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Tommasina Fieschi's Exposition of the Dionysian Epistles

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The Presence of Catherine of Genoa's Doctrine of *fuocosso amore* in Tommasina Fieschi's Exposition of the Dionysian Epistles

Paula Pico Estrada

I. Tommasina Fieschi's Affective Dionysism and its Sources

Tommasina Fieschi is the first woman on record to have written a commentary on Dionysius' writings. Born around 1448 into a noble family in Genoa, she was related to St. Catherine of Genoa and belonged to her circle of friends. In 1477, after the death of her husband in Caffa, she joined the observant Dominican monastery Corpus Christi of Genoa, also known as the monastery of San Silvestre de Pisa. Twenty years after her profession, she and eleven nuns were sent to reform another Dominican monastery in Genoa, that of Saint James' and St. Philip's. She stayed there until her death, in 1534.

The first mention of Tommasina's life and work comes from St. Catherine's *Vita mirabile*, which includes a chapter dedicated to her.¹ According to the *Vita mirabile*, Tommasina authored commentaries on the Apocalypse and on certain texts by Dionysius. She also created paintings of devout figures and a needlework piece depicting God the Father, angels, Christ, and saints. Although her works were once preserved in the monastery of San Silvestre in Genoa, they have been destroyed by time and by neglect. However, three manuscripts containing her writings still exist. Two of these manuscripts, possibly autographs, are described in the book *Osservanza vissuta, osservanza insegnata. La domenicana genovese Tommasina Fieschi e i suoi scritti (1448-1534)* by Silvia Mostaccio.² One manuscript, called "T1" by Mostaccio, is held at the Archivio Storico Provinciale of the Dominican Order in Turin, while the other, called "T2," is kept in the Biblioteca Civica Berio in Genoa (m.r.Cf.Arm.23). T2 contains forty-two letters, nine sermons, and several short treatises and commentaries on the Scripture. T1 includes a summary of Beato Giovanni Dominici's writings and additional short treatises and biblical commentaries by

¹ S. Caterina (1551) 124r-125v.

² Mostaccio (1999) 69-72, 259-264.

Tommasina, including her commentaries on Dionysius' letters to Dorotheus (*Epistle V*), Timothy (*Mystical Theology*), and Gaius (*Epistle I*), which were all transcribed and published by Paolo Fontana in 2006. Fontana's transcription includes a third manuscript, "B," which is a 17th-century copy of T1. Fontana transcribes the text of T1, supplementing it with the content from B when T1 is illegible or incomplete.³

Tommasina's commentaries on Dionysius belong to a tradition that was first introduced by Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) in his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, and that has been baptized by Bernard McGinn as "affective Dionysism".⁴ Following the commentary of Scotus Eriugena, Hugh associates the fire of the seraphim with love and concludes that if the seraphim are superior in rank to the cherubim, then love is superior to knowledge.⁵ Hugh's reading gave birth to a tradition that was developed by a series of commentators and writers in the 13th and 14th centuries, which Boyd Taylor Coolman examines in the appropriately titled article, "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition". There, he describes Thomas Gallus, also a Victorine, as the "primary architect and fundamental source" of those who followed the tradition of affective Dionysism.⁶ Among these, he highlights Hugh of Balma, who flourished in the second half of the 13th century, Saint Bonaventure, who died at the end of the same century, and the anonymous English author of the 14th-century texts *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Hidden Theology of Dionysius*. Given that the conclusion of *Mystical Theology* states that the divine is beyond both affirmation and negation, when these authors claim that love is superior to knowledge they refer to an alleged third way. Following Hugh, they interpreted this third way as a unitive love that happens when the Beloved penetrates the heart of the lover, who abandons themselves and loves nothing or no one else but the Beloved.

Tommasina Fieschi uses the same translation as Thomas Gallus, that of John Sarracen, and her commentary on the *Letters* undoubtedly belongs to the Dionysian affective tradition. It should be noted, however, that her sources came to her through a complex series of mediations that cannot be reconstructed, since the libraries of the two convents where

³ Fontana (2006) 171-172.

⁴ McGinn (2005) 449.

⁵ Rorem (2009) 172-176.

⁶ Coolman (2008)

she lived and worked for almost sixty years have not been preserved. Even so, an approximate general picture can be traced, thanks to Silvia Mostaccio's thorough research. In the first place, she considers the two contemporary manuscripts that contain Tommasina's work and she observes that one (T1) includes a summary of Giovanni Dominici's *Il libero della carità* and, under the title *Li sete scalini*, probably a part of his commentary on the Song of Songs. *Il libro della carità* is a commentary on 1 Corinthians 13. It grows to be an examination of the nature of love and an analysis of the path that takes the soul from the love of one's neighbors to the love of God. That same manuscript, as said above, includes Tommasina's commentaries on Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* and *Epistles I and V*. In addition to this, Mostaccio has rescued from the remains of the monastery's library the books that were published during the period in which Tommasina lived in the community, that is, the first forty years of the 16th century. The inventory includes a volume printed in 1514 in Paris containing St. Bernard's *Ad sororem*, *Meditationes*, and *Epistula de perfetione vite*, St. Augustine's *Soliloquia* and (attributed to him) *Meditations*, and St. Anselm's *Orationes sive meditationes* (BSMC, Santi Giacomo e Filippo, Rari, 11); a volume printed in 1520 that includes St. Augustine's *Expositio in evangelium secundum Johannem* and part of his sermons (BSMC, Santi Giacomo e Filippo, Rari, 21), and Giovanni Savonarola's *Compendium totius philosophie tam naturalis q[uam] moralis*. This last one was published in 1534 in Venice; Tommasina would have been 84 years old, if still alive.⁷

Unfortunately, this general picture is not enough to determine Tommasina's sources, and we are left to conjecture about them. Her mentions of the Song of Songs might refer to the reading of Dionysus by Thomas Gallus, who, according to J. Walsh, "never tires of repeating his fundamental conviction that the *Mystical Theology* and the *Canticle* are complementary."⁸ P. Tyler attributes Thomas' attachment to the Song of Songs to the impact that Bernard of Clairvaux's thought had on him: "Gallus also incorporated the influences of the newly founded Cistercian movement, especially in Bernard's inspiration found in the Song of Songs."⁹ Even so, Gallus' influence on Tommasina may not be needed to explain her references to the Song of Songs, which perhaps

⁷ Mostaccio (1999) 167-235.

⁸ Walsh (1963) 218.

⁹ Tyler (2022) 429-430.

comes from her own closeness to St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Canticle*.¹⁰

The challenges found in determining the sources of Tommasina's affective Dionysism are akin to those encountered when attempting to trace the origins of her references to self-annihilation. As it will be shown further below, Tommasina speaks of a love that lacks an object and lacks a why, a love that results in the annihilation of everything perceived as one's own. This has led to the hypothesis that being a Dominican nun, she received a certain influence of the 14th century Rhineland mystics "at least indirectly through preaching, colloquia and epistolary exchanges with the fathers of Santa Maria di Castello and other communities of the order."¹¹

Rhineland mysticism, whose most famous representatives are Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and John Tauler, was the result of German Dominican scholasticism, which developed independently of the teachings given at the University of Paris. The initiator of this tradition in philosophy, the sciences, and theology, was Albert the Great, and "the extensive network of textual, oral, literary, and personal influences and dependencies that constitute the historical environment of Rhineland mysticism"¹² is designated with the expression "Dominican School of Cologne", the city where Albert founded a *studium generale* for the order. As an answer to William of Auvergne's 1241 condemnation on certain apophatic theses, Albert had created an interpretation of the Dionysian writings that contrasted Thomas Gallus'. He "developed a doctrine of created grace, strengthening humans to know the essence of God, and interpreted Dionysius in a way that made God accessible to mental vision, reducing the radically negative aspect of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*".¹³ Without denying the role of love in preparing for union with God, Albert's reading stressed intellect over will and affection, a fact that led McGinn to name this interpretation "intellective Dionysianism".¹⁴ Whatsmore, apart from St. Augustine and Dionysius, Albert's mystical theology depended on a newly available set of Neoplatonic texts that would have special significance for Rhineland

¹⁰ Mostaccio (1999) 209.

¹¹ Mostaccio (1999) 199.

¹² De Libera (1984) 10.

¹³ Hankey (2022) 296. See also Wéber (1997) 379-403.

¹⁴ McGinn (2005) 449.

mysticism: *Liber de causis*, *Liber XXIV Philosophorum*, and the Latin versions of Proclus.¹⁵

The two most well-known concepts of Rhineland mysticism are *abegescheidenheit*, usually translated into English as “detachment”, and *gelassenheit* or “abandonment”. The first signifies an inner liberation, which allows a participation in divine life that transforms the soul into an image of God, enabling it to know God both in itself and in Him.¹⁶ The second signifies “a state of free emptiness that is achieved by “abandoning” oneself, “going out of oneself” so that God “enters”. This “going out” or “ecstasy”, meaning “knowledge of God through unknowing”, in accordance with the union that is beyond “understanding”, is described by Dionysius in the *Divine Names*, 7, 3 (872B).”¹⁷

In a 1961 essay titled “Una devotio moderna nel Quattrocento italiano?”, Massimo Petrocchi explores the similarities between little known Italian 15th century authors and the *devotio moderna* in the Low Countries. His goal is not to establish the impact of the Flemish spiritual movement on Italian spirituality, an impact that he describes as “marginal” except for a well-studied Venetian area influenced by it.¹⁸ Rather, he understands that the reaction against scholasticism that fuelled the Flemish movement was common to many spiritual writers in Europe during that period, including Italy. Consequently, his study aims to throw some light on the common traits of the practical experience of prayer and private devotion in some figures of 15th century Italy.

After describing the theology of beato Paolo Maffei (ca. 1380-1453), a Canon Regular of St. Augustine from Verona whose writings highlight the central role of the Eucharistic mystery in Christian life, Petrocchi adds the following:

“With a style shining with images and allegories, Maffei is close to a specific type of devotion and mystical theology. A refined

¹⁵ McGinn (2005) 39-47.

¹⁶ De Libera (1996), 39.

¹⁷ De Libera (1996) 40-41. My translation is based on the Spanish version. “El abandono es, pues, un estado de libre vacuidad que se alcanza “abandonándose” uno mismo, “saliendo de sí” para que Dios “entre”. Esta “salida” o “éxtasis”, es decir “el conocimiento de Dios por el desconocimiento, de acuerdo con la unificación que está más allá de la inteligencia”, es descrita por Dionisio en los *Nombres divinos*, 7, 3 (872B).”

¹⁸ Petrocchi (1961) 15-16.

humanist, he feels the mysterious fascination of Dionysian thought, likely received from the Rhineland mystical tradition or perhaps from the circle of Ambrogio Traversari, evidence -I believe, unnoticed until now- of one of Pseudo-Dionysius' destinies."¹⁹

When mentioning the possible influence of Rhineland mysticism on Tommasina's thought, Mostaccio relies on this observation made by Petrocchi. However, the reference is too conjectural and imprecise, and the current state of research does not provide elements to establish such a reception. More importantly, Tommasina's references to abandonment can be explained by her proximity to the doctrine of her cousin, St. Catherine of Genoa, in whose teachings on Purgatory an entire semantic field related to self-annihilation is revealed. In order to show the relation between the two, I will first introduce Tommasina's writings and then I will focus on St. Catherine and her own affective Dionysism.

II. Annihilation of the Self in Tommasina's Reading of Dionysius' *Letter 5*

Tommasina's commentaries on Dionysius' writings begin with her explanation of *Letter 5*. The title, "*Ignorantementi ad Gaium monacum*", shows a mistake in the name of the addressee, who is not Gaius, to whom the previous four letters are addressed, but Dorotheus.²⁰ In the letter, Dionysius identifies divine darkness with the "inaccessible light in which it is said that God dwells." As is well known, he writes that this divine darkness is considered inaccessible due to the overwhelming abundance of the supersubstantial light that emanates from it. In it live those who truly know God by not knowing him, because they accept that He is beyond human vision and understanding. It is in this way, Dionysius goes on to say, "above all intelligence and knowledge", that the apostle Paul knew God.

¹⁹ Petrocchi (1961) 27-28: "Col suo stile così fulgente di immagini e di allegorie, il Maffei si avvicina ad un tipo preciso di devozione e di teologia mistica. Umanista raffinato, eglesente il misterioso fascino del pensiero dionisiano, ricevuto probabilmente dalla tradizione mistico-renana, o forse dal circolo di Ambrogio Traversari, testimonianza (credo non mai notata) di una *fortuna* dello pseudo Dionigi Aeropagita." (All translations, except when said otherwise, are my responsibility.)

²⁰ On a possible explanation for this, see Pico Estrada (2022) 20-23.

Tommasina starts her commentary on *Letter 5* with its first phrase, “The divine darkness is the inaccessible light” (*Divina caligo est inaccessibile lumen*), which will become the pivot of her interpretation, since she identifies this divine darkness with Jesus Christ.²¹ For her, the double metaphor of the divine darkness and the inaccessible light refers to the idea that Jesus, as the Son of God made human, embodies the divine in a way that is both knowable and beyond human comprehension. On this basis, the backbone of her reading of the letter will be the question of to what extent and how one can come to know Jesus Christ. In the first place, she explains in what sense is Jesus Christ knowable and in which sense He is not.

The divine darkness is the Son of God made human, and thus, when it hides, that inaccessible light of eternal majesty is called “darkness”, because in some way it can be understood and yet cannot be entirely seen, for it is invisible and its knowledge is beyond human capacity. It can be partly understood because we see the wondrous man who operates beyond human capacity, illuminating dark minds, like a most powerful God and a true light that shines in secret.²²

In His human form, Jesus “can be understood and yet cannot be entirely seen”. That is, he can be recognized as divine if faith accepts what the Scriptures tell us about His miraculous doings, but His divine nature remains beyond what both human perception and the human intellect can grasp. According to these premises, a very simple theological anthropology follows, centered on human inner capacities. Both reason and intellect are completely inadequate for comprehending the divine, because “the intellect stupefies and reason fails to see God in mortal flesh and the Creator as a creature” (see the quotation below). It is worth noticing that the motive for the failure of reason is that the latter is unable to transcend the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction and therefore it cannot conciliate man and God, or Creator and creature. Unlike other Neo-Platonic Christian thinkers, Tommasina does not

²¹ See the footnote above.

²² Fontana (2006) 173: ““Divina caligo est inaccessibile lumen”. La divina caligine he lo figiolo de Dio humanato, onde, se ocultato, quello lume inaccessibile de la magestà eterna dice caligina, perciöché in alcuna parte se comprende, e in tuto non se vede, perciöché esso he invisibile e la sua cognitione he supra la facultà humana. In parte se comprende, perciöché se vede homo admirabile, operatore supra de la facultà humana, illuminante le tenebrose mente, como potentissimo Dio e lume vero, relucente in occulto.”

believe that the intuitive intellect sees what discursive reason cannot understand. Reason fails, and the intellect is stupefied. The explanation for their limitations is that they are natural faculties. Approaching the supernatural divine darkness requires the intervention of grace.

This light is inaccessible to the human and created intellect of mortal man. It is a supernatural light for faithful lovers and not for intellectuals, for the intellect stupefies and reason fails to see God in mortal flesh and the Creator as a creature. Only faith enters into the darkness, to see this inaccessible light, and it sees as much as it believes and loves. The divine darkness lies where visible things are abandoned for invisible ones and present things are abandoned for the ones we hope for. This is a great darkness to the reason and intellect of man, for the intellect cannot approach this darkness without the superior and illuminating divine grace, but it rather rejects true light because of its natural knowledge. Natural light is extinguished in the presence of the divine light unless it is strengthened by grace, a grace that surpasses the intellect through the bright fire of divine love.²³

Once again, Tommasina differs from other Christian thinkers, in this case, in the fact that grace is not presented as a supernatural divine aid to the intellect. As in St. Augustine, to name the creator of this tradition, the ascent begins with faith in the revealed truths. As in St. Augustine, the ascent progresses through the impulse of love. But unlike St. Augustine, faith does not seek understanding; it seeks to love more and more. The path toward the supernatural light, which begins with faith and is fuelled by love, requires the pilgrim to abandon the visible things and tend toward those that are hoped for. As it can be easily seen, the ascent toward God depends on the three theological virtues, faith, love and hope. In other words, it depends on grace.

23 Fontana (2006) 173-174: “E questa luce he inaccessibile allo intelletto, humano e creato, del mortale homo. E esso he un lume supernaturale alli fedeli amanti e non ha li intelletuali, perciocché l’intellecto stupisce et la raxione manca a vedere Dio inter la mortal carne e lo creator esser creatura. Ma solamente la fede intra inter la caligine, per vedere questo lume inaccessibile e tanto vede, quanto crede e quanto ama. La divina caligine he a lassare le cosse visibile per le invisibile e le presente per le sperade. Questa he una grande caligine alla raxione et allo intelletto del homo, ni iamai lo intelletto se acosta a questa caligine, senza la superna et illustrativa gracia ma, più tosto, per sua natural cognitione repugna alla verace luce. Perciocché lo lume naturale se desperde alla luce divinale se non he fortificato de la gracia, la qual gracia supera lo intelletto per lo risplendente focho del divin amore.

Some 250 years before Tommasina, another Dominican, her namesake St. Thomas of Aquinas, discussed in *Summa Theologicae* I^a-IIae q. 62 the problem of human perfection through virtue, particularly in the context of achieving happiness. There, he described human happiness as twofold. One form is attainable through natural means and the other is a happiness that surpasses human nature and can only be obtained through divine intervention. To reach this supernatural happiness, human beings require additional principles beyond their natural capacities, which are provided by God. These principles are known as “theological virtues” because they have God as their object, they are infused by God, and they are revealed in the Holy Scriptures.²⁴

In her commentary on *Letter V*, Tommasina takes into consideration supernatural happiness, which, as Thomas himself states, can be achieved only through supernatural means. So, starting from faith in the revealed Word of God, the loving ascent towards what is hoped for begins. Some steps can be identified in the description of its course:

The small light of the mind, not properly purified by the burning fire but only by a small flame, believes to see great things and it appears to it that it has understood and known, and this is due to the comparison with its dark past life, or because of the imperfection of the spirit. For a poor person, a small gift seems great, and so it is that it believes to see the great goodness of God.

²⁴ S. Thomas Aquinas (1898). *Summa Theologicae* I^a-IIae q. 62 a. 1 co. “Respondeo dicendum quod per virtutem perficitur homo ad actus quibus in beatitudinem ordinatur, ut ex supradictis patet. Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas, ut supra dictum est. Una quidem proportionata humanae naturae, ad quam scilicet homo pervenire potest per principia suae naturae. Alia autem est beatitudo naturam hominis excedens, ad quam homo sola divina virtute pervenire potest, secundum quandam divinitatis participationem; secundum quod dicitur II Petr. I, quod per Christum facti sumus consortes divinae naturae. Et quia huiusmodi beatitudo proportionem humanae naturae excedit, principia naturalia hominis, ex quibus procedit ad bene agendum secundum suam proportionem, non sufficiunt ad ordinandum hominem in beatitudinem praedictam. Unde oportet quod superaddantur homini divinitus aliqua principia, per quae ita ordinetur ad beatitudinem supernaturalem, sicut per principia naturalia ordinatur ad finem connaturalem, non tamen absque adiutorio divino. Et huiusmodi principia virtutes dicuntur theologicae, tum quia habent Deum pro obiecto, in quantum per eas recte ordinamur in Deum; tum quia a solo Deo nobis infunduntur; tum quia sola divina revelatione, in sacra Scriptura, huiusmodi virtutes traduntur.” (Retrieved on September 30th, 2023 from [Thomas de Aquino, Summa Theologiae, I^a-IIae q. 55-70](https://www.thomasdeaquino.org/) (corpusthomicum.org)).

But the mind purified by the burning fire of love sees God's greatness and superiority to be so great that it surpasses all human and angelic understanding. The greatness and magnificence cannot be adequately estimated, known, and understood by created things, but rather, they must be humbly adored and purely loved. Therefore, this burning light does not allow the eye of the curious intellect to open most brightly. Thus, by itself, it cannot approach the knowledge of this inaccessible light because of the cries of the burning and flaming affection, loudly shouting to the curious intellect: "What are you doing, oh you curious and foolish intellect? No! My love is not unknown. Rather your fragile vessel is neither apt nor sufficient for the incomprehensibility of the sublime majesty!" Therefore, it is silent. It is silent and, having now stepped down from its speculative role because the light of divine love shines in the interior of the fiery affection without intellect, and thus becoming blind and ignorant, the intellect receives a little light from the burning affection originated in such elevated splendor. For it is not the eyes of the intellect, but those of love that see what they love.²⁵

According to this description, the first step involves the purification of the natural light of the soul (*mente*) by grace, which is characterized as "the bright fire of divine love". At a second stage, as it begins to feel love but it is not fully cleansed or possessed by it, the soul believes that

²⁵ Fontana (2006) 174: "Lo piccolo lume de la mente, non bene purgata per lo ardente focho, ma per la piccola fiamma, le par vedere grande fato e crede aver compreso e cognossuto, e questo he per la comparatione de la tenebrosa sua pasata vita, o vero per la imperfetione de lo spirito. Percioché ha un povero lo piccolo dono ghe pare grande e cossi li par vedere grande bontà de Dio. Ma la mente, purgata per l'ardente focho d'amore, vede tanto grande e tanto superchianta tute le parte de Dio, che supera ogni sentimento, humano e angelico. La altesa e la magnificentia non estima essere condignamente, [esser] cognossuta e compresa da le cosse create, ma scì humilementi adorata, e puramenti amata. Sciché, questo ardente lume non lassa aprir l'ogio allo curioso inteletto molto chiarissimo. Modo che, per sé, non pò acostare alla cognitione de questa luce inaccessible per li cridi de lo ar(79r)dente e affocato affeto, cridando fortamenti a l'intelle(cto). curioso: "Or che fai o tu, curioso e stulto inteletto? Non, non che lo amor mio he incognito, oimé che lo tuo fragile vaxo non he ato, ni bastante, ad altissima incomprendibilitade de la excelsa magestade". Perciò tace. Tace et, scesa oramai da lo suo speculativo officio, percioché questo lume del divin amore risplende inter lo affocato affeto, senza inteletto e, cossi, como cieco e ignorante, lo inteletto de cossi alto splendore receve alcun lume de lo ardente affeto. Percioché non li ogi de lo inteletto, ma quelli de l'amore vedo(ano) quello chi amano."

it has known and understood great things. This perception, though, its subjective and only related to the smallness of the soul's previous experience. As the soul becomes more purified by the burning fire of love, it starts to perceive that the greatness and superiority of God surpass all human and angelic understanding, and it is called to humbly and purely adore God. The understanding of God's incomprehensibility leads the soul to an attitude of worship that silences all speculation from the intellect. Once the intellect becomes silent, it receives "a little light from the burning affection" and, inasmuch as it is thus illuminated, it realizes that God's nature is beyond its comprehension, and this understanding brings such a sense of joy and fulfillment that the intellect no longer seeks other forms of knowledge. As a result, the intellect, which is the lower part of us, takes its rightful place in the hierarchy of capacities, submitting itself to love.

Then, Tommasina describes the characteristics of unitive love:

It loves above itself and knows above itself and above all knowledge. That is, it burns unknowingly in the light of its unknowable divinity, which surpasses all knowledge. This love, rooted in simplicity, loses the object, loses the why. This simple love has no self, does not have God for itself, but has itself for God. This love does not love to know, but knows because it loves, and wants to love as much as it wants God. And this is the love that is infused by the strength of the one who is loved, a love without any object that unites and transforms the love of the human heart into the likeness of its love. And thus, united and transformed in God, it sings together with the bride saying: "*Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*," that is, my beloved is mine and I am his, for whom I live. For there is no other life in me but my love, nor any other will but His. There is no more life, nor death, nor any human fear. And thus, turning below this radiant light of the burning fire, the presence of the supreme beloved can be invisibly seen, inflaming the secret heart. And its flame is my God. Therefore, through His light, He is seen, as the prophet says: "*In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*": through Him He is felt, through Him He is known.²⁶

²⁶ Fontana (2006) 174-175: "Ama sopra de sé e conosce sopra de sé e sopra de ogni cognitione. Cioè ignorantementi arde in lo lume de la sua incognosibile deidade, la qual supera ogni cognitione. Questo amore, semplicementi radecato, perde lo ogeto, perde lo perché. Questo amore de la semplicità non ha sé, non ha

As it can be seen, this passage contains several traits that could be attributed to an influence of Rhineland mysticism. The love the text speaks of is rooted in simplicity, and detached from worldly concerns: “There is no more life, nor death, nor any human fear”. The detachment goes further, with the description of this love as one that “loses the object, loses the why”. It is a love that “has no self, does not have God for itself, but has itself for God”, phrases that suggest a dissolution of the self in divine love. This dissolution gives plays to a rebirth or transformation of the human heart into the likeness of God’s love. Still, all these themes are present in a much closer source, the teachings of Tommasina’s cousin Caterina, St. Catherine. Leaving aside, for lack of space, the rest of Tommasina’s commentary to *Letter 5*, I will next focus on Catherine’s doctrine.

III. St. Catherine’s Purgatory

St. Catherine was born in Genoa in 1447, one year before Tommasina. In 1463, at the age of sixteen, she was married to Giuliano Adorno. She fell into a five-year long depression, followed by five more years of leading a worldly life together with her husband. Then, she underwent a profound experience during confession. According to the *Vita mirabile*, at the insistence of her sister, a nun, Catherine reluctantly went to confess to the monastery. As soon as she knelt before the confessor,

she received a wound in her heart, an immense love for God, and such a clear vision of her own miseries and faults, as well as the goodness of God, that she almost fell to the ground. Due to these feelings of immense love and of the offenses committed against her sweet God, she was so drawn out of the miseries of the world by a purified affection that she seemed almost beside herself.

Dio per sé, ma sé per Dio. Questo amor non ama per cognoscere, ma cognosce per amare e tanto vole amare, quanto vol Dio. E questo he quello amore chi he infuso per forza da quello chi ama, senza alcun ogeto, lo qual hunisce e transforma lo amore de lo cor humano alla similitudine de lo suo amore. E cossì, hunita e transformata in Dio, canta cun la sposa dicendo: “Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi” cioè, lo mio dileto a me he vita e la mia vita he a lui, per lo qual vivo. Sciché non più altra vita in me che lo mio amore, ni altra volontà che la sua. Sciché non ge più vita, ni morte, ni alcun timore humano. E, cossì, rivoltando infra questo radiante lume del ardente focho, se pò veder invisibilmente la presentia de lo superno amato, infiamessante in el secreto core. E la sua fiamma he pur lo Dio mio. Sciché, per lo suo lume se vede lui, como dice lo propheta “in lumine tuo videbimus lumen”: per lui se sente lui, per lui se cognosce lui.”

Thus, she internally cried out with deep love: “No more world, no more sins,” and in that moment, if she had had a thousand worlds, she would have thrown them all away. By the flame of this deep love that she felt, the sweet God imprinted in her soul and infused all perfection by grace in an instant. Thus, He purified her from all earthly affections, illuminated her with His divine light, made her see with the inner eye His sweet goodness, and finally, completely transformed her into faith through a true union of good will, inflaming her on all sides with His deep love.²⁷

As it can be seen, the narrative of her conversion includes the mention that faith and love are gifts from the grace of God, just as Tommasina writes. Catherine did not have to exercise herself in mystical theology but was “infused all perfection by grace in an instant”.²⁸ During the following four years, she submitted herself to severe mortifications until in 1477, divine love emptied her mind and Catherine ended her penance.

After the aforementioned four years, she was given a clean, free, and God-filled soul (*mente*), to such an extent that nothing else ever entered her; attending sermons and masses, she was so occupied by the inner feeling that she neither heard nor saw what was being said or done externally but instead, in the sweet divine

²⁷ S. Caterina (1551) 3v-3r: “Il giorno dopo la festa di san Benedetto (per in instantia di sua sorella monaca) andò madonna Caterina per confessarsi dal confessor di esso monastero, benché non fusse disposta al confessarsi, ma la sorella gli disse, al manco vattegli a' riccomadar per che è buon religioso, e in verità era un huomo santo, di subito che se gli fu ingenochiata inanti, ricevette una ferita al cuore, d'un immenso amor de Dio, con vna vista così chiara delle fue miserie & suoi disfetti, & de la bontà del Dio, che ne fu quasi cascar in terra: Onde per quelli sentimenti de immenso amore, & delle offensioni fatte al suo dolce Iddio, fu talmente tirata per affetto purgato fuor delle miserie del mondo, che resto quasi fuor di sè, & per cio' di dentro gridava con affogato amore: Non più mondo: Non più peccati, & in quello ponto se ella havesse havuto mille mondi, tutti li haveria gettati via.

Per quella fiamma de l'affogato amor che essa sentiua, il dolce Iddio impresse in quel, l'anima & infusse in vn subito, tutta la perfetion per gratia, Onde la purgò da tutti li affetti terreni, la illumino' con il fuo diuin lume, facendogli veder col'occhio interior la sua dolce bonta, & finalmente in tutto, la vi, muto, & trasformò, in sè, per vera union di buona volontà, accendendola da ogni parte con il fuo affogato amore.”

²⁸ On the exemplary use by the *Vita mirabile* of the differences between Catherine's and Tommasina's vocation, see Pico Estrada (2022) 12.

light, being entirely immersed in the inner delight, she saw and heard other things, and it was not within her power to do else.²⁹

This happened during the same year that Tommasina joined the Dominican order. One year later, in 1478, Catherine moved into the Hospital of Pammatone, where she would later serve as a rector. The hospital became the center for her spiritual teaching, gathering along the years a vast community of followers and disciples. Among them, the names of Ettore Vernazza, Cattaneo Marabotto and Carenzio da Diano Marina stand out. Catherine's husband, Giuliano, lived chastely with her and they worked together at the hospital. Eventually he joined the Franciscan Third Order.

After her sudden conversion in 1467, for about twenty-five years Catherine persevered in her inner path without the surveillance of any spiritual teacher but, as the *Vita* tells us, "taught and governed solely by God".³⁰ When her health began to decline, one of her followers, the aforementioned Father Marabotto, was appointed to care for her well-being, although he always continued to call her "Mother". As Paolo Fontana writes,

"We are still in the late fifteenth century, in the era of the divine mothers who accompany and sometimes replace the spiritual fathers. [...] However, with Catherine, a phase is coming to an end. From the seventeenth century onwards, spiritual direction and teaching about mystical experiences would become strictly male affairs, in which women would only appear as disciples."³¹

Catherine passed away in 1510 at the age of sixty-three.

When examining both her life and the doctrine of *fuocoso amore*, fiery love, it must be born in mind that St. Catherine, although a prolific

²⁹ S. Caterina (1551) 14v: "Dopo i sopradetti quattro anni le fù dato una mente netta, libera e piena di Dio, talmente, che mai più entrò alcuna altra cosa in lei, stando alle prediche e alle messe, tanto era occupata dal interiore sentimento, che non udiva ne vedeva quello, che si dicesse o si facesse esteriormente, ma interiormente nel dolce divino lume, vedeva et udiva altre cose, stando tutta immersa nel gusto interiore e non era in sua possanza di poter altro fare."

³⁰ S. Caterina (1551), 117v: "... da solo Dio instrutta & governata".

³¹ Fontana (1999), 19: "Siamo alla fine del quattrocento, ancora nell'epoca delle divine madri che affiancano e a volte sostituiscono i padri spirituali." And 21: "Con Caterina si sta però chuidendo una fase. Dal secolo XVII in poi la direzione spirituale e l'insegnamento dell'esperienza mistica saranno affari strettamente maschili nei quali le donne compariranno solo come discepoli."

teacher, did not write herself. Instead, her teachings were transmitted by her disciples in various manuscript versions, which converged in the already-mentioned *Vita mirabile*, published in 1551, 40 years after her death, although some of the material may have been written during her lifetime. The book, therefore, can be described as “the works of her friends recounting what they heard from Catherine”³² and they include theological additions, probably introduced by the priests who assisted her.³³ The *Vita* has three sections, the *Life*, a *Treatise on Purgatory*, and a *Dialogue between the Soul and the Body*.

Based on her collected teachings, it can be said that Catherine's conception of Purgatory, linked to her doctrine of fiery love, stands apart from others that circulated in Genoa during her life. It is not topographical, it is not visionary, and it does not describe encounters with other souls or with the devil.³⁴ Catherine of Genoa's teachings on Purgatory stem from her personal experience of the divine fire burning within her. She understands that Purgatory is nothing other than the process of purification of the loving heart, a process characterized by perfect conformity to the will of God. Not all the stages in this process are equivalent to the ones described by Tommasina because the souls that are in Purgatory have already been detached from the senses, the reason, and the intellect. Souls in Purgatory, teaches St. Catherine, have a one-time understanding of why they are there. This understanding happens when they die. But then they do not retain this knowledge because in Purgatory there is no *proprietà*, nothing that one could call one's own. The souls do not have memories, they do not dwell in their sins, they do not speculate why they are in that state or for how long they will remain in such a condition, they do not compare themselves to others. This does not mean that they do not experience suffering. Rather, they do not perceive their suffering as painful because they are completely content with God's divine order and have no will of their own. In Catherine's words, their will “is united in pure love (*carità*)”³⁵ to God's divine ordination.

³² Hughes (1979) xv.

³³ Fontana (1999) 22, 31. Pages 22 to 28 provide a detailed account that presents both the state of the arts on Catherine's work up to 1999 and a still very much relevant analysis of the *Vita's* codicological problems.

³⁴ Fontana (1999) 32-36.

³⁵ S. Caterina di Genova (n.d.): “Non manca però la pena, ma solo il tempo di stare in essa pena. E quanto alla volontà, non possono mai dire che quelle pene siano pene, tanto si contentano dell'ordinazione di Dio, con la quale è unita la loro volontà

The penance that souls undergo in Purgatory is an inner suffering caused by their love for God. They are drawn by God's love and experience a profound longing to be united with Him. However, their sins have created an obstacle, which Catherine compares to a coat of rust, that prevents them from fully attaining this union. This rust of sin is gradually consumed by the purgatorial fire (*fuoco purgatorio*), which is no other than divine charity.

The rust of sin is the impediment, and the fire consumes the rust; and thus the soul becomes more and more uncovered to the divine influence. Just as a covered object cannot correspond to the reflection of the sun, not because of any deficiency in the sun, which continuously shines, but due to the opposition of the covering: if the covering is consumed, the object will be uncovered to the sun, and it will correspond more to the reflection inasmuch as the covering is consumed. Thus, the rust (that is, the sin) is the covering of the souls, and in Purgatory, it is consumed by the fire; and the more it consumes, the more the soul corresponds to the true sun, God. So the contentment increases as the rust decreases and the soul becomes uncovered to the divine rays. And thus one grows and the other decreases until the time is finished.³⁶

The vocabulary of annihilation explicitly appears in chapters XI (“*annichilarla*”) and XII (“*annichilare*”, twice, and “*annichilano*”, once). It always refers to the action of God's love on the soul. Divine charity is described as an “*affocato amore*” (inflamed love) that irresistibly draws the soul towards Him. When the soul experiences the

in pura carità.” Retrieved on September 30th, 2023 from [Il trattato del Purgatorio e Biografia \(veritatemincaritate.com\)](https://www.veritatemincaritate.com)

³⁶ S. Caterina di Siena (n.d.) 5. “La ruggine del peccato è l'impedimento, e il fuoco va consumando la ruggine; e così l'anima sempre più si va discoprendo al divino influsso. Siccome una cosa coperta non può corrispondere alla riverberazione del sole, non per difetto del sole, che di continuo luce, ma per l'opposizione della copertura: se si consumerà dunque la copertura, si discoprirà la cosa al sole; e tanto più corrisponderà alla riverberazione, quanto la copertura più si andrà consumando. Così la ruggine (cioè il peccato) è la copertura delle anime, e nel Purgatorio si va consumando per il fuoco; e quanto più consuma, tanto più sempre corrisponde al vero sole Iddio. Però tanto cresce la contentezza, quanto manca la ruggine e si discopre l'anima al divin raggio. E così l'un cresce e l'altro manca, sin che sia finito il tempo.” Retrieved on September 30th, 2023 from [Il trattato del Purgatorio e Biografia \(veritatemincaritate.com\)](https://www.veritatemincaritate.com)

overwhelming love of God, it becomes so transformed and consumed by that love that it sees itself as nothing but God. It is annihilated, that is, it surrenders the self to the divine. Just as fire purifies gold by burning away its impurities, the fiery rays of God's love penetrate and purify the soul, consuming its imperfections.

I also see certain fiery rays and lights proceeding from that divine love towards the soul, so penetrating and strong that it seems they must annihilate not only the body but even the soul itself, if it were possible. These rays realize two operations: first, they purify, and second, they annihilate. Consider gold: the more you melt it, the better it becomes, and you could melt it so much that you would annihilate every imperfection in it. This is the effect of fire on material things; but the soul cannot be annihilated in God but rather in itself: and the more you purify it, the more it annihilates itself, and in the end, it remains purified in God. When gold is purified to twenty-four carats, it is no longer consumed, no matter how much fire you subject it to because only its imperfection can be consumed. The divine fire does the same in the soul. God keeps it in the fire so that it consumes every imperfection and leads it to the perfection of twenty-four carats (each soul, nevertheless, in its own degree): and when it is purified, it remains entirely in God, without anything of its own, and its being is God. When He has led the soul thus purified to Himself, then the soul becomes impassible because it has nothing left to consume. And even if it were held in the fire in such a purified state, it would not be painful; it would rather be fire of divine love, like eternal life, without any conflict.³⁷

³⁷ S. Caterina di Genova (n.d.) 14-15: "Vedo ancora procedere da quel divino amore verso l'anima certi raggi e lampi affocati, tanto penetranti e forti, che pare debbano annichilare non solo il corpo, ma ancora essa anima, se fosse possibile. Questi raggi fanno due operazioni: per la prima purificano, con la seconda annichilano. Vedi l'oro: quanto più tu lo fondi, tanto più divien migliore, e tanto lo potresti fondere, che annichileresti in esso ogni imperfezione. Questo effetto fa il fuoco nelle cose materiali; ma l'anima non si può annichilare in Dio, ma sibbene in sé propria: e quanto più la purifichi, tanto più in sé l'annichili, e infine in Dio resta purificata. L'oro quando è purificato per fino a ventiquattro carati, non si consuma poi più, per fuoco che tu gli possa dare; perché non si può consumare se non la sua imperfezione. Così fa il divin fuoco nell'anima. Dio la tiene tanto al fuoco, che le consuma ogni imperfezione, e la conduce alla perfezione di ventiquattro carati (ognuna però in suo grado): e quando è purificata resta tutta in Dio, senza alcuna

The precedent paragraphs of Catherine's *Treatise on Purgatory* have main traits in common with Tommasina's description of unitive love. Although the style is very different, for both the goal of the soul's journey is union with God through divine love. For both the action of divine love purifies the soul, transforming it. For both this transformation implies a process of self-annihilation that results in the soul dying to itself and being born in God. And, of course, both resort to the symbolism of the fire and of the light.

Whatever the mutual influences between Tommasina and Caterineta (as she was affectionately called by her cousin), their common source should not be forgotten. Although Catherine never mentions the author that her cousin comments, the narrative of her teachings is impregnated with Dionysian imagery,³⁸ albeit indebted to a particular reception of Dionysius, the one that read him as the authority who disclosed that love is superior to knowledge. It was the aim of this essay to introduce two rich and little known examples of this reception.

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cosa in sé propria e il suo essere è Dio. Il quale quando ha condotta a sé l'anima così purificata, allora l'anima resta impassibile, perché più non le resta da consumare. E se pur così purificata fosse tenuta al fuoco, non le sarebbe penoso; anzi le sarebbe fuoco di divino amore, come vita eterna, senz'alcuna contrarietà." Retrieved on September 30th, 2023 from [Il trattato del Purgatorio e Biografia \(veritatemincaritate.com\)](http://www.veritatemincaritate.com)

³⁸ See Fontana (1999) 41-46 for an analysis of Dionysian themes in the *Vita mirabile*.

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