After the end of the fourteenth century, Bonaventure O.F.M. (c. 1221-74) was a widely read and highly regarded writer on spiritual matters. Not without reason, K. Ruh refers in his excellent study Bonaventura Deutsch to a Bonaventure Renaissance.¹ The Fathers of Quaracchi, who published a critical edition² of Bonaventure’s works, mention 299 manuscripts of the Triplex via, 257 of the Soliloquium, and 175 of the Lignum vitae.³ In the Low Countries, particularly, Bonaventure was a popular author, and his influence has been felt since the beginning of Dutch literature, while the leaders of the Modern Devotion admit to having drawn liberally from his works.⁴ Thus it is not surprising that the Seraphic Doctor, as he was called, is well represented in early printed texts. GW gives 189 printed editions (including spurious works), a success unmatched even by Augustine (166) and Bernard (172).⁵

Of the Dutch incunabula there are seven which are genuine works by Bonaventure: 1. Tractatus sancti Bonaventurae,⁶ a collection of four short tractates; 2./3. the tractate De preparatione ad missam, two copies,⁶ a text in five short chapters preparing the reader for the Mass; 4. a translation of the ‘Legenda maior Si Francisci’, Die Legende van Sinte Franciscus, printed by G. Leeu in 1491;⁸ 5. the Soliloquium in Latin; 6. a Dutch translation of the Soliloquium, and 7. a Dutch adaptation of the Soliloquium, these last two appearing under the title: Boeck(xken) van den vier oefeningen. Let us now examine and discuss these Soliloquium editions.

What, in fact, was the Soliloquium?⁹ It was a mystical tract in the form of a dialogue between the soul – the concrete person who yearns for good but almost always does evil – and the inner man, the opposite of what St. Paul calls

¹ K. Ruh, Bonaventura Deutsch. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Franziskaner-Mystik und -Scholastik (Berne 1956), p. 72. This work has been consulted repeatedly.
² S. Bonaventurae opera omnia, X partes + indices. Quaracchi 1882-1902.
³ Opera omnia, VIII, pp. x-xv, xvi-xxxviii, xli-xliv.
⁵ K. Ruh, op. cit., p. 72. GW 4644-4832.
⁶ GW 4645. CA 350.
⁷ GW 4668 and 4672. CA 352 and 353.
⁸ GW 4464. CA 334.
⁹ See in particular Jean de Dieu, Oeuvres spirituelles de S. Bonaventure, vol. II: De la vie parfaite (Gembloux 1931).
the man of flesh, man enlightened by faith and reason, who, with the help of grace alone, desires and seeks supernatural goodness. The inner man tells the soul how he must prepare himself: by examining his own innermost being (first exercise), by seeing how he must react to what is outside him, the created world (second exercise); how he must turn against that which is below him, death, judgement and hell (third exercise): and what he must think of that which is above him, the life eternal (fourth exercise). It is a gradual climb from all that is created towards the eternal uncreated with which the soul desires to unite. The author himself declares that it is his intention to write in the simplest terms: Hunc tractatum, instigante conscientia, propter simpliciores quosque simplicibus verbis de sanctorum dictis compilavi per modum cuiusdam dialogi (For the convenience of simple people and out of a sense of duty imposed by my conscience I have written this tractate in simple words and in the form of a dialogue taken from the sayings of the saints). And indeed it is a conspicuous fact that he quotes many other writers: sometimes his dissertation seems to be a string of the pronouncements of others. But the whole is given its own colour by the extremely sensitive use of language and the regular switches to fervent prayers to God. To the modern way of thinking there is, however, something of a lack of logical, systematic discussion, and the author is more than once guilty of repetitiousness. From all this it is clear that such reading-matter was judged suitable for the daily meditation required of monks. Numerous manuscripts testify to the solace to be gained from this work and the value which it can have for all men. One copyist recommends reading the book without haste, but with an effort to understand it properly, saying that the reader must meditate upon it with humility and devotion, seek its practical application and thus come to understanding.

The work was written in about 1257. The Fathers of Quaracchi knew of 257 manuscripts, of which they collated twelve against the text of the Vatican edition. The GW lists eight incunabula of the Latin text, the oldest being the Strasbourg edition [Heinrich Eggestein, not later than 1474].

1 Boek van den vier oefeningen des herten [Utrecht, printer with monogram (1479–13 January 1480)].
This is the first Dutch translation of the Soliloquium printed by the mysterious printer with the monogram in Utrecht, who was perhaps simply the publisher.

1 S. Bonaventurae opera omnia, VIII, p. 29.
3 Jean de Dieu, op cit., p. 15.
4 S. Bonaventurae opera omnia, VIII, pp. xxv–xxxviii.
5 GW 4626–4693.
6 GW 4686. I have been unable to compare this text with the Leeu edition.