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The Weight of Love

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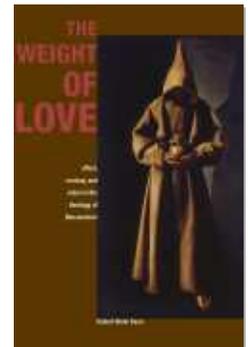
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The Seraphic Doctrine: Love and Knowledge in the Dionysian Hierarchy

Contemporary debates about the autonomy of affect resurrect medieval questions about the relationship of the faculties of intellect and affect. Then as now, thinking people disagreed about the degree to which affect operated independently of cognition, and the relative value of each to the examined life. Then as now, the disagreements could become acrimonious.¹ The nature of affect and its relationship to the intellectual faculty was a primary concern for the medieval interpreters of the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose writings were formative for medieval mystical thought and practice. Dionysius's small but influential corpus discusses the inadequacy of all forms of address to the divine beyond being and language, describes the ascent of the mind beyond knowledge in union with God, and advances a hierarchical cosmology of nine ranks of angels mirrored in the ranks of ecclesiastical offices. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century Latin interpretations of these works, especially the program of ascent in the *Mystical Theology* and the angelic speculations of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, are rich sources for examining the place of affect in later medieval Western Christian devotion and mysticism. Yet these sources have been largely neglected in recent studies of late medieval

affective meditation, the literary and spiritual practices of popular Christian devotion seemingly far removed from the esoteric mystical theology and angelology of Dionysius. But it was through this theological framework that devotional writers theorized the practices that their texts prescribed. Because the celestial hierarchy was understood to be mirrored in the visible realm, Dionysius's seemingly obscure speculations on the ranks of angels in fact revealed for medieval Christians the nature of the material world and humans' place within it. For the Dionysian interpreters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, above all Bonaventure, the Seraph, the six-winged angel who occupied the highest and most intimate place in the hierarchy and who came to be associated with ardent love, was a crucial interpretive topos in debates about the value of affect and intellect in the devotional life and path to union with God.

This chapter provides historical context for the readings of Bonaventure to follow in subsequent chapters by narrating Bonaventure's role in the development of what has been referred to as the affective misreading of Dionysius—an understanding of mystical theology based on the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite that privileges unitive love over intellectual activity through an association of the Seraph with love. Though Bonaventure's debts to Dionysius are frequently noted, he receives surprisingly little attention in broader histories of medieval Latin Dionysius scholarship.² Unlike Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Gallus, Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure did not produce commentaries on the Dionysian texts. Yet the cosmology and mystical theology of Dionysius (as refracted chiefly through the commentaries of the Victorine Thomas Gallus) were so integral to Bonaventure's thought that he deserves to be counted among the most important proponents of Dionysian theology in the thirteenth century. And if, as I will argue in Chapter 5, Bonaventure's *vita* of Francis itself is thoroughly marked by his understanding of Dionysian ascent, then, given the widespread influence of that text for later medieval mysticism, Bonaventure occupies a crucial place in the history of later medieval piety, translating a program of mystical ascent through unknowing into an embodied example of ecstatic piety in imitation of Christ. Placing Bonaventure within this interpretive tradition allows us to see Bonaventure's account of the soul's movement toward and union with God as a theologically rigorous claim about the nature of love. This requires not simply parsing the relevant terms (*affectus*, *intellectus*, *cognitio*, et al.) but also asking what work the distinctions between various modes of union and aspects of the soul perform.

The Seraph in the Dionysian Hierarchy

While the writings of Dionysius were not entirely unknown to Latin theologians in the early middle ages, they were not available in Latin until the ninth century, when the abbot Hilduin translated the corpus given by the Byzantine emperor to Louis the Pious in 827. In the translation and commentary of the ninth-century theologian John Scotus Eriugena, and again in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century schools through the translation of the Victorine John Sarrazen, the Dionysian corpus exercised a profound influence on medieval Christian thought in the West. Drawing deeply on the language of scripture and the fifth-century Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus, Dionysius describes the ascent of the mind to God and the drawing of all things into God by the means of a hierarchy of ecclesial and celestial ranks. Of particularly wide influence was Dionysius's conception of a ninefold angelic hierarchy by which all things are purified, illumined, and perfected so that they come to resemble God as closely as possible.

By the thirteenth century, many readers would find in the Latin translations of Dionysius's writings a program of ascent through contemplation that culminated in a loving intimacy with God that penetrates deeper than knowledge. Such a conception is not to be found explicitly in the Dionysian corpus. But the traditional association of the Seraphim (who occupy the most intimate position to God in the Dionysian celestial hierarchy) with love or affection provided a crucial exegetical hinge. With this post-Dionysian association of the Seraphim with love, the Dionysian ascent to a state beyond knowing could be seen to culminate in a divine union characterized by the sharing of love between God and the soul.

Dionysius's own writings, however, never associate the Seraph specifically with love. In the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius gives the etymology of the term "Seraphim" as "carriers of warmth" (*thermainontēs*) and explains that the name signifies

a perennial circling around the divine things, penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails, a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, the same warmth. It means also the power to purify by means of the lightning flash and the flame. It means the ability to hold unveiled and undiminished both the light they have and the illumination they give out. It means the capacity to push aside and to do away with every obscuring shadow.³

For Dionysius, the fire that characterizes the Seraphim is the dynamism of hierarchy: Burning, it purifies; flashing, it illuminates; and heating, it unites and perfects. All three of these Seraphic operations are ordered toward the goal of every hierarchy: “to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him.”⁴ The Seraphim, who with the Cherubim and the Thrones enjoy the closest likeness and proximity to God, conform and unite beings to God in the manner of a purifying and elevating fire.

Though all orders of angels purify, illumine, and perfect (and in this way unite all beings to God), Dionysius suggests that the characteristics of Seraphic fire are somehow exemplary of the hierarchic operations as a whole. The properties of fire, at least, provide a fitting solution to the exegetical problem presented by the biblical appearance of the Seraph in Isaiah 6:6. In this passage, the Seraph is depicted as touching the prophet’s lips with a live coal plucked from the burning altar. It was on the basis of this passage that the Seraph was understood to purify, and the live coal helped to cement the association of the Seraph’s purifying activity with fire. But at the same time, the scene seems to violate the hierarchic order, insofar as the highest order of intermediaries, rather than one of the lower ranks of angels, appears to a human being.

The author considers a number of credible solutions to the problem. It is possible, he writes, that by the term “Seraphim” the scriptures mean only to signify the purifying operation by means of fire—and that the angel who visited the prophet was in fact of a lower order. He goes on then to consider another, more profound explanation. In this case, the qualities of Seraphic fire are taken to explain the nature of the entire celestial hierarchy. What a hierarchy *is*, according to this explanation, is a series of reflections and transmissions of the light and warmth of the highest order, just as “the rays of the sun pass easily through the front line of matter since it is more translucent than all the others.” But the subsequent layers of matter are more opaque and thus transmit less and less of the sun’s light: “Similarly, the heat of fire passes more easily into those entities which are good conductors, more receptive and in fact quite like it.”⁵

Yet this is not a mere simile for Dionysius, but an instance of the “harmonious law that operates throughout nature” and that reigns in the celestial hierarchy just as it does in the material realm. What every intermediary mediates is, in fact, the light and warmth of God.⁶ Because this light and warmth is most fully reflected and absorbed in the highest order of the Seraphim, its manifestation in the lower orders of the hier-

archy is identified most fully with those beings of the highest ranks. In an extraordinary ascent of contemplation, then, Isaiah was able to see, in a manner of speaking, the highest orders of angels through the transparency of the hierarchy and the immediate presence of God throughout that hierarchy. And Isaiah's "vision" occurred both because of the self-diffusive nature of the light and warmth of God *and* the uplifting power of fire—whereby the Seraphim make all things godlike through an "endless, marvelous upward thrust toward God," signified by the beating of their intermediate wings. Thus, in Dionysius's own cosmology, the Seraphim enjoy a preeminent position not just in the angelic ranks but in the deifying thermodynamics of hierarchy. For Dionysius, the prophet's uplifting is intellectual: "the sacred theologian was uplifted to a conceptual knowledge [*noētēn*] of the things seen."⁷ Explicitly connecting this seraphic uplifting to Dionysius's erotic cosmology would be the work of later interpreters.

Dionysius in the West

As Paul Rorem has shown, the increasing emphasis on the role of affectivity in Dionysian union among a number of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theologians was not the result of a single interpretive decision.⁸ The association of the Seraphim not only with fire broadly conceived, but more specifically with the fire of love, appears in Christian literature throughout late ancient and early medieval Christian writings. Long before the Dionysian corpus found its way to the Frankish court and into Latin translation, theologians in the west already knew the name of Dionysius and had some exposure to his celestial hierarchy. Though he likely had no direct knowledge of the corpus,⁹ Gregory the Great's homily 34 on Luke 15 includes a discussion of the angelic ranks—and a nod to Dionysius—that exercised a great influence in later medieval angelology. There Gregory gives an extended reflection on the fiery and desirous nature of the Seraphim.¹⁰ However, he does not impute love to the Seraphim to the exclusion of the other orders. The distinction between Seraphim and Cherubim is not based on the distinction between love and knowledge (a distinction that Gregory took pains to complicate), but rather on different modes of love. Citing Romans 13:10 ("love is the fullness of the law"), Gregory offers an etymology for the term "Cherubim" as meaning "fullness of knowledge" (*plenitudo scientiae*) and notes that the Cherubim are "full of love [*dilectione*] for God and their neighbor."¹¹

This passage would seem to be the source for Bernard of Clairvaux's discussion of the angels in his nineteenth sermon on the Song of Songs. Concerning the Seraphim, Bernard writes:

God, who is love, has so drawn and absorbed them into himself, and so seized for himself their ardor of holy affection, that they seem to be one spirit with God, just as, when fire inflames the air and imprints all of its own heat, the air assumes the color of the fire so that it appears not just to be ignited, but to be fire itself. The Cherubim love especially to contemplate God's knowledge which is without limit, but the Seraphim love the charity that never passes away. Hence they derive their names from that in which they are seen to be preeminent: "Cherubim" denotes the fullness of knowledge, but those called "Seraphim" are burning or enkindled.¹²

The association of the Seraphim with ardent love echoes Gregory's homily, and Bernard's list of the nine angelic ranks is identical to the one Gregory supplies. Yet with Bernard's homily, the distinction between the Seraphim and the Cherubim begins to harden along the axis of love and knowledge. Of the Cherubim, Bernard mentions only their self-sufficiency in gazing on the wisdom and knowledge of Christ. Where the Cherubim look upon God with knowledge, the Seraphim adhere to God as one spirit in love.¹³

Even so, it would be easy to overstate the distinction Bernard makes here between knowledge and love, as the lesson of the sermon is that the righteous love of the angels of every rank is grounded in knowledge. He glosses the "young maidens" (*adulescentulae*) of Song of Songs 1:2 as those human beings who are filled with love for God, because they have just begun to receive God's "outpouring" or infusion of love. By contrast, the nine angelic orders love God according to their modes of understanding and according to their more perfect knowledge of him. Far from a hymn to Seraphic love beyond knowing, Bernard's sermon draws a reproachful contrast between well-ordered angelic love based on knowledge and the misguided zeal of effusive love that causes new recruits to religious life, the *adulescentulae*, to err in intemperate self-sacrifice. Thus his description of the Seraphic "ardor of affection" is put to the service of cooling the fires of ecstatic love in his listeners. Yet Bernard, too, would be cited in support of the "affective reading" of Dionysius intent on stoking those same fires. It is a witness to the complexity and the fluidity of the medieval Christian concept of *affectus* that Bernard's use of Seraphic imagery to condemn intemperate fervor among spiritual beginners became an *auctoritas* for a description of loving union with God from which knowledge was excluded.

The Dionysian Revival at St. Victor

If there was a Dionysian renaissance in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Paris, the abbey school of St. Victor was its cradle. Among the works on Dionysius by figures associated with the school, none were perhaps as fateful as Hugh of St. Victor's commentary on Eriugena's translation of the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Hugh offers an explication of Dionysius's anagogy according to a scholastic organization of knowledge that recalls his own *Didascalicon*. And he interprets Dionysius's reflections on clothing of divine truth in symbols according to his own distinction between the work of creation (*opus conditionis*) and the work of restoration (*opus restaurationis*).¹⁴ In discussing the ranks of angels, Hugh interprets the preeminence of the Seraphim over the Cherubim as an affirmation of the superiority of love to knowledge in union. Hugh so orders love and knowledge hierarchically on the basis of Eriugena's comment that the motion of the Seraphim is warm because it is inflamed with charity.¹⁵ Around the same time as Hugh produced his gloss on the *Celestial Hierarchy*, John Sarrazen, also a Victorine, made a new and complete translation of the Greek corpus, upon which the commentaries of Thomas Gallus (d. 1246)—a regular canon who taught at St. Victor in the first quarter of the thirteenth century—are based.¹⁶ Though Gallus did not produce his commentaries while in Paris, the school of St. Victor was a major center of textual production for the reception of Dionysius in the West, and Gallus's study of Dionysius surely began there.¹⁷

Whether all of these works bear enough in common theologically to qualify as a discretely "Victorine" phenomenon is another question. Csaba Németh argues that Gallus's take is sufficiently different from Hugh and Richard's as to constitute a new tradition of Latin Dionysian thought rather than a development of the first.¹⁸ Yet however one carves up the terrain, Gallus is a central figure in the intellectual landscape of thirteenth-century mystical theology. New research on and editions of Gallus's work continue to revise our understanding of his significance for later medieval mysticism and readings of Dionysius in particular. In 1219, Gallus left St. Victor to found the Abbey of St. Andrew at Vercelli in northern Italy—of which he would later become abbot and where he would, in the last decade of his life, produce his most important commentaries on the Dionysian corpus. At a minimum, these include the *Extractio* (an abridgment and paraphrase that Gallus composed in 1238 and which was subsequently included in most of the manuscripts of the Dionysian corpus that circulated in thirteenth-century Paris¹⁹) and the longer *Explanatio*, an extensive gloss on Sarrazen's

translation of the corpus that Gallus produced between 1241 and 1244.²⁰ The sheer breadth of Gallus's work secures his singular place in the history of Dionysian scholarship, but it is the depth and novelty of his reading of Dionysian ascent as an affective transformation toward union that left a decisive mark on later Christian mystical theology, a mark perhaps nowhere more clearly legible than in the writings of Bonaventure. In the concept of an innate affective power by which the soul exceeds its own capacities (which Gallus and Bonaventure call *synderesis*), and in the association of this power with the rank of the Seraphim, Thomas Gallus furnished Bonaventure with the hermeneutical key to reading the exemplary life, vision, and embodied piety of Francis of Assisi.

Though the association of the Seraphim with ardor and with charity long preceded Thomas Gallus, he was, nevertheless, the first to gloss the Dionysian state of unknowing explicitly as affective. As Boyd Coolman has observed, with the *Extractio*, "the very text of *The Mystical Theology* acquires an affective dimension" when Gallus writes that Moses was united to God through a union of love (*per unionem dilectionis*).²¹ Yet Gallus is not attempting to deprecate knowledge as such. Ironically, by glossing the state of unknowing as affective, Gallus reintroduces knowledge into the Dionysian darkness, calling this loving union "effective of true cognition."

In his *Explanatio* on the *Mystical Theology*, Gallus brings further specificity to the ascent toward God by describing the capacity in the human soul for affective union—what he calls the *principalis affectio*, or the "spark of synderesis [*scintilla synderesis*] which alone is able to be united to the divine spirit."²² He explains the spark of synderesis or the "principalis affectio" to be higher than the intellect, the highest cognitive force (*summam vim cognitivam*). Gallus refers the reader to his gloss on Isaiah 6—where he identifies the highest part of the soul, synderesis, with the figure of the Seraph. As the next chapter discusses more fully, Gallus's notion of synderesis as an affective capacity for ecstatic union plays an important role in Bonaventure's psychology and account of union, even as Bonaventure sets this conception within a somewhat different context of ethical questions about *conscientia* and the will.

The affective associations of the Dionysian Seraph were crucial to the new interpretations of his corpus developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But interest in the Seraph was by no means limited to the Dionysian commentary tradition. Jacques de Vitry's *vita* of the early Beguine Marie D'Oignies recounts that the holy woman, hating the wretchedness of her flesh, cut out a piece of her body: "She had been so inflamed by an overwhelming fire of love that she had risen above the pain of her wound

and, in this ecstasy of mind, she had seen one of the seraphim standing close by her.”²³ Almost twenty years before Francis’s death, this episode from the life of Marie D’Oignies associates ecstasy, wounds, burning love, and a vision of the Seraph. While there is no firm evidence of influence on the Franciscan tradition, this episode clearly anticipates not only the later legend of Francis’s wounding, but also Bonaventure’s interpretation of it in terms of the branding “fire of love.”²⁴

Though Bonaventure—known since the first half of the fourteenth century as *Doctor Seraphicus*²⁵—does more to exploit the image of the Seraph as a model of Franciscan devotion than anyone before him, he was not the first to do so.²⁶ The association of the Seraph with Francis’s stigmata has a long history in the legends of Francis’s life prior to Bonaventure’s account. It has traditionally been held that Francis’s vision was attested as early as the announcement of his death. However, as this source cannot be reliably dated to the year of Francis’s death in 1226, Wayne Hellmann has argued convincingly that Thomas of Celano’s *Vita Prima* (completed in 1229) provides the earliest known mention of the Seraph’s appearance in Franciscan legend.²⁷ Unlike later versions of the story, however, Thomas’s does not make the Seraph the agent of Francis’s wounds. In fact, the figure he describes is not really a Seraph, but a man with six wings “like a Seraph.”²⁸ In a later passage, Thomas returns to the six-winged figure of the Seraph, this time as a model of Franciscan piety: “We too can undoubtedly reach these things, if we extend two wings over our heads, as the Seraph did; that is to say, by having a pure intention and right conduct in all good works, according to the example of the blessed Francis . . .”²⁹ The middle wings, outstretched, are the “twofold duty of charity” to one’s neighbor—“refreshing his soul with the word of God and . . . sustaining his body with earthly help.”³⁰ The lower wings, contrition and confession, clothe the body with restored innocence. In all of this, Thomas writes, the Seraphic model is Francis, who “bore the image and form of the Seraph” and “merited to fly away to the sublime order of the spirits.”³¹

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a number of treatises on contemplation found in the six-winged Cherub a convenient organizational scheme for the stages of ascent. These include Richard of St. Victor’s *Beniamin Maior* and the anonymous *De sex aliis cherubim*, traditionally attributed to Alan of Lille. Thomas’s transposition of the allegory from the Cherub onto the Seraph has little significance insofar as the creature functioned simply as a mnemonic or organizing device for a six-fold spiritual lesson.³² But by invoking the Seraphim, Thomas introduced into the story of Francis’s vision a Dionysian vision that Thomas himself left unexplored,

and which Bonaventure is the first to fully develop. By making explicit the Dionysian resonances of Francis's Seraphic vision (and the particular ways the Dionysian Seraph resonated in thirteenth-century Paris), Bonaventure gives flesh to Dionysius's mystical itinerary through love (*eros, amor*) to a union beyond knowledge in the exemplary life of the saint. While Bonaventure was not the first to understand Dionysian union as a function of the *affectus*, he deploys and develops a conception of *affectus* that grounds Dionysian anagogy within the faculty psychology of the thirteenth-century schools and provides the rationale for a program of imitation of and ascent to Christ through the exemplar of Francis.

At the culmination of that program of imitation and ascent, as Bonaventure describes it in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, the relationship between the intellect and affect emerges most pointedly as a problem. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, Bonaventure positions the *Itinerarium* as a kind of exegesis of Francis of Assisi's vision of the Seraph, and describes six ascending illuminations on the way to divine union, a progression that mirrors the six wings of the Seraph. The *Itinerarium* becomes, then, for its reader, a visitation of the very Seraph who appeared to Francis. The final, seventh chapter of the *Itinerarium* attempts to describe the union that succeeds the six illuminations, and reads, in part, as a gloss of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*. Here Bonaventure scripts his reader to pray, "with Dionysius," his prayer to the unknowable Trinity. Bonaventure then follows Dionysius's change of address, from God in prayer to his friend Timothy in spiritual instruction, advising the reader directly through the words of Dionysius: "having completed the journey, abandon both the senses and intellectual operations, both sensible and invisible things, all that exists and does not exist, and, insofar as it is possible, be restored, unknowing (*inseius*), to the unity of the one who is beyond all essence and knowledge (*essentiam et scientiam*)."³³

To the reader who wants to achieve this state ("If you ask how this comes about . . .") Bonaventure offers an explanation of what he calls the soul's *transitus* ("passing over," and also, literally, "death") and *excessus mentis* (ecstasy or exceeding of the soul) into God: "For this passing over to be complete, all intellectual operations must be abandoned, and the height of the affect [*apex affectus*] must be completely carried over and transformed into God. This is mystical and very secret; no one knows [*novit*] it but the one who receives it, and no one receives it but the one who desires [*desiderat*] it, and no one desires it unless they are inflamed to the marrow with the fire of the Holy Spirit."³⁴

No other single passage of Bonaventure's writings has inspired so much scholarly commentary and debate. At stake, it seems, is how to classify Bonaventure with respect to the intellectual changes taking place in the thirteenth and fourteenth century—does Bonaventure represent the culmination of an older monastic tradition in which intellectual speculation and affective fervor are intertwined? Or is he the forerunner of the so-called affective mysticism of late-thirteenth- and fourteenth-century authors, such as Hugh of Balma and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who grow increasingly suspicious of intellectual effort in the devotional life? On the one hand, Bonaventure makes some kind of claim for union as a state of knowing when he states, in language drawn from the book of Revelation, that “no one knows [*novit*] it [this mystery] except one who receives it.” Whatever Bonaventure is describing, *notitia* and *experientia*—knowledge and experience—are not entirely inappropriate terms for it (though, at least in the *Itinerarium*, the term *scientia*—certain knowledge—is rejected). And yet he draws a sharp contrast between the darkness of the soul's final *excessus mentis* and the illuminations that preceded it. The *transitus* of the soul in divine union is the death of the soul: What kind of knowledge could take place here?³⁵ The question, rather, is what the love that characterizes ecstatic union *is* in the soul, and why it is privileged in the *excessus mentis*.

In his 1924 study of Bonaventure's thought, Etienne Gilson insists that the abandonment of knowledge is the essential point of Bonaventure's mysticism, affirming that the soul cannot fully grasp or see God in this life. But where the intellect cannot by its very nature go, he writes, the faculty of love pursues further, to touch and know God experientially.³⁶ In doing so, the intellect is not so much abandoned as drawn up into and concentrated in the faculty of love because for Bonaventure the faculties are ultimately identical to the soul itself in substance. Thus on Gilson's reading, the *mens* is exceeded in a way that includes the intellect within the faculty of affect. To say that intellect is abandoned simply means that the soul has no representation of God, but instead enjoys immediate contact with its object.

Gilson's reminder of the essential identity of the faculties with the soul is apposite because for Bonaventure mental ecstasy occurs at a point beyond the ordinary functioning of the faculties. Yet this alone does not explain why Bonaventure insists that the intellect is abandoned while the affect is transformed and carried into God. George Tavard, by contrast, convincingly argues that ecstasy in Bonaventure exceeds *all* faculties of the soul because it occurs beyond the distinction of the faculties in the undifferenti-

ated substance of the soul. Thus, he concludes, ecstasy may be considered either in terms of love or knowledge. Nevertheless, Tavad concludes, love is the more appropriate term since *synderesis* is affective.³⁷

Joseph Ratzinger is less equivocal, suggesting that in Bonaventure's vision, ecstatic union with God is totally free of knowledge. This view was conditioned, he writes, not only by Bonaventure's Dionysian influences but also by a "Franciscan view which attributed a higher value to the *affectus* rather than to the *intellectus*."³⁸ Yet because Bonaventure not only received but also helped to create the "Franciscan view" in question, Ratzinger's explanation would seem only to defer the question of what Bonaventure means by the abandonment of intellectual operations in ecstasy. And even if one wished to speak of a more or less unified "Franciscan view," the characterization of this view as valuing *affectus* over *intellectus* is too simple. Affective and intellectual operations are crucial for the formation and spiritual progress of the believer. The question here is precisely what role affect plays in the *excessus mentis*. Is it possible to give a positive characterization of this state as something other than a deeper form of knowing?

Desire (*desiderium*), Bonaventure explains, can be activated even in the absence of certain knowledge.³⁹ It is not a consequence of or response to *scientia*, but a receptive capacity for spiritual movement, cohesion, and transformation. Thus, when it is a question of union, affect serves better than intellect as an explanatory mechanism for the relationship between God and the soul. For Bonaventure, affect is not simply the other of intellect, nor is it a modification or deepened form of knowledge (where that term is determined by analogy to intellectual activity). Rather, affect is privileged as the highest point of encounter possible in this life—not because it is more powerful than or superior to knowledge, or more like God than intellect, but because the nature of affection is to cleave and unite: affection is movement and touch. And the *affectus* names the capacity for that movement and contact in the soul. This is evident in the movements of physical objects, and it is no less literally true for spiritual beings. Natural motion is not a convenient metaphor for ascent; it is a divinely implanted means of return to God. When Bonaventure writes that at the highest stage, all intellectual operations are abandoned and the height of the affect is carried over into God, he is working out more fully the implications of a theological anthropology and cosmology derived from Thomas Gallus's reading of the Dionysian corpus.

As Coolman writes, reflection on the role of *affectus* in the interpretation of Dionysian ascent "is not merely an interpolation of love into *The Mystical Theology*, but also a conviction regarding how human beings are most

basically constituted and how they relate most fundamentally to God.”⁴⁰ These convictions about the constitution of human beings in relation to God carried with them related assumptions about how creation as a whole was ordered by and to its Creator. According to Gallus in the *Explanatio* to the *Divine Names*, love (*amor*) names the “ineffable, harmonious compact between the creator and the created universe,” evident throughout all levels of being, known in part even to the pagan philosophers, but perfected in the Incarnate Word.⁴¹ For Bonaventure, too, the constitution of affectivity—by which all things revert to their source—is more basic than the distinction between humans and nonhumans or animate and inanimate beings. Concomitant with the analogical structure of the universe (a structure that is more fundamental than the distinction between the bodily and the spiritual) is a similarly continuous understanding of affect—a single principle of movement that orders the physical world and governs the soul’s wayfaring through the sensible and intelligible worlds and its journey into God.

It is a mistake to characterize the privileging of affect in Gallus’s and Bonaventure’s readings of Dionysius as “anti-intellectual.” But it is equally misleading to attempt to rescue these theologians from the charge of anti-intellectualism by hastening to understand affect as only another form of knowledge. To reduce affect to knowledge is to miss the force of affect in a spiritual and corporeal economy. Bonaventure’s development of the concept of *affectus* itself is deeply embedded in the Dionysian universe, and draws, implicitly and explicitly, on the conception of *eros/amor* as a capacity to effect a unity that Dionysius describes in the *Divine Names*.⁴² Bonaventure, while heavily indebted especially to Gallus’s interpretive interventions, carries through these insights about the force of *eros* into a program of Christian devotion organized around the exemplary body of Francis.

In Denys Turner’s formulation, *eros* is the key to Dionysius’s ecstatic metaphysics: God’s ecstasy of *eros* creates the cosmos and through ecstatic *eros* all creation returns to God.⁴³ For Dionysius, *eros* is the affirmation that all things are in God, for “all things must desire, must yearn for, must love, the Beautiful and the Good.”⁴⁴ And in this way the Beautiful and the Good are the source of all movement, both the movement of the soul and the movement in the “realm of what is perceived.” *Eros* is that which “binds the things of the same order in a mutually regarding union. It moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, and it stirs the subordinate in a return toward the superior.”⁴⁵ In other words, *eros* orders the cosmos to

God and holds it together in hierarchy. And since it is hierarchy through which all things flow from God, return to God, and are ultimately united with God, *eros* is ecstatic union.⁴⁶ As Dionysius writes, “The divine *eros* brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved.”⁴⁷ This conception of *eros*—God’s providence for creation, the movement of creation toward its end, and the dispossession of the soul in God—resonates with Bonaventure’s understanding of the place of *affectus* in the soul and in the role of *desiderium* in the consummation of creation in God. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, Bonaventure cites the *Divine Names* on this very point: “We call love the unitive force.”⁴⁸ And he places *amor* at the heart of Dionysius’s theology in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*: “For, as Dionysius says, the whole of mystical theology, ‘what is hidden in mystery,’ consists in excessive love according to a threefold hierarchic force: purgative, illuminative, and perfective.”⁴⁹ What Bonaventure derives from Dionysius’s corpus—and not only from the identification of the Seraph with charity—is that love means a modality of union, one that is the end of the soul in its relation to her Beloved and the end of all things in relation to their creative source.

The abandonment of intellectual operations that Bonaventure describes in the final stage of the *itinerarium*, however, is not a simple passage from knowledge to love. In the first place, the force of *amor* is present throughout the journey as that by which each stage exceeds itself, and by which the soul is drawn into and out of itself. In addition, to describe the mystical *transitus* as a passage from knowledge to love is to miss what is for Bonaventure a more fundamental transformation. To put it in the simplest terms—terms whose inadequacy will become evident throughout the rest of my analysis—it is a transformation from moving to being moved. This distinction is more fundamental than the distinction between love and knowledge; or rather, it is on the basis of the distinction between moving and being moved that Bonaventure’s use of love and knowledge terminology must be understood.

In the seventh of his *Disputed Questions on the Knowledge of Christ*, Bonaventure makes this distinction between modes of movement explicit. There he argues that Christ’s (human) soul had a comprehensive knowledge of the finite created things which were in the Exemplar. But the infinity of things expressed in the Exemplar could not be comprehended by any finite soul. Therefore, Bonaventure concludes, Christ knew the infinity of the expressive exemplar not with a comprehensive knowledge, but by an “excessive” or “ecstatic” knowledge—one that, rather than grasping things completely, is instead “taken captive [*capitur*] by them.” So he explains,

“I call this an ecstatic mode of knowing [*excessivum modum cognoscendi*], not because the knower exceeds what it knows, but because the knower is drawn toward an object that exceeds it in an ecstatic way that raises the soul above itself.”⁵⁰ This kind of knowing, Bonaventure notes, is what Dionysius describes in the *Mystical Theology* as a union exceeding the nature of the intellect. This capacity for knowledge was perfect in Christ, but it is also possible for all souls, both *in via* and in heaven, depending on the measure of grace they receive.

Bonaventure distinguishes these two modes of knowledge in a number of ways. First, “in the comprehensive mode, the knower takes captive what it knows, but in the ecstatic mode what is known takes the knower captive.” Second, comprehensive knowledge “terminates in the gaze [*aspectus*] of the intelligence, while ecstatic knowledge finds its goal in an appetite of the intelligence.”⁵¹ When the soul knows something finite, it takes in the object and conforms it to itself. But when the soul knows the infinite, it is the soul which is drawn up and transformed into the object. As Bonaventure explains, the fulfillment of this latter type of knowledge is not vision, but desire. Though classed here as a mode of knowledge, this transformation, which “totally deifies” the soul, is described just as the mystical *excessus mentis* of the *Itinerarium*. Whether or not it goes by the name of knowledge, the movement of ecstasy is a movement and transformation of the soul into God. Ecstatic knowledge is nothing the soul does, but something that happens to the soul. And the language for this kind of movement is the language of affectivity, not cognition. Ecstatic knowing is realized in *appetitus*, not *aspectus*.

This passage suggests that the transformation that occurs in the soul’s exceeding of itself is, most fundamentally, a transformation of the soul’s mode of moving. To know God ecstatically means to be drawn out of oneself and into God. Another name for the soul’s motion toward its object is *amor*. Thus, one could say that to love God is to know God in an ecstatic way—or, conversely, that to know God ecstatically is love. The crucial distinction is that union with God is a state in which the soul is seized, taken captive, and transformed into its object. This is why ordinary knowledge—in which the soul takes hold of its object—can have no place in the soul’s intimacy with God, according to Bonaventure. In this way, *amor* names an even closer intimacy with God than *sapientia*, which Bonaventure characterizes as a movement of a thing toward the soul.⁵² By a contrary motion, love carries the soul towards the thing it loves. Love is still defined here in opposition to knowledge, but in Bonaventure’s distinction, *amor* is not simply a more perfect or deeper *cognitio*. Love and knowledge

are two different forms of movement and contact between the soul and its object. As the next two chapters discuss, what here goes by the name of love or ecstatic knowledge operates in Bonaventure's other writings as natural motion. And following and building on Gallus, Bonaventure calls the capacity for this supremely simple motion *synderesis*: The apex of the soul is above intellect and unaffected by knowledge. The inclination by which the soul is moved in ascent belongs to the *affectus*.