Theological aesthetics is an important current trend in theology, with a growing number of studies, many of them dedicated to the thought of H.U. von Balthasar. Von Balthasar’s project of theological aesthetics is based on a retrieval of a number of medieval texts, including those of Aquinas, in his *Herrlichkeit* (English *Glory of the Lord* [GL]).

According to von Balthasar, “Thomas sees esse as the non-subsistent fullness and perfection of all reality and as the supreme ‘likeness of divine goodness’...” (GL4, 393). B. sees the main achievement of Aquinas in the doctrine of the real distinction between esse and essentia. Although it is a philosophical doctrine, “it enables us once again to make a clear distinction between the ‘glory’ of God and the beauty of the world” (GL4, 395). Esse is not God, but some manifestation of the existence of the essences. B.’s general scheme for Aquinas’ thought looks like this: there is a real distinction between the “order of essences” (the “horizontal dimension,” which in aesthetic terms appears as order, or proportion [consonantia], i.e., beauty) and the “order of being” (the “vertical dimension,” or “glory,” which in aesthetics appears as claritas). Aquinas’ aesthetics thus fits into the standard “theology of glory”: glory belongs to the inner life of God; however, this glory “percolates” into the world in some visible or intuited way (the vertical dimension) and manifests itself at the earthly level as beauty (the horizontal dimension), which is the proportion between elements (consonantia), but also the manifestation and shining forth of this proportion (claritas). According to B.’s scheme, perceiving the beauty of the world (the horizontal dimension) eventually leads one to glory (the vertical dimension).

Although Aquinas has not elaborated any aesthetics per se, B. thinks that it is implicit in his metaphysics: thus we can interpret Aquinas’ metaphysics as aesthetics (GL4, 407ff). Aquinas uses beauty (pulchrum) to define being, seeing pulchrum as some disclosure of being and its qualities. According to B., the synthesis of the sphere of essences is only possible at the superessential level, which is inaccessible to us and creates wonder at the face of reality. ‘Being’ in this case is the ‘glory’ aspect of beauty (beauty being the manifestation of essential order), which rises from the incomprehensible depths of reality. This is why beauty remains vague and undefined: one cannot capture precisely that radiation of glory from the depths, which is being, but “the circle can be entered through the sensory experience of beauty, which has an irreducible primacy” (GL4, 411).

An Austrian scholar and follower of von Balthasar G. Pöltner presents a similar interpretation of the aesthetic element in Aquinas (e.g., in *Schönheit: eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*). Pulchrum in Aquinas appears as a disclosure of being to the intellect, and of the fact that being is good. According to P., pulchrum in Aquinas “is placed in the middle position between bonum and verum, to which a peculiar crossing of intellectus and appetitus corresponds on the part of the anima” and thus beauty is a “distinct image of the unity of difference, or of the
convenientia of anima and ens” (Schönheit 20): the principle of consonantia. In addition to standing for the connection and unity between the good and the true, beauty also possesses the power of manifestation: the principle of claritas signifies the manifestation of the aforesaid unity to the soul. Thus the difference observed in being, which is expressed by the transcendentals, presupposes some common ground for comparison, or some original unity, and the shining forth of this ground is beauty.

The discussion of Aquinas’ aesthetics in this key is important for the twentieth-century debate about the fate of metaphysics. Speaking of the idea of “being as the likeness of God” in Aquinas, von Balthasar in part draws on the work of the twentieth-century Thomist G. Siewerth (e.g., Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes). B.’s characterization of the importance of Aquinas’ “aesthetic” metaphysics is also reminiscent of Siewerth’s ideas: “the de-essentialization of reality, as demanded by Heidegger and as achieved by Thomas, is an extension within philosophy of the illumination by biblical revelation of the idea of God as creative principle” (GL4, 406). B.’s statement is reminiscent of Siewerth’s effort to free Aquinas from the Heideggerian accusation of onto-theology and forgetfulness of being (esse). According to Siewerth, forgetfulness of being does not appear until Scotus, and Aquinas still preserves that “wonder” in the face of being, which is the crucial element of B.’s theological aesthetics that he retrieves from ancient and medieval texts. (Aquinas, of course, has a special place also for Heidegger, who traces back his principle of the “priority of Dasein over all other entities” to Aquinas’ De ver. q. 1, a. 1, or the idea that the soul is ens quod natura est convenire cum omni ente.) Thus the paper will attempt to show how the recent discussion of Aquinas’s aesthetics can contribute to this important post-Heideggerian debate in theology and philosophy.

This paper will also move in another direction. While both von Balthasar and Pöltner in their discussion of Aquinas remain in the area of metaphysics or at best philosophical theology, the most striking statements about beauty actually come from Aquinas’ discussion of the Trinity, or from the idea of appropriation of beauty (pulchrum) for the Son as the perfect image of the Father. The idea of ‘image’ incorporates both the structural element of likeness (consonantia) and the element of disclosure of the prototype (claritas). Thus the main elements of worldly beauty or aesthetics are already contained in the inner life of the Trinity, from which they percolate into the created world in the form of divine glory (the vertical aspect) to reflect in worldly beauty (the horizontal aspect), which possesses the same two qualities (structure and disclosure). The paper will attempt to restore the underemphasized connection between Aquinas’ “aesthetic metaphysics” and his Trinitarian theology.

Finally, many modern retrievals of Aquinas’ aesthetics are dismissed as overinterpretations that are only loosely based on texts. In the course of the discussion, this paper will reexamine some contexts, both familiar and new, thus potentially introducing correctives to both von Balthasar’s and Pöltner’s interpretations.