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# “Flowing from the Wild Sea and Back to the Sea”: Water Metaphors and Mystical Union in the Late Medieval Low Countries

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Whosoever is speaking concerning God, must be careful to search out thoroughly whatsoever furnishes moral instruction to his hearers; and should account that to be the right method of ordering his discourse, if, when opportunity for edification requires it, he turn aside for a useful purpose from what he had begun to speak of; for he that treats of sacred writ should follow the way of a river, for if a river, as it flows along its channel, meets with open valleys on its side, into these it immediately turns the course of its current, and when they are copiously supplied, presently it pours itself back into its bed. Thus unquestionably should it be with everyone that treats of the Divine Word, that if, in discussing any subject, he chance to find at hand any occasion of seasonable edification, he should, as it were, force the streams of discourse towards the adjacent valley, and, when he has poured forth enough upon its level of instruction, fall back into the channel of discourse which he had proposed to himself.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Sed tamen quisquis de deo loquitur, curet necesse est, ut quicquid audientium mores instruit rimetur, et hunc rectum loquendi ordinem deputet, si cum opportunitas aedificationis exigit, ab eo se, quod loqui coeperat, utiliter deriuat. Sacri enim tractator eloquii morem fluminis debet imitari. Fluius quippe dum per alueum defluit, si ualles ex latere concauas contingit, in eas protinus sui impetus cursum diuertit, cum que illas sufficienter impleuerit, repente sese in alueum refundit. Sic nimirum, sic diuini uerbi esse tractator debet, ut, cum de qualibet re disserit, si fortasse iuxta positam occasionem congruae aedificationis inuenerit, quasi ad uicinam uallem linguae undas intorqueat et, cum subiunctae instructionis campum sufficienter infuderit, ad sermonis propositi alueum recurrat.” Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, ed. Marci Adriaen, CCSL 143 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 3–4. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of primary sources are by the author. The English translation of Gregory the Great is from Gregory the Great, *Morals on Job*, trans. Anon. Library of Fathers (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1944), 6–7.

Thus does Gregory the Great describe theological practice in the prologue to his *Moralia in Iob*. As the title indicates, the *Moralia in Iob* is a treatise devoted to the exegetical interpretation of the *sensus moralis* of the book of Job.<sup>2</sup> In other words, this passage refers to the relevance of the scriptural text for the personal life of the theologian, the one who “speaks concerning God.” The moral interpretation does not of course refer only to the active life but has implications for all aspects of the person in their relationships with God and the world. In the passage above, however, Gregory is discussing discursive theological exposition, and we may therefore say that his concern here does specifically relate to the active life, and he formulates what may appear to be a surprising position. When one is speaking concerning God, Gregory advocates flexibility and digression, but always in response to needs that may arise unexpectedly, and with the objective of edifying one’s audience. Furthermore, and which is perhaps even more striking for our purposes, he likens the theologian whose activity diverges from a set course to the water of a river that fills the valleys it encounters before returning to its bed and continuing to flow. We shall have occasion to return to these themes below.

Christian theology in the Middle Ages generally and Christian medieval mystical theology in particular make abundant use of river imagery to articulate ideas about the self and God—human life and the Trinitarian life—and about the interrelationship between the two. In many cases, the employment of river imagery in the later Middle Ages is directly associated with glosses and interpretations of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> For example, in his Commentary on the Psalms, Peter Lombard directly associates the “river of God” of Psalm 64:10 with the faithful who are filled with the living water of the Holy Spirit, and consequently share the gifts of the Spirit in the community: “‘The river of God’ indicates the first people of God, namely the faithful of the Early Church who were profound in their receptivity. ‘Is filled with water’ indi-

<sup>2</sup> For the standard work on the senses of medieval exegesis, see Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64). Available in English as Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. M. Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998–2009).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding images of the ocean, however, McGinn has argued: “The desert motif, precisely because it was rooted in the Bible, had a larger and more continuous role than the use of ocean and sea motifs.” Bernard McGinn, “Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition,” *Journal of Religion* 74 (1994): 156. McGinn attributes the use of ocean imagery in the West . . . the Platonic tradition: “It was in Greek philosophico-religious mysticism, especially in the Platonic tradition, that we must look for the literary roots of ocean language among Western mystics. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima’s teaching about the ascent of *eros* culminates when the soul, ‘turning towards the great sea of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth . . . many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in the plenteous crop of philosophy.’” McGinn emphasizes, however, that usage of the sea and ocean as metaphors in the Platonic tradition was not univocal, but at best ambivalent. McGinn, “Ocean and Desert,” 157–58. It must be noted that McGinn treats Evagrius Ponticus’s use of the metaphor of rivers draining into the sea, but we follow his assertion that “it is difficult to find evidence that either he or Cassian directly inspired later identifications of God with the ocean or sea” (160).

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cates the gifts of the Holy Spirit that would be given to others to drink and flood out over them, as according to this verse: ‘He who believes in me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:38).<sup>4</sup>

Taking its lead from a series of articles published over the last forty years,<sup>5</sup> the modest aim of the present article is to engage in the discussion of the meaning and significance of aquatic imagery as it appears in the texts of some late medieval mystics of the Low Countries, and specifically as it relates to their conceptions of mystical union with God. The article aims to offer a new analysis on the use and development of these images, to complement and possibly nuance the interpretations that are currently available. We propose that such imagery should not merely be considered a kind of literary flourish or decorative embellishment, but that it is intimately linked to the mystics’ theological and anthropological presuppositions, which are central to unpacking the very core of their teachings.

In some form or another, aquatic imagery is to be found in the writings of all the major thirteenth- and fourteenth-century mystical authors in the Low Countries—Hadewijch, Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and John of Ruusbroec<sup>6</sup>—though there are considerable differences in the applications of this imagery and its significance in the overall context of each author’s thought. Close examination of these images reveals a complex development in the use of such metaphors and suggests that there may have been a critical reception of ideas between the authors in question.

<sup>4</sup> “‘Flumen Dei,’ id est populus Dei prior, fideles scilicet, qui fuerunt in primitiva Ecclesia profundi ad recipiendum, ‘repletum est aquis,’ id est donis Spiritus sancti, unde alii potentur, et rigentur, juxta illud: ‘Qui crediderit in me, flumina de ventre ejus fluent aquae vivae.’” Peter Lombard, *Commentarius in Psalmos Davidicos*, Patrologia Latina, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 191 (Paris), col. 586C.

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought,” *Church History* 40 (1971): 397–411; McGinn, “Ocean and Desert”; and Juan Marin, “Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 103 (2010): 89–109.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this article, we consider Marguerite Porete as belonging to the sphere of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century mysticism in the Low Countries. She has been associated with the beguine spirituality of authors such as Hadewijch (see *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn [New York: Continuum, 1994]), and the Cistercian spirituality of Beatrice of Nazareth (see John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “The Influence of Beatrice of Nazareth on Marguerite Porete: The Seven Manners of Love Revised,” *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses* 64 [2013]: 41–88, and “‘Commune à tous par largesse de pure charité’: Common Love in Beatrice of Nazareth and Marguerite Porete,” *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 83 [2012]: 297–323. See also John Van Engen, “Marguerite (Porete) of Hainaut and the Medieval Low Countries,” in *Marguerite Porete et le “Miroir des simples âmes”: Perspectives historiques, philosophiques et littéraires*, ed. Sean L. Field, Robert E. Lerner, and Sylvain Piron [Paris: Vrin, 2013], 25–68). Few publications have hitherto focused on Marguerite’s relationship with John of Ruusbroec, though Paul Verdeyen, “Oordeel van Ruusbroec over de rechtgelovigheid van Margaretha Porete,” *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 66 (1992): 88–96, and Marin, “Annihilation and Deification” offer suggestions regarding Ruusbroec’s reception of Marguerite’s thought.

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## I. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: SOME BACKGROUND

Bernard of Clairvaux uses two water-related metaphors that are particularly relevant to this article, one of which has been commented upon extensively. A brief examination of these metaphors may serve to sketch the background against which the authors from the Low Countries formulated their own water images. It will be clear that the applications of these images are sufficiently divergent that we cannot posit direct influence, but Bernard may be considered to have been inspirational if only because his texts were so popular.<sup>7</sup> The first of his images, which is to be found in his *De diligendo Deo*, concerns a description not of the present life, but the lives of the saints in heaven. He describes the beatific vision as follows: “As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a big quantity of wine, even assuming the wine’s taste and color; just as red, molten iron becomes so much like fire it seems to lose its primary state; just as the air on a sunny day seems transformed into sunshine instead of being lit up; so it is necessary for the saints that all human affections melt in a mysterious way and flow into the will of God. Otherwise, how will God be all in all if something human survives in man? No doubt, the substance remains though under another form, another glory, another power.”<sup>8</sup> All the scholars who have treated Bernard’s use of this image (as well as the images of iron in fire and light in air) stress his use of the term *videtur* to indicate that the saints only “seem” to become God. Furthermore, Bernard is discussing here the future reality of the beatific vision, not the state of mystical union with God in this life.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, however, it is important to note precisely how Bernard defines the saints’ union with God. He specifies that—albeit mysteriously—all their affections “flow away” into God’s *will*. This, of course, implies that the saints are entirely but ineffably suffused with the love of God.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For example, no fewer than sixty early manuscripts of *De diligendo Deo* survive. See J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, introduction in Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, Tractatus et opuscula, Sancti Bernardi Opera vol. III (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), 112–17.

<sup>8</sup> “Quomodo stilla aquae modica, multo infusa vino, deficere a se tota videtur, dum et saporem vini induit et colorem, et quomodo ferrum ignitum et candens igni simillimum fit, pristina propriaque exutum forma, et quomodo solis luce perfusus aer in eandem transformatur luminis claritatem, adeo ut non tam illuminatus quam ipsum lumen esse videatur, sic omnem tunc in sanctis humanam affectionem quodam ineffabili modo necesse erit a semetipsa liquescere, atque in Dei penitus transfundi voluntatem. Alioquin quomodo omnia in omnibus erit Deus, si in homine de homine quidquam supererit? Manebit quidem substantia, sed in alia forma, alia gloria aliaque potentia.” Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo*, 143. Translation from *On Loving God*, Cistercian Fathers Series 13B (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1973), 30. Slightly modified.

<sup>9</sup> See, in addition to the articles mentioned in n. 5, Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes, Cistercian Studies Series 120 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1990), 121–22. Jean Pépin’s discussion of these metaphors is also authoritative: “*Stilla aquae modica multo infusa vino, ferrum ignitum, luce perfusus aer*”: *L’origine de trois comparaisons familières a la théologie mystique médiévale*, in *Miscellanea André Combes (Divinitas 11)*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1967), 331–75.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for emphasizing this point. Indeed, the will of God necessarily implies the love of God, into which the human “*affectus*” flows.

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As noted by many other commentators, Bernard underscores that the substance of the soul remains, even in heaven, despite the fact that it is completely united with God. He expresses that on the level of its being or its existence as a creature, the soul remains ontologically distinct from God, though it seems or appears to become ontologically indistinct. These points have been emphasized in order to safeguard Bernard’s text from any hint of unorthodox auto-theism, though his image would later become a contentious one in this regard.

The second, perhaps lesser known image that is significant for our purposes is from Bernard’s thirteenth Sermon on the Song of Songs, which begins as follows:

Just as the sea is the ultimate source of wells and rivers, so Christ the Lord is the ultimate source of all virtue and knowledge. For who has power to endow us with virtues if not he who is the King of Glory? . . . Hence from him as from a well-head comes the power to be pure in body, diligent in affection and upright in will. . . . If the waters that surround us inevitably return to the sea by hidden underground channels, only to gush forth again without fail and without weariness for the refreshing of our sight and the relief of our needs, why should not those spiritual streams return unerringly and without ceasing to their native source, and flow back without interruption to irrigate our souls? Let the rivers of grace circle back to their Fountain-Head that they may run their course anew. Let the torrent that springs in heaven be channeled back to its starting point, and be poured on the earth again with fertilizing power.<sup>11</sup>

Within the context of this sermon, it is clear that Bernard is not referring here to mystical union.<sup>12</sup> The central point of the sermon—a theme Bernard announces in the final lines of the above quote—is that the credit for virtue is not due in the last analysis to the virtuous person, but to Christ, from whom all spiritual gifts come. This does not concern mystical consciousness as such, but any virtue practiced by any person. The practice of virtue is a participation in God’s virtue, from whom ultimately all good things come. The important element for our purposes is that Bernard uses the image of rivers flowing forth from the sea and returning to their source to evoke the dependence on

<sup>11</sup> “Origo fontium et fluminum omnium mare est, virtutum et scientiarum Dominus Christus. Quis enim Dominus virtutum, nisi ipse est Rex gloriae? . . . Continentia carnis, cordis industria, voluntatis rectitudo, ex illo fonte manant. . . . Quod si copiae aquarum secretis, subterraneisque recursibus incessanter aequora repetunt, ut inde rursus ad visus usuque nostros iugu et infatigabili erumpent obsequio, cur non etiam spirituales rivi, ut arva mentium rigare non desinant, proprio fonti sine fraude et sine intermissione reddantur? Ad locum unde exeunt revertantur flumina gratiarum, ut iterum fluant. Remittatur ad suum principium caelestis profluvium, quo uberius terries refundatur.” Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, vol. 1 (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), 68. I take Bernard’s and all later authors’ references to the sea as the origin and destination of rivers to be inspired by Ecclesiastes 1:7. The Vulgate translation of the verse reads “Omnia flumina in trant in mare, et mare non redundant; ad locum unde exeunt flumina revertuntur ut iterum fluant.”

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, I am grateful to Bernard McGinn for his suggestion, communicated in personal correspondence, that in his later *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard may have been open to a more radical doctrine of deification in this life than he had been in *De diligendo Deo*.

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God for these spiritual gifts. Later mystics use a similar image, but they appear to do so in a very different way, expanding its meaning and applying it to a more fundamental, ontological concern, namely dependence on God not only for spiritual gifts, but for life itself. The use of this metaphor would likewise prove controversial in later centuries.

### II. BEATRICE OF NAZARETH: A FISH IN THE SEA OR A DROP IN THE OCEAN?

We do not find either Bernard's metaphor of the drop or of the river in the only extant treatise written by Beatrice of Nazareth, *The Seven Manners of Love* (Seven manieren van minne), though such images would be associated with her after her death. Beatrice does nevertheless use other water-related images to express mystical union, and the clearest example is to be found in her sixth manner of love,<sup>13</sup> in which she writes: "And just like the fish that swims in the breadth of the sea and rests in the depths, and as the bird that boldly flies in the expanse and the height of the air, she feels her spirit to be walking freely in the breadth and in the depth and in the expanse and in the height of love."<sup>14</sup> Beatrice here combines two implicit biblical references. The first refers to the fish in the sea and the birds in the air of the fifth day of creation in Genesis 1:20–23. It is important to note in this regard that Beatrice's entire exposition is premised on the notion that the soul is "drawn into the desire to receive and to be in the purity and in the freedom and in the nobility in which she was made by her creator, to his image and to his likeness,"<sup>15</sup> which is another obvious reference to the book of Genesis (1:26). She then combines the spatial dimensions of these animals in their natural habitat with

<sup>13</sup> It is nevertheless true that in the fourth manner we find an image akin to an image used in the *Vita* of Ida of Gorsleeuw, which may have been inspired by Bernard's "big quantity" of wine in *Deo diligendo Deo*: "And like a vat that is full suddenly overflows and wells up when it is touched, so she also is suddenly touched deeply, and overwhelmed by the great fullness of her heart, so that often, despite herself, she is beside herself." (Ende also gelijc alse .i. vat dat vol es, alsment ruret, haesteleke oueruloyt ende vut-welt, also wertse [following MSS HW, Reypens and Van Mierlo read *wert hi*] haesteleke sere gerenen, ende al verwonnen van der groter uoelheit hars heren so datsi dicwile hars ondanc vut moet breken.) Beatrijs van Nazareth, *Seven manieren van minne*, ed. Leonce Reypens and Jozef Van Mierlo, Leuvense studieën en tekstuitgaven (Leuven: De vlaamsche boekenhalle, 1926), 16.

<sup>14</sup> "Ende also gelijc als die visch die swimmet in die wijtheit van der vloet ende rast in die diepheit, ende als die vogel die kunlike vlieget in die gerumheit ende in die hoegheit van der locht also gelijc geuult si haren geest vrieleke wandelende in die witheit ende in die diepheit ende in die gerumheit ende in die hoeheit der minnen." Beatrijs van Nazareth, *Seven manieren van minne*, 25–26. McGinn refers to the image briefly: "Ocean and Desert," 175. Jos Huls provides more extensive analysis in 'Seven manieren van minnen' van Beatrijs van Nazareth: *Het mystieke proces en mystagogische implicaties*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 587–89, 592.

<sup>15</sup> As she states in the very first manner: "datsi es getrect in die begerte te vercrigene ende te wesene in die puerheit ende in die vriheit ende in die edelheit daer si in ghemaket es van haren sceppere na sijn beelde ende na sijn ghelikenesse." Beatrijs van Nazareth (ed. Reypens and Van Mierlo), *seven manieren*, 4.

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the spatial dimensions of love, a Christological allusion that may refer to the cross.<sup>16</sup> Beatrice thus suggests that the love of God is the natural habitat of the human person and that its highest expression is the crucifixion.

Though in the paragraph directly preceding the fish and bird metaphors, Beatrice uses the image of a housewife running her household to describe the indwelling of love, where she stipulates that the soul “is love,” her aquatic imagery of immersion and mystical union is very different from Bernard’s formula discussed above. Beatrice has no need of a saving *videtur* since there is an obvious ontological distinction between a bird and the air or a fish and the sea. Yet at the same time, by employing images that emphasize the distinction between the soul and God, she perhaps does not satisfactorily account for how it is that the soul “is love.” Is this a hesitation on Beatrice’s part to use metaphors that might express too close a union? To say that the soul moves in love like a fish swims in the sea leaves us to ponder the question of how adequately to explain that the soul has become love in any real or direct sense, rather than just that it is immersed in love.

Given that Beatrice emphasized the continuing distinction between the soul and God in the images she used, it is curious to note that a few years after her death, her biographer used an aquatic image that may be considered more daring: a drop of water running down and mingling with the sea. Apart from the fact that Beatrice herself never used this image, it is also noteworthy because we find it in the anonymous author’s recapitulation of Beatrice’s *Seven Manners*, and especially because he uses it in the context of an earlier manner, namely the fourth:

In this stage a very strong loving affection, divinely aroused in her heart, bound it so strongly, invaded it so deliciously, and tied it so firmly that Beatrice was, as it were, absorbed in the abyss of charity and made wholly celestial because of the excessive abundance of spiritual sweetness. All the affection of her heart took on, in some way, a celestial nature like a little drop of water running down into the vast expanse of the sea and immersed in the ocean of eternity. Not a flood of words but only personal experience will explain, to those who want to know, what spiritual sweetness, what blessed happiness and happy delight Beatrice tasted in her mind and with what a fire of ever fervent love she glowed in this stage. That supreme beauty of love which surpasses human understanding, so allured her mind, so attracted her with all her

<sup>16</sup> For a recent study on the spiritual significance of the dimensions of the cross, see Beverly Mayne Kienzle, “Preaching the Cross: Liturgy and Crusade Propaganda,” in *Preaching and Political Society: From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. Franco Morenzoni, Sermo: Studies on Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation Sermons and Preaching 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 11–46. Pages 15–16 are particularly enlightening for our purposes, since they discuss the beginning of “the interpretation of the four dimensions of divine love as the four dimensions of the cross. . . . He [Augustine] calls the audience to contemplate the dimensions of the cross in the framework of the crucifixion: the suffering and death and Christ points to *boundless charity*; Christ is one in being with God, who cannot be held in the hand like an idol. The physical object of the cross points beyond itself and represents the limitlessness of God’s fullness.” Emphasis added.

affections to itself, so embraced and swallowed her into the bosom of its unlimited depths that she relished nothing but love, she spoke of nothing but love, and in her works she showed forth nothing but love.<sup>17</sup>

Following brief indications in the work of Albert Deblaere, Rob Faesen has discussed the tendency of the anonymous author of the *Vita* to mitigate the mystical content of the *Seven Manners*.<sup>18</sup> It is thus telling that he uses a metaphor that is stronger than any we find in Beatrice's own text to describe her union with God in the fourth manner, a relatively early stage of mystical development in her thought. The metaphor is also stronger than Bernard's formula of water in wine. The context in which the *Vita* uses the metaphor obviously does not refer to the afterlife, but to a reality on earth. For a biographer who otherwise eschews the mystical content of the author he is discussing, it is surprising that he apparently unproblematically uses identical substances, water and water, though in different measures, to describe mystical union.

One easily sees how potentially unorthodox auto-theistic tendencies might be descried in such images, but our author hastens to add that "not a flood of words but only personal experience will explain"—perhaps indirectly suggesting that he is aware that the image might easily be misunderstood. In any event, it thus appears that though the author of the *Vita* has an ambiguous attitude to strong expressions of mystical union, he does not seem to have had any qualms about using an image that was more radical than Beatrice's own—namely the identification of the water of the human soul and the water of the divine sea. It is important to add that the biographer adds what might be considered a "saving" *quodammodo* to his description of the union, which lends weight to the presupposition that he sought to undermine any interpretation that simply takes the metaphor at face value.

<sup>17</sup> "In hoc siquidem statu fortissimus quidam amoris affectus, intra cor suum diuinitas excitatus, idipsum tam valenter adstrinxit, tam delectabiliter inuasit, tam fortiter alligauit: ut, pre nimia spiritualis dulcedinis habundantia, velut in abissum caritatis absorta, tota celestis effecta fuerit, et, instar guttule decurrentis in maris amplissimam latitudinem, tota simul affection cordis eius in pelagus eternitatis immersa, celestem quodammodo naturam induerit. In quo statu quantum spiritualis dulcedinis, beate felicitates et felicissime iocunditatis in mente gustaverit, quantum igne fereuntissime caritatis accensa flagrauerit: non verborum affluentia, sed sola testis experientia, misterium hoc indagare volentibus explicabit. Illa quippe caritatis supereminens pulchritudo, que sensus humanos exsuperat, in tantum illius mentem allexerat, sibique totam cum suis affectibus attrahens et amplexans intra sinum incircumscripse profunditatis sue glutuerat: ut nichil preter caritatem saperet, nichil aduerteret nichil in ore sonaret nisi caritas, nichil in opere preter caritatem demonstraret." Vita Beatricis, *De autobiografie van de Z. Beatrijs van Tienen O.Cist. 1200–1268*, ed. L. Reypens (Antwerp: Ruusbroec-genootschap, 1964), 165–66. English translation in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth*, trans. and annotated by Roger DeGanck, Cistercian Fathers Series 50 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1991), 303, 305.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Faesen, "Mystiek en hagiografie: Hoe benadert de anonieme auteur van de *Vita Beatricis* het verschijnsel mystiek?" *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 73 (1999): 97–110. See also Albert Deblaere, "Altniederländische mystik," in *Albert Deblaere: Essays on Mystical Literature*, ed. Rob Faesen, BETL 177 (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 2004), 93.



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### III. HADEWIJCH: THE DIVINE SOURCE

Hadewijch introduced the river metaphor to Middle Dutch mystical literature, though it occurs only once in her work.<sup>19</sup> We find the metaphor in “Mengeldicht 16,” the poem that discusses the seven names of love. The last three of these seven names are “great and strong, each one brief and eternally long; they are dew, living spring and hell.”<sup>20</sup> An extensive discussion of these seven metaphors forms the first part of Jo Reynaert’s detailed study of Hadewijch’s imagery, *De beeldspraak van Hadewijch*.<sup>21</sup> This is one of the very few studies on Hadewijch to analyze the *Mengeldichten*, and specifically “Mengeldicht 16,” in any detail.

In Hadewijch’s own words, the origin of all seven metaphors cited as the names of God in this poem are scriptural: “If I mention these names to you, it is because they are in the Scriptures.”<sup>22</sup> The river metaphor, which is mentioned only briefly in “Mengeldicht 16,” is in fact not the central focus of the text. It is used merely as a comparison to another metaphor, namely the sixth name of God, the “living spring” (*levende borne*). In other words, her use of the river as a metaphor for mystical union with God is limited to two lines, which themselves function only as a clarification of a different metaphor:

Living spring, her sixth name  
Fittingly follows the dew [the fifth name].  
The flowing and the flowing back  
The one through the other, growing,  
Is above reason and understanding  
Above knowledge and above the capacity  
Of human creatures.  
And yet we have it in our nature:  
The hidden ways Love makes us travel,  
And receive the sweet kiss with blows  
Therein one receives the sweet living life  
That gives living life to the living.  
That name is living spring because it nourishes  
And preserves in a person a living soul  
And erupts from the living with life  
And brings new life to the living from life.  
The living spring flows always

<sup>19</sup> It must be noted that Hadewijch also uses other aquatic images. See McGinn, “Ocean and Desert,” 175–76, for commentary.

<sup>20</sup> “Die andere .Iij. sijn groet ende stranc, altoes cort ende eeuwelike lanc: dat es dau, leuende borne ende helle.” Hadewijch, *Mengeldichten*, ed. Jozef Van Mierlo, Leuense studiën en tekstuitgaven (Leuven: Standaard boekhandel, 1952), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Jo Reynaert, *De beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, Studiën en tekstuitgaven van Ons geestelijk erf 21 (Tielt: Lannoo, 1981). For the discussion of water metaphors, see 143–59.

<sup>22</sup> Hadewijch, “Mengeldichten 16”: “Dat ic v dese namen vertelle dats omme datse staen inder scriftueren.”

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In old customs, in new ardor,  
Just as the river flows forth  
And quickly takes back to itself:  
Thus Love engulfs its gifts.<sup>23</sup>

In its concise and poetic formulation, this passage contains a number of key elements of mystical theology. Reynaert compellingly argues, with reference to Richard of Saint-Victor's *De Trinitate*, that the first seven lines of the quote above refer to the intra-Trinitarian life. God's nature consists of perfect love and is therefore inherently relational.<sup>24</sup> Although God's nature is perfect love through the mutual self-gift of the Persons to one another ("flowing and flowing back"), it is impossible for human reason to plumb the depths of this divine mystery because it is "above reason and understanding."

According to Hadewijch, however, though the soul cannot comprehend God's nature, the divine nature is not opposed to human nature ("we have it in our nature"). In other words, as Beatrice had affirmed, the relationship with God is natural to humanity. In its most fundamental, ontological aspect, the human soul reflects the mutual love of the Trinitarian relationship and participates in the love that unites the Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit. By their own nature, humans are vivified by the love of God that is poured out unceasingly upon them. The essential characteristic of this "living water" is its dynamism ("the living spring flows always") and is the foundation of the unity of the soul with God ("the river flows forth and quickly takes back to itself").

Following Van Mierlo, Reynaert questions whether this passage in the poem should not be interpreted in a Neoplatonic sense, as an emanation from and subsequent *regiratio* to God.<sup>25</sup> As Reynaert readily admits, however, no direct sources can immediately be identified for Hadewijch's use of the image in this sense. On my reading, these lines need not constitute a Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation and *regiratio*, or at least not exclusively. Indeed, Hadewijch's view that the Holy Spirit identifies and "spirates" the names of all people singularly and collectively may be interpreted to mean no more than—but also no less than—that God knows each and all creatures by name, and that they were created through God's love. On this reading, rather

<sup>23</sup> "Leuende borne hare seste name / Volghet den dauwe wel bequame. / Dat vloyen ende dat weder vloyen / Die ene dore dandere ende dat in groeyen / Dat es bouen sinne ende verstaen / Bouen bekinnen ende bouen ontfacen / Van menscheliken creatueren. / Doch hebben wijt in onser natueren: / Die verhoelne weghe die minne doet gaen / Ende met slaghen dat suete cussen ontfacen / Daar inne ontfetmen dat suete leuende leuen / Dat den leuenden leuene leuen sal gheuen. / Die name es leuende borne, omme dat hi voedet / Ende leuende sielen inden mensche hoedet / Ende met leuenne vten leuenne ontspringhet / Ende den leuenne vten leuenne nuwe leuen bringhet. / Die leuende borne vloeit allen tijt / In ouden ghewoenten, in nuwen vlijt / Ghelijc dat vte gheuet die riviere / Ende weder te hare haelt sciere: / Alsoe verslindet die minne haer gheuen." Hadewijch, *Mengeldichten*, 82–83.

<sup>24</sup> Reynaert, *De beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, 144–49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–65. See also Hadewijch, *Brieven*, vol. 1, ed. Jozef Van Mierlo, Tekst en commentaar, Leuvense studiën en tekstuitgaven (Antwerp: Standaard boekhandel, 1947), 168.

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than emanating from the divine One, each creature’s fundamental identity is characterized by the capacity to love, since individually and collectively, creation bears within it the name of God’s love. This implies that for Hadewijch, human beings as created beings are ontologically related to God by virtue of being created by God, and that their lives are vivified by the love of God. This may also explain what Van Mierlo and Reynaert identify as Hadewijch’s so-called doctrine of *regiratio*. Hadewijch’s poem is premised on a doctrine of God that is essentially personal and a conception of human life that principally relies on the vivifying movement of the Holy Spirit. Andrew Louth has argued with respect to Neoplatonism and Christian mysticism that the Neoplatonic doctrine of God is essentially impersonal or supra-personal and, furthermore, that the Neoplatonic doctrine of grace is clearly distinct from that of Christian theology, given that the One does not *love* the soul but is basically indifferent toward it. Following Louth’s analysis of the Christian and Neoplatonic doctrines of God, we might conclude that Hadewijch need not necessarily rely on Neoplatonism for her theological content, even if she does rely on language and symbols that find their origin in the Neoplatonic tradition.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than advocating a principle of emanation and return to the One, Hadewijch’s river metaphor may be intended to articulate her conception of human anthropology as fundamentally related to the mutual love between the Persons of the Trinity. Though it is incomprehensible to the human intellect, human nature consists in being vivified by the love of the Holy Spirit, which is the same love that is shared by the Father and Son in their mutual self-gift to each other. Hadewijch emphasizes that this mutual self-gift entails a dramatic dynamism of mutual indwelling (“the one through the other”), not only with respect to the Persons of the Trinity, but also in the human soul.

#### IV. MARGUERITE PORETE: THE HUMAN RIVER AND THE DIVINE SEA

Marguerite Porete’s use of the metaphors of the river and sea is perhaps the most contentiously debated of all the authors considered in this article. Marguerite had a remarkable gift for devising striking new metaphors to describe union with God, but we shall focus on two particularly relevant exam-

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190–92. See, in this regard, the Eucharistic and Christological allusions in other stanzas of “Mengeldicht 16.” As Louth underscores (190): “In Christian mysticism grace is God’s gift to the soul of communion with Himself, without which not even the soul’s search for God would be possible.” And on 191: “The Fathers’ emphasis on grace in their mysticism is derived from their experience of the love of the *Incarnate* Christ.” The same may certainly be argued in Hadewijch’s case. We refer, for example, to her “Vision 7,” in which the incarnate Christ comes to Hadewijch, administers the Eucharist to her and then embraces her so closely that her humanity is merged with his and she can no longer distinguish him from herself. See Hadewijch, *Visioenen*, ed. Jozef Van Mierlo, Leuvense studieën en tekstuutgaven (Leuven: De vlaamsche boekenhal, 1924), 77–78.

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ples. In a possible allusion to Beatrice's sixth manner, discussed above, Marguerite writes:

**Love.** Such a Soul, says Love, swims in the sea of joy, that is in the sea of delights flowing and streaming from the Divinity, and she feels no joy, for she herself is joy, and so she swims and flows in joy without feeling any joy, for she dwells in joy and joy dwells in her; for through the power of joy she is herself joy, which has changed her into itself. Now they have one common will, like fire and flame, the will of the lover and that of the beloved, for love has changed this Soul into itself. **The Soul.** . . . How sweet is this changing by which I am changed into the thing that I love better than I love myself! I am so changed that I have therein lost my name for the sake of loving, I who can love so little; and I am changed into that which I love more than myself, that is, into Love, for I love nothing by Love.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Beatrice's image of the fish swimming in the sea and resting in the deep, Marguerite's image boldly asserts an identity between the soul and the love into which it is transformed, that is, the love that is God. According to Marguerite, this has two dimensions. The first is the soul's immersion in love ("she dwells in joy"), while the second is the infusion of love into the soul ("joy dwells in her"). Marguerite thus resolves the tension between the framework of mutual indwelling and ontological distinction that we saw in Beatrice, not by asserting an ontological "transubstantiation," but by affirming that the soul is transformed by love (i.e., the Holy Spirit) into love.<sup>28</sup> In resolving this tension, however, she uses a formulation that comes close to suggesting an ontological fusion with God.

The impression of an auto-theistic union is strengthened by Marguerite's emphasis on the loss of the soul's identity ("I have therein lost my name"). However, there are also elements in this passage that indicate an unremitting ontological distinction between the soul and God. For example, the soul never speaks from the perspective of God. Indeed, the character of the soul retains

<sup>27</sup> "Amour: Telle Ame, dit Amour, nage en la mer de joye, c'est en la mer de delices fluans et decourans de la Divinite, et si ne sent nulle joye, car elle mesmes est joye, et si nage et flue en joye, sans sentir nulle joye, car elle demoure en Joye, et Joye demoure en elle; c'est elle mesmes joye par la vertuz de Joye, qui l'a muee en luy. Or est ung commun vouloir, comme feu et flambe, le vouloir de l'amant et celluy de l'amie, car Amour a muee ceste Ame en luy. L'Ame: . . . Comment c'est une douce nuance de ce que je suis muee en la chose que j'ayme mieulx que moy! Et tant suis muee, que je en ay perdu mon non pour amer, qui si pou puis amer: c'est en amour, car je n'ayme fors que Amour." Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des simples ames*, ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen, CCCM 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 96. Translation from Margaret Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, foreword by Kent Emery, trans. Edmund Colledge, Jack C. Marler, and Judith Grant, *Notre Dame Texts in Medieval Culture* 6 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 46–47.

<sup>28</sup> See also chap. 21: "I am God, says Love, for Love is God, and God is Love, and this Soul is God through its condition of Love, and I am God through my divine nature, and this Soul is God by Love's just law" (Je suis Dieu, dit Amour, car Amour est Dieu, et Dieu est amour, et ceste Ame est Dieu par condicion d'amour, et je suis Dieu par nature divine, et ceste Ame l'est par droiciture d'amour). Porette, *Le miroir des simples ames*, 82. Translation from Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 41.

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its voice in the dialogue and continues to refer to itself as distinct from God. The dialogical nature of love is thus affirmed. On my reading, this position reveals something of Marguerite’s anthropological position, for the mutual indwelling to which she refers presupposes that the soul’s ontological structure is such that it is capable of receiving the consciousness that it stands in direct relationship with God’s love. This presupposes, of course, that the infusion of God’s love into the soul occurs directly, without mediation.

Marguerite returns to the themes that she had brought to the fore in the passage above later in the *Mirror*, in a more contentiously debated passage that describes rivers draining into the sea:

And so she loses her name in him by whom and into whom she is melted and dissolved, into him and in him for her sake. Just as a watercourse does, the waters of which come from the sea, and which has some name or other, Aisne, it may be, or Seine, or another river; when this watercourse or river flows back into the sea, it loses its channel and its name, by which it was known in many lands as it flowed and performed its work. But now it is in the sea, where it takes its rest and so is relieved of this work. It is just so with this Soul. You have in this a sufficient example of this, by which to interpret how this Soul came from the sea, and had a name, and returns into the sea, and so loses her name, and has no name at all, except the name of him into whom she is completely changed; that is, into the love of the spouse of her youth who has wholly changed his bride into himself. He is and thereby she is, and that is wonderfully sufficient to him, and thereby she is dumbfounded; and this is Love that pleases, and thereby she is love, and this delights her.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Lerner was the first person since the rediscovery of Marguerite’s authorship of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in 1946 to devote extensive attention to this metaphor in an article published in 1971.<sup>30</sup> Though Lerner concedes that “whatever pantheism [the *Mirror*] may contain is not glaringly self-evident,”<sup>31</sup> he does appear to interpret her use of the above image in a pantheist vein, since he identifies her as one of the “earliest known formulators of the heresy of the Free Spirit, a doctrine commonly understood to have embraced pan-

<sup>29</sup> “Et pource pert elle son nom en celluy, en quoy elle est de luy en luy fondue et remise de luy en luy pour elle mesmes. Ainsi comme feroit une eau qui vient de la mer, qui a aucun nom, comme l’en pourroit dire Aise, ou Sene, ou une aultre riviere ; et quant celle eue our riviere rentre en mer, elle pert son cours et le nom d’elle, dont elle couroit en plusieurs pays en faisant son œuvre. Or est elle en mer, la ou elle se repose, et ainsi a perdu tel labour. Pareillement est il de ceste Ame. Vous avez de ce pour ce assez exemple, pour gloser l’entente comment ceste Ame vint de mer, et eut nom ; et comment elle rentre en mer, et ainsi pert son nom, et n’en a point, fors le nom de celluy en quoy elle est parfaictement muee ; c’est assavoir en l’amour de l’espoux de sa jouvence, qui a l’espouse muee toute en luy. Il est, dont ceste est ; et ce luy souffist merueilleusement, dont ceste est merueilleuse, et c’est plaisante Amour, dont ceste est amour ; et ce la delecte.” Porette, *Le mirouer des simples ames*, 234, 236. Translation from Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids.” Marguerite was identified as the author of *The Mirror* by Romana Guarnieri, who published her discovery in “Lo *Specchio delle anime semplici* e Margherita Poirette,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, June 16, 1946.

<sup>31</sup> Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids,” 400.

theism and antinomianism.”<sup>32</sup> He underscores this interpretation by emphasizing that in Marguerite’s passage we find no “saving clause equivalent to Bernard’s *videtur*.”<sup>33</sup>

Bernard McGinn affirms Lerner’s reading of the metaphor, though he emphasizes that we “need to remember that even the condemned Marguerite, whose writings were used by Eckhart, has a complex teaching about union that includes elements of distinction as well as of indistinction.” He concludes that “The symbols of ocean and desert seem to provide considerable ammunition for those who argue for a strand of what is sometimes called absorptive mysticism in Christianity, that is, that the notion that the goal of the mystical path is to become identical with God, to merge into the divine reality in a final, nondual way. It is precisely the function of [these] symbols to suggest this ‘indistinction’ aspect of the consciousness of the immediate presence of God. But [in the context of these mystics’ thought] the symbols become more ambivalent, as all symbols eventually must.”<sup>34</sup>

It is my contention that Marguerite’s image of the rivers draining into the sea may in fact be intended precisely to nuance the “indistinction” aspect of mystical consciousness in an ingenious manner. Unlike any of the aquatic metaphors she inherited, Marguerite’s image presents a harmonized notion of the “transformation of love” that does not imply either a fusion with God’s nature or antinomianism. First, it is important to note that her description of the river that “was known in many lands where it flowed and performed its work” is surprisingly similar to Gregory the Great’s image of the river to which we referred at the beginning of this text. In other words, as Marguerite likewise affirms, the flowing of a river is likened to the works of virtue that are dynamic, flexible, and respond to the needs that may arise unexpectedly. Second, though the river loses its course, name, and works when it merges with the sea, it never does so in a final, nondual way. Indeed, the rivers to which Marguerite refers, be they the Oise, Meuse, Aisne, or Seine,<sup>35</sup> or indeed any other river, continue to flow along their course as they simultaneously merge with either other rivers or ultimately the sea. Rivers retain both their name and their course at the same time as constantly losing both. If Marguerite had intended to convey an ontological, nondual fusion with the Godhead, she might more fruitfully have used Bernard’s image and

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 399. Lerner refers to the articles extracted from the *Mirror* that were condemned at Marguerite’s trial and to the regents of the University of Paris who condemned Marguerite to death and were later presumably instrumental in drafting the decree *Ad nostrum* at the Council of Vienne, which formally condemned the Free Spirit heresy.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> McGinn, “Ocean and Desert,” 178.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the names of the rivers Marguerite most probably originally used, see Robert Lerner, “New Light on the Mirror of Simple Souls,” *Speculum* 85 (2010): 91–116, esp. 97–98. The Middle English text renders the names “Oise or Muese,” which according to Lerner are more likely to have been original. In the French text, one of these rivers was kept (Oise, rendered Aise), and one was changed (Muese [Meuse] became Sene [Seine]).

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omitted the “saving” *videtur*. Indeed, the image of the drop implies finality, while the image of the river implies continuity and dynamism.<sup>36</sup>

Marguerite’s image highlights a fundamental aspect of Christian mysticism, namely that united to Christ through the Holy Spirit (“transformed into the love of the spouse of her youth”), the deified soul lives both in time and in eternity, in God and in the world. Though it rests in God, the soul lives and is active in the world, performing works wherever need may arise. The loss of the soul’s identity (“it loses its name”) is not a final abrogation of the soul’s existence as a creature as such, but an emphatic assertion of its direct relationship with the love of God (“except the name of the one into whom she is completely transformed”).<sup>37</sup> In the general context of Marguerite’s book, which contains strong statements about the annihilation of the soul’s will in union with God, this emphasis on the dynamism of love is undoubtedly important.

It is undeniable, however, that pantheist and antinomian interpretations of this image appear to have the weight of history on their side. After all, Marguerite was condemned for heresy and burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic. Nevertheless, as Lerner notes, the *Mirror* survived in a large number of copies and translations that were “owned by orthodox monks and nuns who treasured it as a work of inspired mysticism.”<sup>38</sup> He goes on, however, to describe the later identification of the *Mirror* as a work by Ruusbroec to

<sup>36</sup> The recent study by Rachael Victoria Matthews affirms this interpretation of the image: “The Mystical Utterance and the Metaphorical Mode in the Writings of Marguerite D’Oingt and Marguerite Porete” (doctoral diss., Durham University, 2014), esp. 207–14. See also Zan Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls*, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 17 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 184: “The poetic comparison of mystical union with the water cycle suggests continuity and preservation, yet loss of identity, in the same way that a volume of water, like its spiritual counterpart, loses its proper name and individuality. In this simile the relationship between a river and the sea shows the likeness of the Soul with God: the two bodies of water have the same substance, and the same gender, and only temporarily do rivers take on separate shapes, identities, and proper names. Their confluence with the sea is a restoration of prior unity rather than only a loss of individuality.” I question the temporariness upon which Kocher insists in the interpretation of the image in question. See also the commentary in Joanne Maguire Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete’s “Mirror of Simple Souls”* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 97: “The soul comes from the sea with a name, returns to the sea having lost her name as a river (that is, something created), but having gained the ‘name of Him into whom she is perfectly transformed.’ The river, or the soul, is transformed into the sea (God) and becomes indistinguishable from it. The only name that matters after this melding is the name that exists virtually in the soul, the name of God. The soul established in the fifth and sixth stages loses her name and is with God forever.”

<sup>37</sup> With respect to its antinomian content, this image should perhaps be read in light of what Marguerite writes in chap. 21 of the *Mirror*, namely that “the virtues have not taken leave of such Souls, for they are always with them, but they are in perfect obedience to such Souls. It is in this sense that this Soul takes leave of them, and that yet they are always with them” (Les Vertuz n’ont mie prins congïé a ells, car elles sont toujours avec elles; mais c’est en parfaite obedience d’elles. Et par cest entendement prent ceste Ame congé a elles, et si sont toujours avec elle). Porete, *Le mirouer des simples ames*, 80. Translation from Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids,” 400.

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be “ironic.” The latter point is an important one, for among Marguerite’s many contemporaneous detractors, Ruusbroec, like Eckhart, may actually have been inspired by her text.

### V. JOHN OF RUUSBROEC: MUTUAL POSSESSION IN THE IMMERSION OF LOVE

John of Ruusbroec was beatified in 1903, signaling—if nothing else—that from an official ecclesiastical point of view, his mystical theology may be considered orthodox. This is significant because Ruusbroec’s orthodoxy has not always been so universally accepted. We have evidence suggesting that even during his lifetime, Ruusbroec’s doctrines of the Trinity and of mystical union, and even his lifestyle as such raised considerable opposition within the Church.<sup>39</sup> After his death, however, Ruusbroec’s work famously attracted the attention of a great (and identifiable) ecclesial and intellectual authority: Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, who condemned Ruusbroec for his doctrine of union.<sup>40</sup>

One of the striking aspects of Gerson’s condemnation of Ruusbroec is that in his repeated attacks on Ruusbroec’s doctrine, Gerson refers to two aquatic metaphors that we do not actually find anywhere in Ruusbroec’s works, namely of a drop of wine in the sea and of a drop of water in a vat of wine (the Bernardine formula). In other words, Gerson likened Ruusbroec’s doctrine to these heretical-sounding metaphors, established his guilt by association, and condemned him.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See, in this regard, John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “Mysticism With or Without the Church? John of Ruusbroec’s Conflict with the Clergy,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 74, no. 1 (2013): 18–32. See esp. 19–20 for a discussion of Ruusbroec’s perceived Trinitarian heresy and pantheism in Jan van Leeuwen (see esp. n. 8) and the prologue by Brother Gerard of Saintes, respectively. For an English translation of the latter, see Brother Gerard, “Prologue,” trans. John Arblaster, in *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, ed. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 51 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 378–83. For the objections raised to Ruusbroec’s lifestyle and the foundation of his hermitage in the Sonian Forest, see the discussion of Pomerius’s biography in John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” in Arblaster and Faesen, *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 47–80, esp. 57.

<sup>40</sup> For the most extensive discussion of Gerson’s condemnation of Ruusbroec, see André Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruusbroeck par Gerson*, 4 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1945–72). For a summary of the dispute, see Kees Schepers, “Ruusbroec in Latin: Impulses and Impediments,” in Arblaster and Faesen, *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 237–85. It is important to note that as far as we know, Gerson only read one of Ruusbroec’s works, *The Spiritual Espousals*, and not in the original Middle Dutch but in Latin translation. For the resonances of Gerson’s censure in later centuries—particularly in the Society of Jesus—see Rob Faesen, “‘Dupliet intelligi potest’: Jan van Ruusbroec in the First Century of the Society of Jesus,” in *De letter levend maken: Opstellen aangeboden aan Guido De Baere SJ bij zijn zeventigste verjaardag*, ed. Ineke Cornet, Rob Faesen, Frans Hendrickx, and Kees Schepers (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 285–307. It is possible that, later in life, Gerson’s position in fact began to move closer to that of Ruusbroec, but the damage to Ruusbroec’s reputation had been done, as it were. More research is warranted into this matter. See Jean Gerson, “Letter 55,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, *L’Oeuvre Épistolaire*, intro., text, and notes by Mgr. Glorieux (Tournai: Desclée, 1960), 259–63.

<sup>41</sup> Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids,” 407–9.



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Several of the authors to which we have already referred comment on Ruusbroec’s metaphors, and on his liquid images in particular. Lerner claims that “the great Flemish mystic Jan Ruysbroeck never used the Bernardine image.” This in itself is true, but Lerner continues: “The closest he came to it was to make a different point in *The Book of the Sparkling Stone* when he said ‘we feel that He has surrendered and given Himself to our free desires, for us to savor Him in every way that we could wish; and then we learn, in the truth of His vision, that all we savor, compared with what we still lack, is as a drop of water compared to the sea.’”<sup>42</sup>

While it is true that in this quote, Ruusbroec emphasizes that the created human soul can never fully grasp God or become God by nature and thus comprehend God’s unfathomable mysteries, Ruusbroec does in fact use other, and perhaps surprising, liquid images to describe mystical union. It is noteworthy that none of the discussions of the use of metaphors in mystical texts draw attention to the fact that in the very same book, *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec uses a river metaphor that is remarkably similar to Marguerite’s own. Synthesizing many of the themes found in the earlier tradition I have discussed, Ruusbroec writes:

We follow that brightness [of God], without resting, into the depths from which it springs. And there we feel nothing but the losing of our spirits and the sinking away from ourselves without return in simple love unfathomable. . . . For our immersion in *the transformation of the love of God* remains eternal, unceasing, once we have gone out of ourselves and possess God in immersion of loving, that is: *lost to ourselves*, God is our own and we are his own and we sink away from ourselves for ever, without return, in our possession that is God. . . . This sinking away is essential, with habitual love. . . . This immersion is like the rivers which *always flow into the sea*, without ceasing and without turning back, for that is their proper place. . . . This immersion is above all virtue and all practice of love, for it is nothing but an eternal going out of ourselves with clear foresight. . . . And so we are unwrought from ourselves and wrought by God until we are immersed in love where we possess bliss and are one with God.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>43</sup> “Deser claeheit sijn wij na volghende sonder onderlaet tote inden gronde daer sy uut comt. Ende daer en ghevoelen wij anders niet dan ontgheesten ende ontsincken in eenvoldigher grondeloser minnen zonder wederkeer. . . . Want onse ontsinken in die overforminghe gods, dat blijft ewelijc zonder ophouden, eest dat wij ons selfs uute ghegaen sijn ende gode besitten in ontsonckenheyden van minnen. Want besitten wij gode in ontsonckenheyden van minnen, dat es in verlorenheyden ons selfs, soe es god onse eyghen ende wij sijn sijn eyghen, ende wij sijn ons selfs ontsinckende ewelijc zonder wederkeer in ons eyghendom dat god es. . . . Dit ontsincken es weselijc, met hebbelijcker minnen. . . . Dit ontsincken es ghelijc den rivieren die sonder ophouden ende sonder wederkeren altoes vlieten inde zee, want dat es haer eyghen stad. . . . Nu es dit ontsinken boven alle doechde ende boven alle oefeninghe van minnen, want het en es anders niet dan een ewich uitgaen ons selfs met eenen claren voersiene. . . . Ende aldus werden wij van gode ontwracht ende ghewracht tote in ontsonckenheyden van minnen, daer wij salicheit besitten ende met gode een sijn.” John of Ruusbroec, *Vanden blinkenden steen*, ed. Hilde Noë, trans. A. Lefevere, CCCM 110 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), lines 593–627.

The similarities between this passage and the quotation from chapter 82 of the *Mirror* are unmistakable, and it is thus all the more surprising that none of the commentators on Ruusbroec's metaphors have compared the two authors on this point.<sup>44</sup> Ruusbroec elsewhere does use the classical images of iron in fire and sunlight in air to describe mystical union,<sup>45</sup> so it is perhaps all the more telling that he consciously avoided the Bernardine formulation (of a drop of water in wine) or any of its variants, in favor of a metaphor that bears such striking similarity to Marguerite's. It is of course impossible to demonstrate definitively that Ruusbroec knew Marguerite's book, let alone borrowed from it. Indeed, Ruusbroec may have developed and employed his metaphors entirely independently. Nevertheless, it is notable that against the backdrop of a variety of aquatic images, we find such a close literary parallel here. Let us examine the theological implications of these images and whether we find any convergence of thought between the condemned heretic and the beatified doctor.

In the above passage, Ruusbroec characterizes the mutual indwelling of mystical union between the soul and God in terms of mutual possession. As in Marguerite's text, Ruusbroec associates the soul's possession of God with the *loss* of itself. Transcending the self in God is an "eternal" and "unceasing" movement (thus affirming the dynamism of Hadewijch's metaphor). The conception of the human person as ontologically related to God is the *conditio sine qua non* for the harmonious reconciliation of maintaining created human reality and the loss of the self in God. In other words, when Ruusbroec characterizes immersion in the love of God as "essential, with habitual love," he does not imply that the soul is transformed essentially or that it becomes one essence with God, but rather that the transformation and deification of the soul entail a union with God in which no created intermediary remains.<sup>46</sup> The metaphor of the river powerfully encapsulates this conception of mystical union.

<sup>44</sup> One exception to this rule is Pyong-Gwan Pak, "The Vernacular, Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts and Theological Practices" (doctoral diss., Boston College, 2008), 390 n. 750. Though she does refer to Ruusbroec twice in side remarks, R. V. Matthews does not mention the passage in the *Stone*, stating: "The second of Marguerite's metaphors of mystical union under scrutiny here [the river] also takes its influence from Bernardine expression [*sic*], although her manipulation of the imagery seems unique within the corpus of Christian spiritual writing." Matthews, "The Mystical Utterance and the Metaphorical Mode," 210.

<sup>45</sup> Jan van Ruusbroec, *Boesken der verclaringhe*, ed. Guido de Baere, CCCM 101 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), lines 253–63.

<sup>46</sup> On our reading, Ruusbroec in this sense allied himself with the old tradition championed by Peter Lombard and William of Saint-Thierry that identifies charity with the Holy Spirit. This idea, which was rejected by many prominent Scholastics (though not by Eckhart), is entirely consonant with Marguerite's thought. See John Arblaster, "The Pious Jackal and the Pseudo-Woman: Doctrines of Deification in Medieval France," in *Mysticism in the French Tradition: Eruptions from France*, ed. Louise Nelstrop and Bradley Onishi, Contemporary Theological Explorations in Christian Mysticism (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 121–48.

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Along with Beatrice, Ruusbroec emphasizes that God is the “proper place” of the soul, and he then recapitulates many of the central elements that we find in the passage from Marguerite. For example, union with God occurs “above all virtue and all practice of love.” Like Marguerite,<sup>47</sup> Ruusbroec does not hereby imply that the soul no longer engages in the virtues or the practices of love. The love of God is infinitely greater than the virtues, but rather than abrogating them, the love of God guarantees their practice in the transformed contemplative. Furthermore, Ruusbroec affirms that ultimate human happiness resides in the transformation of the self, wrought by God (“we possess bliss and are one with God”).<sup>48</sup>

Finally, unlike Marguerite, Ruusbroec does not refer explicitly to the names of the rivers or the loss of those names through merging with the sea. Juan Marin interprets Marguerite’s emphasis on the loss of the soul’s name in mystical union as exemplifying her notion of radically indistinct union: “Dissolution is to be completed, a mutual melting where nothing remains of the human nature, *not even its name*. . . . No metaphorical drop of wine will serve. By stretching Bernard’s metaphor to the point that it breaks down, changing it into one substance divided only in terms of magnitude, she sets the stage for her claim that it is the chasm between humanity and divinity that *seems* real. While in Bernard human consciousness of distinction is lost, in Porete divine consciousness of indistinction is regained.”<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere in the *Sparkling Stone*, however, Ruusbroec explains what precisely the “sparkling stone” of his title means, and this may shed light on an alternate interpretation of Marguerite’s text. The stone refers to the white stone of Revelation 2:17, about which Ruusbroec says:

By this sparkling stone we mean our Lord Jesus Christ for according to his divinity he is a shining forth of light eternal and a splendor of the glory of God and a mirror untarnished in which all things are alive. Whoever conquers all things and transcends them shall be given that sparkling stone. . . . And so you may see that this is the sparkling stone given to the contemplative man and in this stone a new name written, which no one knows except he who receives it. . . . If we still want to follow God, especially in three works he wants to work in us, we are baptized again in the Holy Spirit and we are given a new name that will remain ours for ever.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See n. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Compare Marguerite’s “this delights her.”

<sup>49</sup> Marin, “Annihilation and Deification in Beguine Theology,” 101. Emphasis added.

<sup>50</sup> “Met desen blinkenden steenken verstaen wij onsen heere Jhesum Cristum, want na sire godheit soe es hi een blic des ewichs lichts ende een schijn der glorien gods ende een spiegel sonder vleckende daer alle dinghe in leven. Soe wie dat alle dinc verwint ende overclemt, hem wert dese blinkende steen ghegheven. . . . Siet, dit es die blinkende steen die den scouwenden mensche ghegheven werdt, ende in desen stene eenen nuwen name ghescreven die niemen en weet dan dien ontfet. . . . Eest dat wij noch gode ghevolchsaem sijn willen, sonderlinghe in drien werken die hi in ons werken wilt, soe werden wij anderwerf ghedoept inden heilighen gheeste. Ende daer ontfanen wi eenen nuwen name die ons ewelijc blijft.” John of Ruusbroec, *Vanden blinkenden steen*, lines 149–54, 180–82, 187–90.

Ruusbroec thus does advocate a self-annihilating form of deification, but not one according to which created human nature as such is annihilated. For both Marguerite and Ruusbroec, annihilation and transformation have a fundamentally Christological foundation. Marguerite expresses this with an allusion to the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs (“transformed into the love of the spouse”), while Ruusbroec articulates the same fundamental insight with reference to the image of the sparkling stone in Revelation. In other words, although Ruusbroec does not use the names of specific rivers to elucidate the soul’s transformation, he does nevertheless make it very clear that this point is also a constitutive element of his project. Here too, the soul receives a “new name,” which is written on the sparkling stone the soul receives: the name of Christ. The deified soul becomes an *alter Christus* and is united with God in the same way that the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ are united in his person, that is, without any created intermediary. Our humanity, like Christ’s, is transfigured in the love of God through the annihilation of the self. The soul thus takes on the form of God’s love without losing its created substance. In this way, the soul lives entirely in God and entirely in itself, or as Ruusbroec also expresses it: “And thus we live completely in God, where we possess our bliss; and completely in ourselves where we practice our love towards God. And even if we live completely in God and completely in ourselves, it is only one life.”<sup>51</sup>

### VI. JAN VAN LEEUWEN: RETURNING TO THE WILD SEA

Finally, though Lerner refers to Jan van Leeuwen’s famous invective against Meister Eckhart and the Free Spirit heresy,<sup>52</sup> he does not refer to van Leeuwen’s use of the river metaphor that we also find in Marguerite and Ruusbroec. Jan van Leeuwen was a lay brother and the cook at the Priory of Groenendaal, and he wrote a eulogy of Ruusbroec, who was his confessor. The text was certainly written before Ruusbroec’s death, since Jan van Leeuwen predeceased him in 1378. This personal, almost conversational and colloquial tribute is one of the oldest known biographical documents about Ruusbroec. Jan van Leeuwen employs the river metaphor not in the context of articulating his own ideas about mystical union, but in the context of explaining how Ruusbroec’s holy life personified what the river metaphor intends to convey about the contemplative soul’s relationship with God:

His [Ruusbroec’s] holy teaching, however, bears witness and publicly proclaims how and in which ways he was a leading example for us and a true mirror of holy life. But he himself lived far more nobly and more profoundly and more highly than he

<sup>51</sup> “Ende aldus leven wij gheheel in gode, daer wij onse salicheit besitten; ende wij leven gheheel in ons selven, daer wij ons in minnen te gode oefenen. Ende al eest dat wij gheheel in gode leven ende gheheel in ons selven, dit en es doch maer een leven.” *Ibid.*, lines 579–82.

<sup>52</sup> Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids,” 411.

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could teach us to do. For his words and his cherished writings do not reflect his inner life, but his life itself shows us his worth. In the same way, you should know that *all waters and all rivers in the beginning of their first source flow from the wild sea and flow back to the sea*. Thus also was this good, holy man’s life well and honorably ordered towards God, himself and his fellow humans, through divine charity towards all people. For he gave his spirit freely and singly to God.<sup>53</sup>

The river metaphor appears to occur somewhat out of the blue in this context, which may be an indication that Jan van Leeuwen assumed some familiarity both with the metaphor and with the figure of John of Ruusbroec himself. Van Leeuwen offers no indication of the intended meaning of the image. He restricts his commentary to stating that Ruusbroec’s life was well ordered, and that he “gave his spirit freely and singly to God.” It is with respect to Ruusbroec’s ordered life that we are presumably to interpret the image. A river that comes from the sea (God) is well ordered if it returns to that source. It is also noteworthy, however, that van Leeuwen uses the metaphor in the context of describing the effects of giving one’s will freely and singly to God, namely that the result is “divine charity towards all people.” In this respect, it is not only through the use of the same metaphor, but also the adoption of the content of the doctrine of “common love” or “common life” that van Leeuwen shows himself to be indebted not only to Ruusbroec, but also ultimately to Marguerite.<sup>54</sup>

By the same token, however, he questions the importance of the mystic’s literary legacy by claiming that it is not in Ruusbroec’s writing but in the externalization of his interior life that one might appreciate his holiness. This may not merely be a hagiographical trope, but may rather be intended to emphasize the essentially social and communal aspects of Christian mysticism. At the same time, it clearly highlights that the river metaphor is not intended to be understood in either a pantheistic or antinomian vein.

<sup>53</sup> “Maer sine heilighe leeringhe die gheeft ons ghetughe ende oppenbaer orconde, hoe ende in wat manieren hat hi on seen voergaende exempel ende een ghewarech spiegel van heilighen levenen heeft ghewest, maer noch vele edelekere ende vele diepere ende oec vele hoechlekere soe heeft hi selve gheleeft dan hi voert gheleeren can. Want sine waerde ende sine minleke scriftuere dat en gheeft ons sijn binnenste leven niet; maer sijn leven, dat gheeft ons de waerde. Want gheliker wijs seldi weten dat alle watere ende oec alle rivieren in den beghenne van ierst oerspronghen uter welder zee ende vloeien weder toter zee. Siet aldus was oec al des goets heilechs mans leven wel ende eersamleec gheoerdyneert toe Gode, te hem selven ende te sinen evenmensche, overmids godleke karitate toe allen menschen. Want Gode was hy vrileec ende oec eenechleec sinen gheest ghevende.” This is the text from Ms H (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 2412–13, siglum H) as it appears in Willem de Vreese, “Bijdragen tot de kennis van het leven en de werken van Jan van Ruusbroec,” *Het Belfort* 10 (1895): 255–56. Emphasis added. The English translation of Jan van Leeuwen’s complete eulogy of Ruusbroec is available as Jan van Leeuwen, “Appendix Five: The Eulogy of John of Ruusbroec by Jan van Leeuwen,” trans. John Arblaster in Arblaster and Faesen, *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 389–92.

<sup>54</sup> For Marguerite’s doctrine of common love, see Arblaster and Faesen, “*Commune à tous par largesse de pure charité*.”

### VII. CONCLUSION

From the investigation of this limited case study, it is apparent that throughout the later Middle Ages, water metaphors were repeatedly employed by the mystics of the Low Countries in an attempt to articulate conceptions of mystical union. Unlike many other metaphors that were used in relatively stable configurations by different authors—iron in fire, light in air, a seal pressed into molten wax, and ascending mountains, to name but a few—the water metaphors used by the major mystical authors in the late medieval Low Countries underwent considerable change over time. If we hypothesize that the medieval authors in question were aware of one another's work, we may conclude that they were dissatisfied with the images they inherited, and therefore sought to reformulate them, in order that they might more accurately convey the intended meaning.

It is striking in this regard that despite his great theological authority, Bernard's liturgically inspired image of a drop of water in a large quantity of wine was apparently considered to be potentially confusing. Though modern scholars have emphasized that Bernard safeguarded his image from any unorthodox content, some of the medieval critical inheritors of Bernard's texts apparently preferred to either revise the image or reject it altogether. An example of the former may be seen in Beatrice of Nazareth's biographer, who presents a bold variation on Bernard's image but immediately emphasizes that the underlying reality it attempts to convey cannot be expressed "with a flood of words." On the other hand, Jean Gerson resolutely opted for the latter approach, and rejected it.

Marguerite Porete's reception is a more complex case. Generally speaking, the river image she introduced has been interpreted in our day as evidence of a more daring conception of mystical union. In her own time, it appears that none of her detractors took issue with these metaphors specifically,<sup>55</sup> but even more remarkably, we find resonances of her images in the texts of John of Ruusbroec and Jan van Leeuwen, who opted to recapitulate Marguerite's metaphors rather than to employ any of their other predecessors' attempts.<sup>56</sup> Given the convergences between Marguerite and Ruusbroec on this point, it perhaps need not be considered ironic that her text was attributed to him. On my reading, the irony is rather that Marguerite and Ruusbroec have not been more closely associated on this point. It is notable that they employ the most relationally dynamic images in this metaphorical field, ingeniously holding in tensile yet harmonious union the "distinction" and "indistinction" realities of the mystical life, and offering thereby a clear account of the doctrine of deification from a Christian perspective.

<sup>55</sup> Lerner, "The Image of Mixed Liquids," 400.

<sup>56</sup> We must reiterate that we cannot demonstrate direct influence between Marguerite and Ruusbroec, but that the concern here is the theological significance of their similar metaphors.

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It would be wrong for us simply to assume that the reformulation of this pervasive metaphor amounts to no more than a question of devising pretty new bottles for the same old wine. Beatrice’s image of the fish in the sea does not convey the content of the union with God without difference or distinction that is so central to Ruusbroec’s thought. According to Ruusbroec, the ontological identity between the humanity of Christ and our humanity is the premise upon which the soul’s spiritual transformation through the Holy Spirit can occur. This transformation, as Marguerite and Ruusbroec both illustrate through the use of their river metaphors, reveals a fundamentally anthropological point, namely that the soul lives both in itself and, through the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit, is related directly to eternity. Or as Ruusbroec succinctly expresses it: “Thus we live completely in God, where we possess our bliss; and completely in ourselves where we practice our love towards God.”