Sloterdijk 2013: 19), and should therefore be maintained. In Sloterdijk’s view, a less steep vertical tension still exists in some dimensions of human life (e.g. sports), but being devoid of the spiritual element, these verticalisations are a pale imitation of the true vertical tension on which life was based in Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Bringing together Sloterdijk’s reference to Rilke’s “You must change your life” – a command that he receives in an aesthetic experience in front of a mutilated statue representing the torso of Apollo – and Portera’s reference to the Platonic dialogue *Ion*²⁰ – to which may also be added Plato’s evocative association of *to kalon* and *kaleo* (beauty and calling) in the *Cratylus* (416c) (Manoussakis 2007: 2, 159) it can be suggested that the experience of beauty implies a vertical tension, or rather, a *call from above*.

To remain with Plato, it must be underlined that in his *Symposium* the discourse on beauty does not come from Socrates alone, but also comes from Diotima, a *xene*, a foreigner, who is also a priestess. Hence, there is a double element of unfamiliarity: the unveiling of the nature of beauty comes from a figure arriving from abroad, and who also mediates between human beings and the deity.

Already here, at the very beginning of the philosophical tradition, beauty has to do with an experience that is characterised by the elements of unfamiliarity, transcendence, and appeal (from the Latin *appellare*, to call or *adpellere*, to drive towards). With the Christian tradition, and the aesthetic focus some theologians and philosophers have maintained – such as pseudo-Dionysius and Hugh of St. Victor – beauty has kept a prominent role in shortening the distance between man and God, between humans and the transcendent source of meaning.

¹⁹ “If, on the other hand, the half-price imperative is adopted, as in the shallower forms of enlightenment, progressive thought and starry-eyed idealism, a mode of existence is established whose aims are facilitation of life, breakdown of vertical tension and avoidance of passion” (Sloterdijk 2013: 373).

²⁰ Portera uses this reference to explain the experience of being subjected to a force that possesses us – like the inspiration coming from the Muse in the dialogue – a dynamic that “nails the subject to a stupefied passivity” (Portera 2020: 107).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Hugh of St. Victor's analysis of the image offers a transformative perspective on the role of the image in theology and philosophical aesthetics. For Hugh, the *simulacrum* – the term conveying the notion of image in the text considered, *De tribus diebus* – is not merely a surface imitation, but a divine reflection that guides the soul toward deeper understanding, therefore also showing a gnoseological value. The Victorine sees the beauty of nature and the world around us as symbolic representations of divine attributes – more precisely divine Wisdom. Hugh draws on the *simulacra of nature* to illustrate how human beings can move from the visible world of appearances to the invisible truths of the divine, emphasising that the correct reading of these images leads to salvation and a communion with God. In this framework, the image becomes an essential, authentic tool in revealing God's intention and presence in creation, particularly in the context of the Incarnation: indeed, as the etymology of symbol suggests – *symbolleîn*, to put together – the role of the image is precisely that of mediating between the divinity of God and the non-divinity of nature (Poirel 2020: 321-3): a mediation that is, again, ultimately and fully realised in the figure of Christ. By presenting natural beauty as a simulacrum of divine attributes, Hugh of St. Victor encourages the viewer to move beyond the surface of material reality, perceiving in the image a reflection of transcendent truths. While the material, physical aspect of creation – and thus of the image – must ultimately be surpassed, it is not to be entirely dismissed, as it constitutes the necessary starting point for the ascent toward God.

Furthermore, Wunenburger's analysis underscores this perspective, offering a contemporary reaffirmation of the dignity of the image. By emphasising the relation of "participative filiation", which is intrinsically linked to the doctrine of the Incarnation and a Christocentric perspective, he argues that the image should not be viewed as a diminished copy of the original. Instead, the image retains the dignity of the original, expressing it through a distinct yet equally significant ontological status. This status is deeply rooted in the metaphysics of participation, where the image does not merely replicate the original but participates in its essence, thereby reflecting the divine in a manner that maintains, rather than diminish, its significance. Ultimately, by acting as an intermediary, the image allows us to perceive the world not merely as a collection of material objects but as

a network of relational entities that reveal deeper, transcendent truths and dimensions.

This dynamic is especially evident in the experience of beauty, which transcends human projections to emanate from a transcendent (and in this case divine) source, inviting us to engage with a higher reality. Philosophers like Portera – building upon Plato – and Sloterdijk, emphasise the vertical tension inherent in the experience of beauty, where the aesthetic encounter serves as a call from above, urging us to transform our lives (as the poet is called to do in Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo"). This perspective resonates with, and rearticulates in contemporary terms, a vision already expressed within early and medieval Christian thought. Figures such as pseudo-Dionysius and Hugh of St. Victor placed particular emphasis on beauty as a mediating principle that unites humanity with the divine. For these thinkers, beauty functioned as the manifestation of the transcendent within creation, inviting the human soul to a deeper apprehension of reality, one that discloses glimpses of a higher dimension and ultimately leads back to the source, of both existence and meaning, of everything.

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