Richard of Saint Victor: *The Mystical Ark (Benjamin major)*

Paris, ca. 1160–70

Jonathan Morton

Histories of Experience around the Globe: The Virtual-Classroom Sourcebook, #008
Commentary: CC BY 4.0 DE

https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/sites/default/files/2025-03/HistoriesOfExperience008Morton_Jonathan.pdf

Commentary

The twelfth century saw an explosion in the range and sophistication of philosophical and theological theory and practice and has long been recognized as a key moment in the history of European thought. It had, though, little culture of scientific experimentation as understood in modernity, and many of the most exciting intellectual developments took place in monasteries, for whose members the monk's cell could be understood not as a space of confinement but one of spiritual experience and discovery. The Augustinian Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris was one of the key centers, home to the prolific Hugh of Saint Victor, who in the first half of the century composed an extraordinary corpus of works on theology, learning, and mystical meditation that was strongly inflected by the Neoplatonism of Augustine, Origen, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

The two passages I present here come from *The Mystical Ark* (also known as *Benjamin major*), an account of spiritual ascent through contemplation composed by a later leader at the Abbey, Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173 CE). Uninterested in experiencing the external world except as a preliminary step on the mental journey up to the superrational mysteries of Christianity, Richard provides instead a detailed study of or guide to the internal experiences by which the mind ascends each *gradus* (step) of the path towards spiritual enlightenment. *The Mystical Ark*, in line with the teaching of Hugh and of the celebrated Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, does not place value on experiencing the natural world to arrive at useful knowledge but, concerned more with faith than with natural philosophy, is a sustained meditation on the experience of thought.

If the external world is encountered through the mind's processing of data from the senses, or on a secondary level from written accounts other such experiences, the same is not true of the experience of thought or of contemplation. Instead, the phenomena experienced are purely internal, and Richard's text is a study of the mind thinking about itself in a circular process by which mental experience is both studied and being studied,

so generated. The ideal monastic subject—for whom Richard intends his work—is his own object of study.

Describing a visible phenomenon, while not necessarily easy, can at least draw on literal language, whereas the literal description of invisible experiences is extremely hard, not least because the internal powers of cognition cannot actually be seen. Richard's work is considerably more detailed than other writings on the mind in the twelfth century and he goes beyond his contemporaries, who provide only the thinnest descriptions of cognition. He does not just describe how thought happens but represents how it is experienced, using non-literal, figurative language in the place of descriptions of phenomena observable by the external senses. Richard's elaborate, almost poetic imagery in discussing the powers of imagination, ingenuity, and reason are attempts to make the invisible experience of thought visible to his audience, and among the results of this activity are some of the most sustained and sophisticated passages of psychological writing in the twelfth century. In the passages excerpted here, the thickness of the detail in talking about imagination and the power of ingenuity (*ingenium*) describes the phenomena (to be) experienced but also, itself, shapes the experience of reading.

The reasonably lengthy treatise runs to over two hundred pages in a modern edition and is a guide to a process of contemplation, which is framed as a spiritual ascent, figured repeatedly as mounting a watchtower (*specula*). Each step is subdivided into smaller discrete parts in order to provide a detailed guide for observing the inner workings of one's own mind. The starting point of *The Mystical Ark* is the description of the ark of the covenant that Moses commanded to be made for God, as recounted in Exodus, ch. 37, with its wooden frame, gilding, poles, cloth covering (also known as a propitiatory), and two mounted angels. Each of these details is taken to stand allegorically or figuratively for one of six steps of contemplative ascent, listed as follows:

> There are six kinds of contemplations in themselves, and within each there are many divisions. The first is in imagination and according to imagination only. The second is in imagination and according to reason. The third is in reason and according to imagination. The fourth is in reason and according to reason. The fifth is above but not beyond reason. The sixth is above reason and seems to be beyond reason. And so, there are two in imagination, two in reason and two in understanding.
> *The Mystical Ark*, 1.6 (trans. Zinn, 161; *Patrologia latina*, ed. Migne, 196.70BC)

Several historians have rightly drawn attention to the important role played by the imagination in Richard's theology. This preoccupation with generating mental experience goes a long way towards explaining his method of using allegory in expounding the image of the ark and especially in using more local metaphors, such as that of the watchtower, which entails an image of elevation and improved perception.

The two passages I have excerpted demonstrate such figurative language and, more broadly, their heightened rhetoric indicates how this text aims to incite experience for

its audience of monks. The first passage concerns the third of the stages of contemplation just outlined, how reason intuits invisible principles from what is visible, moving from sense perception as processed by the imagination to grasp abstract principles and the invisible spiritual realities that subtend the gross, created world. The second passage comes from the fourth contemplation, reason acting according to reason, which has surpassed its dependence on deriving meanings from the images of the imagination. It describes the second step of this contemplation, which involves the mind reflecting on its own processes, a dazzling and detailed account of marvelous (*mirabile*) powers of the mind that is also intended to generate wonder (*admiratio*).

There is a constant movement between theory and practice, or, to be more precise, between the description and the generation of internal, mental experience. This makes sense when we consider the spiritual context, in which experience is a tool for mystical knowledge and the ultimate aim is to transcend rather than to understand the natural or external world. These passages are highly self-conscious, so that the mind can think about itself or so that people can think about mental experience (or even experience thoughts in a particular way). This circular practice is part of the process of contemplation for the mystical Richard of Saint Victor. I chose these excerpts to bring out the discussion of processes of knowledge-acquisition over ethical exhortations or allegorical passages discussing the Bible because I thought that the attention paid to the experience of thought would be of most interest to historians of science and philosophy, but readers should be very aware that this text allows for no experiences that are somehow separate from the religious life or outside of theology.

The first excerpt is highly Neoplatonist in the tradition of Paul (Romans 1.19–21)—not to mention Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and so many others—in seeing the things of the visible, created world as a stepping-stone to pass up through a process of similarity to the invisible and more perfect principles that they reflect. I have here used a metaphor of a physical ascent by foot and in this I am echoing Richard, who uses an idea that recurs elsewhere in his writings, that of *manuductio*, being led by the hand. He divides the human into an inner and an outer person, the outer person being the self of sensory perception on whom, in these initial stages, the inner person is dependent. The image for this mental process becomes more developed in chapter 18, where the sensory outer person is likened to a servant leading a king to a palace.

The details of these images are pertinent; this thought experience is a process (a journey) in which different parts of thought are hierarchized. They also serve as figurative, perhaps even narrative elements to allow the reader to picture the recommended cognitive practice, so that the text itself has to serve as a manuduction to lead the reader, bound by his senses, to spiritual truth. The imagery demanding a move from the vehicle to the tenor of the metaphor—the king should be understood as the internal person or the intellectual part of the soul—is itself mimetic of the process of moving from the visible to the invisible, as it is led along the "mountain path of similitudes" (*calle similitudinum*). Richard gives an example: he describes how, on seeing a picture of a lion, a person can, in their mind, construct a representation of the whole

animal, even having never seen one in the flesh. In this analogy, the picture of the lion stands for the visible things of the world and mental conception of the lion for the mental conception of the invisible things represented by the visible thing. What is the real thing, what is the similitude? These are questions to be sat with, ruminated upon, as they refer to the visible things in the world and in Richard's mystical text. Matters are complicated by the analogy that Richard draws between Adam as the rational, inward person and Eve, the sensory outer person, who leads Adam astray, as undirected desires will lead to akratic, poor moral choices. It is important to note the misogynistic association, so common at this time, that figures reason as a man and sin and its relation to the sensory body as a woman, and to stress that Richard's account of experience cannot be divested of its ethical and theological component.

The second passage, book 3, chapter 21, is a high-register, rhetorical performance, akin to preaching, in which Richard exhorts his audience towards a sense of wonder. This concatenation of the mind's powers and of the details of their operations in the subject's mind models how the subject should be turning his mind inwardly, to reflect on and marvel at its own powers, having ascended beyond visible, external things. The two faculties I would like particularly to note are those of the imagination and ingenuity (*ingenium*), of which the former involves the production of mental images and the latter a harder-to-define power by which the mind arrives at solutions to problems.

The imagination is the creator of the images upon which the soul depends for its thinking and is listed, in Richard's text, after the figure of superfast "movement" of thought (*cogitatio*) as it roams (*discurrit*) from one idea to the next. The account of thought is both description and an invocation to Richard's audience themselves to reflect on the speed with which they experience themselves thinking, just as the paean to using the faculty of the imagination urges readers to think about the imagination and, in so thinking, to experience it. This is true, in the first instance, because thinking does not occur without the help of images from the imagination, "another kind of creator" (*alius quidam creator*), i.e., another besides God. It is also a challenge to the reader to engage in the world-creating acts that Richard describes the imagination as capable of:

> What is it, I ask, to execute pictures of so many things and of so much in a moment, in a blink of the eye, and again to remove the same things with the same ease or to change in many ways in one and then another manner? When it wishes, does the soul not create daily by means of the imagination a new heaven and a new earth and in that world of phantasms as it were every hour another kind of creator causes and forms according to his will creatures of that sort as large as you like?

Even more striking is Richard's description of the power of ingenuity (*ingenium*), by far the most detailed description of this power of thought to be found in the Middle Ages. *Ingenium* is a certain kind of cleverness, an ability to intuit what it hidden, to find a solution to a problem, to invent a new method.

> See how that sharpness of human ingenuity is accustomed to investigate deep things, to penetrate whatever things are innermost, hidden within, perplexing, obscure and placed in darkness—and to unfold, disentangle, make clear and bring them out into the light.

As in the first passage cited, the metaphors used here are necessary to find a language to describe an invisible process and so to allow the reading subjects to picture (using the imagination) this act of thinking. The *ingenium* is sharp, it penetrates. There is a noting of principles that are hidden and obscured, another metaphor of vision, and finally the acts of unfolding, disentangling, bringing to light, are other ways of figuring the work of understanding and conceptualizing what is subtle and complex. As with the descriptions of the imagination, there is a circularity to the description of the *ingenium*, which is a necessary act of the soul in going from the visible to the invisible or in making the invisible visible, at least in a metaphorical sense of being understandable. In a way wholly appropriate for a monastic spiritual practice that involves the generation of mental and spiritual experiences, Richard of Saint Victor's theories of how thinking experience happens are inseparable from his method. His writing both describes and seeks to generate in his readers such experiences, which on a fundamental level are literally indescribable or that are indescribable literally.

Further Reading

Aris, Marc-Aeilko. *Contemplatio: Philosophische Studien zum Traktat Benjamin Maior des Richard von St. Victor*. Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1996.

Coulter, Dale M. *Per visibilia ad invisibilia: Theological Method in Richard of Saint-Victor (d. 1173)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2006.

Palmén, Ritva. *Richard of St. Victor's Theory of Imagination*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Richard de Saint-Victor. *Oeuvres, 1: De contemplatione (Beniamin maior)*. Edited and translated by Jean Grosfillier. Sous la Règle de saint Augustin, 13. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.

van 't Spijker, Ineke. "Image of Thought: Hugh of Saint-Victor and Richard of Saint-Victor on Thinking." In *Speaking to the Eye: Sight and Insight through Text and Image (1150–1650)*, edited by Thérèse De Hemptinne, Veerle Fraeters, and María Eugenia Góngora, 17–46. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

Source Texts and Translations

Passage 1 – the imagination leading reason to knowledge

2.17, "Quod in hac speculatione corporeae similitudinis manuductione utimur"

Hoc autem inter secundum contemplationis genus et hoc tertium de quo modo loquimur interesse videtur, quia illud, uti superius jam diximus, versatur in imaginatione et moderatur secundum rationem; istud autem constat in ratione, sed sequitur imaginationem. In hac ei speculatione per omnia quae animus multipliciter scrutatur invisibilibus intendit, et ad illa apprehendenda nititur. In eo itaque haec [Col.0096A] speculatio in ratione consistit quod illis solis investigandi insistit quae corporeus sensus omnino capere nequit. Sed quia hujus speculationis investigatio ad invisibilium cognitionem sine corporalium similitudinum adjutorio non perducitur, imaginationis manuductionem in hac parte ratio sequi videtur, et inquisitionis suae cursu eam quasi ducem itineris habere convincitur. Dum enim imaginatio rationi rerum visibilium formas repraesentat, et ipsam ex earumdem rerum similitudine ad invisibilium investigationem informat, quodammodo illuc eam conducit quo per se ire nescivit. Nunquam enim ratio ad invisibilium contemplationem assurgeret, nisi ei imaginatio rerum visibilium formas repraesentando exhiberet, unde ad illa similitudinem traheret, et investigationis suae modum formaret. Inde est quod ille interior homo noster exteriorem hominem, ducem suum vocat, cum dicit: Tu vero homo unanimis dux meus, et notus meus (Psal. LIV). Certum namque est quia, nisi per corporeum sensum, animus ad exteriorem notitiam pervenire non potest. Merito ergo exteriorem hominem homo interior ducem suum dicit, sine cujus ministerio, vel potius magisterio ad visibilium cognitionem non pertingit. Sed nec ad invisibilium quidem, cum ad illa cognoscenda sine horum notitia assurgere non possit. Quoties ergo cognoscendarum rerum, per corporeum sensum, experientiam capere cogitur, toties (nimirum) interior homo noster ducem suum sequi videtur. Absque dubio sensus carnis, sensum cordis in cognoscendis rebus praecedit; quia, nisi prius sensibilia per sensum corporeum animus caperet, omnino non inveniret quid de eis saltem cogitare potuisset Sed forte mirum non est, si sensum cordis sensus corporis illuc ducit, quo ipse ire potest. Sed illud valde mirabile, quomodo illuc eam conducit quo ipso ascendere non potest. Sensus quidem corporeus incorporea non capit; ad quae tamen sine ejus manuductione ratio non ascendit, sicut jam supra monstrata ratio docuit. Certe et si homo minime peccasset, in cognitione rerum sensus exterior interiorem adjuvaret: nam Evam suam in adjutorium accepisse Adam quis neget? Aliud vero est cursus sui comitem habere, et aliud est itineris sui ducem quaerere. Nam quoniam Eva virum suum, semel contra Dei consilium vel praeceptum post se traxit et ad consilii sui consensum inclinavit, praevaricationis suae poena infirmatus Adam, jam eam sequi necesse habet, et usque nunc quotidiano ejus magisterio eget; verumtamen tunc de adjutoris sui ducatu non solum non confunditur, sed et gloriatur quando, interveniente ejus obsequio, ad invisibilium contemplationem corporearum similitudinum calle producitur.

[… a section from chapter 17 musing on the ethical relationship between the inner and outer human has been omitted]

2.18, “Quod hoc contemplationis genus constat in ratione secundum imaginationem”

Nunc vero ad id redeamus unde digressi sumus, quomodo scilicet per rerum visibilium imaginationem adjuvemur ad rerum invisibilium investigationem. In eo enim exterior homo in investigationis suae cursu interiorem adjuvat, quo ei invisibilium imaginem per rerum visibilium imaginationem repraesentat. Et, dum ducatus sui officium explet, illuc istum similitudinum calle perducit, quo ille intrare non audet. Sic saepe famuli dominos suos in via usque ad regias fores praeeunt et tamen, istis intro usque ad interiora palatii properantibus, illi exterius subsistunt. Patet ergo, ut arbitror, quod superius jam diximus, quomodo hoc contemplationis genus esse quidem in ratione, et secundum imaginationem intelligere debeamus, quia et invisibilia sunt quae mente conspicimus, et tamen ex rerum visibilium similitudine illa nobis formamus. Quid enim dixerim rerum visibilium formam nisi quamdam quasi rerum invisibilium picturam? Sit modo aliquis qui nunquam leonem vidisse se dicat, quem tamen videre desiderat, si ei leonis imago in pictura aliqua convenienter expressae ostenditur, profecto qualem eum cogitare debeat ex eo quod videt statim admonetur. Denique secundum lineamenta quae superficietenus expressa considerat, solida membra et vivum animal sibi in mente format. Cogita nunc quantum sit inter illud quod videt exterius, et inter hoc quod in sua cogitatione sibi fingit interius. Sic sane in hoc contemplationis genere longe a se distant invisibilia quae in mente versamus, et ea quae per imaginationem cernimus, et tamen ad illa exprimenda ex istis similitudinem trahimus. Reddidimus quomodo potuimus rationem cur hoc genus contemplationis videatur esse in ratione, et secundum imaginationem.

> Richard of Saint Victor, *De gratia contemplationis libri quinque occasione accepta ab arca Moysis et ob eam rem hactenus dictum Benjamin major. Patrologia latina*, edited by J.-P. Migne, 196.99AC

Book 2, chapter 17, “That in this speculation we make use of the leading hand of corporeal similitudes”

Between the second kind of contemplation [in imagination and according to reason] and this third kind of which we are now speaking [in reason and according to imagination], the difference seems to be this: that the former of which we spoke above is engaged in imagination and is governed according to reason; however the latter is in reason, but follows imagination. In this speculation the spirit, through all the many things that it examines, is attentive to invisible things and strives to grasp them. And so, for that this speculation is in reason, because it pursues the investigation of those things only which bodily sense is wholly unable to grasp. But since the investigation of this speculation cannot be led to the knowledge of invisible things without the assistance of corporeal similitudes, reason seems to be following the leading hand of imagination in this part

and is shown clearly to hold onto it, the leader of the journey as it were, in the course of its search. For while imagination presents forms of visible things to reason and instructs itself from the similitude of the same things for the investigation of invisible things, in a certain manner it brings reason to that place to which it did not know how to go by means of itself. For reason would never rise up to the contemplation of invisible things unless the imagination, by means of representing the forms of visible things, were to show from what it should draw a similitude to those things and form the mode of its investigation. For this reason our inner person calls the outer person his leader when he says: "Truly, you are a person of one mind, my leader and my friend" (Ps. 54:14). For it is certain that the soul is not able to come to an exterior idea except be means of bodily sense. But he does not attain to knowledge of invisible things either since he is not able to rise up to knowing them without an idea of visible things. Thus, as often as he is urged to grasp by means of bodily sense the experience of knowing things, so often, to be sure, does our inner person seem to follow his leader. Without doubt, the sense of the flesh precedes the sense of the heart in knowing things, because, unless the soul first were to grasp sensible things by means of bodily sense, it would completely fail to discover what it should at the least be able to think concerning them. But perhaps it is not marvelous if the sense of the body leads the sense of the heart to that place where it is able to go itself. But it is truly marvelous how the sense of the body leads that of the heart to that place where the former is not able to rise by itself. Certainly bodily sense does not grasp incorporeal things; nevertheless reason does not rise to the latter without the guiding hand of the former just as reason already has taught. Certainly, even if man had not sinner at all, the exterior sense would aid the interio in the knowledge of things; for who does not know that Adam received his Eve for assistance? Truly, it is one thing to have a partner on his way; it is another thing to seek a leader on his journey. But because Eve once drew her husband after her against the counsel and command of God, and he inclined to consent to her counsel, Adam, having been weakened by punishment for his lying, already had necessarily to follow her and up to this present day he is in need of her daily teaching. Nevertheless, now concerning the guidance of her assistance, he not only is confused, but he also glories, with her office mediating, when he is led by the mountain path of similitudes to the contemplation of invisible things.

> [... a section from chapter 17 musing on the ethical relationship between the inner and outer human has been omitted]

Book 2, chapter 18, "That this kind of contemplation is in reason according to imagination"

Let us now return to that from which we have been digressing, namely how, by the imagination of visible things, we are assisted to the investigation of invisible things. Truly, in this the outer person assists the inner person in the course of his investigation. For that purpose he represents to him an image of invisible things by means of the imagination of visible things. And while he completes the duty of his leadership, he leads

the inner person by means of the mountain path of similitudes to that place which he dares not enter. So servants often go before their lords in the way as far as the royal palace gates, and yet while the lords hasten within to the interior of the palace, the servants remain outside. Thus I think it is evident, as we have already said above, how we ought to understand that this kind of contemplation exists in reason and according to imagination, because there are invisible things that we perceive mentally and yet we form them in us out of a similitude of visible things. For what shall I call the form of visible things except a kind of picture of invisible things, as it were? Should there be anyone who says that he has never seen a lion and yet longs to see one, if the image of a lion, portrayed suitably in some picture, is shown to him, certainly the sort of thing he ought to conceive in the mind is suggested immediately from that which he sees. Thereupon, he considers according to the features that have been portrayed on a surface, and he forms in the mind the solid members and the living animal itself. Now think how much difference there is between that which we see externally and this which it shapes internally for him in his thinking. So certainly in this kind of contemplation the invisible things that we engage in the mind differ greatly from those things which we perceive by means of imagination, and yet we draw upon the similitude of the latter, in order to portray the former. We have now declared how we were able to give a reason why this kind of contemplation seems to be in reason and according to imagination.

> Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Grover A. Zinn (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 199–200 and 203–4 (translation emended). Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSClear.

Passage 2 – the mind experiences itself

3.21, “De consideratione eorum quae pertinent ad secundum gradum”

In secundo hujus contemplationis gradu considerantur illa quae ad cognitionem sunt, vel veritatis studio deservire possunt, et quaecunque in augmenta scientiae concurrunt atque conducunt. In hac sane consideratione recte miramur volubilitatem cogitationis, agilitatem imaginationis, ingenii acumen, discretionis examen, capacitatem memoriae, vivacitatem intelligentiae, et circa haec alia quaelibet stupenda et admiratione digna. Quis enim digne pensare, quis sufficienter aestimare valeat, quis in ejus considerationis admiratione non expavescat, si diligenter attendat quae sit illa tam multiplex cogitationis humanae volubilitas, quae sit ejus tam inquieta et infatigabilis velocitas, quae per tam multa, tam varia, et tam infinita discurrit, quae nulla hora, nullo temporis momento quiescit, quae tot spatia locorum, quae tot volumina temporum in tanta festinatione pertransit, qui undique patet tam facilis transitus, tam agilis discursus de summis ad ima, de imis ad summa, de primis ad novissima, de novissimis ad prima. Sed de imaginationis agilitate facultatisque ejus facilitate, quid nos dicturi sumus, vel quid inde digne dicere possumus, quae omnium eorum quae animus suggerit, in tanta

velocitate imaginem depingit? Quidquid a foris animus per auditum haurit, quidquid ab intus ex sola cogitatione concipit, totum imaginatio absque mora et omni difficultate seposita per repraesentationem format, et quarumlibet rerum formas sub mira festinatione repraesentat. Quale, quaeso, est tot rerum atque tantarum in momento, in ictu oculi picturas efficere, et iterum easdem eadem facilitate delere, vel alio atque alio modo multiformiter variare? Nonne per imaginationem animus quotidie novum coelum, novam terram cum voluerit creat, et in illo phantastico mundo quasi alius quidam creator quantaslibet ejusmodi generis creaturas omni hora actitat, et pro arbitrio format? Nihilominus autem si ingenii acumen attendimus, quod in illo mirari debeamus, citius invenimus. Vide quam multa, imo pene infinita humano ingenio pervia sunt, quae nullo unquam corporeo sensu attingi possunt. Vide quomodo illud humani ingenii acumen soleat profunda investigare, intima quaeque penetrare, involuta, perplexa, obscura et in tenebris posita, evolvere, enodare, illustrare, et in lucem evocare. Intimos, ut ita dicam, latitantis naturae sinus abditosque recessus vivacitatis suae subtilitate quotidie adit, irrumpit atque pertransit, festinans et anhelans semper in ulteriora penetrare, et altiora conscendere. Attende quot scientiae disciplinas invenerit, quomodo tot artes excuderit, et tunc incipies obstupescere, et ex nimia admiratione deficere. Sic sane si memoriae capacitatem ejusque amplitudinem attendas, invenies absque dubio quod digne mirari debeas. Quantus, quaeso, est ille tam immensae amplitudinis sinus qui tot rerum substantias, tot substantiarum formas, tot genera rerum, tot species generum, tot individua specierum, individuorum vero tot proprietates, tot qualitates, tot quantitates, actiones et passiones, habitus, situs, loca et temporis latitudinis suae ambitu comprehendit, abscondit atque custodit, diuque custodita iterum in medium producit? Cogita, si potes, quae sint illa gazophylacia, quam multa, quam lata, quam ampla, quam profunda, vel alta, quae tot scientiae thesauros et sapientiae gemmas possunt undecunque colligere et inconfuse custodire. Miranda procul dubio memoriae capacitas, sed non minus mirabilis intelligentiae vivacitas. Quam sit autem magna, vel miranda, facile est perpendere et ex praedictis colligere. Quidquid enim sensus attingit, cogitatio parit; quidquid imaginatio format, ingenium investigat, memoria conservat. Horum omnium notitiam intelligentia capit, et cum libuerit in considerationem admittit, vel in contemplationem adducit.

> Richard of Saint Victor, *De gratia contemplationis libri quinque occasione accepta ab arca Moysis et ob eam rem hactenus dictum Benjamin major. Patrologia latina*, edited by J.-P. Migne, 196.129D–131A

Book 3, chapter 21, “Concerning the consideration of those things pertaining to the second stage”

In the second stage of this contemplation those things are considered which are for knowing or can be devoted to the pursuit of truth, and whichever things come together and lead to an increase of knowledge. Surely in this consideration we rightly marvel with worthy awe and wonder at the fluency of thinking, the agility of imagination, the

sharpness of ingenuity [*ingenium*], the examination of discretion, the capacity of memory, the liveliness of understanding and any other things whatever concerning this. For who is capable of thinking worthily; who is capable of estimating sufficiently; who is not terrified in the wonder of his consideration if he pays careful attention to that fluency of human thinking which is so manifold; the speed of it that is so restless and indefatigable, that runs through so many, such varied and such an infinite number of things; that keeps quiet for neither an hour nor a moment of time; that passes through so great an expanse of space or so great a duration of time in so much haste? Furthermore we ought to pay attention to how easy a passage, how agile a running through, lies open everywhere from highest to lowest, from lowest to highest; from oldest to newest, from newest to oldest. But concerning the agility of the imagination and the skill of that faculty, what are we going to say or what are we able to say worthily about that which portrays with such great speed the image of all those things which the soul supplies? Whatever the soul takes in from outside by means of hearing, whatever it conceives from within from thinking alone, the imagination forms the whole by means of representation, without delay and laying aside all difficulty, and it represents the forms of any things whatsoever with marvelous haste. What is it, I ask, to execute pictures of so many things and of so much in a moment, in a blink of the eye, and again to remove the same things with the same ease or to change in many ways in one and then another manner? When it wishes, does the soul not create daily by means of the imagination a new heaven and a new earth and in that world of phantasms as it were every hour another kind of creator causes and forms according to his will creatures of that sort as large as you like? Nevertheless, if we pay attention to the sharpness of ingenuity, we more quickly discover what we ought to marvel at in that. See how many—no, almost how infinite—are the things that are accessible to human ingenuity that cannot be reached at any time by bodily sense. See how that sharpness of human ingenuity is accustomed to investigate deep things, to penetrate whatever things are innermost, hidden within, perplexing, obscure and placed in darkness—and to unfold, disentangle, make clear and bring them out into the light. With subtlety, so to speak, it daily approaches, bursts into and passes through the innermost bosom of hidden nature and the secret recesses of its liveliness, making haste and always striving with eagerness to penetrate into farther places and to mount up to higher things. Pay attention to how many disciplines of knowledge it discovers, how many arts it hammers out. Then you will begin to be struck with amazement and to faint from excessive wonder. So if you pay attention to the capacity of memory and its breadth, undoubtedly you will discover what you ought to marvel at worthily. How great, I ask, is that inner chamber of such immense breadth, that comprehends, conceals and preserves so many substances of things, so many forms of substances, so many kinds of things, so many species of kinds, so many individuals of species—indeed so many particular natures, so many qualities, so many quantities, actions and passions, conditions, positions and places of individuals during the revolution of its scope of time, and after having preserved them for a long time, it brings them forth in the midst of all? Think, if you are able, how great, how wide, how large, how deep, how high, those treasuries are that are able to collect from all sides

and to preserve without confusion so many treasures of knowledge and jewels of wisdom. Without doubt the capacity of memory is marvelous but the liveliness of the intelligence is no less marvelous. It is easy to ponder and gather how great and marvelous it is from the things already said. For whatever sense touches, thought produces; whatever imagination forms, ingenuity investigates and memory conserves. The intelligence grasps knowledge of these things, and when it pleases it admits them to consideration and draws them into contemplation.

Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Grover A. Zinn (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 250–52 (translation emended). Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSClear.