

DANTE POETICUS/ DANTE MYSTICUS:
DANTE'S MYSTICISM FROM HIS TIME THROUGH THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

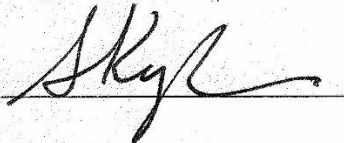
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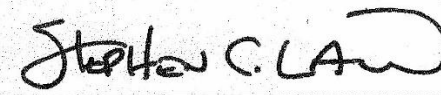
DANTE POETICUS, DANTE MYSTICUS: DANTE'S MYSTICISM FROM HIS TIME
THROUGH THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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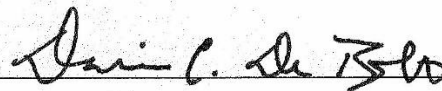

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Section I: Introduction

The relationship of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) to mysticism has been investigated in a surprisingly lopsided manner by scholars. That Dante was influenced by mystics who lived before him is not seriously in question, and not merely because Dante himself claimed to have read, and to have been writing in the tradition of, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1113) and Richard of St. Victor (1110-1173).¹ Writing in 1913, the scholar of Italian literature Edmund Gardner cataloged 182 passages in the *Divina Commedia* that appear to be parallels to passages in the writings of mystics Dante would likely have read, most notably Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. early 6th c.—hereafter Dionysius), Bernard, and Mechtilde of Hackethorne (1240-1298).² Dante was no mere copyist, however—he did not lift catchy-sounding passages from earlier writings and insert them into his own poetry. He understood the ideas of those mystics and wove them into the fabric of his epic. Recently, for example, Lino Pertile has persuasively argued that Dante, like Bernard of Clairvaux, understood the beatific vision not as the end of mystical attainment, but the beginning thereof, the beginning of the call to continued thirst for union with the divine.³ Scholars who address the question of the mystics who influenced Dante are attempting to answer a fundamental and important question about Dante’s relationship to mysticism. But the same body of work also raises other questions, two of which I aim to answer in this thesis. The first of these other two questions is this: was Dante himself a mystic, and if so, what can we begin to say about the nature of his mysticism? As I argue in this thesis, this question should be answered in the affirmative. Dante was, indeed, a mystic who recognized that desire is the engine of progress on the mystical path, and that desire must be transformed before union with God can be

¹ *Letter to Can Grande*, pp 212-3.

² Gardner, *Mystics*, pp 342-8.

³ Pertile, *Desire*, pp 151-3.

achieved. As a result of these features of Dante's mystical thought, he interpolated an investigation of sin on the journey of a contemplative to direct experience of God. The second question to be answered in this thesis is an obvious development from the first question: as a mystic, did Dante influence mystics who came after him? In this thesis, I shall present evidence that Dante's innovations can be recognized in the thought of later mystics.⁴

The only sources we have for determining whether Dante should be thought of as a mystic are his own writings. Some of his earlier works are redolent with phrases that suggest, on an intuitive level, a mystical depth to Dante's thought. At the start of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante writes "In my book of memory...there comes a chapter with the rubric *Incipit Vita Nova*."⁵ It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under that heading—if not all of them, at least the essence of their meaning."⁶ As the text unfolds, readers learn that the "new life" refers, apparently, to Dante's dedication to the god of love, Amor. The love in question is, within the confines of the *Vita Nuova*, both complicated in its texture and simple in that it has a single (indeed, singular) object: Beatrice. Like poets before him, Dante wrote about Beatrice, and his love for her, as having (in the words of Robert Hollander) "some positive relation to a more-than-sensual goodness, or even as though [she] possessed a certain similarity to angelic perfection that might lead from an erotic impulse to a higher understanding."⁷ But, as Hollander goes on to observe, Dante exceeds previous poets in placing Beatrice within the mystic rose of the thirty-second Canto of the *Divina Commedia*, in the third tier, just a step away from the

⁴ I do not mean to suggest there are literally no attempts to understand any potential relationship Dante had on mystics who came after him. However, there are surprisingly few. Gian Balsamo has investigated the use of figural literalism—that is, the creation of a literary figure who lives the true biography of the author—in both Dante and Catherine of Siena. See Gian Balsamo, *Figural Literalism*. Denys Turner has made a case for continuity between Dante's theology and Julian's. See Section 4, below, and Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian*, 106-160.

⁵ "The new life begins."

⁶ *Vita Nuova*, 1.

⁷ Hollander, *Life in Works*, p 16.

Virgin Mary herself.⁸ The scholar Barbara Nolan has suggested that Dante sees in Beatrice the presence of Christ, and the same effulgent and divine grace that Christ himself manifests to the world, and as such, both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia* are a kind of interior biography of Dante's journey towards Christ.⁹ The words "new life" suggest a change in course both decisive and utter, and the higher understanding of which Hollander writes seems to reach maturity in the final cantos of *Paradiso*. These points—the immanent presence of Christ, an interior journey towards salvation, an attempt to reach for a higher understanding—certainly sound mystical, but what does (or would) it actually mean to claim that Dante is a mystic?

To answer this question, it is necessary to consider what defines a person as a mystic. For the purposes of this thesis, I shall define a mystic as someone who:

1. Has at least one experience outside the ordinary that he or she takes to be spiritual or religious in nature, and
2. Takes the experience(s) named in 1, above, to be of profound enough import to warrant organization of all aspects of life, including the interior life, around those experiences.¹⁰

This definition is purposefully broad, as it includes anyone who has experiences of the kind implied by the definition. As such, it avoids construing mysticism as depending on some particular course of training or position within a society, while simultaneously including individuals who seem to deserve the title of mystic. The definition includes mystics who have appeared out of traditional coenobitic communities, such as was the case with Bernard or Richard, both of whom became mystics through practicing prescribed contemplative activities within the confines of a cloister. Such prescribed activities included regular prayer as well as

⁸ *Paradiso*, 32:8

⁹ Nolan, *Book of Revelation*, 52.

¹⁰ "Mysticism" is, then, the spiritual or religious practice and thought of mystics.

study and contemplation of scripture. The definition above includes anyone who obtained mystical experience via such practices. Not everyone who engaged in such practices had mystical experiences as a result, and therefore it will be useful to distinguish contemplatives (those who follow a practice of contemplation and prayer) from mystics (those who fit the above definition). This is particularly important¹¹ because the definition above also includes mystics who neither lived an eremitic lifestyle nor who were members of any coenobitic community, such as Margaery Kemp (1373~1438) or Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). It even includes heretical mystics such as Marguerite Porette (1250-1310).¹² By adverting to mystical experience in this definition, I do not mean to suggest that mysticism is *all about* experience, but rather, that experience is necessary to being called a mystic. Experience, just as such, is not sufficient to being called a mystic, however. It is only when a person values those experiences such that she reorganizes her life around them—when, in short, she takes action based on those experiences—that she is considered a mystic under this definition. This second condition is needed in recognition of the fact that not all religious or spiritual experiences are powerful enough to motivate or change the experiencer. When an experience motivates a mystic to reorganize her life, that reorganization is evidence that the experience transformed the experiencer in some important way.¹³

The above definition is clearly a contemporary one. There were no accepted definitions of mysticism in Dante's period and for long afterward—indeed, the term “mystic,” applied as a

¹¹ As we shall see below, the distinction between contemplative and mystic is valuable in understanding mystical itineraries.

¹² Intuitively, these individuals deserve to be called mystics—that is, there seems to be little disagreement that these individuals are, in fact, mystics. The problem of making a definition is finding a set of conditions that includes all the individuals recognized as mystics, without including any who are not mystics. Any definition that excluded someone generally recognized as a mystic would need to justify such exclusion.

¹³ William Harmless puts the point in historical context thus: “Mystical views fueled practical drives and reform efforts,” *Mystics*, 227.

title, was not used until 1736, some four centuries after the *Divina Commedia* began to circulate, though the term has since become imbedded in scholarly discourse to the point of being indispensable.¹⁴ It was nevertheless common practice, following Origen (184-253), to write of a “mystical sense of scripture,” or, after Dionysius, of “mystical theology.” This latter term was of particular importance from the sixth century, and it continues to maintain its importance in current theology. Roughly, it has two meanings. First, it means the theology that arises from mystical experience. Second, it also means the theological basis for attaining mystical experience. Thus, a mystic who, in her vision, sees something important about the doctrine of the Incarnation and writes about it is doing mystical theology. Similarly, a mystic who offers theory or instruction to others about how to have a mystical experience is also engaged in mystical theology.

Based on these definitions, it might seem that a mystic should be defined as one who engages in mystical theology, but not all mystical visions have obvious theological import, when the content of those visions is considered entirely on its own. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux’s most famous mystical experience was of receiving a divine milk from a statue of the Virgin Mary in a chapel in Chatillon-sur-Seine.¹⁵ Considered at it is, this vision (if it was a vision) *might* import a general Mariolatry if, for example, the milk is considered as a blessing or a sign of beneficence. But since the experience included no verbal communication from Mary, the rich Mariolatry espoused by Bernard must largely have been derived from other sources. It is therefore important to distinguish theology from mysticism. Though theologians were often mystics, and mystics often contributed to theology, the two subjects are, strictly speaking, separate. Theology requires no particular religious or spiritual experience, while mysticism is

¹⁴ Louise Nelstrop, *Christian Mysticism*, 1-3.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 277.

essentially about experience, and as this is so, the definition used herein relies on experience—a property particularly germane to Dante’s writings about purported mystical experiences.¹⁶

Dante describes his own final mystical experience in both positive and negative terms. The final vision is of a light in which three circles (representing, presumably, the three persons of God) appear.¹⁷ Yet, Dante insists on the weakness of his own memory in recounting the vision,¹⁸ the inadequacy of language in describing it,¹⁹ and, perhaps most importantly, he alludes to the fact that the final revelation was not something he, even in his initiated and purified state, could attain under his own power.²⁰ Though ineffable and beyond intellectual comprehension, the final vision was a vision, an experience that engaged multiple sense modalities, including apparently interior modalities such as are engaged in imagination or memory.²¹ Even those mystics, such as Johann van Ruysbroeck, who write of the final union with God in the most

¹⁶ Contemporary scholarship since at least 1979 has been divided on the subject of the definition of mysticism into two broad camps. One of those is the constructivist camp, which takes the position that mystical experience is wholly constructed out of the cultural material in which the mystic is immersed. In this view, there can be nothing in common between the mystical experiences of, say, a sixteenth-century Jewish mystic and a twenty-first century Sikh mystic since the cultural materials available to each are entirely different. Constructivism with regard to mystical experience comes in a variety of forms, but scholars and philosophers working within this line of thought about mysticism will tend to stress the context within which a mystic is placed as key to understanding her mysticism and, especially, any mystical experiences she may have. For the essay that inaugurated Constructivism, see Steven T. Katz, *Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism*, 22-74, and for discussion of the current trends in analysis, see Peter Moore, *Mysticism-Further Considerations*, 6356-7. Taking the contrary position is the anti-constructivist, or *unitivist*, camp, which adopts the view that while some elements of mysticism can be explained through reference to cultural context, there remains a (perhaps ineffable) central reality to mystical experience. For the inaugural anti-constructivist essay, see: Robert C.K. Forman, *Constructivism, Mysticism, and Forgetting*, 5-49. At present, each side touts its own definitions of mysticism, and there is no clearly dominant side. As such, there is no contemporary consensus on the definition of mysticism, and such consensus doesn’t appear to be forthcoming. I have no intention of taking sides in this debate, but have been careful to craft the definition of mysticism used in this thesis so that it could be adopted by either camp. The definition used herein relies not on whether an experience is considered veridical, but on how the experiencer takes the experience and what motives arise from it.

¹⁷ *Paradiso* 33:110-120.

¹⁸ *Paradiso* 33:106

¹⁹ *Paradiso* 33:120

²⁰ *Paradiso* 33:139

²¹ In *Paradiso* 33:109-113, for example, Dante writes that “he looked” (*ch’io mirava*), and says of his sight (*vista*) that it “grew stronger” (*s’avalorava*). But in line 120, his “mind was struck by light that flashed” (*che la mia mente fu percossa*).

apophatic terms, cannot entirely avoid writing of experience.²² As a supremely gifted writer and poet, Dante's descriptions of apparently mystical experience have few parallels in the entire corpus of western literature.

Recognition of Dante's contribution leads to the second of the two questions this thesis is meant to address. What influence might Dante have had on mystics who came after him? To answer this question, as was hinted above, we must first grasp how Dante may have innovated on mystical ideas. Bernard McGinn has recently suggested we should read the *Divina Commedia* not merely as a great Christian epic, but also as a *mystical itinerary*,²³ a term that may be unfamiliar to readers who have not spent much time with contemporary literature on Christian mysticism. Mystics have produced a number of means by which to organize their thoughts and experiences. A mystical itinerary organizes mystical experience around the analogy of a journey. Intuitively, the notion that a mystic is on a journey from the ordinary world to direct experience of God makes some sense, at least insofar as there must be some kind of change, and hence some motion (physical or metaphorical) in *something*, from world to God. Mystical itineraries typically present descriptions of different states of consciousness and different experiences along an ordered vector, such that each successive state of consciousness or experience is considered more holy than the previous one. More simply, a mystical itinerary organizes the mystical task as a journey. While the *Divina Commedia* is presented as the story of

²² See, for example Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, 12. Writing of the highest union that is "without difference or distinction," he says "And in consequence of this enlightened men have found within themselves an essential contemplation which is above reason and without reason, and a fruitive tendency which pierces through every condition and all being, and through which they immerse themselves in a wayless abyss of fathomless beatitude...this beatitude is so onefold and so wayless that in it every essential gazing, tendency, and creaturely distinction cease and pass away." But of the lead-up to this condition, he writes in chapter 9 of the same work: "...man through his bodily feeling may sometimes pass into a ghostly feeling which is according to reason; and through this ghostly feeling, he may pass into a godly feeling, which is above reason; and, through this godly feeling, he may drown himself in an unchangeable and beatific feeling." Johann writes in undeniably apophatic terms, but nevertheless affirms that mysticism has an essential experiential component.

²³ Bernard McGinn, *Flowering*, 180.

a journey, it cannot have been a journey undertaken in the actual world. Rather, it must be understood as an allegory of an interior journey, one that starts in a dark wood, symbolizing the state of being mired in sin, and ends in the supreme vision and direct experience of God. Along the way, the pilgrim is emphatically cast as a learner, whose understanding of topics necessary to obtaining the final vision changes as the journey progresses. Dante, for his part, claims that his masterwork will lead a reader into a deeper relationship with God.²⁴ As such, he clearly intends his poem to function as a mystical itinerary, albeit one that deviates substantially from the norm.

A standard mystical itinerary, or at least a broad overview of a standard itinerary, had developed in the Medieval Latin West by the 11th century. That itinerary had its roots in the far older devotional practices of the Desert Fathers²⁵—notably Anthony of Alexandria (251-356), and Origen’s commentary on the Solomonic books. It was promulgated to the Latin West via the writings of Ambrose of Milan.²⁶ The standard itinerary featured three stages: purgation, illumination, and union with God (*purgatio, illuminatio, unio*).²⁷ In the first stage, the contemplative is purged of sin or other obstacles that might prevent her from passing on to the next stage. In the second stage, the contemplative gains a deeper understanding of God, of Christ, of sainthood, and of scripture. The final stage is the goal of contemplative pursuits, though it is typically understood to encompass more than one degree of depth of contemplation—such that one vision or experience of union is more pure than another.

²⁴ Dante, *Letter to Can Grande*, 199; see also *Paradiso* 1:70-2.

²⁵ The “Desert Fathers” is a collective name applied to some members of groups living in monastic conditions in the early centuries of Christianity in the deserts of Egypt. Aside from Anthony the Great and Pachomius the Great (292-248), very little is known about most of the individuals comprising these early Christian monastics, other than what is collected in *The Sayings of the Fathers*, which is, as the title suggests, a collection of sayings of these early Christian monastics. See Benedicta Ward, ed., trans., *Foreword to Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xvii-xxxi.

²⁶ McGinn, *Foundations*, 197-9.

²⁷ For discussion of the standard itinerary and the role it played in mystical practice before the fourteenth century, see: McGinn, *Growth*, 144-5, 183.

This standard itinerary was a framework for actual itineraries produced by medieval mystics, notably John Climacus (d. 606), Bernard, and Bonaventure (1221-1274).²⁸ These authors, as we will see, mold their itineraries on the standard one, but each also elaborates that itinerary, presumably according to their individual experiences. Each author brings unique insight to the process of attaining mystical experience—that is, of the journey from life as a contemplative to becoming a mystic, as well as a unique storehouse of analogies and metaphors by which to conceive and describe spiritual progress, and so the itineraries produced by each author differ in their details. Nevertheless, mystical itineraries prior to Dante followed this standard model. If we take seriously McGinn’s suggestion that the *Divina Commedia* should be read as a mystical itinerary, then it becomes clear it does *not* follow the standard itinerary.²⁹

²⁸ Notably, the only female mystic to have produced an itinerary explicitly as an itinerary in the Medieval period was Marguerite Porete (1250-1310), and she was declared a heretic and burned at the stake shortly after circulation of her work, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. The third part of Hildegard of Bingen’s (1098-1179) *Scivias*, written in 1142, and Angela of Foligno’s (1238-1409) *Memoriale*, circulated in 1300, are perhaps the works closest to itineraries by female mystics who avoided execution. But the *Scivias* is presented as an ordered series of Hildegard’s visions from the third part of which an itinerary might be deduced, though Hildegard herself refrained from so doing. Similarly, the *Memoriale* is presented as a simple record of Angela’s spiritual progress and is bundled together with instructions for mystical progress, though these are not placed in any particular order. Importantly, Angela makes no claim that her journey might be instructive for other contemplatives. As we will see below, Teresa of Avila succeeded in producing an itinerary while remaining in the good graces of the Church.

²⁹ One simple and obvious way it deviates from the standard itinerary is that it is presented as a narrative, rather than as a set of ordered instructions to a contemplative, as was the common form of itineraries both before and after circulation of the *Divina Commedia*. The imagery of the poem is one of its most outstanding features, and imagery had come to play an increasingly important role in contemplative practice since the twelfth century, when female mystics, especially Hildegard of Bingen, Elizabeth of Schonau (1129-1164), and Christina Mirabilis (1150-1224), began to blur established lines separating categories of vision in Medieval theology. This development led, in turn, to an increasing emphasis on imaginal forms of devotion such as meditation on the image of the crucifix, or reconstruction in imagination of various episodes of the life of Christ, in which the affective faculties could be engaged. If Dante were purely a mystic, or a mystic first, it would be possible to view the fact that his itinerary is presented as an epic poem as part of this broad evolution in contemplative practice—and indeed, it is entirely possible that his poem was influenced by just this growing reliance on imaginal forms of devotion. But this change in contemplative practice also provides a doorway through which the *Divina Commedia* could come to be seen as an exposition of a mystical itinerary, and as the writing of a mystic, could participate in the confluence of mystical literature from the fourteenth century onward. Since it was already the case that contemplative practice was turning towards the use of imagination and narrative, a narrative of the soul’s journey through the entire spiritual realm was both timely and desirable. Dante’s supreme skill as poet and maker of images provided ample material for mystical contemplation, and it is this fact coupled with the growth of imaginal forms of devotion that would have piqued the interest of mystics. Still, this change in devotional practice was underway nearly two centuries prior to Dante’s life. See: McGinn, *Flowering*, 155; see also Nelstrop, *Christian Mysticism*, 183-7.

Dante's epic is divided into three *cantiche*—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. The first, *Inferno*, is divided into thirty-four cantos, while *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are divided into thirty-three cantos each. As a mystical itinerary, however, the poem is a narrative of a change in the pilgrim. Each time the pilgrim reorients himself within the poem towards some more holy goal is a liminal event, a passage from one episode in the mystical itinerary to the next. As such, we can recognize six broad episodes: being lost in the dark wood, the journey through Hell, the climbing of Purgatory, a period of repose in the Earthly Paradise, the journey through the sub-solar circles of Heaven, and the journey to the final vision through the inner circles of Heaven. Recall that the standard itinerary consisted of three episodes: purgation, illumination, and union. Comparing these three standard episodes to the structure of Dante's epic reveals that the *Divina Commedia* departed substantively from the standard itinerary.

As we will see below, mystical itineraries prior to circulation of the *Divina Commedia* either did not substantively address the question of sin, or alternately, advised the contemplative to avoid thinking about sin. The pilgrim's journey through hell would have been unnecessary, and even anathema, in the views of the mystics who came before Dante. Nevertheless, for Dante, a tour through all the sins committed by human beings is a necessary step along the mystical path.³⁰ Mystics after Dante began to take up the idea that examination of sin could be a source of wisdom for the contemplative, and was necessary so as to avoid potential wrong turnings along the mystical itinerary. As we shall see in a later section of this thesis, itineraries before the circulation of the *Divina Commedia* either avoided mention of sin, or actively warned against any examination of sin by contemplatives. Dante's interpolation of *Inferno* on the mystical itinerary has no counterpart in the history of mystical itineraries prior to the fourteenth

³⁰ *Inferno* 1:95-6.

century. Dante, through the *Divina Commedia*, was responsible for introducing some profound innovations on both the understanding of the role of desire on the mystical path, and on the standard mystical itinerary, according to which separation of purgation and illumination is mistaken. As such, these parts of the standard itinerary are no longer distinct episodes in Dante's itinerary, which has a wholly different principle of organization than had previous itineraries; the *Divina Commedia*, as mystical itinerary, is organized around the transformation of desire or human love into divine love. In summary, then, I will argue that Dante made three important contributions to mystical thought:

1. The notion that examination of sin can be a source of wisdom for the mystic.
2. Desire as both the source of sin and also the engine of progress on the mystical path.
3. Interpolation of *Inferno* as a necessary episode on the mystical itinerary.

In reevaluating the role of desire on the mystical path and reorganizing the mystical itinerary, Dante influenced mystics who came after him—and the analysis of that reorganization provides part of the answer to a heretofore neglected aspect of the question of Dante's relationship to mysticism. Later in this thesis, I shall present evidence from the writings of four mystics—Johann van Ruysbroeck (1294-1381), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), and Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)—to show that Dante's idea about the importance of an examination of sin caught on. With the present thesis, at least some work will have been done toward showing Dante's influence on mystics who came after him. To fully grasp the nature of his contribution, however, we must first grapple with the nature of Dante's own mysticism. As I shall argue in the next section, Dante was both a poet and a mystic, and should be thought of as such.

Section II: Dante's Mysticism

Dante clearly knew about, and had read, a great many mystics, and it is certainly possible to believe that he had digested and reformed that material in the forge of his own considerable genius. I contend, however, that Dante was a mystic, per the definition in the previous section.³¹ Dante seems to allude to his own regular devotional practice in *Paradiso* 23:88-9, which may form a basis of training through which he was able to attain mystical experience. However, Dante also describes spontaneous visions in the *Vita Nuova*, and in a letter to Moroello Malaspina, to be examined below.³²

We are fortunate to have some of Dante's correspondence. In two surviving letters, both to be examined below, Dante either describes apparent mystical experience or comments on his poetic descriptions of such experiences in the *Divina Commedia*. These letters are of particular import as they occur outside the context of narrative. The episodes in the *Divina Commedia* are part of a tale that is a literal fiction (that is, the events of the narrative did not happen in the actual world), and as such, we might suspect those episodes of being mere poetic contrivance. However, when Dante comments on experiences in his correspondence, he is not writing in the context of telling a story, but either commenting on the *Divina Commedia*, or alternately, describing his experiences. In his letter to Can Grande, Dante describes the final vision thus:

³¹ There have been some critics who have questioned the veracity of the notion that human beings even *have* mystical experiences, or at least that mystical experiences are anything other than fantasies constructed from cultural material. See, for example, Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 228-36. More recent work on the psychology and neuroscience of mystical experience has, however, strongly indicated that mystical experiences are real and that they do not belong to some other category of experience—they are not dreams, epileptic episodes, the result of schizophrenia, or mere hallucinations. See Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newburg, *Mystical Mind*, 109-120. I am going to assume that human beings have mystical experiences, and that at least in principle, it is possible for anyone to have them.

³² One category of mystic currently acknowledged, but not well-studied, by contemporary psychology is the natural mystic—a person to whom mystical experiences simply occur, without any special preparation or exercise necessary. See Paul Marshall, *Encounters*, 21-48.

He proceedeth to speak of Paradise, by circumlocution, and saith that *he was within that heaven which receiveth most of the glory of God, or of his light*. And from this it is to be understood that that is the highest heaven, containing all bodies and contained by none, within which all bodies move, whilst it remaineth in sempiternal quiet and receiveth its virtue from no corporeal substance.³³

Since Dante's letters were presumably not a fiction, but an expression of his actual thoughts and feelings, it is useful to compare these words to the corresponding lines in *Paradiso*.

Bernard was signaling—he smiled—to me/ to turn my eyes on high; but I, already/ was doing what he wanted me to do,/ because my sight, becoming pure, was able/ to penetrate the ray of Light more deeply—/ that Light, sublime, which in Itself is true.³⁴

The imagery of divine light, and God *as* Light, appeared previously in the canto, but only in the prayer of Bernard, though Dante invoked this imagery previously throughout *Paradiso*. The poem continues with an address to the reader:

From that point on, what I could see was greater/ than speech can show; at such a sight, it fails,/ and memory fails when faced with such excess./ As one who sees within a dream, and, later, the passion that had been imprinted stays, but nothing of the rest returns to mind,/ such am I, for my vision almost fades/ completely, yet it still distills within/ my heart the sweetness that was born of it.³⁵

In the letter to Can Grande, Dante expresses the same thought in these words:

For the comprehension of these things it must be understood, that when the human intellect is exalted in this life, on account of the natural relation and affinity that it hath to the separate intellectual substance, it is exalted to such a degree that after return the memory waxeth feeble, because it hath transcended human bounds.³⁶

These comparisons suggest that Dante wrote about his actual experiences in his poetry. Dante goes on, in the letter to Can Grande, to cite Bernard and Richard of St. Victor as authorities to show that visions that transcend the ability of the mind to fully apprehend or recall are possible.³⁷

³³ *Letter to Can Grande*, 207.

³⁴ *Paradiso* 30: 49-54.

³⁵ *Paradiso* 30: 55-63.

³⁶ *Letter to Can Grande*, 211-12.

³⁷ *Letter to Can Grande*, 213-4.

His citation of Bernard and Richard was probably meant to show that then-contemporary people could have such experiences as Paul had.

Dante's citations of Richard and Bernard nevertheless hold some surprises. The words of Richard of St. Victor to which Dante likely refers are these: "For some things are such, which go beyond the understanding of the human, and the human cannot investigate by reason."³⁸ Richard goes on to write that even of rarified visions, the mystic retains "a kind of memory."³⁹ His own words stop short of, and perhaps directly contradict, Dante's claim that certain *experiences* might themselves be beyond the ability of a human being to recall; Richard's claim is that certain *subjects* are beyond the understanding of *reason*.⁴⁰ Similarly, the most likely words of Bernard's to which Dante refers are these:

But he is the greatest of all who, scorning the use of sensible things as far as human frailty permits, has accustomed himself, not by gradual steps, but by sudden ecstatic flights to soar aloft to the glorious things on high. I suppose Paul's ecstasies were of this last description; they were departures rather than ascents, for he himself relates that he did not ascend into paradise, but was caught up thither.⁴¹

Bernard does not claim that ecstatic experiences, even those of the apostle Paul, are beyond the ability of human memory to recall, merely that they are departures (perhaps from sensible things). Nothing in the work of either author, especially in the places Dante cites, is a remark on

³⁸ Richard of St. Victor, *The Mystical Ark*, 278.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁰ Perhaps it is possible to infer from Richard's claim that certain experiences are beyond the abilities of human memory, but this would require three auxiliary assumptions: First, that those subjects that are beyond human reason correlate to their own peculiar set of experiences, second, that those experiences are also beyond human memory, and third, that it is possible for a human being to have at least some of those experiences, even if they are in some way beyond recall. But the second and third auxiliary assumptions are essentially what Dante claims, and ergo, he didn't get his view about the difficulty of recalling mystical experience from Richard. The question at hand is about the relationship of reason to experience. Some readers will likely be convinced that an experience that is utterly beyond the ken of reason is as impossible as a triangle without line segments or language without syntax. Steven Katz seems close to this view in his essay *Language, Mysticism, and Epistemology*. In this view, reason is a necessary constituent of experience, and so no experience can transcend reason. Dante is making the claim that experience beyond the ability of reason to comprehend is, in fact, possible, and he asserts his own experience as evidence for his case.

⁴¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Consideration*, 172.

experience that cannot be recalled later—at least not without added assumptions. Dante himself offers us the assumption he adds to these and other scriptural sources he cites. It is precisely because, writes Dante, the mind has “exceeded human bounds,” that the memory is unable to recall much of the experiences it has.⁴² This notion of exceeding human bounds is one to which we shall return. For now, Dante seems to be arguing that, to the extent that the memory of a human being is a human faculty, transcending human bounds takes one outside the grasp of human faculties. But he is not *merely* arguing in the abstract, he is arguing that among his own experiences are to be found some that exceed human bounds.

Another example exists, and one that strikes me as even better evidence that Dante was not only a mystic, but that he incorporated his mystical experience into his poetry. In a passage in Dante’s letter to Moroello Malaspina includes an apparent description of a mystical vision:

I set foot by the streams of Arno...when suddenly alas! descending like a flash of lightning, there appeared to me, I know not how, a woman suited in all respects to my inclinations, my character, and my fortunes. Oh! how in wonder at her did I stand amazed. But my amazement gave place to the terror of the thunder that followed. For just as the lightnings from heaven are followed straightway by thunder, so I had barely beheld the flash of her beauty, when a love, terrible and imperious, held sway over me. And this love, as violent as a lord who, banished from his native land, returns to it after a long exile, either slew, or drove forth, or fettered whatever had been contrary to him within me...The assiduous meditations wherewith I was contemplating the things of heaven and earth...he impiously banished. Finally, lest my soul should yet longer rebel against him, he fettered my free will, so that I must need turn, not where I wish, but where he wishes.⁴³

Here, Dante claims to have had a vision of a divine woman, and divine or saintly women are a staple of Dante’s mystical imagery. One of the few seemingly autobiographical references to Dante’s own spirituality is an indication that he invokes the Virgin Mary, “that fair flower,” morning and evening,⁴⁴ and this vision reads like an answer to his invocation. Ralph McInerny

⁴² *Letter to Can Grande*, 212.

⁴³ *Letter to Malaspina*, 55-6.

⁴⁴ *Paradiso* 23: 88-9.

has even suggested that *Paradiso* is a “cumulative concentration” on the Virgin,⁴⁵ and this vision seems to indicate that Dante’s Mariolatry was for him a reality, and not constructed as part of a poetic persona for the Pilgrim. This description of a vision on the banks of the Arno occurs in context alongside one of Dante’s poems (a canzone that was not part of any longer work), which seems to be motivated by the vision itself—a relationship between vision and verse similar to that alleged to exist in the letter to Can Grande, wherein Dante claims that *Paradiso* was written on the basis of personal experience.

The canzone was offered to Malaspina as a means to explain the effect the vision had on him. The poet is now ruled by a violent and powerful love. Echoes of the transformation announced at the beginning of the *Vita Nuova* are apparent, which can be read as a description of the transmogrification of Dante’s soul, while he was yet alive, into the new life as the poet (and perhaps even prophet) of love. But the story told in the *Vita Nuova* of that transformation does not include this vision, and it is unclear when the letter to Malaspina was written.⁴⁶ As Dante presents this vision, it simply came to him, without him having prayed or engaged in ascetic practice to obtain it. The description makes clear that the vision was affective and consequential for Dante. The vision transformed him in an instant.

If we take Dante at his word in this description of the vision on the banks of the Arno, Dante qualifies as a mystic under the definition proposed in the previous section. Dante writes that the vision came like a lightning flash from heaven, and was followed by a thunderous outbreak of love within him, suggesting that he takes the vision to be spiritual in nature. The

⁴⁵ Ralph McInerny, *Blessed Virgin*, 103.

⁴⁶ Dante claims that it occurred by the banks of the streams of the Arno, suggesting the vision itself happened before Dante’s permanent exile from Florence. A member of the Malaspina family, Currado, is mentioned in *Purgatorio* 8:117-126, suggesting that perhaps this letter was composed after Dante’s exile, in the temporal neighborhood of the composition of *Purgatorio*.

transformation he records fits the second criterion, in that Dante's life is reorganized around the vision itself. This vision is, then, enough to qualify Dante as a mystic. However, to appreciate the nature of Dante's mysticism, and the innovations he made on the mystical itinerary, it will be necessary to go beyond these visions to examine Dante's published writings. The *Vita Nuova* chronicles Dante's relationship with Beatrice and expresses, in poetic terms, the visions and inner experiences through which Dante becomes a devotee of Amor, the god of love. In an essay published along with his translation of the *Vita Nuova*, Mark Musa argues that Dante grapples with the cross-currents of two kinds of love or desire, which Musa describes as the lower and higher aspects of love.⁴⁷ When the *Vita Nuova* begins, Dante is selfish, concerned only with the lesser aspects of love. In Musa's view, Dante is constantly concerned with Beatrice's effect on him, and he could be said to want to possess her on the one hand, and yet he is afraid to converse with her.⁴⁸ After Beatrice's death, Dante must confront the fact that he has not understood love, and that his love for Beatrice includes the higher aspects of love, a divine love that goes far beyond the bounds of normal human love. Beatrice becomes a symbol for Dante's desire, and as she is transformed from a living woman to a saint in heaven, so Dante's desire (his love) is transformed.

Along lines similar to Musa's analysis, Carin McClain has more recently focused on the implausibility of the story of the screen woman that occupies a part of the *Vita Nuova*. Dante would have us believe that he attempts to hide his love for Beatrice through the use of a "screen woman," that is, a woman whom he does not love, but about whom he can dissemble so as to

⁴⁷ Mark Musa, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, 111.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109-12.

make others think his affection is directed to her.⁴⁹ McClain argues that Dante has used the screen woman as a metaphor for

a kind of desire—a convention, courtly desire—that is fungible and can be transferred from one beloved to another based on her interest and availability. Love for Beatrice, however, is non-transferable: because she herself is extraordinary...the kind of love she inspires, as the protagonist will eventually discover, is utterly unique.⁵⁰

The final vision of Beatrice that confronts Dante after her death is not explicitly mystical—it is easy to read it as simply an instance of a clear memory arising from grief—but its very presence provides the conceptual foundation, in the form of a pure and innocent love, for the most mystical experiences Dante records. The other visions discussed above are not so easy to dismiss as mere memory, and they have effected a change in Dante, from the self-absorbed youth of the first half of the *Vita Nuova*, to the more mature poet who is a servant of the higher aspects of love. Transformation of the entire human being, and the process of transformation, has in the meantime become one of the central themes of the *Vita Nuova*, and as we shall presently see, of the *Divina Commedia*. In the words of Barbara Nolan, “The history of the lover's relationship with Beatrice is also the record of his progress towards salvation.”⁵¹ The *Vita Nuova* is sometimes thought of as a kind of unintentional introduction to the *Divina Commedia*, especially insofar as Beatrice is one of the central characters of the *Divina Commedia*.⁵² Where the *Vita Nuova* leaves off, with Dante vowing to “write of her that which has never been written of any other woman,”⁵³ the *Divina Commedia* picks up. The appearance of Beatrice in the final cantos of *Purgatorio*, and through to canto 31 of *Paradiso*, fulfills

⁴⁹ *Vita Nuova* 8-9.

⁵⁰ Carin McLain, *Screening the Past*, 2.

⁵¹ Nolan, *Revelation*, 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵³ *Vita Nuova*, 86.

Dante's vow. And with her resurrection in the *Divina Commedia*, Dante has found it necessary also to resurrect precisely that which he seems to have buried in the final image of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*—desire, for (especially in *Purgatorio*) it is desire for Beatrice that spurs the Pilgrim to move onward.⁵⁴

One pathway toward understanding the role of desire in Dante's mysticism may be found in understanding the nature of desire within the larger traditions of Christian mysticism. Popular notions of the strict chastity prescribed by the Church might suggest that erotic imagery and desire could never enter into mystical contemplation. In fact, this is not the case. Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1294) had, for example, conceived of the soul's relationship with God as a mutual love, in which God commands the mystic to lay in "utter repose and nakedness" before Him.⁵⁵ Lino Pertile suggests that Dante understood the bliss of union with God not as a static and timeless point, but as an ever-evolving process, the motile force for which is love, in all its many aspects, high and low.⁵⁶ Upon entering heaven, the blessed pilgrim is not confronted with figures who are content to remain where they are, but rather, who are content with their ever-burning desire for God.⁵⁷ Pertile writes "The hope and purpose of the pilgrim in his ascent to the Empyrean will not be the extinction of desire, but its constant fulfilment, the attainment of a perfect state of equilibrium whereby his soul will always receive what it desires and will never cease desiring what it receives."⁵⁸ The language of love in desire had long been a feature of Christian mystical writings. John Climacus writes of love as "an abyss of light, a fountain of fire. The more it flows the more burning the thirst for it becomes."⁵⁹ Augustin does not shy

⁵⁴ See, for example, *Purgatorio* 6:43-51, 15: 76-82, 27: 34-54.

⁵⁵ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of Godhead*, 205.

⁵⁶ Lino Pertile, *Desire of Paradise*, 151-2.

⁵⁷ See, for example, *Paradiso* 3:57,

⁵⁸ Pertile, *Desire of Paradise*, 154.

⁵⁹ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 291.

away from using the metaphor of a sexual encounter to describe mystical union.⁶⁰ Bernard, in commenting on the *Song of Songs*, advises his audience to, without qualification, love passionately, for only by doing so can they understand the language of scripture.⁶¹ But in these and similar cases, the erotic desire for sensual contact with another human being is transformed into a metaphor for desire for union with God. Such metaphors are not to be understood as a direction to contemplatives to engage in anything sensual. Bernard, again, makes this clear when he remarks that the *Song of Songs* can be read as the poetry of a human marriage, but such is not its ultimate depth.⁶² Commenting on the evidence we have for Dante's own sexual character, one contemporary biographer notes

Boccaccio regretted that he had to record Dante's inclination through his life to the sin of lussuria, or lechery; yet what this probably means is simply that Dante had a strong sexual drive. Indeed, it was the tension between his sexuality and his aspiration towards a perfect, rational, and intellectual love that helps to explain the variety, intensity, and amplitude of his creative powers...His falling in love when he was almost nine with the child Beatrice was a mystical experience of enhanced consciousness that transformed, refined, and purified the later and more self-acknowledged sexual attraction and the overwhelming emotions to which he gave vent in his verse.⁶³

If there is any truth to this speculation, then few strains of thought in the writings of mysticism could have been more congenial to Dante's character than those concerned with desire. This use of desire in the history of mystical thought is, for Pertile, one of the underlying pillars of the *Divina Commedia*. He notes that Dante *may* have adopted this language of desire to help "spin out" the tale of travelling through paradise; were heaven one single timeless moment of unchanging bliss, there would be no story to tell.⁶⁴ I prefer to think that Dante poured too much

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Augustin, *Exposition of Psalm 139*, pp 162-7.

⁶¹ Bernard, *Sermons 3*, 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶³ Anderson, *Maker*, 401.

⁶⁴ Pertile, *Desire*, 150.

emotion into the erotic aspects of his poetry, and into the transformation of the pilgrim in the *Divina Commedia*, for the theme to have been a mere structural or stylistic choice.

Whether or not the language of desire in mystical thought helped Dante tell the story he wished to tell, there can be little denying that, for Dante, desire plays a crucial role in the *Divina Commedia*, as if it had been resurrected from its burial in the *Vita Nuova*. If there is a distinction between love and desire in the *Divina Commedia*, it is difficult to find. Love is conceived as a motive force, one that moves or impels one to seek the object of desire.⁶⁵ When confronting the wall of fire of *Purgatorio* 27, Dante the pilgrim hesitates, feeling its heat. Virgil says to him “Now see, son: this wall stands between you and your Beatrice.”⁶⁶ Upon hearing the name that was “always flowering” within his mind,⁶⁷ Dante braves the flames.⁶⁸ Later, Beatrice guides Dante through Paradise, a theme itself redolent with erotic overtones. And yet, Beatrice is a saint, ensconced in the rose of the highest heaven. As Barbara Seward has observed, “In his supreme apotheosis of Beatrice, Dante has succeeded in reconciling two great discordant forces of the medieval spirit, human and divine love.”⁶⁹ Dante’s love for Beatrice is ultimately the alchemical alembic in which he is able to achieve his mystical vision. The (almost) unerring constancy of his love for her is a mirror of the love for God that will lead a human being into direct experience with God. It is his longing for her that impels him to take the final steps through the fire and into paradise.

In an investigation of the sources of Dante’s poetry, Mark Mirsky examines the connections between the transformation of desire in the *Divina Commedia*, and the mysticism of

⁶⁵ The final line of *Paradiso*, and thus of the whole epic, is “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

⁶⁶ *Purgatorio* 27: 35-6.

⁶⁷ *Purgatorio* 27: 41

⁶⁸ *Purgatorio* 27: 49-51.

⁶⁹ Barbara Seward, *Mystic Rose*, 518.

Kabbalah. He makes two observations that are of note. First, he points out the similarities in the overall form of the *Divina Commedia* to the Merkabah mysticism that serves as the foundation for Kabbalah.⁷⁰ The Merkabah mystic *descends* to the throne of God, all the while describing the process of doing so as an ascent. The paradoxical character of this claim is taken to imply a descent through the more infernal aspects of Ezekiel's visions, such as the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37: 1-14. It is only by passing through such terrifying realms that the mystic can come to behold the vision that so drove King David: the vision of God enthroned. Like King David's legendary lust for Bathsheba,⁷¹ the theme of sexual desire runs like blood throughout the main texts of the Kabbalah. Just as Beatrice, and the Virgin Mary beyond her, serves as an image of holiness, Mirsky points out that, in Kabbalistic doctrine, it is through the divine feminine, the *Shekinah*, that the mystic achieves union with God.⁷² This union is explicitly erotic, though it is an Eros that makes use of sexual lust, but is transformed into a kind of holy lust, an undying lust for the indwelling of the divine spirit.⁷³

The rather more openly sexual character of Kabbalistic mysticism, if it is one of Dante's sources, may help to explain the origin of his innovations on the standard mystical itinerary.⁷⁴ By providing a more positive vision of the nature of desire, Kabbalah may have served to underwrite Dante's view of desire and hence of sin. As we will see later, Dante's view of sin and evil differed substantially from that of earlier theologians and mystics. For now, it is

⁷⁰ Mark Mirsky, *Kabbalah*, 19-20.

⁷¹ 2Samuel 11:2-5.

⁷² Mark Mirsky, *Kabbalah*, 18-21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁷⁴ The emphasis on sexuality also created a problem for Dante, as it had to a lesser degree for earlier mystics. Put simply, original sin was conceived as being literally transmitted to each child through the act of sexual intercourse that conceives it. Sex was, therefore, the gateway through which sin entered the world. Paradoxically, Dante recognized the desire that condemns human beings to damnation is also the engine of progress on the mystical path.

necessary to understand Dante's theory of sin as explained in the *Divina Commedia*, as his theory is what entails the necessity of placing an investigation of sin on his mystical itinerary.

Dante propounds a general theory of sin, the main exposition of which is to be found in canto eleven of *Inferno* and seventeen of *Purgatorio*. In the first, Virgil explains that Hell is divided broadly into three sets of rings, in which are punished, from top to bottom and in increasing order of severity, sins of incontinence, sins of malice, and sins of fraud.⁷⁵ Sins of incontinence are punished with less severity than are sins of malice, and fraud, being peculiar to human beings, is punished more harshly than all other sins.⁷⁶ Building on this foundation in canto seventeen of *Purgatorio*, Virgil completes the general theory of sin of the *Divina Commedia*. In this speech, Virgil says first that "there's no Creator and no creature who ever was without love—natural or mental."⁷⁷ Natural love is always without error, but mental love—that is, the love and desire of a minded object, such as a human being—can fall into error, choosing an evil object, or by being either too vigorous, or not vigorous enough.⁷⁸ Love directed to the First Good—God, the Prime Mover—and only to other goods in due measure, remains good.⁷⁹ But when the mind directs the good towards some evil, the love causes sin.⁸⁰ Virgil goes on to describe two kinds of love that are corrected in Purgatory. The first is the love that corresponds (mostly) to the sins of violence in *Inferno*, and these are purged with terrible punishments on the lower steps of purgatory. The second is less severe, and corresponds to the sins of incontinence.⁸¹

⁷⁵ *Inferno* 11: 22-30, 84.

⁷⁶ *Inferno* 11: 25.

⁷⁷ *Purgatorio* 17: 91-2.

⁷⁸ *Purgatorio* 17: 94-6.

⁷⁹ *Purgatorio* 17: 97-9.

⁸⁰ *Purgatorio* 17: 100-3.

⁸¹ It is perhaps notable that the fraudulent do not have their own distinct terraces on the mountain of purgatory. The sins of fraud are, of course, the worst of the worst in the scheme presented in *Inferno*, and it is possible Dante

The mental love that can be perverted, in Dante's view, cannot be the love possessed by just any minded being. Otherwise, God, as a minded being, would be possibly capable of sin—and this is not an acceptable outcome. When Dante has Virgil say that neither creature nor Creator is born without love, we should probably not understand him as making the claim that the love of the Creator, and of His creatures, possesses all the same properties. The love of the Creator cannot be perverted, only the love of His creatures, particularly human beings, can. If this is right, talk of human love as distinct from divine love is warranted in at least some sense. Augustin writes that human beings learn love from God, who loved us first.⁸² Bernard puts the same thought this way: "He (God) has put love in order in me."⁸³ God has, in these strains of theology and mysticism, given human beings love directly, and the love human beings have for one another is the selfsame love that God has for creatures. Divine love and human love therefore share a substantial identity, but differ in their modal properties: it is *possible* for human love to be perverted, while impossible for divine love to be perverted. On the account Virgil gives, in cases where human love actually does become perverted, it leads inevitably to sin. The danger that desire presents is precisely that it can lead to sin. But human beings come with desire seemingly inborn, and if it cannot be excised, it must be transformed. Of the many seeming ways into the highest heaven, this one is the way Dante has chosen: the transformation of desire so that it no longer serves the lesser, human aspects of love, but the greater, divine aspects. On this particular path, desire is not a disturbance, but an absolute necessity—it is the engine by which the contemplative makes any progress at all. Through this doorway, and perhaps only through this doorway, Dante seems to say, can we attain union with God while

believed the sins of fraud beyond redemption. Another interesting discontinuity between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* is that the sin of sodomy is considered a sin of violence in *Inferno*, but is treated as a sin of incontinence in *Purgatorio*.

⁸² Augustin, *Sermon 34 on Psalm 139*, 15.

⁸³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons* 3, 31.

living. The language of necessity pervades the *Divina Commedia*; Virgil reminds the pilgrim again and again that God himself has ordained this journey,⁸⁴ and given that 1) Dante seems to suggest that everyone can make the journey his pilgrim makes and 2) that desire or human love transformed is the principle story of that journey, the transformation of desire or human love is the truly essential mystical goal. Realizing this point has far reaching consequences for the enterprise of Christian mysticism, as we shall shortly see.

The vision of the final canto of *Paradiso* is presented as the supreme vision of which not only Dante the pilgrim is capable, but of which any mortal person is capable.⁸⁵ Dante describes parts of the vision with characteristic skill, but at the same time, laments that “what I could see was greater than speech could show.” The mystical knowledge that comes to him via this vision does not come via the usual means by which vision conveys knowledge. Dante writes of his experience as akin to a dream in a certain respect:

As one who sees within a dream, and, later,/ the passion that had been imprinted stays,/ but nothing of the rest returned to mind,/ such am I, for my vision almost fades/ completely, yet it still distills within/ my heart the sweetness that was born of it./ So is the snow, beneath the sun, unsealed;/ and so, on the light leaves, beneath the wind,/ the oracles the Sibyl wrote were lost.⁸⁶

The “sweetness” of the vision remained with Dante, but the images are difficult to recall. Difficult, but not impossible, as Dante goes on to record some imagery in the remaining lines of the canto. He sees first an “Eternal Light,”⁸⁷ within which he sees, bound “by love into one single volume”⁸⁸ things that normally seem separate to us. Within this light, as his sight grows stronger, he perceives three circles of different colors but equal dimension.⁸⁹ One, presumably

⁸⁴ *Inferno* 3:124-6, *Inferno* 8: 103-5.

⁸⁵ *Paradiso* 33: 28-33.

⁸⁶ *Paradiso* 33: 58-66.

⁸⁷ *Paradiso* 33: 83.

⁸⁸ *Paradiso* 33: 86.

⁸⁹ *Paradiso* 33: 116-7.

the Son, is reflected from another, presumably the father,⁹⁰ and from both comes a fire to create a third circle, which can be none other than the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ Within this vision of the Christian trinity, Dante perceived “our effigy”⁹²—that is, he saw the human form within the circles representing God. The final few lines are worth quoting in full for the illumination they shed on this vision:

As the geometer intently seeks/ to square the circle, but he cannot reach,/ through
thought on thought, the principle he needs,/ so I searched that strange sight; I
wished to see/ the way in which our human effigy/ suited the circle and found
place in it—/ and my own thoughts were far too weak for that./ But then my mind
was struck by light that flashed/ and, with this light, received what it had asked./
Here force failed my high fantasy; but my desire and will were moved already—
like/ a wheel revolving uniformly—by/ the Love that moves the sun and the other
stars.⁹³

Mandelbaum glosses the phrase “what it had asked” as the mystery of Christ.⁹⁴ However, Dante also sees within the circles painted “our effigy” (*la nostra effige*)—that is, our own human form, and seeks the answer to how that form can dwell within those circles. Christ was, in the mythology to which Dante subscribes, incarnate as a human being, but this is, in the history of mystical thought both before and after Dante, only one of the ways in which God and human beings come into direct contact. The way most relevant in this moment at the height of heaven is mystical union with God, and though the incarnation is what makes such union possible, instances of mystics attaining union with God were considered genuine, and Dante certainly takes his own experience as such. But the apparent fact that human beings can attain union with God remains a mystery to be unraveled only through the experience of union. In the final moments of Dante’s journey, it is the human image raised up to the divine trinity, the mystery of

⁹⁰ *Paradiso* 33: 118.

⁹¹ *Paradiso* 33: 119-20.

⁹² *Paradiso* 33: 131.

⁹³ *Paradiso* 33: 133-45.

⁹⁴ Allen Mandelbaum, *Notes on The Divine Comedy*, 791.

divine union that Dante, after all the purification through which he has gone, still wishes to understand.

The desire to understand the way in which the human image fits into the most essential vision of God is the final desire presented in the entire poem. The pilgrim has desired to question the events and spirits to which he is witness.⁹⁵ His journey is one of discovery, but it is also one of purification. Virgil embraces him as he acquires the correct attitude towards sin.⁹⁶ On the terraces of Purgatory his desires are continually refined, until the moment when he himself must pass through the purifying flames to “heal the final wound of all.”⁹⁷ These flames are so hot that the pilgrim tells us “no sooner was I in that fire than I’d have thrown myself in molten glass to find coolness.”⁹⁸ Virgil’s last words to the pilgrim declare that the pilgrim’s “will is free, erect, and whole...”⁹⁹ Of all the desires that are purged in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and despite the many questions answered in the lower reaches of *Paradiso*, the final, the most essential, of all desires in Dante’s heart is to understand the mystery of the relationship of God to human beings. It is even more crucial in that it remains even after Dante the poet has placed Beatrice in the company of the saints. Seen in this light, having an answer to this question of the relation of the divine to the human image is the aim of the entire poem, as if to suggest that it is this mystery that was always lurking behind the mystery of Dante’s love for Beatrice. Dante provides an answer in the first canto of *Paradiso*. The first canto is, as are the first cantos of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, a precis of the entire *cantica*. The purpose of the journey through heaven appears with a neologism: “passing beyond the human” (*transumanar*), a purpose that

⁹⁵ *Inferno* 4: 46-50, 9: 124-6, 15: 46-8, 20: 103; *Purgatorio* 25: 13.

⁹⁶ *Inferno* 8: 45-7.

⁹⁷ *Purgatorio* 25: 139.

⁹⁸ *Purgatorio* 27: 49-51.

⁹⁹ *Purgatorio* 27: 140.

“cannot be worded.”¹⁰⁰ Immediately afterward, as we might expect after such an announcement, we learn how—if words will not suffice—the purpose is to be fulfilled: “let Glaucus serve as simile—until grace grant you the experience.”¹⁰¹ The reference to Glaucus is to a story that appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; Glaucus was a fisherman who tasted a magic herb and became a sea-god. Again, Dante invokes the theme of transformation, but the story can only be like the one Dante is telling in that general sense. The transformation Dante the pilgrim undergoes is rather different in character, but with mention of this story, Dante seems to suggest that narrative, and perhaps narrative in poetry, can accomplish something that direct prose cannot. If passing beyond the human cannot be *explicated*, perhaps it can be *narrated*. What Dante finds in the Empyrean, he cannot tell of directly, but he can deploy his skill as a poet to describe to others how they, too, may attain this experience, and so finally understand what he describes. As such, the *Divina Commedia* is a mystical itinerary. Dante expresses this point explicitly in his letter to Can Grande: “But omitting all subtle investigation, it can be briefly stated that the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those beings living in this life from a state of misery and to guide them to a state of happiness.”¹⁰²

Scholars who have examined the question of Dante’s relationship to mysticism have tended to focus on *Paradiso* (and with good reason, as the above discussion hopefully shows). It is only in *Paradiso* that the essence of Dante’s mysticism is revealed. But it is a mistake to suppose that *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* have no part in explicating Dante’s mysticism. As we have seen above, one of the principle themes of Dante’s mysticism is the transformation of human desire, and as such, Dante must grapple with the human beings who are doing the desiring. The

¹⁰⁰ *Paradiso* 1:70-1.

¹⁰¹ *Paradiso* 1: 70-1.

¹⁰² *Letter to Can Grande*, 199. McGinn is prepared to accept this as sufficient evidence that the *Divina Commedia* is a *bona fide* itinerary. See

themes that dominate *Inferno* are commonplace enough in human life so as to be recognizable to the vast majority of potential readers of the *Divina Commedia*. Much of the imagery of *Inferno* would have been not too dissimilar to actual experience. Common modes of public execution included the tearing out of flesh with red-hot tongs, breaking on a wheel, being thrown from a height and left to die of starvation, dismemberment, and other such extremes of violence.¹⁰³ The effects of battle on the bodies of human beings, combatants and otherwise, were both horrific and frequent.¹⁰⁴ The great gushes of blood, gore, and excrement in the epic were an exaggeration of daily life in Medieval Europe, but not entirely off the mark. Dante, in writing the *Inferno*, is in some sense holding up a mirror to the ordinary lives of ordinary people. But it is also, critically, an inversion of the ideal of paradise, in the words of Dimitri Nikulin, a “mirror of the higher divine world, but this mirror is inevitably uneven, ragged and distorting, so that it never can adequately reflect and embody the initial intelligible harmony and beauty of the heavenly region.”¹⁰⁵ The cannibalistic imagery that increases in savagery throughout the second half of *Inferno* to culminate in Lucifer munching the bodies of the three great traitors, has been interpreted by Sheila Nayar as distortions of the Eucharist.¹⁰⁶ Hell is a divine creation,¹⁰⁷ though its inhabitants have “lost all intellect.”¹⁰⁸ As a mirror of daily life, Dante is merely showing his readers what is often read from the very first line of *Inferno*—that the lessons of his epic, though given to the pilgrim, are actually offered through the poem itself to every person.¹⁰⁹ But the Pilgrim’s journey through hell remains part of Dante’s mystical itinerary.

¹⁰³ Sean McGlynn, *Sword and Fire*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-85.

¹⁰⁵ Dimitri Nikulin, *Distorting Mirror*, 251-2.

¹⁰⁶ Sheila Nayar, *Dante’s Sacred Poem*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ *Inferno* 3:5.

¹⁰⁸ *Inferno* 3:18.

¹⁰⁹ Guy Raffa, *Danteworlds*, 9.

Structurally, *Inferno* is part of the tripartite structure of the epic, which structure reflects the three persons of the trinity, the trifold division of time,¹¹⁰ and other tripartite schemes. Narratively, however, its presence is problematic, a fact obscured by (in the words of Nayar) “nearly 700 years of ways of reading” the *Divina Commedia*.¹¹¹ The Pilgrim, waking in the dark wood, desires to travel to a sunlit hill (usually interpreted as purgatory), but he cannot. Virgil appears to guide him. Readers would notice nothing amiss had Dante chosen to have Virgil and the Pilgrim journey straight to Purgatory. Virgil himself asks the Pilgrim why he doesn’t travel to Purgatory,¹¹² and so Dante was surely aware that having his Pilgrim take the route directly to Purgatory would have made sense to readers. Dante must therefore have had a purpose in diverting the Pilgrim through Hell, and indeed, we find that purpose in the Pilgrim’s answer to Virgil. The journey through Hell is necessary because the “beast that is the cause of your outcry/ allows *no man* to pass along her track, but blocks him even to the point of death”¹¹³ Since no man will pass this beast, the other pathway, through *Inferno*, is the only one available to anyone wishing to reach the summit of *Purgatory* while yet alive.¹¹⁴ The apparent lesson is that no man (we should presumably read no person) can pass into the heavens unless he first travel through Hell, and thence to Purgatory. The beast that blocks the Pilgrim blocks every person, and so the contemplative must travel through *Inferno* with the Pilgrim before climbing the face of the mountain of Purgatory and proceeding thence to experience of God in Heaven.

The necessity of this seeming detour is a consequence of Dante’s central mystical theme, the transformation of human love and desire into divine love and desire for God. As we later

¹¹⁰ Scriptural, contemporary, apocalyptic.

¹¹¹ Nayar, *Dante’s Sacred Poem*, 2.

¹¹² *Inferno* 1:77-8: “Why not climb up the mountain of delight,/ the origin and cause of every joy?”

¹¹³ *Inferno* 1: 95-6 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁴ At least under then-current conditions. Lines 101-11 appear to foretell the coming of a savior-figure, a “greyhound” who will throw the wolf “back to hell.”

learn, only one whose “heart has matured within the flame of love” can understand the path of salvation.¹¹⁵ The phrase “flame of love” (*fiamma d’amore*) suggests the burning passion—in short, the *desire*—that is such a large part of love for Dante. The paradox of hell being a distorted mirror of heaven is that one can still learn something about heaven by investigating the distorted image carefully—if nothing else, one can learn what heaven does not look like. The sinners in *Inferno* are trapped in their own distorted image, unable to grasp the undistorted image of God. As the pilgrim is made to confront the image of sin after sin, he is shown a distorted, sometimes even a completely contradictory, view of life.¹¹⁶ The learning method employed by Dante is simply this: the reader is shown, along with the pilgrim, image after image of sin, as if to say to the reader “and this is not correct either.” At the same time, it is an accurate view of one part of human nature, characterized by the cast of hundreds, from all walks of life, who appear among the tormented in *Inferno*. They are there, as Virgil tells us, because of Love, which is in itself a divine good, a gift from God.¹¹⁷ But it is perverted love, one that misdirects and distorts the human beings who possess it. As the pilgrim progresses downward, he sees ever deeper levels of distortion, but by learning to reject them, he learns something of the nature of the undistorted image of heaven. Therefore, as the pilgrim learns something about heaven by viewing its distorted image, he (and hence, the reader) learns something about the potential evils within himself, at least to the extent he is anything like the souls whose suffering he witnesses. It is perhaps notable that those souls whose evil tendencies are most despicable are depicted by Dante as having lost their human form, visible as “wisps of straw in glass.”¹¹⁸ These sinners,

¹¹⁵ *Paradiso* 7:38-40.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, *Inferno* 7:25-35. This is the episode of the Greedy and the Spendthrifts, in which two groups of condemned souls are made to roll boulders away from and then towards each other in a perpetual cycle of clashes.

¹¹⁷ See above, p 40.

¹¹⁸ *Inferno* 34: 12.

guilty of betrayal of their benefactors, have no place in Purgatory, by which arrangement Dante seems to suggest that it is possible to commit a crime so atrocious as to be forever cut off from divine grace. Examples of people who have committed sins of incontinence or violence appear in Purgatory, but none who have committed either fraud or betrayal, as these are crimes beyond the power of transformation. All other sins, however, can be repented, and—crucially—the motives that led to them reworked.

The images carved into the side of the mountain at the start of each terrace on Purgatory present allegories of the manner of correcting each sin. For example, in *Purgatorio* ten, we meet the prideful, and the first image presented in lines are of the Virgin Mary,¹¹⁹ humbly accepting her decreed place in God's plan for salvation. The next image is of those who labor to bear the Ark of the Covenant.¹²⁰ The next is of King David, "less and more than a king."¹²¹ These images together present part of the answer to the question that haunts Dante in his final vision: how does the human image fit into the divine? But the question must be understood in an unusual way: Dante chooses (emphatically) not to answer it by description of the human image as part of the divine. He cannot do that, every part of that image is beyond words. Rather, he presents instructions to human beings by which they can witness the mystery for themselves, and the crucial part of the method is transformation of desire, which is a necessary prerequisite for attaining to direct experience of God. In the transformation of desire by which the human being can achieve union with God, *Inferno* plays its role, as does Purgatory. The images along the paths of Purgatory show by what means a human can fit herself into the divine image—that is, how she can attain union with the divine. The punishments endured by the souls in Purgatory are

¹¹⁹ *Purgatorio* 10: 40-5.

¹²⁰ *Purgatorio* 10: 55-63.

¹²¹ *Purgatorio* 10: 64-7.

described, in this canto, as the means by which they “pay the debt [they] owe.”¹²² Once paid, these souls will be received into paradise in the afterlife; but by completing the same process while living, the Pilgrim (and by extension, a contemplative) is able to achieve union.

This description of paying a debt in Purgatory raises a question about *Inferno*. To the extent that the souls currently in hell are there for all eternity without hope of escape, they cannot be said to be paying a debt, at least not in the same way the souls in Purgatory are paying. The punishments in *Inferno* are of a wholly different character than those in *Purgatorio*. Each *contrapasso* follows on the sin of necessity—that is, the *contrapassi* we see in hell are essential properties of each sin.¹²³ When we encounter the lustful, who are spun and driven about in a great whirling tempest, we are meant to understand that this is in some essential way what lust is truly like. If this is the case, then those who lust in a sinful manner are, in the confines of their soul, already experiencing their punishment while yet alive on earth—they are blown about here and there by their base desires. Their punishment is to remain in their sin.¹²⁴ Similarly, the sowers of discord, who are presented in canto 27, are presented dismembered and split in half. Their mental apparatus, all their concepts and values, derive from the culture into which they are born. The act of trying to split that culture, to polarize its members along some axis, is indicative of a split that must exist somewhere within the sower of discord first, a split from which the sinner already suffers.¹²⁵ It is not a punishment in the usual sense of the term—it is not a negative condition or effect applied by some external agency. Rather, the *contrapassi* of *Inferno*

¹²² *Purgatorio* 10: 108.

¹²³ Essential properties are properties of some object which it has in all possible worlds in which it exists. For instance, a triangle has the property of being a three-sided closed planar figure, and in no possible world in which triangles exist do they lack this property. For a triangle to exist just is for a three-sided closed planar figure to exist, and vice versa. Similarly, the image of the punishment of lust, for example, in canto five, is an attempt to capture such essential properties of lust in poesy. Wherever lust exists, it is the punishment being wrought on the lustful as presented in canto five.

¹²⁴ See J.A. Berthoud, *The Vision of Eternity*, 26.

¹²⁵ Victoria Kirkham, *Contrapasso*, 2-3.

are a depiction of the condition of the soul who sows discord—an articulation of the problem such a betrayal creates within the sinner. The punishments endured in Hell are *literal images* of the sins they punish. The story of Manfred from the third Canto of purgatory is the crucial episode for understanding this point. Manfred explains that he repented with, quite literally, his last breath. Dante writes that the grace of forgiveness is so great that those who, even for an instant, ask for grace are granted it, no matter how great their transgressions.¹²⁶ So the sinners in *Inferno* are not people who chose a sin unaware of the consequence; they had experienced the nature of that sin, and had chosen to stay with their perverted love, unrepentant, down to the very last. Dante employs them to display to his readers a compendium of mistakes on the path of transformation that leads to the highest vision. In this process, Dante is like an alchemist removing all impurities from the *prima materia* before transforming it. The desire which alone can propel one towards the beatific vision and direct access to God is, like the pilgrim at the start of the *Divina Commedia*, in a dark wood, mired by sin. Virgil, to continue the alchemical analogy, finds him and purifies him by degrees. But this purification is not the same as purgation in the standard itinerary; that process occurs (as we would expect) on the slopes of the mountain of Purgatory, and is only foreshadowed in *Inferno*.

What is happening in *Inferno* is much closer to illumination. As each sin presents itself before the Pilgrim, a lesson is learned. And the final lesson is a reorientation, presented as a literal inversion on the very shanks of Lucifer in the final canto of *Inferno*.¹²⁷ In the mythology of the *Divina Commedia*, it is Lucifer's fall to earth which both makes possible the temptation in the garden that leads to the original sin, but his fall also creates the mountain of Purgatory, on

¹²⁶ *Purgatorio*, 3:22-3.

¹²⁷ *Inferno* 34: 76-84.

which sinners are relieved of the burden of their sins.¹²⁸ Like the desire that Beatrice represents, Lucifer is both the origin of the perennial problem, and the cause of the mechanism of its redemption. Lucifer is presented as the final vision in *Inferno*, the final lesson that seems to distill all the lessons of Hell. In his influential essay *The Muted Self-Referentiality of Dante's Lucifer*, Dino Cervigni observes that

By way of *disconvenientia* [disproportionality], the Pilgrim is set apart from Lucifer and what characterizes hell's king most specifically, namely, his primordial rebellion against the *Verbum* and his eternal deprivation of the word. By way of *convenientia* [proportionality], on the contrary, the Pilgrim is likened to what Lucifer stands for....Throughout the Pilgrim's infernal journey, from the moment he becomes lost in the dark forest, he is in fact caught in this dialectical rapport of *convenientia* and *disconvenientia* with Lucifer. As the Pilgrim's infernal journey nears completion, his *convenientia* and *disconvenientia* vis-a-vis Lucifer reach a climax.¹²⁹

For Cervigni, the Pilgrim has been in a kind of dialogue with Lucifer from the very start of his journey. All the horrors of hell owe their existence to Lucifer, and the Pilgrim has, on his journey, seen aspects of himself in some of them—and no doubt, readers of the *Divina Commedia* will see aspects of themselves therein. But in this supremely infernal moment, the Pilgrim undergoes a reorientation, one at which he has been aiming the whole time. If not for the presence of Lucifer, neither the lessons learned in confronting each sin, nor the reorientation towards Purgatory, would be possible.¹³⁰ It is by confronting Lucifer that the first real transformation of desire, in the form of reorientation, occurs.

The work of contemplation transforms the contemplative, but care must be taken that not just any transformation takes place, because sin, far from being external to the contemplative, is an indelible feature of her own soul. The mystical itinerary is a process that, by its most

¹²⁸ *Inferno* 34: 121-8; see also Guy Raffa, *Danteworlds*, 122.

¹²⁹ Dina Cervigni, *Muted Self-Referentiality*, 60.

¹³⁰ That this is true is in no way to suggest that Dante lauds Lucifer, who, in Dante's system (as in Christianity in general) is ultimately responsible for introducing temptation, and hence sin, into the world.

fundamental nature, bound up as it is with desire, can lead those who enter upon it astray. In Dante's understanding of sin as presented by Virgil on the slopes of the mountain of Purgatory, the desire for direct experience of God is just the same kind of motive that leads to desire for other things, including those that are the objects of sin (lust, violence, power, pride, etc.). The mystical path is then, for Dante, a path on which there is but a single motive force, and it must be the business of the contemplative to ensure that the target of that force is the right one. This conception of how mystical theology works on a practical level is a far cry from the manner in which mystics prior to Dante thought about the task of contemplation. As we will see, recognition that a contemplative *could* go wrong due precisely to the motive forces of the mystical journey itself was not a point for which provision was made in mystical itineraries prior to Dante. But after the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, mystics became increasingly concerned to both investigate sin as a source of wisdom, and also to warn contemplatives against a growing catalog of mistakes along the path. The most manifest sign of Dante's influence on later mystics is the apparent fact that mystical itineraries, and the attitudes of mystics towards sin, began to change shortly after the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*.

Section III: Mystical Itineraries Prior to Dante

As I argued in the previous section, *Inferno* is a necessary episode in Dante's mystical itinerary—for Dante, it cannot be expunged or avoided. The pilgrim's journey through hell is a consequence of certain features of Dante's mysticism—most especially, Dante's understanding that desire is the primary engine of progress on the mystical path, but desire must be transformed before union with God can be achieved. In placing a journey through hell, and the attendant examination of sin, on his itinerary, Dante departs sharply from itineraries that had been written

prior to the *Divina Commedia*. It is one of the central points of this thesis that a change in the manner in which mystics viewed the relationship between the contemplative and sin can be observed beginning shortly after circulation of the *Divina Commedia*. Before circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, as we will see below, mystics either mostly ignored the subject of sin, or advised contemplatives to avoid any investigation of sin. After circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, however, mystics began to advise contemplatives to investigate sin, and even inserted episodes analogous to *Inferno* into their own itineraries. In this section, I aim to show that the notion that an investigation of sin is useful or necessary to contemplatives was absent in mystical itineraries prior to the latter half of the fourteenth century—with the exception of the *Divina Commedia* itself. The *Divina Commedia* is the first itinerary to include a journey through hell and an investigation of sin. In this section, after a brief overview of the historical roots of mystical itineraries in the Latin West, we shall examine some of the more well-known itineraries written prior to the fourteenth century. As we shall see, itineraries prior to the *Divina Commedia* either ignored the subject of sin, or actively discouraged contemplatives from thinking about or looking at sin.

Mystical itineraries as they exist in the mysticism of the Medieval Latin West have two main historical roots. Perhaps the most pervasively influential historical root is to be found in the writings of that unknown fifth century mystic Dionysius. His primary itinerary, *The Mystical Theology*, not only coined the eponymous phrase, it had a profound and far-reaching influence on the entire corpus of Christian mysticism.¹³¹ His primary contribution to mystical thought is the juxtaposition of both positive and negative ways of conceiving God. Positive theology—that is, theology that attributes some definite quality or property to God—has a place in the thought

¹³¹ McGinn, *Foundations*, 85.

of Dionysius. But for Dionysius, it is also necessary to recognize the impossibility of any positive set of qualities or properties adequately conceiving God, who is always more than we are capable of grasping.¹³² If the contemplative is to be raised up to heaven, she must pass to a place beyond the ability of the mind to grasp or describe, implying humility in the recognition that human powers of cognition cannot grasp the divine.¹³³ The idea that mystical ascent only comes about through profound humility comes to fruition in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Steps of Humility and Pride*, and leaves some traces on Bonaventure's *Journey of the Soul into God*, in which each step on the mystical path involves both a positive or acquisitive task, and a negative or banishing task. William Anderson sees some influence of Dionysius' apophatic theology in Dante's Pilgrim's journey into heaven in that the final vision in *Paradiso* cannot be entirely articulated or grasped by the mind.¹³⁴

The second historical root and the earliest explicitly Christian mystical itinerary was propounded by Origen of Alexandria, in his *Twenty-Seventh Homily on the Book of Numbers*. As an itinerary, this work is a difficult one, as it is phrased as a commentary on the book of *Numbers*—it is not presented as a mystical itinerary per se, though it came to be read as such by the next generation of mystics, including Ambrose of Milan and Gregory the Great (540-604).¹³⁵ Though it consists of forty-two stages of attainment, in broad strokes it recapitulates Origen's earlier commentary on the three books of Solomon.¹³⁶ *Proverbs* presents, on Origen's reading, moral knowledge. *Ecclesiastes* presents natural science, knowledge about the created things and the uses for which God intended us to use them. Finally, the *Song of Songs* presents mystical

¹³² See McGinn, *Foundations*, 174; Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 149-50.

¹³³ Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 139.

¹³⁴ See William Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, 282-3, and *Paradiso* 33: 121-2.

¹³⁵ See McGinn, *Flowering*, 118-9.

¹³⁶ McGinn, *Foundations*, 117; Origen, *Commentary on Canticle*, 14-24.

knowledge, that is, knowledge of union with God. Contemplatives attain direct experience of God, implies Origen, by concentrating on, and moving through, these areas of knowledge (importantly) *in order* from moral knowledge to mystical knowledge. At the beginning of the mystical journey, the contemplative must be concerned with knowledge of how to conduct herself, and how to avoid sin. In the second stage, the contemplative meditates on the created universe and attempts to understand it. In the third, the contemplative finally becomes a mystic, attaining union with God.

The first stage, that of purgation, may seem to be the most obviously relevant for this thesis, since *Inferno* is the *cantica* that most seems to be about sin. But a sharp distinction in the attitude toward sin to be taken by the contemplative can be observed in comparing *Inferno* to the first stage of Origen's itinerary. In that first stage, Origen reads *Proverbs* and the moral knowledge it presents entirely through the lens of the complete *avoidance* of sin—that is, the contemplative is to refrain from even being in proximity, bodily and mentally, to any instance of sin.¹³⁷ In Origen's writing, sin is an inevitable consequence of sexual reproduction and of being embodied in matter, and only belief in Christ enables human beings to overcome sin.¹³⁸ Sin is an all-or-nothing phenomenon—one either sins or does not sin.¹³⁹ As such, there is very little to understand about sin beyond the fact that sin is of the devil and only Christ can deliver a person from a state of sin. Though Origen seldom mentions them, ascetic practices were universally prescribed to avoid sin, and were almost universally perceived as the most efficacious, if not the sole, means of doing so.¹⁴⁰ While it is wise, in Origen's view, to avoid sin, investigation of sin

¹³⁷ Origen, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, 227-30.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁴⁰ Exceptions to the belief that ascetic practices alone accomplish the purgation of sin were so rare as to be almost non-existent, and in fact *no* itinerary up to the fourteenth century that addresses sin at all fails to prescribe ascetic practices to drive sin away. As an example of one exception, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) proposed that the

itself does not lead to wisdom, an attitude that would guide mystical itineraries for an entire millennium after Origen, as we will see. Origen's tripartite scheme of purgation, illumination, and union became the standard to which itineraries conformed until the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*. This standard form was adopted by Gregory the Great in his *Homily on Ezekiel*, in which he describes Christian life as occurring in three stages, in which one first turns back to the self, then one examines the self, and then, in the final stage, one transcends the self.¹⁴¹ Gregory's itinerary provides an example of the power of the tripartite scheme introduced by Origen. As McGinn notes, Gregory produced a number of itineraries as briefer parts of larger works, though his chief concern was always the incessant struggle of living as a Christian, and turning away from the world—a process Gregory perceived as an ongoing struggle that could not be divided into stages.¹⁴²

John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written in the mid-seventh century, is the earliest itinerary written specifically as an itinerary in the Latin West. Where Origen's itinerary had to be deduced from his commentary on scripture, and Gregory's appears as a small part of a larger work, Climacus' *Ladder* is explicitly and exclusively an itinerary. While Climacus refrains from offering practical advice for spiritual combat, the *Ladder* nevertheless illustrates the central point that early Christian mystics conceived of sin as caused by external forces to be shunned and avoided rather than investigated and engaged. Indeed, Climacus writes as if convinced of the efficacy, for combatting sin, of making confession and taking vows of contemplation. In his *Ladder*, to illustrate exactly this point, he relates the story of a renowned robber and murderer who experiences pangs of conscience and fear for his own soul. These

contemplative be moderate in prostration, neither engaging in it too little, or doing so overlong, as the ascetic practice, if taken to extreme, might invite a different kind of sin. See Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 362.

¹⁴¹ Gregory the Great, *Homily on Ezekiel*, 17.

¹⁴² McGinn, *Growth*, 45.

pangs and fears become so oppressive, and his need to be close to God so strong, that he seeks out a monastery and asks to be admitted. The abbot suggests he take a week to live in the monastery, and then decide. The robber does so, and at the end of the week, his resolve not wavering, he is dragged before the brethren to confess his sins. He makes his confession, and as he does, Climacus writes that one of the brethren reported seeing a terrifying man holding a pen and a book, and at each sin confessed, the man crossed something out in his book.¹⁴³ Importantly, Climacus refrains from saying, in anything more than a vague manner, just what sins the man had committed—rather as if the sins themselves were of little consequence.

Throughout the remainder of the *Ladder*, Climacus dispenses advice for not falling into sin, though this advice is rather uniform: one should simply avoid it where possible, and shun it where it cannot be avoided. When one is overcome by some sin, calling out to the Lord may help.¹⁴⁴ Sin is something that comes from outside the contemplative in Climacus' itinerary. Climacus seems to have either invented, or inherited from some unknown source, some lore about the causal connections—some more plausible than others—between sins and either psychological or bodily states. For example, unwarranted jesting is sometimes occasioned by lust,¹⁴⁵ while hardness-of-heart can result from overeating.¹⁴⁶ Climacus recognizes these causal connections as essentially unintelligible, but nevertheless affirms them. They are not wisdom, he says, because they are too chaotic, do not hold often, and present no means of practical help.¹⁴⁷ Climacus concludes that the only remedy of use against any and all sin is humility.¹⁴⁸ He is

¹⁴³ This story appears in: Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁴⁸ Climacus, *Ladder*, 95.

explicit that all sin and all temptation comes from demons, who cannot attack a humble person.¹⁴⁹

Of special interest in comparison to Dante, Climacus reverses the order of severity of sins between those of pride and those of lust; the former are merely pitiful, while the latter are a fatal error.¹⁵⁰ Recall that, for Dante, desire or love is the engine of progress on the mystical path, and as such, its close image lust cannot be the most grievous sin. And yet for Climacus, as for a number of other medieval theologians, lust is a mortal sin,¹⁵¹ especially as the means by which original sin is propagated from one generation to another. This reversal of the place of lust in Dante's theology suggests that he has rethought the nature of sin and its role in human life. Where earlier mystics were ready to condemn lust as the most severe of sins, Dante's reappraisal suggests a readiness to accept the desire which causes lust as a necessary quality on the mystical journey. Such an idea had not been contemplated by earlier mystics, who saw in lust simply an external temptation that had to be resisted at all costs by the contemplative. The notion that there might be something about lust worth preserving even as the contemplative proceeds through the stages of purgation to attain union with the divine was not one that featured in mystical itineraries before the fourteenth century. Even Mechtilde of Magdeburg, whose sensual imagery is among the most potently erotic in the writings of mystics before Dante, makes clear that she despises the appetites of the body, and that the apparent sensuality of her prose is mere metaphor.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵¹ See, for example: Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, I:1, Gregory the Great, *Regulations of Pastoral Rule*, 3:27-8, Aquinas *Summa Theologica Pars Secunda Secundae* 154:2.

¹⁵² Mechtilde of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of Godhead*, 41.

Not all itineraries dealt with the subject of lust in any depth. Such is the case with what is perhaps the most well-known itinerary of the High Medieval Period, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Steps of Humility and Pride*. Of the itineraries examined in this section, none is clearer that investigation of sin is anathema for the contemplative. Investigation of sin, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, is itself a pathway to sin. In *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, Bernard writes that

Leave was given to thee to eat of every tree in Paradise, except that one which is called *the tree of knowledge of good and evil*. For if the others are good and have a good savour, what need is there to eat of one which also has an evil savour? *Not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise*. For to know evil is not knowledge but folly.¹⁵³

Bernard's explicit view is that investigating evil is a product of curiosity, and even to look at the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may not itself be a sin, but there is a sin "somewhere in the background," and the act of looking will "lead you on to sin."¹⁵⁴ Bernard may have in mind a medieval theory of vision, itself based on Augustin's theory of vision, according to which an image can impart psychological or even physical effects to the seer. This theory may help to explain why mystics before the fourteenth century, and to some extent even afterward, refrained from advising contemplatives to investigate sin. The fear was that looking at sin with either the physical or spiritual vision (i.e. imagination) would cause it to enter into the one doing the looking, with deleterious consequences. Theories of vision formulated by Augustin, according to which an inner intellectual vision and also an imaginal spiritual vision coexisted with physical vision survived well into the Renaissance, though not without challenge starting in the fourteenth century.¹⁵⁵ Often, such theories postulated concomitant action on the part of physical vision along with at least one of the other two kinds of vision, such that an image

¹⁵³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Steps of Humility and Pride*, 58-9.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences*, 72.

presented to the physical eye could carry into the soul of the seer some spiritual or intellectual force.¹⁵⁶ These, in turn, were sometimes thought to manifest physical effects—this was the theory behind what is usually called Medieval astral or image magic.¹⁵⁷ Quinlan-McGrath points out that Christian theologians, philosophers, and mystics were generally taken with the causal powers of light, since God was supposed to have created by first calling light into being.¹⁵⁸ As such, vision, as the sense through which light entered, was particularly sensitive to outside influences. Intellectual and spiritual vision came to be bundled together with physical vision in that the same effects were understood to be occasioned by images residing in the mind.¹⁵⁹ This theory helps us understand, to some extent, why an investigation of sin would have been considered deleterious by mystics, especially before the fourteenth century. When we understand that this theory was both far-reaching and widespread,¹⁶⁰ it becomes clear that mystics had powerful theoretical reasons to counsel not mere avoidance of sin, but to tread lightly around the subject in their own writings. It also gives us some appreciation of the extent of Dante's innovation, which cut across not merely the traditions of theology, but also theories of vision and the lore those theories occasioned.

A partial survival of this doctrine that seeing something evil causes the evil to enter into the one who is seeing *may* be present in canto IX of *Inferno*, in which Virgil physically turns the pilgrim around so that he cannot see Medusa.¹⁶¹ The power of the gaze of Medusa to turn a viewer to stone was not a Medieval invention, though Dante adopts it, perhaps with the understanding that the ancient monster and the consequence of her gaze, though an extreme case

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 151; see also *Inferno* 25: 91-3.

¹⁵⁷ Kiekheffer, *Medieval Magic*, 131-2.

¹⁵⁸ Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences*, 25-6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 70-4.

¹⁶¹ *Inferno* 9, 55-60

with physical effects, was in harmony with then-current theories of vision. Interestingly, this is one of only a few times when Virgil discourages the pilgrim to look at sinners and their punishments in *Inferno*; his most common advice is to look and understand what is before him.¹⁶² The one time when Virgil offers clear advice to the contrary¹⁶³ suggests that Dante agrees that *something* evil or sinful may enter in through the senses, but the many admonitions by Virgil to look and understand suggest Dante has a very different view than Bernard or other mystics who had gone before Dante. The contrast between Dante's *Inferno*, whose advice is promulgated in dramatic fashion mainly through the speech of Virgil, and Bernard's, is clear. Because the error of sin is already within the contemplative, and is tied to the very engine of mystical progress, in Dante's view, examination of sin is necessary. In Bernard's view, since sin is essentially caused by external forces that have the power to enter into a person through the senses, investigation of sin is foolhardy.

Bernard's *Steps* is not the only itinerary he produced. Another one occurs among his sermons on the *Song of Songs*. The seventh, eighth, and ninth sermons outline a tripartite itinerary based on the words "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."¹⁶⁴ Bernard develops some lore about the spiritual meaning of kisses mentioned in the text, and he posits three such kisses—on the feet, the hands, and the mouth. These correspond, roughly, with the stages of the standard itinerary. Unlike his *Steps*, Bernard makes no explicit comments about sin in these sermons. Lack of comment on sin, or mention only in passing, is the most common treatment the subject of sin receives in mystical itineraries prior to the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*.

¹⁶² See *Inferno* 3:51, 4:32, 5:64-7, 7:129, 8:11, 9:45-8, 9:73-81, 12:46, 12:118, 13:20, 14:85-90, 16:117-23, 17:39, 18:75-7, 20:31, 23:80-1, 26:46-8, 31:22-6, 31:106-8, 34:20-1.

¹⁶³ *Inferno* 30:131-2.

¹⁶⁴ See *Song of Songs* 1:2.

The most well-known itinerary to be produced in the century before Dante's life was Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey into God*. In its structure, Bonaventure's itinerary can be analyzed in a number of ways, though it is most commonly understood to consist of seven parts. Six of those parts are based on the three kinds of vision considered by Augustin—physical, spiritual, and intellectual.¹⁶⁵ The soul first considers material things (seen by physical vision), then interior things (perceived by the spiritual vision), and finally, the things of heaven (perceived by the intellectual vision).¹⁶⁶ Ultimately, every stage is meant to reinforce and guide the contemplative to a final ecstasy of union with God,¹⁶⁷ but there is a clear resemblance to the standard itinerary. As the contemplative moves through the first stage, she is purged of sin. In the second, she receives illumination, and in, or through, the third, union with God is attained. In this final point, Bonaventure's itinerary resembles the Pilgrim's journey, which ends in a final supreme vision. In its treatment of sin, however, there is a clear distinction between Bonaventure's itinerary and the *Divina Commedia*. Like Bernard, Bonaventure counsels avoidance of sin, though he does not offer any advice for how to do so. He writes merely that whoever wishes to be united with God must "first avoid sin."¹⁶⁸ Bonaventure refrains from mentioning specific sins, or developing a general theory of sin in his itinerary.¹⁶⁹ Unlike Climacus, Bonaventure leaves us little clue to understand why he more or less ignores sin—though as we will see below, there were powerful theoretical reasons to think that any investigation of sin was superfluous, if not harmful, to the contemplative. Bonaventure's

¹⁶⁵ Bonaventure, *Soul's Journey*, 60-1.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Glen David, *Hierarchy and Excess*, 436.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶⁹ Bonaventure does enter into consideration of the problem of evil, and hence, the origin of sin, in his *Breviloquium*, 101.

itinerary is more typical of itineraries prior to the *Divina Commedia* in that Bonaventure more or less ignores sin.

Climacus' *Ladder* and Bernard's *Steps* are extraordinary precisely because they say more than just a few lines about the subject of sin. Where sin is mentioned in any kind of detail in these exceptional itineraries, the contemplative is advised to avoid it through ascetic practice, to refrain from looking at it, and is never advised to go looking for it. This advice is precisely what Dante, through Virgil, repudiates. As the pilgrim descends through the rings of hell, he is generally encouraged to look and understand, and given that the *Divina Commedia* may be read as mystical itinerary, this act of looking and understanding is part of that itinerary. The *Divina Commedia* thus deviates substantially from mystical itineraries prior to its circulation.

One possible reply to this analysis would be one hinted at above, that the pilgrim's descent through hell is a kind of figuration of the descent described by Dionysius. Scholars have certainly likened the descent through hell with the Dionysian descent.¹⁷⁰ But such a reply is weakened when we recognize that, like the other itineraries prior to the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, Dionysius does not advise anything like an investigation of sin. Like other early mystics, Dionysius refrains from spending much time discussing sin in his itinerary, the *Mystical Theology*. He does mention it in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, but in a manner consistent with the treatment given by Climacus; Dionysius prescribes an essentially magical remedy, in which the ceremony of initiation into a monastic order, or into the priesthood, banishes sin.¹⁷¹ He is quick to add that contemplatives will continue to have to deal with sin, but the application of ascetic practices will be the cure.¹⁷² The notion that investigation of sin might form a potential

¹⁷⁰ William Franke, *Ethical Vision*, 211.

¹⁷¹ Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 237-8, 253-6.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 254.

means of illumination for the contemplative is as alien to Dionysius as it is for other mystics prior to circulation of the *Divina Commedia*. Moreover, the descent of which Dionysius writes is not the descent of the mystic; he writes about the descent of God, and the descent of souls into matter. He does not describe the mystical path itself as, or partially as, a descent. For Bernard, the descent that forms part of the mystical path is a descent into humility, a metaphorical lowering of oneself from the towers of pride into a willingness to surrender to Christ.¹⁷³ It is tempting to view this lowering in Dionysian terms—perhaps it is precisely the essentially negative recognition that God is utterly beyond the ability of the human mind to grasp that brings one to a state of humility. But *Inferno* does not seem written so as to teach the reader to think of God in purely negative terms. It appears, rather, to be a discourse on sin, and in the ways that human beings can go astray from the pathway that leads to salvation. As such, it is the first mystical itinerary to recommend an examination of sin in the history of the western mystical tradition.

Space prevents us from making an examination of literally every mystical itinerary composed up to the turn of the fourteenth century. Moreover, it is unlikely that we know about all relevant pieces of writing by all mystics who were alive before the fourteenth century. One obvious problem therefore presents itself. The claim I am making is that *no* itineraries in the Latin West prior to the *Divina Commedia* included an examination of sin, and further, that *no* mystics in the Latin West prior to Dante saw any use for contemplatives making any kind of detailed investigation of sin. But while examination of examples is important for understanding the context of Dante's innovation on the mystical itinerary, no possible examination of examples could show conclusively that Dante was the first mystic to recognize the value of an

¹⁷³ Bernard, *Steps*, 33.

investigation of sin to a contemplative. However, as we saw above in the discussion of early theories of vision, mystics had reasons to advise contemplatives to avoid investigating sin. As I shall now argue, even more powerful reasons for avoiding sin existed for mystics prior to Dante. Prevailing theories of evil and sin from the fourth through to the fourteenth centuries predisposed mystics to think that investigation of sin would be detrimental to a contemplative.

Medieval theories of sin were intimately tied to theories of evil and its origin. Christian philosophers recognized the theological problem posed by the existence of evil. God is presumed to be wholly good, and as the omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe, it is puzzling that He would create a universe in which evil exists. To solve this problem, Augustin held that all being is wholly good, while evil is the privation of good. As such, evil is also the privation of being, since no being can be anything other than good.¹⁷⁴ Human souls are created in the image of God, and so are themselves complete beings. Sin, on Augustin's account, is a corruption of a human soul and a privation of the original being of the soul. Importantly for the present discussion, according to Augustin's account, evil was not itself a being.¹⁷⁵ A thing *is*, on Augustin's account, just to the extent that it *is good*.¹⁷⁶ Aquinas clarified Augustin's account by distinguishing evil as a being, and evil being, acknowledging that the latter existed.¹⁷⁷ In making this acknowledgement, Aquinas was also acknowledging then-current folklore about the nature of temptation—specifically, that it was often caused by demons, who were objective beings external to the contemplative.¹⁷⁸ The tradition of spiritual combat against demons began with the desert fathers, and continued into Climacus' itinerary. But while demons appear as objective

¹⁷⁴ Augustin lays out this theory most clearly in the *Enchiridion*. See Augustin, "Enchiridion," 267-76.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ In this, Augustin is following Origen. See Origen, "Against Celsus," 526.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica Pars Secunda Secundae*, 249.

¹⁷⁸ See Frank Klaasen, *Transformations of Magic*, 11.

being in *Inferno*, they appear specifically in hell.¹⁷⁹ They are not embodiments of sin as they were in the folklore that arose out of the earliest experience of contemplatives in the Egyptian desert.¹⁸⁰ Sins are, in this theoretical framework, caused by demons. One of the first tasks on the mystical path before the fourteenth century was to escape those demons, not to investigate them, which would necessitate coming into proximity with them. The point is that neither orthodox theology nor everyday lore gave mystics any reason to suppose that mystics should undertake an investigation of sin. Indeed, it gave them ample reason to suppose that investigation of sin would be harmful to a contemplative. The plain reason that itineraries examined in this section did not counsel that contemplatives examine sin is because they could see no reason for such an examination, and potent reasons to counsel against it. As we saw in the previous section, Dante developed a different understanding of the nature of sin itself, and so he understood that an investigation of sin is a source of wisdom, and indeed necessary, to contemplatives.

Dante's innovation may be a result of his understanding of desire, which differed sharply from that of mystics before his time. In the previous section, we saw that Dante understood desire as the engine of progress on the mystical path, and this is likely the reason he held that lust is among the least severe of sins. One thing that Climacus, Bernard, and Bonaventure had in common among themselves and with other mystics before Dante is that they made a sharp distinction between earthly desire and heavenly or spiritual desires. For example, though Bonaventure praises the "man of desires,"¹⁸¹ he also clearly counsels against indulging or (to the

¹⁷⁹ No demons appear in the dark wood, for example. The Pilgrim encounters beasts there, not demons. See *Inferno* 1:32, 43-5, 58, 88.

¹⁸⁰ For example, Abba Anthony devises a cruel lesson to show his students that the demons will make war on a person who desires anything of their life before becoming a hermit. See Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 5. See also *Ibid.* 97, 136, 176.

¹⁸¹ Bonaventure, *Journey*, 55.

extent possible) even having earthly desires.¹⁸² Similarly, Bernard advises contemplatives to extinguish their own earthly desires,¹⁸³ and he clearly repudiates any kind of lust.¹⁸⁴ But he nevertheless lauds desire for union with God.¹⁸⁵ Dante differs from such analyses in that he sees no distinction between earthly and spiritual desire just as such. The only distinction lies in their objects. This recognition is what makes *Inferno* a necessary episode for Dante. If a contemplative extinguishes desire, as Bonaventure or Bernard advise, she will also extinguish the means by which she can attain to union with God. For Dante, such desire must be transformed, and so first it must be understood and examined in its baser aspects, and those aspects must be rejected and reformed, rather than extinguishing desire outright. Accomplishing this rejection and transformation of desire is part of the purpose of the journey through *Inferno*—a purpose that had not been understood to be necessary in the views of mystics before Dante.

Section IV: Mystical Thought after the *Divina Commedia*

As we have seen, the *Divina Commedia*, when read as a mystical itinerary, departs substantially from mystical itineraries prior to its circulation. Since mystical itineraries are predicated and constructed on the mystical theologies of the mystics who write them, with generally accepted theological doctrine in the background, we may infer that Dante differed in his own mystical theology from that of mystics who had come before him. His primary point of departure from prior mystical thought is to be found in the insight that the engine of progress along the mystical path is also a potential source of error, and thus, the transformation of desire and human love into divine love is the only path by which a contemplative (or indeed any

¹⁸² Bonaventure, *Life of St. Francis*, 194-5, 218.

¹⁸³ Bernard, *Steps*, 41.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

person) may attain direct experience of God. Investigation of sin is a necessary step along this path, in order to recognize, among many distorted reflections, the true image of divine love. Those distorted images provide the contemplative with information about that true image, and hence, they are a source of wisdom on the mystical path.

While the works produced by later mystics suggest the wide-spread influence of Dante and his ‘brand’ of mystical itinerary, it is impossible to prove that any of the mystics covered in this section had read the *Divina Commedia*. Two chief difficulties present themselves. The first is that little is known about the lives of the mystics to be discussed. The other difficulty is the fact that mystics of this period, when quoting or paraphrasing anything, would typically limit themselves to scripture or the writings of the Church Fathers.¹⁸⁶ What we will not find are mentions of Dante, quotes, or paraphrases in the writings of mystics to some passage in the *Divina Commedia*. Nevertheless, we will begin to see reflections of Dante’s principle innovations in mystical theology. Let us recall that his principle innovations were these:

1. The notion that examination of sin can be a source of wisdom for the mystic.
2. Desire as both the source of sin and also the engine of progress on the mystical path.
3. Interpolation of *Inferno* as a necessary episode on the mystical itinerary.

All of the mystics examined in this section do exhibit some influence from the *Divina Commedia*, adopting one or more of these innovations into their own thought. To the extent we can find Dante’s innovations in the literature of mysticism so long after the circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, we ought to trace credit for them to Dante’s authorship. As we saw in the last section, mystics included no examination of sin or episode analogous to *Inferno* in their itineraries. Desire did figure into mystical literature before the *Divina Commedia*, though always

¹⁸⁶ One possible reason for this general restraint is that mystics have often occasioned suspicion from within the ranks of Church clergy. Quoting poetry might well have fed such suspicion.

distinguished into earthly and heavenly or spiritual desire. As we will see in this section, mystics after Dante began to incorporate these ideas into their own thought.

Before getting to this analysis, however, we must first address the question of readership—did the mystics to be examined here have access to the *Divina Commedia*? Given the popularity of the *Divina Commedia*, it seems safe to say that the *Divina Commedia* had formed part of the cultural “background” of Europe by the middle of the fifteenth century.¹⁸⁷ When we get to the great Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century, concerned as they were with Catholic identity and counter-Reformation, the *Divina Commedia* was likely part of the *de rigeur* literature of humanist education.¹⁸⁸ By this time, nearly two centuries had passed since the *Divina Commedia* had first begun to circulate, enough time for it to soak into then-current ideas and literature. We know enough about the lives of the two Spanish mystics considered below (Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila), and the influence the *Divina Commedia* had on later Spanish literature, to make reasonable inferences that both likely either had read the *Divina Commedia*, or at least were familiar with its stories and structure.

But the earlier mystics to be covered in this period, Johann van Ruysbroeck and Julian of Norwich, present more of a problem when it comes to the question of readership. The problem of readership on Johann’s part is compounded by the fact that we know little about his life, and hence we do not always know precisely where to look for manuscripts or other evidence when attempting to discover his sources. What is known about Ruysbroeck’s life is derived mainly from a brief but problematic biographical sketch written by Henricus Pomerius (d. 1469) forty

¹⁸⁷ Werner Paul Friedrich, *Dante’s Fame Abroad*, 13-4, 57-8, 181-5, 341-3.

¹⁸⁸ Antonio Nebrija (1441-1522) serves as one example of a fifteenth century Spanish grammarians traveling to Italy to learn from humanist scholars there, and then returning to Spain with Italian manuscripts and educational theories. But he was one among literally hundreds to do so. See: Carlos del Valle Rodriguez, *Antonio Nebrija*, 57-8. Spanish language translations of the *Divina Commedia* were roughly contemporaneous with Latin translations; the first Spanish translations date to the 1340’s, and these spread throughout Spain at a rapid pace. Dante’s work remained popular in devoutly Catholic Spain well into the seventeenth century. See: Friedrich, *Fame*, 13-55.

years after Johann's death, and a short *vita* composed about him by Gerard of Saintes (fl. 1350-1363), a Carthusian monk living in the charterhouse in Herne, just southwest of Brussels, with whom Johann had both corresponded and conversed in person.¹⁸⁹ Arguing in favor of the validity of the information contained in this *vita* is the fact that its author knew Johann personally—a claim that cannot be made of Pomerius' biographical sketch. Gerard's *vita* suggests that Johann may have embarked on a study-tour to the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris sometime before he settled in Groendal in 1343, a fact that cannot be confirmed as the Abbey's guest book over the period in question has been damaged—however, it is known that Johann submitted his Groendal Priory to the rule of the Abbey in 1345, and he seems to have maintained some connection to scholars at the University of Paris, which had absorbed the Abbey school in 1301.¹⁹⁰ Johann was clearly educated somewhere; he was ordained to the clergy in 1317 and, until his departure for Groendal in 1343, Johann enjoyed access to a large library, said to be filled with many illuminated manuscripts, which was owned by his uncle Jan Hinckaert (d. 1350) until Johann's departure for Groendal in 1343.¹⁹¹ Despite the uncertainties that remain about Johann's life, nothing about the *vita* recommends its unreliability, and I will proceed on the assumption that Johann likely did study at the Abbey of St. Victor prior to 1343, and had access to a large library of manuscripts in Brussels.

The *Divina Commedia* was not circulated as a single work, but rather, each of the *cantiche* were circulated separately, and only collected into single manuscripts after the completion of *Paradiso* in 1319-20.¹⁹² Partial Latin translations and commentaries on *Inferno*

¹⁸⁹ Rob Faesen, *John of Ruusbroec's Life and Works*, 47-9.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁹² Peter Brieger, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 3 *fn.*

and *Purgatorio* were circulating in the first half of the fourteenth century,¹⁹³ with the first known complete Latin translation finished in 1330 in Milan.¹⁹⁴ Dante's work was known well enough in Germany to have been mentioned at a meeting of the Princes of the Holy Roman Empire in 1338.¹⁹⁵ By the 1370's, copies of the *Divina Commedia* had travelled as far east as Budapest,¹⁹⁶ as far west as Andalusia,¹⁹⁷ and as far North as England.¹⁹⁸ Unfortunately, the Abbey school of St. Victor in Paris was damaged during the 1789 Revolution, and no known catalogs of manuscripts available in the library where Johann is thought to have studied exists.

Nevertheless, the obvious popularity of the earliest circulating manuscripts of the *Divina Commedia*, coupled with the intensely humanistic philosophy of education at the Abbey school and its policy of acquiring manuscripts,¹⁹⁹ suggests that the *Divina Commedia* would have been available to Johann during his time in Paris. This probability is increased when we observe that there are some similarities in Johann's thought and Dante's.

Johann never wrote a work specifically intended as an itinerary. Although brief sketches of various mystical itineraries aimed at different aspects of the mystical task occur throughout Johann's work, distilling a single itinerary from these fragments is a daunting task. By comparison of Johann's three most well-known works, *The Spiritual Espousals* (likely composed in the late 1330s), the *Sparkling Stone* (likely composed in the 1340s), and *The Book of Supreme*

¹⁹³ One, for example, now resides in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. See *Divina Comedia*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Département des manuscrits*, Italien 69. Another illuminated manuscript now in the *Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal* is thought to have been illustrated by French illuminators in the first half of the fourteenth century, possibly in the employ of the Anjou in Naples, possibly in a French scriptorium—see Brieger, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 309. A third manuscript in Latin with commentary by an (otherwise unknown) “Ottimo” appears in the archives of the University of Paris in the 1330s. See *Divina Comedia, Prima Cantica, Con l'Ottimo Commento*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Département des manuscrits*, Italien 74.

¹⁹⁴ Brieger, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 47n1.

¹⁹⁵ Friedrich, *Fame*, 342.

¹⁹⁶ Brieger, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 45.

¹⁹⁷ Friedrich, *Fame*, 13-14.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁹⁹ Brian D. Fitzgerald, *Medieval Theories of Education*, 576-80.

Truth (likely composed after 1345 but before 1360), it is possible to at least rough out the itinerary lurking within his thought.

Johann held that there are two kinds of union with God, a union through means and a union without means.²⁰⁰ The means by which one achieves the first kind of union include prayer, receiving the Eucharist, contemplation of images or icons, imaginal meditation, reading scripture, and practicing the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The union without means is higher than the union with means, because the union without means is free of any kind of external attachment or content of imagination, allowing the mystic to enter first into darkness, then nakedness, and finally nothingness.²⁰¹ Arising again and again in Johann's writings are the terms: inwardness, love, rest, activity, and essential unity.²⁰² Johann's mystical theology is essentially inward; he never mentions the demons that so concern Climacus. Nor does he counsel against examination of sin as does Bernard, nor ignore it as does Bonaventure. For Johann, sin is as inward a phenomenon as holiness, and he seems always concerned with all the ways a mystic can fall into error, even sinful error.²⁰³ For Johann, human souls are an image, albeit a distorted image, of God,²⁰⁴ and it is this fact that allows human beings to correct the distortions in their soul so as to attain union with God by inversion into the perfected soul, where God dwells. But an almost literal inversion of self is required to attain this union, which goes some way towards explaining why Johann adopts such language as sinking into an abyss or falling into rest to describe the nature of that union. Though Johann does not employ imagery or allegory, we are nevertheless reminded of the inversion of the Pilgrim and his guide on the

²⁰⁰ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, II and IV.

²⁰¹ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Spiritual Espousals*, 2:65.

²⁰² McGinn, *Essential Themes*, 16

²⁰³ McGinn, *Vernacular*, 30.

²⁰⁴ McGinn, *Vernacular*, 29.

shanks of Lucifer. At this moment in *Inferno*, this inversion is necessary to leave hell, and hence the inversion is a necessary step before leaving the realm of sin and moving on to the stage in the mystical itinerary represented by Purgatory. The inversion of the Pilgrim is, in this sense, analogous to the inversion prescribed by Johann. Both Johann and Dante before him appreciate that making progress on the mystical path requires an inversion of self at the very beginning of the contemplative's journey—and inversion that must remain permanent throughout the remainder of one's life. Dante emphasizes the moment of inversion through a direct address to the reader.²⁰⁵ We should recall, however, that the entirety of the episode of *Inferno* was made necessary through a deeper insight about the nature of desire and its role on the mystical journey.

The primary similarity between Dante's thought and Johann's is that Johann seems to have understood Dante's key insight that desire is the engine of progress on the mystical path. Like Dante, Johann recognized that precisely the thing that serves as the engine of motion along the mystical itinerary is also itself dangerous. Johann is constantly writing about the ways in which mystics, even those who have rejected sin per the prescriptions of Climacus or Bernard, could go wrong.²⁰⁶ Writing of such men, he says:

And this was well understood by St. Paul, when he said that he had a desire to depart and to be with Christ. But he did not say that he had a desire to be Christ Himself or God; as is done by some unbelieving and perverse men, who say that they have no God, but that they are so wholly dead to themselves, and united with God, that they have themselves become God.²⁰⁷

Passages such as this one pepper Johann's writings, earning him a reputation in his lifetime as a heresy-hunter. More recent scholarly reappraisals have suggested this is an inaccurate picture of Johann's work,²⁰⁸ partially because he never presented himself as a heresy hunter, and seems to

²⁰⁵ *Inferno* 34: 92-3.

²⁰⁶ McGinn, *Vernacular*, 29.

²⁰⁷ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, IV.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

have preferred to retire from, rather than engage in, public controversy. What is the error committed by those “perverse men” mentioned in the previous passage? Johann explains:

Behold, these men have gone astray into the vacant and blind simplicity of their own being, and they seek for blessedness in bare nature; for they are so simply and so idly united with the bare essence of their souls, and with that wherein God always is, that they have neither zeal, nor cleaving to God, neither from without, nor from within.²⁰⁹

We should recall Climacus’ story of the robber—mystics prior to Dante generally did not consider the possibility that a contemplative could be in such grave error. Here, Johann is affirming what mystics before Dante had denied; Johann claims that mystics can be in grave error.

Johann elsewhere writes of entering the simplicity of one’s own being as a necessary step in the mystical task; even a good man who does not become “inward and simple” will not attain to union with God.²¹⁰ In the final stage of mystical attainment as described in the *Seven Rungs*, Johann claims that all “modalities, including the three persons of the trinity, become one in the modeless and unknown divine essence.”²¹¹ To this, we should compare the Pilgrim’s final vision, in which all that seemed separated was bound together.²¹² Such an experience is not easily distinguished from an experience described as maximally simple (i.e. not divided into any parts). The error these men make, presumably upon attaining some mystical experience, is that they believe themselves perpetually unified with God.²¹³ To have an experience wherein one could make such mistake must be a profound thing in itself. What has gone wrong in those who commit such an error? Predictably, the error is partially attributable to lack of humility, in

²⁰⁹ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, IV.

²¹⁰ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, VII.

²¹¹ McGinn, *Themes in Ruusbroec’s Mysticism*, 137.

²¹² *Paradiso* 33:85-91.

²¹³ Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, VIII.

Johann's view, they "think themselves set above God's commandments and His Church."²¹⁴ But this is not all that has gone wrong. In the quoted section above, we read that they lack zeal and cleaving to God. Their error, then, is explicitly that in casting themselves as entirely unified with God, they have no desire for God, any more than a person can have desire for themselves. They have not "sought God through active Love," and because of their union, falsely claim to be "beyond love."²¹⁵

To put Johann's excoriation of such mystics in context, no other mystics of the Medieval Period prior to this point had such harsh things to say about their fellows. As the terrible *Trecento* progressed, however, it became more common for mystics to do so; nevertheless, Johann was the first mystic to have concerned himself with error on the mystical path. As we saw in the previous section, it was commonly thought to be enough guard against sin to simply live under the strictures of a convent or monastery. The notion that a contemplative could go wrong, especially so wrong as to "die like mad dogs...and go to the eternal flames,"²¹⁶ was new in mystical writing, and could have no theoretical basis in the view espoused by Origen, Climacus, and Bernard, that sin could be avoided by appropriate ascetic practices. Johann seems to be saying otherwise, and in so claiming, he agrees with Dante, whose theory of sin allows for such error among contemplatives. As we saw in the section on Dante's mysticism, one apparent purpose of *Inferno* (from the perspective of it being part of a mystical itinerary) is to show the many ways in which human beings can pervert their God-given love and thus fall into sin. It is not clear that Johann is accusing his targets in this passage of having committed any of the usually-recognized sins (e.g. gluttony, lust, sloth, etc.), though his forecast of the consequence of

²¹⁴ Ibid., IV.

²¹⁵ Ibid., IV.

²¹⁶ Johann van Ruysbroeck, *Book of Supreme Truth*, IV.

their error (dying like mad dogs and going to eternal flames) seems to suggest they have committed a grievous sin, one that is partially caused by just that which causes sin in Dante's scheme: perverted love. Just as the sinners in *Inferno* have misdirected their love, or failed by loving too much or too little, so these false men in Johann's text have both misdirected their love towards a false unity, and they have loved God too little. Of the authors recognized as exclusively mystics of the Medieval Period (Dante is both poet and mystic), Johann's denunciation, which was probably written in the 1360s, is the first to suggest that perverted love can lead to such grievous error on the mystical path. But he could only do so with an innovative theory of sin such as the one presented by Dante.²¹⁷

Julian of Norwich is another mystic perhaps influenced by the *Divina Commedia*. Before we get to analysis of Julian's mysticism and the manner in which it seems to have been influenced by Dante, it is again necessary to take a moment to answer the question of readership. Like Johann, we know little about Julian's life—but unlike Johann, the only source we have for her biography is her own writings. The generally accepted year of her birth, 1342, is based on her description of the circumstances of her visions, which, she says, happened in 1373 when she was thirty years old, occurring in the midst of what those around her thought would be a fatal illness. Andrea Dickens speculates that she had been educated at the convent school in Carrow, but the only evidence of this is the proximity of the school to Norwich and the fact that she was obviously literate and conversant with theological literature.²¹⁸ Her descriptions of the events surrounding her illness, and the treatment she received, suggest she was either a member of a

²¹⁷ Johann and Dante's thought differed in points, and I want to be careful to avoid overstating the case. Johann's itinerary, to the extent it can be deduced from his writings, does not include an episode analogous to *Inferno*. Johann preferred to describe the earliest stages of the mystical itinerary in the positive terms of acquiring virtue rather than discarding sin, though such acquisition had the power to correct the mirror of the soul so that it would reflect an undistorted image of God.

²¹⁸ Andrea Dickens, *Female Mystics*, 134.

privileged class, or already an anchoress.²¹⁹ Norwich was, at the time, the second most populated city in England and was a bustling trading center.²²⁰ During Julian's illness, she received a series of sixteen visions, and was miraculously healed. She recorded these visions with little commentary in a work she titled *A Vision Shewed by the Goodenes of God to a Devoute Woman*. This text has come to be known as the Short Text. In 1393, after two decades of reflection, she wrote a long commentary to her visions, titled *A Revelation of Love*, sometimes called the Long Text, as it contains most of the Short Text plus a great deal of new theology, mystical and otherwise.²²¹ The Long Text is the one primarily studied by scholars, as it is thought to contain Julian's mature reflections on her experiences, and thus it is the Long Text with which we will be primarily concerned.

Given how little we know of Julian's life, it is not possible to know for certain whether she had ever read anything of Dante. Again, at best, a cumulative argument can be made in favor of the position that she had read at least some of Dante's work. As we saw in the discussion of Johann, above, the *Divina Commedia* probably first entered England in the 1370s.²²² Dante's work achieved popularity in England earlier than in Spain or even parts of Italy thanks in part to the efforts of Geoffrey Chaucer, who admired Dante as a poet.²²³ In all, five complete manuscripts of the *Divina Commedia* are known to exist in England, along with an unknown number of fragments.²²⁴ This evidence, together with the fact that Julian was

²¹⁹ Ibid., 134.

²²⁰ Jeanette Zissel, *Medieval Norwich*, 333.

²²¹ McGinn, *Vernacular*, 429.

²²² One of which is to be found in the Library of the Earls of Leicester in Norwich. See Brieger, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 177. Another manuscript, an English translation, dating to the fourteenth century (unfortunately the date is not more certain) exists in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Ibid., 202.

²²³ Friedrich, *Fame*, 116.

²²⁴ Brieger, *Illuminated*, 104-134. This number (i.e. five surviving manuscripts) is likely not representative of the number of manuscripts that existed in England in the late fourteenth century, due to the immense damage done to libraries across England during the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIIIth (1491-1547). John Bale

obviously well-educated, seems sufficient to make a claim that it is possible Julian had read at least some of the *Divina Commedia*. If she had read the *Divina Commedia*, she would have done so after her visions of 1373. But it was after these visions that she joined the convent of St. Julian, during which period she would likely have had access to reading material. Given the development of Julian's thought evident in the period between the short and the long text, it is clear she spent some time studying materials relevant to the content of her visions.

The similarity in Julian's thought to Dante's focuses specifically on the nature of sin. Julian's Long Text can be seen as an attempt to come to grips with a single question. On the one hand, Julian believes, based on her daily life, that sin is real. But in her visions, she receives information about the nature of sin that startles her in that it seems to contradict exactly what her day-to-day experiences tell her. Specifically, in her visions, Christ or God (it is sometimes unclear who is speaking) tell her that "sin is no deed,"²²⁵ suggesting that sin is in some way unreal, but then that "sin behoveth,"²²⁶ suggesting that sin has some part to play in the divine order. Finally, she learns that "sin is nought but a want of good,"²²⁷ confirming once again that sin is essentially unreal. It has been thought that Julian was primarily driven to compose the Long Text due to the tension between her daily experience and church dogma on the one hand, and her visions on the other.²²⁸ On the one hand, she has the authority of Church teaching and her own personal experience, as well as one of the sayings from her own vision, to support the view that sin is real. On the other hand, other sayings within her visions seem to support the opposite conclusion, that sin is not real. How will she resolve the tension?

(1495-1563) noted specifically that libraries in Norwich were devastated and their holdings lost, manuscripts thrown into the streets for people to use as kindling or in personal hygiene. See Ivan Lindsey, *History of Loot*, 180.

²²⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 21.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

²²⁸ Denys Turner, *Julian the Theologian*, 68-9.

The background of this tension within her visions, and the visual and aural information that surrounds it, only serves to heighten the conflict. At the end of her last vision, Julian perceives (much like Dante) the love of God as a great light, residing in the midst of the soul, and she sees in that moment the rightness of everything, even of the feebleness of human will.²²⁹ Previous to this vision, she has seen Christ at the very bottom of all sin, a curious juxtaposition of images that she finds at first difficult to explain.²³⁰ She has also seen that “all manner of things shall be well,” which she takes to mean that, literally, everything is exactly as it is supposed to be—everything is well.²³¹ In her visions of God, she confronts a being in whom is no anger, no rage, only never ending love.²³² Denys Turner has noticed a similarity in these points to Dante’s cosmology and mystical theology.²³³ Hell is, for Dante, a place created by primal love,²³⁴ a place that, while cut off from the love of God, must nevertheless exist as an expression of that Love—an idea reflected in Julian’s perceiving the face of Christ at the bottom of all sin.²³⁵ The inhabitants of hell have chosen their abode, by choosing a distorted image of heaven, and it is this distorted image that rules their lives.²³⁶ Similarly, for Julian, sin is the rejection of God, the perversion of love. In Turner’s view, for both Dante and Julian, love does not wage war on sin, only sin wages war, while love remains in its own peace, ultimately unaffected.²³⁷ Indeed, in the final cantos of *Paradiso*, it is hard to imagine that hell is of any disturbance at all. In this, the combat between sin and love is one-sided, both in the sense that it is being waged only by sin, but also in the sense that sin has no hope of prevailing. Similarly, for

²²⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 53; see also Turner, *Julian the Theologian*, 93.

²³⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 52.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²³² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³³ Denys Turner, *Julian the Theologian*, 95.

²³⁴ *Inferno* 3:6.

²³⁵ Turner, *Julian the Theologian*, 95.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

Julian, sin can be of no consequence to the infinite love of God. Sin is “no deed” because, though as human creatures we are bound to perceive things somewhat in the distorted manner of Dante’s sinners most of the time, God is nevertheless truly within everyone, and it is we who choose not to behold His image. Sin is only real from our limited human point of view, and one that we ourselves choose.²³⁸

While I agree with Turner’s view, I wish to carry the argument a step farther. Recall that God has told Julian that “sin behoveth,” that is, that sin has some kind of *conveniens*, or “fit place” in the universe. As we have seen above, Turner explains this “fit place” with respect to Dante in a cosmological sense: in order for God to truly love his creatures, he must allow them their own choice, including the choice to reject His love and dwell in their own distortion. While this respects the fit place of sin in Dante’s cosmology, it does not fully appreciate the fit place of sin in either Julian’s or Dante’s mystical theology. The pilgrim, as we have seen above, receives illumination from seeing the many sinners and hearing their deformed narratives. He has learned, of the many possible images, which are definitely not proper images of God, and which (lust) are closer than others (betrayal). As one who seeks out the mystery of God, who seeks to behold what Julian also later beholds, the pilgrim must undergo this preliminary. Dante, for reasons already discussed, saw it as necessary to place *Inferno* on the mystical itinerary. Julian has not consciously composed an itinerary, having presumably recorded, without embellishment, visions beyond her conscious control. It is nevertheless interesting that she beholds two visions of hell.

Of the first, she writes that:

For if afore us were laid all the pains in Hell and in Purgatory and in Earth--death and other--and sin, we should rather choose all that pain than sin. For sin is so

²³⁸ Ibid., 94.

vile and so greatly to be hated that it may be likened to no pain which is not sin.
And to me was shewed no harder hell than sin.²³⁹

This vision is entirely abstract, she sees (perhaps in the sense of “understands”) all the pain in the universe, and sees in the same sense that it would be preferable to take on that pain than abide in sin. Her preference is because she perceives that sin disorients one from God, though she only truly learns this lesson in an episode that recalls the final canto of *Inferno*. She confronts Satan himself:

After this the Fiend came again with his heat and with his stench, and gave me much ado, the stench was so vile and so painful, and also dreadful and travailous. Also I heard a bodily jangling, as it if had been of two persons; and both, to my thinking, jangled at one time as if they had holden a parliament with a great business; and all was soft muttering, so that I understood nought that they said.²⁴⁰

In contrast to the abstract vision of the pains of hell and purgatory, this is a visceral and concrete image. Like Dante’s Satan, whose fiends pervert language, this Satan cannot speak intelligibly, making only a “soft muttering” and a “bodily jangling.” And like the quite literal turning-point that Satan presents for the Pilgrim, Julian experiences a reorientation of her life in this confrontation:

And I thought to myself, saying: Thou hast now great business to keep thee in the Faith for that thou shouldst not be taken of the Enemy: wouldst thou now from this time evermore be so busy to keep thee from sin, this were a good and sovereign occupation.²⁴¹

With the stench of the Fiend departing, so does her illness, and she wakes an apparently changed person, one with a “great business.” Just as the pilgrim can only truly begin the journey he wished to undertake from the beginning (i.e. to Purgatory) after confronting Satan, so Julian’s illness, both physical and spiritual, is finally resolved by her own confrontation. The final

²³⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 40.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

chapters of the Long Text, which come immediately after her vision of Satan and which consist entirely of commentary, resolve (or seem to resolve, in her view) the conflict that had seemed to loom so large at the start of the text between the two views of sin. Julian herself has been on her own journey between the Short and Long Texts, and it is apparently the case that she obtains her end only through the confrontation with the Fiend, which teaches her, as she says, to fasten her heart upon God.²⁴² If Julian has not consciously composed a mystical itinerary, she has, by the time of the composition of the Long Text, recognized that the confrontation with Satan was necessary before she could truly understand the mystery of divine love—a match for Dante’s similar recognition that the journey through *Inferno* is necessary to the Pilgrim in the itinerary of the *Divina Commedia*.

Of the mystics to be examined in this section, none has more clearly interpolated an episode analogous to *Inferno* on the mystical itinerary than Ignatius of Loyola, and with this brief discussion of him, we come to the great Spanish mystics of the 16th century. His primary work to be examined is *The Spiritual Exercises*. As a book of exactly what the title suggests (i.e. spiritual exercises), it was attacked by conservative theologians of the day, for a number of reasons, most especially because it (in short) granted too much power to individuals in the laity to determine the course of their own spiritual lives.²⁴³ The power behind this power, so to speak, was nothing other than imagination. Anti-Jesuit theologians feared the power of the imagination that might be set loose by the exercises. Michael Sluhovsky summarizes the manner in which the exercises were supposed to work thus:

The practice of spiritual exercises...was based upon an anthropological-cognitive theory, Aristotelian-Augustinian in its origins. According to this theory, there are three different spirits (or instincts) active within the human soul--divine, natural, and angelic--and the latter is further divided between activities that result from

²⁴² Ibid., 69.

²⁴³ John McManamon, *Texts and Contexts*, 1-2.

fallen angels...and those that result from the activities of good angels. All these spirits move within the soul and activate it continuously in different intensities and tonalities, thus creating a large variety of effects...through divine grace, intellectual cognition, and methodic exercises...one learns how to differentiate among these spirits and to discern their impacts, thus enabling the imposition of order on their incessant disorder.²⁴⁴

Similar mechanisms might be said to underlie the efficacy of narrative poetry. Like the exercises, Dante's epic takes the reader on a journey of the imagination and invites the reader to examine his own life in the context of the journey of the pilgrim. As such, the *Spiritual Exercises* is often remarked to have been nothing all that new.²⁴⁵ The theology was largely mainstream Catholic in the shadow of the early Reformation, though perhaps tempered with ideas reminiscent of the heretical Alumbrados (a sect of heretical Spanish mystics who believed in the guidance of the Holy Spirit in every person).²⁴⁶ The notion of lay devotion, and of imaginal exercises, had already been broached by the *Devotio Moderna* of Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) and the *Vita Christi* of Ludolf of Saxony (1295-1378), respectively.²⁴⁷ As mentioned above, however, one episode in the *Spiritual Exercises* is not to be found in any of these currently recognized sources.²⁴⁸ That episode is one in which the exerciser imagines herself in hell. Like Dante's pilgrim, she does not imagine the punishments of hell applying to herself, but rather, she sees them happening to others, though she is to pray for a deep "sense of the pain which the lost suffer."²⁴⁹ The exerciser is to engage the senses so as to experience in imagination the torments those in hell suffer.²⁵⁰ Similarly, Dante's vivid descriptions cannot help but conjure something of those torments in the imagination of his readers. A further

²⁴⁴ Moshe Sluhovsky, *Spiritual Exercises*, 654.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 650.

²⁴⁶ McManamon, *Texts and Contexts*, 1.

²⁴⁷ Sluhovsky, *Spiritual Exercises*, 649.

²⁴⁸ See: Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, and Paul Shore, *Vita Christi*, 1-16.

²⁴⁹ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 32.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

similarity of note between this meditation and *Inferno* is that this episode occurs early in the program of the exercises, just after the contemplative has undertaken practices to bring herself to full understanding of the depth and nature of her own sin. Like the pilgrim who awakes in the dark wood, suddenly aware of the depth of his own spiritual trouble, so the contemplative practices exercises first to recognize the depth of her own spiritual trouble. And just as the pilgrim immediately travels to hell, so is a meditation on hell the very next point for the contemplative following the program of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Both the exercises and Dante's poem engage the imagination to bring about a change in the contemplative. A reader of Dante's poem puts herself in the place of the pilgrim, and through Dante's vivid descriptions, she visualizes what the Pilgrim experiences. Similarly, a contemplative who undertakes Ignatius' exercises uses imagination to visualize her own spiritual situation, and then the torments of hell.

While the meditation on hell Ignatius prescribes takes less time to read than does the Pilgrim's journey through *Inferno*, the goals of the meditation and the Pilgrim's journey are comparable. Ignatius phrases the goal in a curious manner: "...if, because of my faults I forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of these punishments will keep me from falling into sin."²⁵¹ On a casual reading, nothing more seems to be implied than that this meditation is a stopgap measure, so that if the exerciser becomes unmindful of the love of God, she will not lapse into sin. Nevertheless, implicit in this reading is the idea that cognizance of the love of God is sufficient to guard against sin. It may be that Ignatius has nothing more in mind than that such cognizance will keep the exerciser from sin, but it is also possible that he has something similar to Julian of Norwich's analysis of sin in mind. Some hint that this latter possibility may be correct is found later in the exercises, when the exerciser is to pray for understanding of the

²⁵¹ Ibid., 32.

Ten Commandments and the nature of the seven deadly sins, not merely the strength either to observe or avoid them, respectively,²⁵² suggesting that Loyola's goal is similar to Dante's, in that images of Hell are supposed to enlighten the exerciser and provide her with just the understanding of sin that is the apparent purpose of *Inferno*. Some further hint of a similarity is underlying theory between Ignatius and Dante is to be found in Ignatius discussion of spiritual consolation, which occurs

...when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of the all....I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.²⁵³

It may seem strange that Ignatius says that the exerciser, upon receiving consolation, can love no creature for its own sake, but only for (the sake of) God. He clearly cannot mean that no creature is worthy of love, since one is to love creatures for the sake of God who created all of them, and since consolation is an increase of love (along with faith and hope). One possible means of making sense of this passage is by understanding the relationship of God's love to sin as developed by Julian of Norwich and prefigured in Dante. Just as God is, for both Dante and Julian, perfect love beyond human conception, so the mystic who has a direct experience of God has a direct experience of that love. Ignatius, then, in saying that one who is granted spiritual consolation can love no creature for "its own sake," is saying that the person who succeeds in these exercises has love that is not human love. Rather, it has transformed into divine love, where it becomes obvious that the distortions of sin can hold no power. This seems to be the meaning of spiritual consolation. Similarly, in writing of the opposite of consolation—spiritual

²⁵² Ibid., 107-9.

²⁵³ Ibid., 142.

desolation—Ignatius establishes a dual image, where the image of consolation is whole and perfect, while the image of desolation is “low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love.”²⁵⁴ This duality calls to mind just the duality between sin and God’s love that is present in comparison of *Inferno* to the final cantos of *Paradiso*, and in Julian’s analysis of the relationship of sin to God’s love. While experiencing desolation, one is little separated from the day-to-day condition of life, when, unconscious of the presence of God in the soul, one is all-too-easily drawn to “low and earthly” things. This existence, divided as it is between self and the object of the self’s desire, is by its nature broken and distorted. Only in the wholeness of God, as described so eloquently in the final canto of *Paradiso*, is there no longer any distortion. These descriptions of consolation and desolation occur in the section in which Ignatius describes in more depth the principles on which the exercises are based; he expects the exerciser to experience both consolation and desolation. As such, these two states, these two images of how the soul can be, are real and tangible to the exerciser. Like Dante’s sinners, the exerciser is presented a choice between the images—though there is little doubt which image Ignatius wants the exerciser, or Dante wants the reader, to choose. “In time of desolation,” he writes, “we should never make any change, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision we adhered in the preceding consolation.”²⁵⁵ It is perhaps the very point of the exercises that the exerciser learn to have faith in the image presented in times of consolation, just as Julian could not remain in the state of beholding the infinite peace, light, and love of God forever—and neither, presumably, could Dante. By interposing an episode wherein the exerciser endures a journey to hell, Ignatius offers the first mystical itinerary written purely

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 142-3.

as an itinerary in which an episode analogous to *Inferno* occurs. His doing so is prefigured, perhaps, in Julian's vision of the Fiend, but more especially and exactly by Dante's *Inferno*.

Another of the great Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century, Teresa of Avila, put an episode analogous to *Inferno* on her mystical itinerary, *The Spiritual Castle*. Compared to Johann and Julia, we know a lot about Teresa's life. Scholars have been able to uncover several of her influences, most notably early Spanish mystical writings in the Dionysian tradition, thanks in part to the fact that the Dionysian corpus had been made available in Spanish a generation before Teresa's. These translations may be among the "many good books" that Teresa claims to have read in her childhood.²⁵⁶ But scholarly focus has tended to emphasize the end of the mystical path in Teresa's writings—a fact that is not surprising, as it is typically at the end that the mystery that is of most concern to an individual mystic is finally revealed.²⁵⁷ The same pattern haunts scholarship on Dante's relationship to mysticism, most of which is focused on *Paradiso*. Despite this biased pattern, analysis of the beginning of mystical itineraries reveals how the author envisions the process of becoming a contemplative. Without this initial transformation, there can be no hope that any individual will succeed in attaining the final stages of mystical progress, since the earliest will not have been attempted. Arguably, then, the transformation from layperson to contemplative is at least as important as any other transformation that may be thought to occur on the mystical path.

As the title of the work suggests, Teresa likens the soul²⁵⁸ to a castle with many mansions nestled one into another like the rings of a target or the layers of an onion. Of this castle, she

²⁵⁶ Teresa of Avila, *Vita*, 1:1.

²⁵⁷ Juan Miguel Marin, *Teresa Dionysian Tradition*, 67.

²⁵⁸ As Colin Thompson rightly points out, the use of the term *alma*, usually translated as "soul" in English, is broader than contemporary English use of "soul" suggests in Teresa's writings—it should be more properly understood as the self. See Colin Thompson, *Angels of Light*, 55.

says that there are “many rooms” within each of the mansions, and it is impossible to describe them all.²⁵⁹ In the “center, in the very midst of them all, is the principle chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse.”²⁶⁰ The erotic overtones of the phrase “most secret intercourse” should not be ignored, as such phrases appear throughout Teresa’s writings, most apparently in the vision, famously captured by Bernini in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria:

I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form...I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.²⁶¹

The language of desire is suffused throughout Teresa’s writings, and like Dante’s Pilgrim, her itinerary is the story of the transformation of desire. She begins by describing those who are without the castle walls:

Just so, there are souls so infirm and accustomed to think of nothing but earthly matters, that there seems no cure for them. It appears impossible for them to retire into their own hearts; accustomed as they are to be with the reptiles and other creatures which live outside the castle, they have come at last to imitate their habits. Though these souls are by their nature so richly endowed, capable of communion even with God Himself, yet their case seems hopeless. Unless they endeavor to understand and remedy their most miserable plight, their minds will become, as it were, bereft of movement, just as Lot's wife became a pillar of salt for looking backwards in disobedience to God's command.²⁶²

Such souls she describes as “bereft of movement” are surely incapable of the journey of the Pilgrim, and this inability is precisely their undoing. Being incapable of movement, they are incapable of transformation. If there is any doubt that transformation, and transformation of

²⁵⁹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 2:1-9.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:4.

²⁶¹ Teresa of Avila, *Vita*, 29:16-17.

²⁶² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 1:8.

desire, is the major theme of her itinerary, that doubt is dispelled when she later likens the soul to a silkworm that works to become fat, spins its cocoon, dies, and is reborn a beautiful white butterfly.²⁶³ Teresa explains that this transformation is the central and most important change the contemplative undergoes in her itinerary, the change towards which all preliminary training has aimed:

Forward then, my daughters! Hasten over your work and build the little cocoon. Let us renounce self-love and self-will, care for nothing earthly, do penance, pray, mortify yourselves, be obedient, and perform all the other good works of which you know. Act up to your light; you have been taught your duties. Die! Die as the silkworm does when it has fulfilled the office of its creation, and you will see God and be immersed in His greatness, as the little silkworm is enveloped in its cocoon.²⁶⁴

The imagery of transformation she chooses is not the same as Dante's, but the scaffolding of her itinerary is remarkably similar. She starts with those outside the castle walls who have no apparent interest in travelling to the interior of the castle, and says of them that they are incapable of motion. She next describes those who have at least become cognizant of the castle, who "think about their souls every now and then,"²⁶⁵ and it is these individuals, no less than the ones who take no notice of the castle at all, who are in dire circumstances. Of such souls, she writes "No night can be so dark, no gloom nor blackness can compare to its obscurity. Suffice it to say that the sun in the center of the soul, which gave it such splendour and beauty, is totally eclipsed."²⁶⁶ These souls are similar to the Pilgrim, in that they are lost in darkness and mired in sin, though they have one advantage over those who take no notice of the castle: they have a chance to recognize their state, and hence make progress towards the interior of the castle.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Ibid., 5:2:1.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 5:2:5.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 1:10.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 2:1.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 1:10.

They begin in the basements of the first mansion, and must confront the images of mortal sin.²⁶⁸ Teresa relates the story of a woman who was granted a vision of this sin, the result of which was that the “Lord revealed the result of a mortal sin, and who said she thought no one who realized its effects could ever commit it, but would suffer unimaginable torments to avoid it.”²⁶⁹ These passages occur in the first two chapters of *The Interior Castle*, which are each longer examinations of, and meditations on, sin. For Teresa, once a person has recognized that, so to speak, she is in the dark wood, she must confront the horror and ugliness of sin. Her instructions are explicit that each contemplative must take up such an examination, which must include each of the rooms of the castle, including those in which the horrors of sin dwell.²⁷⁰ In examining sin, the soul will gain “self-knowledge.” All of this sounds exactly like the lessons learned by the Pilgrim in the dark wood and then in hell, where he must first recognize the state of his own soul, and then confront the images of sin so as to gain illumination and hence motivate a re-orientation toward Purgatory, and ultimately, God. The Pilgrim is transformed in the course of *Inferno*, literally changing direction at the moment of the most horrible confrontation with Lucifer, surrounded by those sinners who are bereft entirely of any power of motion—which is exactly as Teresa describes them. Interestingly, it is lack of ability to move towards Purgatory that so worries the Pilgrim; the function of the three beasts encountered in the first canto of *Inferno*, is precisely to stop the Pilgrim from moving along his desired path.

By contrast, the most studied and well-known influence on Teresa, Francisco Osuna (1492-1540), adopted the much more conventional approach we saw taken by Bernard towards sin. Osuna does speak of error, but says that “we speak of imperfections or faults in people who

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 1:10; 2:1-5.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 2:2

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 1:10; 2:1-5.

already are deeply intimate with God and as such their defects are better than our ordinary perfections and are called imperfections relative to a more perfect state.”²⁷¹ For Osuna, sin is not real,²⁷² but this implies, in an analysis that cannot help but remind us of Bernard’s, that:

As the power to sin is no power at all but a weakening of it, and as to know how to do evil is knowing how to err and not be right, so we say that knowledge of evil is not knowledge at all but ignorance, stupidity, or better yet, devilish cleverness and malice....And you must understand that the more earthly knowledge you hoard, the better your cracked vessel will contain it, for knowledge of the world is unlike wisdom of God and he who vehemently contends with the world is the wise person.²⁷³

Like Bernard, Osuna advises the contemplative not to seek after knowledge of sin or evil, as to do so can only lead to ignorance. Osuna’s principle influence on Teresa is his stunningly incisive understanding of interior prayer, but he cannot be a source of influence for Teresa in how she handles the question of sin and the transformation of desire. Like Dante, she treats of human beings lost in the dark wood, who must be illuminated by an examination of the distortion of their own souls, a concept she explains by way of a metaphor of the rooms of the castle being disordered.²⁷⁴ Indeed, given Osuna’s recognized influence on Teresa’s mystical theology, and the suspicion her mysticism aroused among male clergy interested in her experience and writings, it is remarkable that she broke so clearly with Osuna in her treatment of the subject of sin on the mystical path,²⁷⁵ and she must have had a powerful reason to do so. It is possible that she took some cue from Garcias de Cisneros’ (1455-1510) *Exercitatorio de la Vida Espiritual* (published in 1500), aimed as it was at the laity, in her description of those outside the castle. Importantly, however, Cisneros does not engage in any examination of sin, or recommendation

²⁷¹ Francisco Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, 39.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 2:4.

²⁷⁵ For description of just how dangerous it was for Teresa, as a female mystic, to advise that contemplatives investigate sin, see: Andrea Dickens, *Female Mystics*, 180-2.

of the same.²⁷⁶ Indeed, the popularity of Osuna's work, and the similarity of his attitude toward sin with those of the itineraries reviewed in the last section is evidence of the continuing endurance of Bernard's position: sin is not to be investigated. Teresa's insistence otherwise was likely another source of worry among the clergy at large. In 1543, for example, Magdalena de la Cruz had attracted a large following due to her apparently mystical visions, only to confess to fraud and possession by the devil.²⁷⁷ Many were suspicious that women could resist being led astray by the devil in prayer unguided by a male member of the clergy,²⁷⁸ and certainly the fact that a female mystic advocated an examination of sin for female contemplatives only fanned the flames of this suspicion. Teresa had many reasons to refrain from advising contemplatives to undertake an examination of sin, and that she did so suggests she had a powerful model in mind, one in which such an examination is necessary along the mystical path.

If we accept that, from at least some theological views, it is entirely correct for a mystic to engage in an examination of sin, then it is clear (again, in those same views) that Dante has done something right in having his pilgrim descend through the depths of hell. As we saw in the previous section, his was the first work that could be read as a mystical itinerary to recommend such an episode as the journey through *Inferno*. As such, he is to be credited with originating the idea that examination of sin can be a source of wisdom for the mystic, and hence Teresa's work owes a debt to Dante. Again, it cannot be conclusively proven that Teresa had ever read the *Divina Commedia*, but to return for a moment to her statement that her father kept many "good books" and encouraged her to read them, we can appreciate that it is likely she had read it. The *Divina Commedia* was popular in Spain from the end of the thirteenth century well into the

²⁷⁶ Juan Marin, *Teresa Dionysian Tradition*, 60-1.

²⁷⁷ Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy*, 89.

²⁷⁸ Andrea Dickens, *Female Mystics*, 182.

seventeenth century, and especially as a manifesto of the Catholic vision of the order of the cosmos, it was popular among devout Catholics in the face of the threat posed by the Reformation.

Section V: Conclusion

Dante should be recognized not merely as a poet, but as a mystic in his own right, and one who formulated significant innovations on the standard mystical itinerary of the Medieval Period. Dante's innovations caught on among mystics who came after him, and in this thesis, we have touched upon a few instances in which later mystics seem to have incorporated Dante's ideas, which stand in sharp contrast to the ideas of mystics before circulation of the *Divina Commedia*. As such, Dante is at least partly responsible for a reorientation in the course of mystical thought itself. Departing from the tripartite scheme of purgation, illumination, and union, Dante created a different scheme in which he interpolated an episode in which the contemplative, allegorized as the Pilgrim, undertakes a detailed examination of sin. At the end of this episode, the contemplative confronts the epitome of evil within herself and undergoes a reorientation towards the divine. This new episode in the standard mystical itinerary is a result of Dante's understanding of the role of desire on the mystical journey. Dante's theme in the *Divina Commedia* is primarily one of transformation of the human person, and in particular, transformation of desire from earthly or carnal desire into divine or spiritual desire, and in Dante's view, it is this process alone by which a person can attain to direct experience of God.

Dante's central message about the transformation of desire is a single idea beyond easy articulation; mystical thought and experience in general is characterized by its ineffability. Dante, perhaps reflecting on the difficulties of articulating the true nature of sin, presents it in its

myriad forms throughout *Inferno*, and only later, after having spent some time receiving illumination along with the pilgrim, do we learn that sin has a single source—perverted love. As theological doctrine, we learn this on the steps of Purgatory. But as a poetic image, this ineffable idea is figured in the genuinely hair-raising vision of Lucifer at the very close of *Inferno*.

Without that vision, something about the nature of Dante's doctrine would elude us. However, the essence of Dante's mysticism lies in the image of his love for Beatrice transforming into love of God, and all that this love and transformation entail for the mystical itinerary. For mystics before Dante such as Climacus or Bernard, desire was conceived as a manifold feature of human beings, some parts of which must be extinguished before the contemplative may hope for success on the mystical path. Those earlier mystics' understanding of the nature of sin as essentially external to the contemplative is incompatible with Dante's understanding of the role of desire as the engine of progress on the mystical journey. For Dante, desire was a singular feature of human beings, and if the contemplative extinguished earthly desire rather than transformed it, she would lose an opportunity to make progress on the mystical path. At the same time, transformation of desire is, for Dante, entirely necessary, as sin and the kinds of desire it occasions distort or pervert the love that is present in all human beings, even those who sin. This innovative understanding of the nature of sin was yet another reason for the interpolation of *Inferno* on the mystical itinerary. As the contemplative proceeds through the layers of hell, viewing each of the sins in turn, she learns about the distortion caused by sin, and, indirectly, about the undistorted image of heaven. These innovations entered into the writings of Christian mystics shortly after circulation of the *Divina Commedia*, altering and enriching the ideas of those mystics who attended them.

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